

Classic Poetry Series

**Nabaneeta Dev Sen**  
**- poems -**

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# Nabaneeta Dev Sen(13 January 1938 -)

Nabaneeta Dev Sen is an award-winning Indian poet, novelist and academic.

## <b>Personal Life</b>

Dev Sen was born in Kolkata, to the poet-couple Narendra Dev and Radharani Devi. In addition to Bengali and English, she reads Hindi, Oriya, Assamese, French, German, Sanskrit, and Hebrew.[citation needed] In the very next year of obtaining her Master degree she was married to Amartya Sen. In 1976 they were divorced and she went abroad for higher studies. Dev Sen lives in Kolkata, in her parental house Bhalo-Basa, where she was born, now declared a Heritage Building. She has two daughters Antara Dev Sen and Nandana Sen with former husband economist Amartya Sen, and one adopted daughter, Srabasti.

## <b>Educational Background</b>

She graduated from Presidency College and received her Masters degree from Jadavpur University, Calcutta; and a Masters with Distinction from Harvard University. She earned her Ph.D from Indiana University.

Dev Sen completed her post-doctoral research at the University of California at Berkeley; and Newnham College, Cambridge University. She was also a University Grants Commission Senior Fellow at University of Delhi.

## <b>Professional Background</b>

Dev Sen has been a writer in residence at several international Artists' Colonies, including Yaddo and MacDowell Colony in the United States; Bellaggio in Italy; and the Mishkenot Sha'ananim in Jerusalem.

She has been a visiting professor and a visiting creative writer at several universities in the United States, including Harvard, Cornell, Rutgers, Columbia, Smith College, and Chicago. In Canada, she has been visiting professor at Toronto, York, and British Columbia. Other countries where she has participated as professor include Mexico, England, Germany, France, and Japan.

Dev Sen has delivered the Radhakrishnan Memorial Lecture series (1996–1997) at Oxford University on epic poetry.

She has held the Maytag Chair of Creative Writing and Comparative Literature at

Colorado College 1988–1989.

She has represented herself and India in many international conferences, both academic and literary. These conferences have been presented at the Festival of India USA 1986; the Frankfurt Book Fair 1993; and the Munich Book Week 2002.

She has held important executive positions in International academic bodies like the International Comparative Literature Association (1973–1979), and The International Association of Semiotic and Structural Studies (1989–1994). She has been the Vice President of Indian National Comparative Literature Association; chief editor of Bengali in the Macmillan's Modern Indian Novel Series. She has also served as Member of the Jury of important literary awards including the Jnanpith award, Saraswati Samman, Kabir Samman, and Rabindra Puraskar.

Dev Sen is the Vice President of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat. She is the founder and president of West Bengal Women Writers' Association.

In 2002, Dev Sen retired as Professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta. She has been working with the treatment of women in world epics and the treatment of epic poetry by rural women in India.

Dev Sen was nominated as the JP Naik Distinguished Fellow at the Centre of Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, 2003–2005, where she is translating Chandrabati's 16th century Bengali Ramayana text into English with a critical introduction and annotations.

#### **Published Works**

Dev Sen has published more than 80 books in Bengali: poetry, novels, short stories, plays, literary criticism, personal essays, travelogues, humour writing, translations and children's literature. Her first collection of poems Pratham Pratyay was published in 1959.

Dev Sen deals with a wide variety of social, political, psychological problems like the role of the intellectuals in the Naxalite movement, (Ami Anupam, 1976), identity crisis of the Indian writing in English (1977), that of the second generation NRIs (1985), breakdown of the joint family, life in old age homes (1988), homosexuality (1995), facing AIDS (1999, 2002), child abuse, and obsession, uprootedness, immigration and exile in her novels, often using women as her central characters.

Dev Sen's short stories and travelogues are a rare combination of fine humour, deep human concern, and high intellect, which has made her a unique figure in the Bangla literary scene. Her first short story collection was Monsieur Hulor Holiday (1980). Travelogues like Karuna tomar kon path diye and Truckbaahane Myakmahane have become classics in Bengali literature. Additional notable works include Bama-bodhini; Nati Nabanita; Srestha kabita; and Sita theke suru.

She is a well-known children's author in Bengali for her fairy tales and adventure stories, with girls as protagonist. She has also written prize-winning one-act plays.

# Fourteen

Fourteen sticks to my hair like a blob of chewing gum  
Adolescence in my palms  
Moonwax trickling over my brow  
Sum total: zero  
Dream upon dream  
Sum total: zero  
Like adding dew to the wind...  
This green mantle  
Inside my eyes filling my eyes covering my eyes  
Spread out on the dust  
This green mantle  
Step on it for a moment  
Won't you  
Should I call it love  
Should I call it longing  
Inside my head these dark forests  
In my heart these sixty miles of empty highway  
Desolate  
Jamming my jaws, rocks  
Choking my throat, sand dunes  
Roaring inside my head, cascades  
Within my eyes filling my eyes overflowing my eyes  
The moon  
Stars at my fingertips  
Adolescence in my palms  
Five rivers gushing out between the fingers of my clenched fist  
The tears of the teens melt into the air  
Unfree

[Translated by the poet]

Nabaneeta Dev Sen

# Memories Of A Floral Clock

Standing still by the nameless road  
I hear the violence of rain  
Beating on the panes  
Going dark

Switching off the engine is not  
Switching off memory  
Your eyes  
The floral clock  
Survive the rain  
And your tongue  
The unseen pendulum  
Keeps ticking away  
Deep inside me  
Telling time  
Under the soil

[Translated by the poet]

Nabaneeta Dev Sen

# The Jungle Story

My exile is over, mother,  
No more living in the jungle for me  
Come, mother, underneath this matted beard  
Feed the familiar cheeks of your child  
Open up your breasts, mother, and watch how  
The seven streams of milk  
Gush towards my parched tongue

Look at these feet, mother, the tiny feet  
Where your golden bells had jingled  
Look at this arm  
Upon which you had tied your talisman  
When I was born  
Now look at this chest where you had planted  
The sapling of a heart  
In a soft green stretch of sun  
In the hidden mesh of this dark jungle,  
Impenetrable,  
Has grown a hungry tree

With toothy leaves and sharp claws  
And fierce flowers  
It chews on other hearts  
A fine flesh-eater

My time in the jungle is over, mother,  
Now the jungle lives in me.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen

# When It Rains

When it rains it seems the room itself turns blue, trembles  
and falls like rain, as if endless time coming from nowhere  
fills the room, as if endless wind blowing in  
carries the room to the riverbank;

turning into a boat, I float

I get soaked; swaying, shivering, I keep  
moving; in the distance one can see the line where

the river meets the sea, as if

all around waves hiss, as if there's nobody around  
anywhere as if a profound sobbing chokes the throat

as if terrifying harsh sobs strangle

the room – By what strange magic

the ten directions sparkle in a moment,

as if everything will revert

to its real shape, as if all is a dance,

all is rhythm, all is tinted light –

Awakening and seeing the rain, sometimes it's

like this, then I pray Oh sky

break up the room and give me more rain!

[Translated by Sunil B. Ray, Nandana Dev Sen, and Carolyne Wright with the  
poet]

Nabaneeta Dev Sen