



Sahitya Akademi



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meet the author

Nabaneeta Dev Sen





"How, for example, can one not be amazed at the apparent good-humoured ease with which Nabaneeta Dev Sen, internationally known scholar-critic, poet, novelist, and short-story writer, has turned the orderly Bengali patriarchal family edifice topsy-turvy? Through her highly popular, acute, humorous travelogues, short stories, and novellas, she brought her own women-only and female-headed household into the living-rooms of Bengalis."

— Barnita Bagchi

Here is, perhaps, an apt description of the genius of Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Born in 1938 in Kolkata, to two celebrated writers, Narendra Dev and Radharani Devi, she could not but become a writer herself. Her mother was a very famous poet and a fine critic. Her father was also a poet and an erudite scholar, well-read in Persian, French and German. In her own words: "I

was conceived in the womb of one poet and sired by another. Poetry, I suspect, was ruling my stars from the very first moment of my being; I had no way of avoiding its grips. Even my name, Nabaneeta, was a gift from Rabindranath."

Nabaneeta began writing verse in early childhood; her first crop of writing was published when she was seven, in her school magazine—two poems in English, two in Bengali, and two prose pieces, one in English and another in Bengali. "So my debut was as a poet and a prose-writer and a bilingual writer at that!" she says.

She studied English literature at Presidency College, Kolkata and took her Master's degree from Jadavpur University in 1958. In 1959, her first collection of poems *Pratham Pratyay* came out. She proceeded to do doctoral studies in Indiana University, USA, but after a year, returned home for her marriage with Amartya Sen, the future Nobel Laureate. Settling down with her husband in Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he taught, Nabaneeta had her research credits earned at Indiana, transferred to Harvard University. When Amartya Sen moved to Cambridge, she went along with him; she managed to do her viva there itself and got her Ph.D.,



With Girish Karnad, Nissim Ezekiel, U.R. Anantha Murthy, Ayyappa Paniker, 1986, Chicago

in 1963, when she was 25. The same year her eldest daughter was born.

The next decade was spent in following her husband wherever his academic pursuit took him—universities of Britain and America. In the meanwhile, a second daughter was born. But somewhere on the way, differences grew and her marriage broke up. The pain of the experience was expressed in her poems, which she went on writing steadily. In 1974, her second collection, *Swaagata Debdut* (Welcome, Angel) came out, and received much critical acclaim. However, the flow of her poetry was to be arrested, after her

got into this world of hers, and they forgot to pity her. They became a part of a pleasant experience, so rare these days in literature, and in life. Magic of creativity started working wonders and Nabaneeta's output became prolific. Author of 16 novels, 15 collections of short stories, three volumes of poetry, nine volumes of children's literature, four travelogues, four volumes of belles lettres, and one play, her creative genius can truly be described as versatile.

Her first novel *Ami Anupam* which came out during the Emergency, in October 1976, was a political novel, about the Naxalite movement, questioning the role



With Margaret Atwood, Canada, 2002

divorce in 1976. She explains: "When my marriage broke, when I came back from England before my divorce—during the period of separation — my poems had become very intense and sad. They were strong, good poems, certainly not tear-jerkers, but one could see, here is a woman who is going through a lot .... I think the poems were giving me away, and making the readers feel sad and worried about me. So I stopped writing poetry for a while, just to protect my emotional privacy, and I think it harmed me in some way, because the flow of my poetry decreased as I started writing prose."

She began to write about her family...her mother, daughters, dog, cat, car et al. The readers

of intellectuals in leading young, ideologically excitable people into terrorist activities and then not taking the responsibility for what happened to them when they walked into death and disaster.

She wrote *Sheet Sahasik Hemantalok*, (1988) about an Old Women's Home, with women from very different backgrounds. An inmate here, an elderly writer with a terminal disease is the protagonist.

In *Bama-bodhini*, (1997) one of her most important novels — both for the subject matter and for the experiment with form — she has used several genres, several forms of narration, third person, first person, letters, memoirs, research notes, songs, poetry etc. which has perhaps



With M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Selina Hossain, Thirur, 2001

not been attempted before in Bengali.

Her travel stories are really transgressing and personal. The first one *Karuna Tomar Kon Path Diye* (1978) is "a rather funny, irreverent account" of her visit to the Maha Kumbh Mela, on a sudden inspiration, totally unprepared and all alone. The second, *Truckbahoney Macmahoney* (1983) is about a hitch-hiking she did all by herself, to Tawang, on the then NEFA-Tibet border. Both are very popular, going straight to the readers' hearts.

Nabaneeta's academic life has been very successful. Her standing as a comparatist is very high, going solely by the number of invited lectures she delivered, papers presented in international seminars, positions she held in related academic associations and the awards and recognition she received for her professional performance. However, she once told Elisabeth Bumillar:

"When I retire, should I say I am a retired professor of comparative literature...? I don't think so. I would probably say I am a poet. I would say I was a poet before anything else." The awards and honours that sought her out for her creative writing bear testimony to her accomplishments as a writer of rare stature.

In the ultimate analysis what Nabaneeta Dev Sen, the writer, does is, transmitting warmth, and getting the same in return from her readers. She said to Ritu Menon in an interview: "People feel they can trust me, they feel I will understand. They feel I am of some use to them when they need human warmth. My writing is obviously creating a bridge between these individuals and myself so that they feel I'm part of their lives and in a way they become a part of mine, too...it's a blessing... what more can I expect from life? Or from art?"



With Sunil Gangopadhyay, Arun Kolatkar, Allen Ginsberg, NYC 1986

## A Select Bibliography

### Novels

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*Prabaase Doibera Bashe*, Mitra and Ghosh, 1985  
*Anya Dweep*, Karuna Prakashani Swabhumi, Ananda Publishers, 1986  
*Sheet Saahasik Hemanta Lok*, Ananda, 1988  
*Bama-Bodhini*, Deb Sahitya Kutir, 1997  
*Deshantar*, Mitra and Ghosh, 1998  
*Shani-Rabi*, Mitra and Ghosh, 2001  
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*Dashti Upanyas*, Ananda Publishers, 2003  
*Albatross*, Dey's Publishing, 2004

### Short Stories

- Monsier Hulor Holiday*, Karuna, 1980  
*Bhalobasa Kare Koy*, Dey's Publishing, 1992  
*Natyarambha*, Ananda, 1992  
*Sita Theke Shuru*, Ananda, 1996  
*Galpa Samagra, Vol-1, 2, 3* Dey's Publishing, 1997, 1997, 2004  
*Khagenbabur Prithibi*, Dey's Publishing, 1997  
*Swanirbachita Shreshtha Galpa*, Model Publishing House, 1999  
*Zara Hatke Ebong Anyanya Galpa*, Bikalpa, 2000  
*Rag-Anurag O Anyanya Galpa*, Dey's, 2003  
*Bachhai Galpa*, Mandal Publishers, 2003

### Children's Books

- Samudrer Sannyasini*, Cosmos, 1979  
*Swapna Kenaar Sadagar*, Mitra and Ghosh  
*Palashpurer Picnic*, Dey's, 1997  
*Ichhamati*, Ananda, 1995  
*Buddhi Bechaar Saudagar*, 1999, Anjali Prakaashani  
*Chakum-chukum*, Sristi Prakaashani, 2000  
*Monkemoner Galpa*, Doyel, 2002

### Belles Lettres

- Nati Nabaneeta*, Ananda, 1984  
*Shabda Pade Tapur Tupur*, Ananda, 1995  
*Baranda Ebong Ananya*, Bikalpa, 2000

### Drama

- Medea Ebong* (three one-act plays)

### Travel Narratives

- Karuna Tomaar Kon Path Diye*, Karuna, 1978  
*Truckbahoney MacMahoney*, Ananda, 1983

- Hey Purna taba Charaner Kachhe*, Mitra and Ghosh, 1984

### Omnibus

- Naba-neeta*, Mitra and Ghosh, 1996 (a collection of nine genres)

### Poetry

- Pratham Pratyay*, M.C. Sarkar, 1959  
*Swagata Debdut*, Krittibaas, 1974  
*Shreshtha Kabitā*, Dey's Publishing, 1989

### Literary Criticism

- Ishwarer Pratidwandwi and Anyanya Prabandha*, Asha Prakaashani, 1978  
*Birashaiba Santakabi Ebang Birashaiba Sadhana*, Papyrus, 1987  
*Counterpoints: Essays in Comparative Literature* (in English) Prajna, 1885

### Translations

- Shatek Bachan* (Kannada Veerasaiva poetry) 1983  
*Ashtami* (eight Asian women poets), 2004  
*Haldey Wallpaper Ebang Aro* (four stories by Sherlot Perkins Gilman), 2004

### Edited

- Hasir Galpa* (Humourous stories for children)  
*Nari Tumi Ardhek Akash*, (stories by women)  
*Aparajita Rachanabali* (complete poems of Aparajita Debi with notes and introduction)  
*Radharani Debi Sreshtha Kabita* (collected poems by Radharani Debi with notes and introduction)

### Works in Translation

- Seeta se Shuru*, Rajkamal Prakaashani (short stories, into Hindi)  
*Kis path aye Tumhari Karuna*, Rajkamal Prakashan (travelogue, into Hindi)  
*Samudraki Sannyasini*, Vatsal Prakasan, Bikaner (children's novel, into Hindi)  
*Bishahari Prasad* (children's novel, into Hindi)  
*Palashpur ki Picnic* (children's short stories, into Hindi)  
*Truck Bahoney Macmahoney* (travelogue, into Assamese)  
*Hemantaokam* (novel, into Malayalam)

## A Chronology



With husband Amartya Sen and daughter Antara

- |         |  |         |
|---------|--|---------|
| 1938    | Born in Kolkata in the famed house "Bhalobasa"(Love)   |         |
| 1956    | B.A. Presidency College, Calcutta University   | 1988-89 |
| 1958    | M.A. Jadavpur University, Kolkata  |         |
| 1959    | <i>Pratham Pratyay</i> , first poetry collection published   | 1992    |
| 1960    | Marriage with Amartya Sen  |         |
| 1963    | Ph.D Indiana University, USA   | 1994    |
| 1970    | Joined the Comparative Literature Department of Jadavpur University, Kolkata   | 1994-96 |
| 1974    | <i>Swagata Debdut</i> , second poetry collection published   | 1996-97 |
| 1976    | Divorced   | 1995    |
| 1983    | Professor of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University   | 1997    |
| 1987-89 | Chairperson of the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University   | 1998    |
| 1987    | Visiting Professor at the International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies, University of Toronto, Canada          | 1999    |
| 1988    | Visiting Professor at the International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies, University of British Columbia, Canada | 2000    |
|         |  | 2000    |
|         |  | 2001    |
|         |  | 2002    |
|         |  | 2003    |