

## **KEKI N. DARUWALLA'S POEMS: A UNIQUE COHERENCE OF THEMES AND CRAFTSMANSHIP**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Among the 'new' Indian English poets who have ushered in a revolution in the Indian English literary sky both in theme and technique, Keki N. Daruwalla stands head and shoulders above others. Along with Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das and others he produced a body of protest literature in a satirical, cynical and ironical vein. Of them, Daruwalla holds a unique position in terms of his rare poetic calibre. He transmutes his ideas through the poetic mechanism he employs, of say, through his use of images, symbols, rhythm, figures of speech etc. His poetry is "a fine blend of freedom and discipline, metrical rhythms, and a word order of prose, compact, harsh, alliterative phrasing and relaxed moment. "(Ezekiel p.68)" The present paper aims to examine the poetic excellence of Daruwalla that establishes a unique coherence between his themes and craftsmanship.

**Keywords:** revolution, craftsmanship, coherence, themes.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A poet works with words as a painter does with colours. A poet must know how to use words and where. T.S. Eliot once spoke of the poets as "concentrating upon a task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table."(Eliot p.114)" But early Indian English poets like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Anita Desai, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, were primarily concerned with the underlying idea. The poetic device was of little importance to them. They imitated the cult of British romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats. In their works, there was a tale to tell, a vignette or a landscape to unfold, an emotion to convey. There are occasional mighty lines, old and conventional imagery, a haunting lyric, but the point of special distinction was the content and not the form. But in the Post Independence period Indian English poetry took a definite turn with a coterie of poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Shiv K. Kumar, Pritish Nandy, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arvind Krishna

Mehrotra and Keki N. Daruwalla. They ushered in a total radicalisation in Indian English literary sky both in matter and manner of presentation. Such poets represented changes in viewpoints, theme, imagery and the use of language. They steered the spirit of modernity not only in subject matter, creative urge and awareness but also in technique and craftsmanship. Using bold and powerful images they dealt with contemporary issues in a realistic manner. In their poems, form correlates content. Such poets had genuine interest in poetic craft. Commenting on the 'new poets', K.R.S. Iyenger says-

"The Western influences are still here ; but even more than the 'content ', it is the expression and the technique that are being adjusted to the needs of the new age," (Iyenger p.2)

These new poets with whom modernity made its inroads in Indian English poetry are constantly conscious towards content, tone, structure and control. Prithvi Nandy says-

"There is a sense of discipline all throughout but this discipline is not a fatuous imitation of English verse and works. It inculcated an awareness of control as opposed to the earlier poets like Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu. In fact, this is the strange thing about recent Indian Poetry in English. It is generally controlled and disciplined."(Nandy) Nissim Ezekiel is the first among them who first stressed the need of communicating poetic idea through poetic mechanism. However, if anyone excelled Ezekiel, he is Keki N. Daruwalla, a poet per excellence with a fine taste of aesthetic, critical, socio-cultural and diversified literary viewpoint. He has an immense and scintillating influence on the Indian literary scenario. As a poetic craftsman, he possesses the rare calibre of transmuting his poetic idea through his poetic device. His poems display his love for fine phrases, art of condensation, felicity of expression and an ability to shift between the abstract and the concrete.

Most of the poems of Daruwalla border on post independence social realism, of say, violence, misery, corruption, hypocrisy etc. A conscious artist and craftsman Keki N. Daruwalla is sparingly critical about the moral degradation and decadence in the 20th century India. Interestingly, the poetic excellence of Daruwalla establishes a unique interrelation between the poetic mechanism he employs and the themes he deals with. His poetic competence is such that when he deals with violence, he uses expressions dealing with violence. In this sense he is nearer to many English poets like Lord Alfred Tennyson and Thomas Gray. Tennyson and Gray have used similar expressions while trying to create elegiac effect. Not only this, Daruwalla's morbid preoccupation with death reminds us of Emily Dickinson and his supernaturalism reminds one of S. T. Coleridge. His use of broken images in his poems reminds us of the poetic technique of T. S. Eliot. A selective study of his poems would suffice it to say how his poems add a new dimension to Indian English poetry in terms of the selection of matter and manner of presentation.

Poetic craftsmanship implies the mechanics of writing poetry, of say, the art of expression. Daruwalla has his mastery in this regard. His poems abound in striking imagery, appropriate choice of diction, felicity of expression, skill of condensation, use of figures of speech, free verse, rhythm etc. The other remarkable feature of Daruwalla's poetry lies in its ability to materialise its abstractions to strike a creative tension between image and statement. His poetry has the narrative energy and sweep to paint, for instance, a vast portrait of Post Independence India as " a landscape of meaninglessness.

Daruwalla's excellency lies in his mastery over the uses of images. His images are as natural as the leaves to a tree. Imagery flows from his pen even as ideas and words flow from it. They are neither fantastic nor commonplace. Rather they are strikingly original. They are not superimposed, instead they are integral to the theme. They arise from the poet's meditations upon a subject or from his thinking over a particular subject or happening. Most of the images used in his poems have sprung up from his experience as a police officer. He contrasts the objects of his poetic vision with their just opposites. Like a true modernist, the poet juxtaposes the sensuous with the dead and ugly to create the desired effect. There is a brilliant manifestation of the same in the following lines :

"They are palanquin-bearers of a  
Different sort on the string -beds  
They carry no henna-smeared bodies  
Prone upon them are frail bodies  
Frozen bodies delirious bodies  
Some drained of fever and sap  
Some moving others supine  
Transfixed under the sun."("Pestilence")

A perfect craftsman Daruwalla has his say in this poem with the tool of irony. He juxtaposes the marbled white hospital floors with the black bodies :

"The hospital floors are marbled white  
Black bodies dirty them  
Nurses in white habits

Doctors with white faces receive them."

('Pestilence')

Daruwalla is a poet born out of the experiences of modernity. As a keen social critic, he raises his powerful voice against the rampant corruption and moral degradation of Modern men. The poet castigated hollowness of Indian civilization- the spiritual hepatitis it has been suffering from. In 'Monologue in the Chambal Valley' he gives a graphic description of the plights of women in India. They are the objects of gratification of lust of the morally hollow persons. A conscious craftsman Daruwalla relates the sensuousness in equally sensuous images:

"Do you recall how it was with the women

When we started? Taut-breasted

Ones from the hills

Brown ones from Bihar - soft and over ripe

Daughters of the desert, daughters of the forest tribes."('Monologue in the Chambal Valley')

Again in the poem 'Love Among the Pines', the poet relates the irresistible physical passion through well chosen animal images:

"What is there in my hand that when it slides into your blouse

It prowls like an animal that makes you writhe,

Turning your nipples into a black sprout of berries."

The poet again makes marvellous use of images to describe the climactic moment of sensual gratification :

". . .for us I fall upon the earth-crust that is you

We spin, we spin, we spin

Your feet pointed to the skies."('Love Among the Pines')

In another poem Daruwalla graphically describes the anticipation for sexual gratification :

"Tonight she will be waiting

Arched fully backwards

Vibrant as new leaf!"

(*'The Night of the Jackals '*)

In the following lines it is again seen how the poet concretizes the moment of man's sexual excitement and also the process of his being lulled down through the fine images of 'falloon-fury' and the dove :

"And heal with your own bodies;

That is the crux of love:

The fallon-fury of the moment

Turns into the dove.

The face as spirit, the face as flesh

Blend in the face as love."

(*'From Snows to Ranikhet'*)

Death, disease, hunger, violence are recurrent themes in Daruwalla's poems. In a third world country like India, hunger looms large in the lame excuse of Malthusian theory. With a beautiful nature imagery Daruwalla opens our eyes to the social realism of Post Independence India:

"When hunger rages

There is no other lion in the Colosseum

Hunger is everything

It is the thicket and the boar in the thicket

When hunger rages

Yudhishtir and Duryodhana become meaningless."

(*'The Death of Distinctions'*)

The nature imagery continues and the poet metaphorically compares hunger with leafless trees in a desert:

"In a desert a crisis of tree;

In the trees a crisis of leaves

And always a crisis of tubers and roots."('The Death of Distinctions')

In such a time of crisis when the hapless people die of starvation, "the rich turn Malthusian ", the poet has his ironical, satirical say :

"To confront hunger the grain - gods need to come down

And if there are no grain gods, they should be concocted."

(*'The Death of Distinctions'*)

Hunger reaches its devastating magnitude in times of drought in an agricultural country like ours. In perfect tune with Horatian dictum that poetry is a speaking picture, Daruwalla correlates the horrifying situation with apt images:

"The land is an earthen dish,

Empty as always

Baked and fired in a cosmic kiln.

There are smithy fires overhead-

They are forging another sky!

The coppersmith bird shrieks insistent

That death is round the corner.

The gulmohar coughs blood,

The sagun leaves turn a warped bronze."

(*'Hunger 74'*)

In such a time of acute crisis when "the gulmohar coughs blood and the sagun leaves turn a warped bronze ", people hope against hope like ever optimistic blind koel that never gives us:

"Only the blind koel, the stupid koel

Talks of rain in the mango grove."(*'Hunger 74'*)

This is akin to the ever optimistic creed of people as is found in the immortal saying of Micawber in Dickens' 'David Copperfield' :

"Something will turn up." Daruwalla goes on to say -

"Hope is a diseased kidney

Which has already been removed."

(*'Hunger 74'*)

During such crisis when drought brings untold sufferings, some people become morally bankrupt and they are the smugglers, profiteers and hoarders. The poet satirically says-

"No end to hoarding!

Breaking open the lockers they find

A briefcase full of cash." (*'Notes'*)

In a third world country like ours where moral bankruptcy reigns supreme, the crisis of hunger is an irresolvable issue. A wonderful craftsman Daruwalla with well chosen metaphor compares hunger with empty nest of birds:

""Hunger is an empty nest

to which birds fly back in the evening." (*'Jottings'*)

The unprecedented famine and hunger have reduced majority of the people to mere bony structure. Daruwalla relates their death-in-life existence with well chosen words :

"His nephews sat skull cropped

Their necks vein-corded, their heads

Bandaged with resignation.

Everywhere he saw haunted looks,

The same fears fermenting in salt-rot bodies,

Old matchstick bones groaning

Under the gnarled hide."

Unprecedented famine and hunger cause the village people to migrate to cope with the Darwinian theory 'struggle for existence'. Daruwalla is sparingly critical of this face of Post Independence India where the question of the fundamental needs of village people remains ignored. He makes his words speak in one of her poems when he portrays the flights of the village people who are being carried away towards cities in anticipation of a better life :

"Do you see trains steaming out  
ten thousand frying on the lurching roofs?  
It is our craft rolling today.  
Our villagers walking out with their headloads  
an ant-line following  
the scent of a moist root." ('Migrations')

Violence at different levels is a Post Independence reality that Daruwalla deals with. A keen social critic to the core, Daruwalla has little trust in this imbecile social order. It is because of his first hand experience as an I. P. S. officer that he had the knowledge of life in the raw. In this cactus land 'hope is a diseased kidney' and, as such, there is an ever-worried self in him that apprehended all pervasive violence in the shape of riots and rapes, caste and creed conflicts. In his visionary desert there is no hope for a beautiful tomorrow. And he ruminates his violence - ridden vision in well chosen concrete images:

"I can smell violence in the air  
Like the lash of rain -  
Mass hatreds drifting grey across the moon  
It hovers brooding, poised like a cobra." ('Ruminations')

The image 'lash of rain'suggests the unpredictability of violence which knows no reasoning. Again the 'cobra' image makes it clear that community violence is venomous that would lead to killings.

Like other 'new' poets, Daruwalla is consciously experimenting in new imagery. An I. P. S. officer by profession Daruwalla knew well the real face of the rioting people and, as such, he equates such blood thirsty people with predatory animals,:

"barracuda - eyes

Searching for prey

among nocturnal glioma."

( 'Curfew Turn in a Riot Torn City')

Intolerance, violence, riot in the name of what people are and what they believe are the go of the day. In 'Death by Burial' Daruwalla shows how these differences rape humanism itself and lead to communal violence:

"They sewed them up in gunny-sacks alive

But here providence scurvy till now

Could still intervene

Half the village could be Hindu, half Muslim

Enough cause for a riot!

With half the village shouting

'death by fire!'"

And the other half

'death by burial!

During communal violence, "killer and the killed are one - they speak the same language.", and it creates a crisis in civilization to decipher the ultimate meaning of life :

"There is no place here for the lyre and the lute.

In such times is lockjaw the best the best-selling

-to be dumb, to be mute?

(Gujtat 2002)

Daruwalla has an exceptional ability to objectify feelings and situations in concrete images. One such situations occurs in the poem 'The Epileptic'. The poem describes a fit of epilepsy a woman experiences as she is going with her children and husband in a rickshaw. As the fit overtook her, the two children, feeling panicky jumped down from the rickshaw and the poet objectifies this situation in well chosen simile:

"Suddenly the two children

flew from her side

like severed wings.('The Epileptic')

In another poem 'Mandwa' the poet paints the ugly urbanization of Bombay with befitting words:

"Bombay is black yeast

from here, and black salt,

a wall of rotting muscle."('Mandwa')

Again in "The Ghaghra In Spate", the poet draws the smooth and tranquil look of the river landscape as a painter does with colours. With a brilliant simile he makes the landscape real and living. At dusk the landscape becomes black as coffee and the red moon above resembles a woman having her monthly course,:

"When the dusk reaches her

through an overhang OF cloud

she is overstewed coffee.

At night she is a reduction weal

across the spine of the land."('The Ghaghra In Spate')

Power of generalisation is another characteristic of Daruwalla. His poetic acumen is such that he begins with an individual note and lends it a universal touch very easily. As for example, in the poem 'Mother', he starts sketching his own mother, but his power of generalisation makes her appear universal:

"Your spine goes creaking now

Across the bow of your body."('Mother')

Likewise the poet generalizes the separation anxiety of his mother at her widowhood :

"I think something shriveled

Within you, Mother,

The day you broke your bangles

And shook the lion dust

Of my father from your brow."

Myths, rituals, Indian life and culture are well shown by Daruwalla. In his poem 'Notes' he views life as an emblem of success, peace and vitality and death as misery, darkness and failure. Life and death are complementary to each other and a conscious craftsman Daruwalla builds a union between these two opposites with a well chosen bird image :

"The bird of life and the bird of death

must, among other things, flight

I want the two birds,

always fighting

or always making love,

or half the time fighting

and half the time making love."('Notes')

Out and out a humanist Daruwalla also gives a picture of the plights of Indian women in well chosen imagery. Women are as subjugated beings. They are treated as commercial commodities. The poet correlates their cazed life very nicely :

"Women must be confined to the zenana

like quail in a wicket basket."('The Keeper of the Dead')

Myths, rituals, religious practices are very common in Daruwalla's poems though he maintains distance from them. His poetry projects the composite picture of secular India. His craftsmanship deserves mention in this regard . He uses words which are indicative of the concerned religion. As for example, while describing Hindu rituals he uses words like 'mantra', 'gayatri', 'pin-dan', 'panchtritha' etc. and in this his choice of words also correlates the very theme.

## **CONCLUSION**

The craftsmanship of Daruwalla thus establishes a unique coherence between the themes he deals with and the poetic mechanism he employs. His uses of images, symbols, irony, figures of speech like simile, metaphor, though unconventional, are as natural as leaves to a tree. They are not superimposed ; rather they are integral to the theme of his poems. Daruwalla knows well how

to use words and where. His poems display his love for fine phrases, felicity of description, art of condensation and generalisation, an ability objectify situations and an apparent effortless. Rightly does Nissim Ezekiel say -

"By putting Daruwalla among his contemporaries one sees how he scores over them. By depth of feeling, economy of language and originality of insight, Daruwalla commands respect."(Ezekiel p.65)

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