



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.4., 2017 (Oct-Dec)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

LIVING ON HYPHENS: AN APPRAISAL OF KEKI N. DARUWALLA AS A POET OF
IN-BETWEENNESS

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ABSTRACT

Keki N. Daruwalla travelled a lot throughout India in his childhood and also as a police officer. Daruwalla's journey from one place to another is important to place him as a poet 'living on hyphens'. This hyphenated condition represents his state of in-betweenness. This in-betweenness is reflected in Daruwalla's poetry when he oscillates between his longing for 'lost' Persia and his Indian consciousness. One finds Daruwalla as an alone, isolated figure in Indian society, presenting the poverty, hypocrisy, violence and terror in Indian society. His profession as a police officer in the Indian Police Service offered him various opportunities to work in so many parts of the country and met the rough realities of life which lead to crime, communal riots, and other similar events from which the poet draws substance for his poetry. Daruwalla's way of situating himself in relation to India is influenced by being a Parsi in predominantly Hindu-Muslim northern India. Daruwalla's characters in his verse struggle with their cultural and religious identity, and exhibit diasporic rootlessness due to transmigration. However, Daruwalla is also a poet of rural north India putting its people, places, and customs on the map of modern Indian poetry. His poems show a strong feeling for location, social tensions, and cultural differences.

Keywords: Daruwalla, in-betweenness, Parsi, Indianness, culture, identity, roots.

Kaikhusr (Keki) Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in a Parsi family in Lahore, now in Pakistan, on January 24, 1937. His father, Nasserwanji C. Daruwalla, was a Professor at Government College, Lahore. Asha Viswas in *Keki N. Daruwalla: The Poet and Novelist* narrates Daruwalla's reminiscence of his father: "My father was a great lover of books and had a fine collection of books. He would study up to 2 O'clock in the morning. His favourite subjects were History and English Literature. Now and then he wrote a poem" (19). Keki N. Daruwalla's mother, Shirin, was shy and withdrawn, compared to her assertive husband; Daruwalla recollects this in an interview with Eunice de Souza: "She was quiet and orthodox, a typical Bharitiya Nari, self-sacrificing. My father was an extrovert, my mother anxiety ridden and withdrawn. Father had a big ego, mother had none. Father had a temper, mother none. I oscillate between the two. Shirin was a graduate and was very good at French. At home she spoke Gujrati" (Souza 45).

Keki N. Daruwalla's childhood shows a continuous mobility as his father taught at various places – Kolhapur, Amritsar and Bombay. Keki spent his early childhood in Lyallpur (now in Pakistan). In "Childhood Poem" (*A Summer of Tigers*, 1995), he writes about Lyallpur:

My few memories are of Lyallpur.
now Faisalabad, named after the king.
.....
First memories: dust storms I can still taste, one mulberry tree
in whose dark shadow we gorged on fruit.¹(9-10, 13-14)

About his early education, the poet confesses: "Most of my education was at home. My first school was the "Sacred Hearts School" in Lyallpur. It had Italian fathers. Later, we shifted to "Arya School" because the fathers who were teaching in the convent were prisoners of war and my father did not think it right to send the children to study in that atmosphere" (Viswas, *Keki* 20). As a youth Daruwalla was continually uprooted, moved to new places, and attended various schools in which instruction was in Hindi or Urdu, and the teachers at times brutal. His study at Lyallpur is recalled in "Childhood Poem". The Arya School was awful and violent, especially for a middle-class Parsi raised using English:

Arya School; God save us from the Aryans.
Boys spilled in from an orphanage nearby
with pockmarked faces and purple splotches.
'Sing!' I sang 'London Bridge is falling down'. (21-24)

In "Childhood Poem" Daruwalla recalls the different aspects of his getting lessons from the teachers:

We sat on jute strips spread out on the grass
a 'takhti' resting on the right thigh;
dipped our quills in clay inkwells and set out
on the seas of Urdu calligraphy. (26-30)

In 1947, after India's partition, the poet's family left Junagadh and moved to Rampur. Because of this constant moving, the children studied in different schools where the medium of instruction was different. At Rampur, for the first two years, the medium of instruction was Urdu but in ninth and tenth classes it was Hindi. All these moves and studying in different medium schools played influential roles with Daruwalla's life.

At the age of 21, Daruwalla appeared for the Indian Police Service examination and was selected. He served in the police for eleven years from 1958-63, and from 1968-74. The poet recalls his service as a police officer: "I had never thought of being in the police, yet I never resented it" (qtd. in Viswas, *Keki* 22). During his police service, the poet moved from one town to the other in Uttar Pradesh – Dehradun (1960-61), Meerut (1961-62), Agra (1963), Joshi Math (1963-66), Ranikhet (1966-68), Barabanki (1968-69), Agra (1969-70), Fatehgarh (1970-71), and Lucknow (1971-74). After various assignments as Superintendent of Police and Assistant Inspector General of Police, he moved to Cabinet Secretariat in New Delhi in 1974. Daruwalla worked mainly as an analyst on international affairs in the RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) under the Cabinet Secretariat. He rose to the rank of Special Secretary and was later promoted as Secretary and Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee in 1993. He had earlier done a stint as Special Assistant to the Prime Minister. He retired in January 1995, but worked as an Honorary Consultant to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India till 2000. He was also a Member of the National Commission for Minorities from 2011 to 2014.

Daruwalla's journey from one place to another since his childhood is important to place him as a poet of "in-betweenness" – a person "living on hyphens":

Living on hyphens
a man needs to anchor himself.
Between dream and landscape
and between dream and the dark blood
congealing on cobblestones;
between hierarchy and disorder;
.....

man must arrive
at some sort of understanding. ("Living on hyphens" 1-6, 9-10, *Night River*)

This hyphenated condition represents Daruwalla's state of in-betweenness. This in-betweenness is reflected in Daruwalla's poetry when he oscillates between his longing for 'lost' Persia and his Indian consciousness. This can also be found in Daruwalla when he finds himself alone, isolated figure in Indian society, and presents the poverty, hypocrisy, violence and terror in Indian society. His profession as a police officer in the Indian Police Service offered him various opportunities to work in so many parts of the country and met the rough realities of life which lead to crime, communal riots, and other similar events from which the poet draws substance for his poetry.

Though Daruwalla belongs to the Parsi community in India, he wants to present himself as an Indian poet writing in English. Daruwalla does not wish to be accepted as a Parsi poet. The Parsi community rarely figures in the works of Daruwalla. There are however some references to the Tower of Silence and a number of other similar Parsi symbols and metaphors. Landscape plays a very important role in his poetry. His verse reveals his skill in painting the rural landscape of Northern India; the hills, plains, rivers and seas of this region, therefore, acquire a prominent place in his poetry. However, there are elements of scepticism, and alienation from the Indian culture and society by virtue of his Parsi roots as well as his sense of belongingness to the Indian milieu and ethos. Vrinda Nabar in "Keki N. Daruwalla: Poetry and a National Culture" mentions a letter in which Daruwalla writes to her about his Parsi consciousness: "I have nothing interesting to say except that I am neither a good Parsi – hardly ever having lived like one, nor a Hindu or a Muslim. The same goes for culture – I am neither a Punjabi nor a Gujarati or a U.P. man. A bit of everything which really means nothing" (1).

Out of the four major Parsi poets – Kersi Kartrak, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel and Daruwalla, he is the only one who was married within the community. In his poetry he never talks of his religion the way Kersi Kartrak does – "it is not my religion anymore" (qtd. in Doctor, "The Parsi Quarter" 18); he does not deny his Parsi-ness as does Adil Jussawalla – "I don't even consider myself a Parsi" (qtd. in Doctor 21). There is no fear in his poetry of displacement after partition, as one finds in Adil Jussawalla's poem "The Exile's Story". There is no Gieve Patel-like irony of being deprived of the communal hatred between the Hindus and Muslims. Instead, one finds a keen curiosity in Daruwalla to know the distant past of his race, to retrieve the "remaining fragments".

Daruwalla's "Fire Hymn" (*Apparitions in April*, 1971) reveals the characteristic tension between milieu, experience and feeling that marks all Daruwalla's personal poems, poems in which he is an actor, not an onlooker. Fire is the element which the Zoroastrians worship as a symbol of light and purity and to which the Hindus consign their dead. Ironically, fire also happens to be one of the chief weapons of abrasive protest and vengeful communalism. Fire Hymn is the name by which the chief prayer of the Zoroastrians is known and juxtaposes two encounters with death, one as a child and the other upon the death of his own child in "Fire Hymn":

My father said, "You see those half-burnt fingers
and bone-stubs? The fire at times forgets its dead".
A Zoroastrian I, my child-fingers clenched
into a little knot of pain
.....
Broken, yet rebellious, I swore this time
to save it from the sin of forgiving. (8-11, 18-19)

A similar, though somewhat generalised, unease is apparent in "The Parsi Hell" (*The Keeper of the Dead*, 1982) replete with references to Zoroastrian belief but employing these to muse uneasily upon the socio-genetic fate of the Parsis in India:

.... Anxieties congregate
and claw at your dreams as they prospect for hell.
You will cross the hump and come to terms with fate
as you wind up naked at the dakhma well. Burdens
vary. Throughout life a man carries his death

even as a woman carries her child.

A Parsi carries his hell. (21-27)

Here, as in similar references to his Parsi roots, there seems to be a muted protest against the dissolution of a distinct identity as figured in the legend about the first Parsi immigrants to Sanjan adding a handful of sugar to a potful of milk betokening their effortless and smooth merging with the ruling powers. This sad history of the race is part of the consciousness of the Parsis and it is this 'Parsi-hell' that the poet carries within. In "Exile and Chinese Poets" (*Night River*, 2000) the poet, once again, obliquely, talks about himself:

They saw roads turn into rivers,
And at the frayed edge of winter after winter
wondered how many springs would
pass them by before they got back home. (46-49)

As 'home' is nowhere in sight, it is in the world of 'dreams' that the poet seeks refuge: "And those who are not exiled from their dreams / Are they really far from home?" (58-59). Daruwalla is aware that there are people who can live in two worlds:

they function under two skies;
a sky of feeling
for each dialect of love
they instinctively possess;
and a different sky of history
over each separate past. ("Living on Hyphens" 12-17)

In "Dareios" (*Night River*) again the poet goes into the past history of Persia. Professionally, Daruwalla was a part the administration of Indian government; therefore, he never feels completely alienated in the adopted country of his ancestors. But he cannot completely overcome the curiosity for and concern with the history of his race.

Daruwalla's recent collection of verses, *Fire Altar* (2013), is set in the "hoary past" – the Persian Empire of Cyrus and Darius who lived nearly 3,000 years ago, and their wars with, and eventual defeat by the Greeks – is testimony of this (Introduction, *Fire Altar* xiii). Though published recently, most of the poems were written back in the early 1990s in the span of 20-25 days, and came out in dribbles in literary journals abroad. A project that was meant to take the shape of a glossy history book on the Parsis, Daruwalla informs us in his introduction, ended up becoming a book of poems on the ancient Persian Empire, the birthplace of Zoroastrianism. *Fire Alter* celebrates the histories and legends of the grand Persian Empire, a phase of history barely glanced at in contemporary literature. In these verses, Daruwalla explores the histories of Darius, Cyrus, Xerxes and their courts, their battles, their triumphs and their losses. He ties in the narrative of the Persian Empire, with its history of tolerance and its significance as the birthplace of Zoroastrianism, with the more well-known stories of Alexander the Great and his Greek cohorts.

Daruwalla synthesises a great deal of Persian history and myth into verse. There are poems that speak of, or as, Cyrus the Great, Tomyris, King Jamshed, who is said to have ruled for over a 1000 years, Firdausi, the author of "Shahnama", the Persian book of kings, and Alexander, the Greek conqueror of Persia, the Arab invasion of Persia, the destruction of Zoroastrian fire temples, their persecution and subsequent migration. In addition to narrative poems about the past, the collection also contains, in what has become a signature style of the poet, ruminations on sites and landscapes. Pasargade and Persepolis, the Capitals, at different times, of the Persian Empire, are the subjects of a sonnet sequence each. "The sonnets are a takeoff on the fact that there is hardly anything there now to aid your imagination as you try and telescope into the past," he writes in the Introduction of *Fire Altar* (xv).

Though Daruwalla is a Parsi, he displays a peculiarly Hindu sensibility because he has spent most of the time with Hindus. It is for this reason that his "Pilgrimage to Badrinath" (*Apparitions in April*, 1971) is a poem of intensely feelings. Here inside the temple, the pilgrims forget the heat and the dust of the plains:

Swaying with the sistrums
forgotten are dust and heat, calloused feel and pain,
as dhoop with its smoke-tendrils aspires upwards

the arti whirls into arabesques of flame. (18-21)

The temple at high altitude in Badrinath inspires a peculiar feeling of benediction. This feeling finds a moving description in the concluding stanza of the poem: "Each in the cinder-falls finds his small nirvana!/Flame-drops and icon-wash fall on eager palms!/The heart in a moment's surrender to the God-feet" (22-24). The poem shows the fine frenzy with which Daruwalla describes the intensity of religious feeling. It also displays his great capacity for accurate description.

Daruwalla's early poetry was immediate, terse, and about rural north India where he was raised and lived. Although mostly invented in its details, it was sometimes based on his experience in the national police assigned to rural villages and cities. His use of location was complicated by a sense of a world without purpose and by scepticism both towards those he policed and those who governed. Bruce King, in *Rewriting India: Eight Writers* (2014), writes: "He begins as a Parsi outsider in northern India; the later man of the world is perhaps a more tolerant, amused version of the younger man who has since learned that history repeats itself and nothing really changes" (56-57).

Daruwalla's way of situating himself in relation to India is influenced by being a Parsi in predominantly Hindu-Muslim northern India, his alienation as an English speaker in Urdu and Hindi language schools, and his experience as a police officer. Daruwalla becomes a poet of rural north India putting its people, places, and customs on the map of modern Indian poetry. The poems have a strong feeling for location, social tensions, and cultural differences. Later he would reflect:

Looking back I find that the compulsion to mark out an identity for myself must have been very strong.... Just bringing an Indian sensibility to bear on a theme was not enough. The poem had to lie securely fastened to an Indian setting. . . . Most, if not all of this worked unconsciously within me. ("The Decolonised Muse: A Personal Statement", Web)

Daruwalla's first three volumes would reflect patrolling a riot-torn city, battles against criminal gangs, his knowledge of Muslim culture, trekking in the far north, and feeling distant from people and traditions to which he could not belong. Although part of the state apparatus, he was, as Bruce King says in "Daruwalla: Outsider, Sceptic and Poet" in *Critical Spectrum: The Poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla*, a "secular Parsi writing poetry in English, an act thought controversial, even anti-Indian, although Daruwalla could have written in no other language. He avoided fanciful flights of language and stuck to the plain and narrow path" (59). King also comments: "That Daruwalla's poems are concrete, precise and well-crafted while revealing so much tension and violence, might be explained in terms of his life and position in India. If marginality and being an outside-insider of ten is a source of conflict, tension and creativity, Daruwalla represents extreme marginality" (101). For someone whose father was a professor of English literature and who himself had started writing romantic poetry in college to spend his professional career in the police service is unlikely; his poetry, not unexpectedly, is filled with the tensions and ironies that result when someone of sensibility and moral awareness has to act brutally often to contain the violence of others. Bruce King points out this marginality of Daruwalla:

Thus the young alienated rebel, the unrooted Parsi, English-speaking outsider, ironically becomes the police officer, the symbol of social control whose violence and brutality are permitted in situations where those in power find it necessary. One can only speculate on the loneliness, the ambiguities, ambivalence, paradoxes, anxieties that must accompany sensitivity when survival, independence and duty require force and toughness, often at the service of the corrupt, unethical and ruthless, and when the social order itself is threatened by criminality and mob violence. (King, "Daruwalla: Outsider, Sceptic and Poet" 101-02)

In trying to reflect on his own experience as police official, Keki N. Daruwalla has pointed out many ironies of Indian life. He is authentic as much in his verse rhythms as in his ideas. His poetry is related to his environment. P. Lal in *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and Credo* writes that like other Indian poets, Daruwalla is fond of referring to "thatch, roof and cow dung cakes" (93). But, at the same time, he also writes about curfews, riots and racial violence of which he has first-hand experience. Daruwalla's poetry is characterised by unusual integrity because he has successfully reflected on his own authentic experience. He has always allowed his own original thoughts to discover their own peculiar pattern. Daruwalla has pointed out not only the

derivative and imitative nature of Indian culture, but he has been equally critical of other evils as well. This ability to speak out boldly and bluntly is the distinguishing feature of Daruwalla. The peculiar quality of Daruwalla as a poet lies in his ability in depicting the Indian reality by basing his poems on concrete experiences.

Indian setting is embodied in Daruwalla's poetic oeuvre. Moreover, it is something that the poet unconsciously assimilates. He accounts the relevance of an indigenous setting as a mark of his belonging to India. In "The Decolonised Muse", Daruwalla says: "Looking back I find that the compulsion to mark out an identity for myself must have been very strong. Since one was writing in English it should be all the more evident that it was an Indian writing. Just bringing an Indian sensibility to bear on a theme was not enough. The poem had to be securely fastened to an Indian setting (Web)". In Daruwalla's poetry, one clearly notices the poet's adherence to his belief. Very few poets have written with such blunt frankness as Daruwalla has done.

Thus, one finds Daruwalla's characters to struggle with their cultural and religious identity, and exhibit diasporic rootlessness due to transmigration. Apart from the individual culture, the poets project the Indian and the world culture: the values, the norms, the rituals, practices and philosophy. However, the portrayal is not a mere objective representation, but a critique as well as an extension of his subjective outlook towards the social reality. Daruwalla's presentation of society is the result of his first-hand experience with the social anomalies.

Thus, in Daruwalla's poetry, the explicit references to the beliefs and religious consciousness about Zoroastrianism are not very many and to highlight his Parsi identity may seem laboured. However, there is a subtle but distinct divide between the way Hindu, Islamic, and Christian images and events on the one hand and a steadfast Parsi consciousness on the other, operate in Daruwalla's poetry. This difference may be conveniently encapsulated by pointing out that the stance is observational and commentative in the one and experiential and questioning in the other. Considering the poetic corpus of the poet, one observes Daruwalla's poetry to be remarkable for its depth of feeling, profundity of thought, richness of subject-matter, originality of insight and precision of language. The bitter satiric tone with a perspective that is noteworthy for its intense awareness of the social and political positions. Daruwalla adopts the mode of narration, description, and dramatic monologue to evoke multi-layered contradictory realities of life, and presents its diverse cultural, historic and mythic landscapes.

Daruwalla's thematic canvas and subject matter which includes hope, search for identity, nostalgia, death, despair, violence, historic concern, love, Nature, poetic creation, religion, solitude, historical reinterpretation, corruption, social perversion, Indian English and Zoroastrian culture transcends the boundaries of India and stretches itself into the rest of the world. However, the attitudes of Daruwalla towards his situation in India are formed by the geographical mappings of his ancestral shores. For Daruwalla, there are memories which he traces, digging the layers of history. His early depiction of an India of violence, misery, superstition, and social and cultural differences was paralleled by a view of the world as drifting in space without purpose. A similar world view is present in the later poems, although the subject matter is varied in location, time, and situations. Whether poet, policeman, animal lover, map-maker, historian, man of the world, Daruwalla remains someone trying to balance and bring order, rationality, and at least a semblance of calm to conflicting passions and claims.

Note:

1. In this paper, I have quoted lines of Keki N. Daruwalla's poems from his *Collected Poems 1970-2005* published by Penguin Books India, New Delhi in 2006. The figure in the parenthesis refers to the line numbers or the section and line numbers of the poem.

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