



POETRY AS A SOCIAL COMMENTARY: A SELECTIVE STUDY OF KEKI N. DARUWALLA'S POETRY

Hari Sadhan Das

Department of English & Culture Studies
The University of Burdwan

ABSTRACT

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla (born 1937) is one of the prominent and leading figures in the contemporary Indian English Poetry. From the very childhood days, he has travelled a lot throughout India for his academic career. Again he joined Indian Police Service in 1958 and, therefore, he has come into contact with almost every part of India. His poetry, thus, speaks of his own feelings on various subjects such as corruptions, immorality, death, destruction, degradation, myth, history, politics, religion, law, practices, rituals etc. in Indian scenario. While dealing with these aspects, he had made a sharp commentary with a mark of accuracy and excellence with his unsentimental and realistic attitude. A selective study of his poetry would suffice to highlight this.

KEYWORDS: *Corruption, Immorality, Politics, Malpractices.*

INTRODUCTION:

In the field of Indian English Literature, Indian Poetry in English is the oldest form, and it began in the nineteenth century with the works by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. Gradually many poets like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu and other contributed a lot to give it a shape. In the twentieth century-modern-India a group of 'new poets' such as Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Dom Moraes, A.K. Ramanujan, Gieve Patel, A.K. Mehrotra, Shiv.K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar and many other appeared with a new poetic both in the form and in the theme. In this group another poet who has established himself as an important voice in Indian English poetry is Keki. N. Daruwalla.

In more than ten volumes of poetry Daruwalla expressed his personal response to the different aspects of society. His famous volume *The Keeper of The Dead* (1982) earned him the Sahitya Academy Award in 1984. Other volumes include *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *Landscapes* (1987), *A Summer of Tigers* (1995), *Night Rivers* (2000), *The Map Maker* (2002), *The Scarecrow and the Ghost* (2004) and *Collected Poems (1970-2005)*(2006). With a simple language though full of different images the poet makes commentary on multiple aspects of Indian society. That Daruwalla is a poet sincerely concerned more with the social issues in India is established by the assertion of R.N.Sinha in his "Introduction" to *The Poetry of Keki.N.Daruwalla: A Critical Study*. He said:

"From Under Orion (1970) to Night River (2000) each book presents itself as an argument against the contention that Daruwalla, after all, is not so socially committed as writers like Mulk Raj Anand."(14).

From the observation made by different critics it is really an inspiring matter to ponder about the social issues as pictured by the poet in his poetry and to highlight how the poet makes commentary on those issues.

First of all, this paper attempts to point out Daruwalla's commentary on corruption. Corruption pervades everywhere such as social, legal, political and even in religious field.



That is why A.N.Dwivedi says in his “Forward” to *The Poetry of Keki.N.Daruwalla: A Critical Study* “As a poet, Daruwalla raises his powerful voice against the rampant corruption and moral degradation of modern man.”.....(ix)

In the poem “*Food and Words, Words and Food*” from the volume *Apparition in April* there is ‘an old leader’ who is totally corruptive or rather the political system is wholly corruptive. Because the person who is presently a leader, ‘has gone thrice to jail, twice for homerule and once for sodomy’. In Indian political system no one bothers about the personal history of any leader or rather no proper investigation is made before selecting a person as a political leader. Not only that, even the legal system is so corruptive that for a political leader there is no punishment even after committing a series of heinous criminal activities. Thus, Daruwalla makes a sharp commentary on the political and legal system of post-independent India. Again in the poem “*Monologue in the Chambal Valley*” from *Under Orion*, one perceptive reader need not toil much to point out the evidences of corruption prevailing in the social and legal system. In this poem the chief bandit narrates how young girls from different corners of India are collected or rather stolen and are sold to some lascivious even older men to gratify their wild sexual desire.

“...Taut breasted ones from the hills
brown ones from Bihar-soft and over ripe
daughters of the desert, daughters of the forest tribe?
Where did we hot sell them?”(48)

The chief bandit has an informer who regularly informs him about the young girls and takes a share from him. Daruwalla very keenly attempts to high light the fact that the chief bandit and his informer are the representative of a large number of people living in post-independent twentieth century India where a group of people takes advantage of the poor people’s misery and extreme paucity. In this long poem the poet once again goes further to mark the loopholes in the legal system. The chief bandit once is caught by the police, and Daruwalla very daringly explores the corruptive legal system. Because the bandit confesses that he bribes the ‘Judge’s stenographer’ so that he does not ‘type the judgement on the given day’ and again to get an easy escape the bandit also bribes the warder to get ‘large-sized handcuffs’. Thus, in a series, the bandit bribes everyone and the people having responsibility to keep law and order take bribe and help the bandit-like criminal for an escape. These people are dishonest themselves and promote some other dishonest and criminal people to continue their corruptive activities. The poet, thus, hammers at the mentality of the so called dutiful persons.

Not only that, in the religious field also corruption is to its core as is penned by Daruwalla. In this regard R.N. Sinha’s comment is apt:

“*Corruption pervades religion too. A bastard can be legalized’ if the priest is bribed. A non-jew can be married to a jew if the priest is given money.*”(33)

Daruwalla does not overlook to comment on the so called educated civilized and cultured class of people in the society. He obliquely presents the contradictory behaviours of two classes of people in India. In the poem “*Pestilence*” from *Under Orion*, the common people from the country side are seen to carry ‘the frail bodies’ ‘frozen bodies’ ‘delirious bodies’ to the town on the shoulders by string beds to provide some medical treatments from the town hospital. The countryside is pestilence-stricken and the weather is excessively hot.

Yet they carry the dying people for recovery. But the doctors in the hospital begin to debate whether the dying patients suffer from ‘cholera’ or ‘diarrhoea’ or ‘gastroenteritis’ instead of providing them with minimal treatment:

“‘who says they have cholera?

They are down with diarrhoea

Who says it is cholera?

It is gastroenteritis’ ”

Thus, Daruwalla focuses both on the egoistic, irresponsible and callous class of urban people and on the simplistic, dutiful, altruistic, sympathetic and kind-hearted rural people. The poet, in this way slantingly comments on the contradictory mentality prevailing in the society.

The poet continues commenting on human quality like truthfulness by referring to a historical character namely king Ashoka in the poem “The King Speaks to the Scribe” in the volume *The Keeper of the Dead*. Though apparently the poem shows Daruwalla’s interest in Indian history and historical character, actually it attempts to highlight the poet’s strong commentary on the values of post-independent, twentieth century India where priority should be given more over human values than any other aspects. Because in the poem Daruwalla presents the historical king Ashoka confessing truthfully how cruelly he has wrought ruin to the innocent people of his neighbouring kingdom. He speaks to his scribe to engrave the hard truth about his earlier aggressive nature and, at the same time about his present suffering from qualms of conscience for such devastating activity. For this, he earnestly wishes to have an atonement of his grief-stricken tattered soul. Daruwalla, by pointing out this reaction of a historical king wishes that truthful confession and love for peace fraternal affection are very much necessary in the twentieth century modern Indian society.

Daruwalla is daringly critical about the moral degradation, dilapidation and decadence of Indian society in the twentieth century. In his poem “Monologue in the Chambal Valley” he captures such kind of evidences. In the poem the chief bandit confesses that they sold young unmarried girls to the old and rubbish people. They sold them in some fairs or in cattle markets. This is really a gross instance of moral degradation and decadence in Indian society where young girls were considered as non-human like other animals or rather as lumps of flesh for the gratification of some rich people’s perverted sexuality:

“where did we not sell them?

In holy fairs, in cattle markets

To old men, girls younger than their daughters.(48)

Again the chief bandit himself once gratifies his sexuality with a young girl and on the next day he sells her to another person. Thus, the poet comments on the extremity of immorality and decadence in the society. The poet does not stop here. Daruwalla, being an IPS officer has faced so many odd incidents and observed so many odd social activities very closely. With an objective attitude the poet draws the horrible picture of a city during a curfew in the poem “Curfew in a Riot-torn City” in the volume *Under Orion*. Fear, faithlessness, suspicion, hatred are predominant throughout the city. Military forces and police officers are seen to march busily to keep up the law and order of curfew. But at the end of the poem, as the poet describes, ‘two men climb into a rickshaw’ at dusk and after getting down they brutally kill the rickshaw puller out of nothing. Thus, Daruwalla point blankly

comments on the inhumanity, moral dilapidation and decadence of Indian society when common people are prone to murder and bloodshed out of nothing. That is why the poet astonishingly questions at the concluding lines of the poem:

*“What the hell it is, you wonder;
Curfew or contagion?”(43)*

In this way, Daruwalla’s commentary is not limited only to the Indian society, it reaches the status of making a general statement that when a society gets morally degraded and dilapidated, no law and order can protect the values prevailing in the then society; human beings lose their all good qualities and become insane and wild.

Limitless lasciviousness criticized by Daruwalla in his poems “The Unrest of Desire” “The son speaks to the Rake” in the volume *The Keeper of the Dead*. While in the former poem a very rich man is in an illegal relationship with a house wife having two children; he can drive with his own car and can spend nights after nights with her. Not only that, even he unhesitatingly makes sexual relationship with so many women. In the latter poem also, the dead rake has spent his whole life by killing people, drinking wine and enjoying young ladies as his son says in his monologue:

*“...Were they referring
To your prowess with the gun, the bottle or in the bed?”(175)*

Daruwalla does not abandon to criticize the superstitions pervaded among the common people of India. In “The Epileptic, AT BANSA” from some volume, a huge number of diseased people are seen standing in a queue to have the blessing of a ‘maulavi’, and after a long time he appears murmuring some notes from the Quran. Then ‘with a black finger end he smears mascara on’ a girl’s eyelash and asserts that her problems are solved. In this way all the diseased people go back home with an assurance that they are free from diseases. Daruwalla as a social critic points out the superstitious blind belief ever present in Indian society where a group of hypocrites takes advantage of the uneducated common people’s ignorance and innocence.

CONCLUSION: -

Daruwalla stands unique and distinctive as a poet much more concerned with social criticism of his time. That is why most of his poetry deals with various aspects of society and with the use of satire and irony of the poet criticizes Indian society again and again. Though some other Indian poets concentrate on social issues, Daruwalla’s position is remarkably higher than them. In this regard Madhusudan Prasad’s comment is apt and appropriate:

“As for social criticism he indisputably scores over other fellow poets... who though have attempted social criticism in their poetry, lack adequate social insight, basic boldness and above all a sense of consistency he is endowed with”.(62)

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