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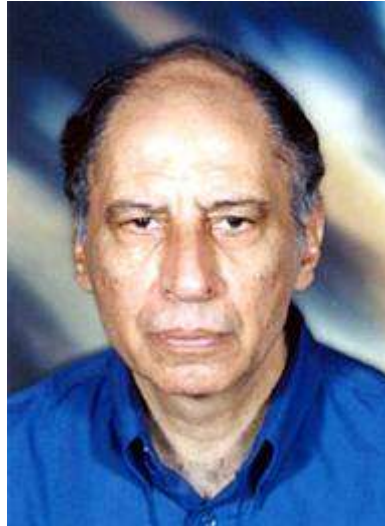
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An Appreciation of K.N. Daruwalla's *Notes*

P. Velmurugan, M.A., M.Phil.



Keki Daruwalla

Daruwalla's Poetry and His Goals

Keki. N. Daruwalla is interested not only in landscapes but also in characterization. Rabindra K.Swain reports, "Darawalla is a master in character sketching, and this art has made him different from his peers in Indian English Poetry. No other poet before him thus far has excelled him in this art" (p.172).

Daruwalla's poetry is always about the external world. The four images used by him in his poem "Notes" prove this point. Rini Chakravarty writes, "His poetry is always Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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outward moving. The socio-cultural and political dimension of life is always reflected in this poetry”(p.81). Poetry is his soul and heart.

As Daruwalla himself believes that “poetry has to be a social gesture, because on occasions I feel external reality bearing down on me from all sides with a pressure strong enough to tear the ear-drums”. His poetry has social relevance. Society mattered much to him. The society is his in special focus in his poetry.

Is Daruwalla an escapist by narrating the social disparities in his poetry? Or is it a means of diversion? No. Prasad replies, “Daruwalla counts it as essential, part of the body of society so that it can function as a witness, an aesthetic of revival, a force for change, reorientation, awareness and as part of a tougher and deeper humanism whose concern is to create grounds for future betterment”(p. 19). Through this poem “Notes”, Daruwalla wants a change in the society, a society without starvation, free supply of kerosene.

Do poets have multiple responsibilities? Yes. Madhusudan Prasad writes, “The poet has intellectual, moral and social responsibility which he cannot afford to abdicate in the face of all social experience” (p. 18). To him Daruwalla is “essentially a fierce castigator of the socio-political-cultural reality of contemporary India” (p. 18). Keki never shirked himself of his poetic responsibility.

“When I Move out of the country [India] I can’t write poetry” thus spoke Daruwalla in an interview in 1995. Like Nissim Ezekiel, he too felt safe in India to write Poetry.

The Poem Notes –Four Images

Daruwalla has given the title ‘Notes’ to the poem under discussion here. The poem is included in the collection titled *Collected Poems 1970-2005* (2007). The title refers to the notes which he has taken during his sojourn in India. The poet has a social consciousness and that’s why he penned this poem to awaken the social consciousness in the people. Hence he satirizes the society.

Four images have been used to present his point of view (i) A bread bus (ii) selling kerosene to a crowd (iii) a poor woman jumping into the well and (iv) (in lieu of red light area) the river bank is used as red light area.

A Bread-bus!

The first image is that of a bread bus. Can ever there be bread bus? Yes, it is possible in his imagination. It halts. Can ever its bumper and mudguard be delicious? Mudguard and bumper will be in iron only. But here he imagines it to be in bread. Is it not delicious instantly? Doesn’t it bring water in the mouth of the readers? Though he portrays different images in the remaining verse-paragraphs, he portrays this one with the intention to emphasize that food is the main thing which is needed for every one for existence. Can anyone live without bread (food)? No, he emphasizes here the need for food to quench everyone’s hunger.

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Crowds in Ration Shops

The second image is that of a street scene where kerosene is sold to a crowd. It may be about a fair price shop where kerosene is sold to ration card holders. Generally, if it is a ration shop, there will be much noise among the people who throng to buy provisions. There will be altercations also between the buyer and the seller regarding the weight and getting the correct change.

Hoarding in Times of Scarcity

The third stanza is about hoarding. When he writes “No end to hoarding”, it (stealing) continues. Though Daruwalla worked in the Police department, he couldn’t do anything solid to stop this social evil. As an individual he may not do anything harmful. But the angry people in a crowd can do anything, when they don’t get kerosene for their ration cards.

The crowd may have wanted to loot the money and so when they broke the lockers to open, it was a different kind of shock, for, there was no money in it but a brief case full of rice! It shows how rice has become a costly provision for many people. It also reflects the societal condition. Generally, currency notes and gold jewels will be there in the lockers but here it is a contrast – it was full of rice. So, rice has become dearer than gold!

Suicide by a Deserted Woman with Her Children – Jumping to Death into a Neighbourhood Well

The fourth stanza is about a poor woman with a child tucked in her each armpit. She jumps into the well since she doesn’t know what to do with her children. Her husband had run away from the family. It shows how he is an escapist and she (his wife) is helpless with her children – no income for her and no money to look after the family and hence she took this fatal decision of jumping into a well with her two children.

A Running Away Husband, Stealing and Selling

The fifth stanza is about her husband who was not family conscious. He ran away with whatever utensils were there in the house; later with her silver anklets and lastly cattle also. Generally, for the stolen articles and jewels, one can’t get much market value money. The poet records it in the following lines “A pregnant cow was sold for seven millet cakes” (p. 134).

Normally, a cow will be sold for Rs.20000/-. If it is pregnant it will cost more. Roughly Rs. 25000. But here the husband had sold it for seven millet cakes. Even if one millet cake costs Rs.10/- it may fetch Rs 70 only. So, the pregnant cow was sold for Rs.70 only. Is it not a great loss to her family? This shows his weak mindedness. Thus, the poet satirizes the people without any family and social consciousness.

A Touch of Irony, Compassion and Helplessness

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M. Prasad comments about this poem, “Daruwalla with his characteristic touches of irony deals realistically with famine, juxtaposing the rich people’s mean practices of hoarding grains with the poor people’s utter helplessness” (p.29). Is this not an attack on the hoarders, blackmarketers and rich people, and an indirect appeal to reform / change themselves?

Creating a Red-light Area Where There is None!

The last stanza is about the pitiable plight of poor girls. Many families starve and fortunately or unfortunately there is no red-light area where these young girls can be sold. This shows how that society has not been touched by the modern area – ‘red light area’

There is no red-light in the town
Where starving daughters can be sold (p.135)

Soft and Volcanic Ash – The River-bed Imposed Prostitution

The river bank comes to their rescue – “its sand soft as volcanic ash”. Does it mean that the river bank is used as (open air toilet) or open air red light area during the dark hours? Its sand can be soft but how can it be volcanic ash? Is it because of the sex-hungry males, females using the river bank as their bed for sexual activities? Thus here also with social consciousness the poet sketches the starving daughter’s plight of starving due to food or starving for sexual contact is left to the imagination of the readers. Anyhow, it may refer to both literal starving and the metaphoric sexual starving. It is there in the young girls this is part of ‘Hunger 74’ portrayal.

Savage Poetry

Bruce King while commenting on Daruwalla’s poetry writes, “This is a savage poetry, tough, ready to strike, often a record of violence in the self and in society but it is an adult poetry of someone who has disciplined himself of the moral ambiguities and irresolvable conflicts of the human condition” (p.47).

About the structure of the poem, it has 6 stanzas. The first 5 stanzas have 3 lines in each stanza; the last stanza has 4 lines. There is no uniform length in the verse line. They are of various lengths. Line 5 has just 2 words “now aesthetic”, but line 9 has 9 words “her husband had run away with their last meal”. Bruce King writes that Daruwalla’s “syntax is taut and economical. The sentence compresses more than one idea” (p.47).

Thus, even a casual reading of Daruwalla’s poem “Notes” reveals the realistic portrayal of the present day society. It is also reformative, ironic and impressive, curt and caustic with a “psychological vision” (Bruce King p.47).

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