

Sensitive Relationships, Subtle Satire and Startling Irony: Keki N Daruwalla's Short Fiction

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Abstract

This research paper presents a synoptic sketch of Keki N Daruwalla's the literary oeuvre and discusses his contribution to the genre of Indian Writings in English.

Keywords: Keki N Daruwalla, Indian Writings in English

Well known for his poetic compositions, Keki N Daruwalla needs no introduction to readers of Indian English literature. With his very first volume of poetry *Under Orion*, published in 1970, he established himself as a poet. Daruwalla got the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Keeper of the Dead* in 1984 and The Commonwealth Poetry Prize for Asia for his volume *Landscapes* in 1987. Lawrence Sail (2007), a poet himself, sums up Daruwalla's oeuvre as:

Over nine books and more than three decades, Daruwalla's poetry has journeyed a long way both formally and thematically. However, it retains certain strong distinguishing characteristics: an ironic stance, an evocation of the multi – layered contradictory realities of Indian life, a preoccupation with diverse cultural, historic and mythic landscapes, a terse, vigorous and tensile style, supple imagism,

sustained narrative drive, an ability to segue between metrical patterns and free verse, and a capacity to combine an epic canvas with a miniaturist's eye for detail.

However, he also experimented with prose fiction as early as 1970s and wrote short fiction including a novella set in Latin America, concurrently with poetry, though his first volume of short fiction, *Sword and Abyss*, appeared in 1979. Then two more volumes came out, *The Minister for Permanent Unrest and Other Stories* (1996) and *A House in Ranikhet* (2003). In 2009 he published his first novel *For Pepper and Christ*. J. P. Dutta's Bollywood film *Refugee* is attributed to have been inspired by one of his stories, based around the Great Rann of Kutch titled "Love Across the Salt Desert" which was also included as one of the short stories in the Standard XII English text book of NCERT. Later, in 2011, twenty short stories, some old and some new, were published by Penguin in the volume *Love Across the Salt Desert*. This was followed by *Islands* (2014), *Daniell comes to Judgement* (2017).

The excellence of his poetry and his fame as a poet eclipsed his popularity as a writer of fiction. In an interview to Arundhati Subramaniam he remarked, "But poems come slowly now. My main interest is in fiction and yet poetry tears me away from it." The mere mention of his name in literary and academic circles, instantly conjures up an image of a sensitive, accomplished and exquisite poet. Therefore his world of fiction remained neglected by critics and is yet to be explored by lovers of literature. In his volume of short fiction, *A House in Ranikhet*, his range of themes is extensive, dealing with the unraveling of myth, corruption endemic in power, theological intricacies, Portuguese missionaries, history etc. He is concerned with what lies behind the façade. His prose is witty, vivid, vibrant, exuberant and fraught with humor, irony and intensity of feelings. His characters are susceptible to circumstances and are sometimes overcome by them. He observes with the keen insight of a policeman, writes with the intensity of a poet, fiction that is thoroughly poetic. This paper

proposes to examine his volume of short fiction, *A House in Ranikhet*, to show that his fiction matches with the merits of his poetry. Commenting upon the art of writing poetry or fiction, Daruwalla says in an interview to *Outlook*, "The art and inner stream and your creative instincts are the same whether you dabble in fiction or you dabble in poetry."

The volume contains sixteen stories in all. With deft strokes, Daruwalla paints a wide range of themes, locales, characters and concerns in the portrait of India and Indians which he presents in this volume. "In my profession I got to travel a lot both in India and abroad. My stories and my poetry is rooted in the soil and it reeks of the soil the hard external reality of people, especially in India," says Daruwalla in an interview to the *Outlook*. In terms of time, the stories span from the ancient Indian period to the contemporary times; in terms of locales he maps the far flung Hellas, Troy or Manchester, as well as our ever familiar India, right from the wave-swept coasts of the south to the fern clad foothills of the Himalayas. Among those dealing with the ancient times are two stories, *The Ford* and *Yavana Cometh*, which are about Alexander's invasion of India. They depict the anticipation of Alexander's attack. They reveal the reaction of ruling royalty on the one hand and a poor commoner on the other, to this impending threat to their independence. Both stories display Daruwalla's deep insight into history and his dexterity in viewing it from a common man's eyes. Another story, *Islands (From the Chronicles of Julio Esteban)*, about the Portuguese missionaries in South India, is almost like a parable. Like his novel *For Pepper and Christ* this story is also set in the 15th century, when Vasco da Gama's voyaged to India for the spice trade, when commerce and exploration were synonymous. The story portrays the problems and perils these missionaries faced in spreading their faith and enlightening the ignorant islanders. It also shows a very human side of these men who toiled tirelessly for their faith, and is a fine blend of historical fact with imaginative fiction. Jane Bhandari aptly points out, "Tales borrowed from other

cultures were absorbed into the body of legend, enriching the tapestry, giving it a touch of gold, as it were.”

In an interview to Ambika Ananth, Daruwalla observed, “... the English poets are criticized for not relating to contemporary reality, as they should and they are sniped at by Indian language poets.” However this does not hold true as not only his poems, but also his stories are a candid critique on contemporary India. There is a small cluster of stories which revolve round a group of characters in Ranikhet, a small and serene hill station at the foot of the Himalayas. The central characters in this group are Freny Batlibhoy, the owner of the house in Ranikhet, Cynthia Craig an Englishwoman who is befooled into buying Freny’s house, Dr Tripathi, the homeopath who sells Freny’s house by fraud and Freny’s relative and a professor of history, Rustam Eruch Danjishaw. This group reveals some stark realities of our society through subtle satire and startling irony. *A House in Ranikhet* depicts the rampant corruption in our society. It shows how frauds prosper and simple people suffer. *The Story of the Seminar* makes a mockery of media travails. It shows how mistaken impressions conveyed by them to the masses lead to misunderstandings and misfortunes. It also exposes in its wake the hollowness of our education system. The other three stories in this group, *The History Professor*, *Of Mother and Of Michel Raynal*, portray among other things, human relationships. *The History Professor* reveals the state of bankruptcy in which small states and principalities found themselves due to the wayward ways of nobility. It also considers husband - wife and mother - son relationships against this backdrop. This story handles sensitively the subject of futile and frustrating relations between a wayward and irresponsible gambler Vijay Singh of a ‘rajwada’ in Rajasthan and his pretty wife Princess Laxmi. *Of Mother* touchingly reminisces the narrator Freny’s mother and her childhood spent at Junagadh. It shows her strong bonds with her parents and her siblings. It is a realistic account of quarrels between school-going siblings and insignificant anxieties and curiosities which

seem so significant at that age. It also prominently portrays the times of partition and the trauma and turbulence in its wake, experienced by those who were not directly and deeply touched by violence but did get scarred anyway. *Of Michel Raynal* is another story of this group which deals with human relationships as well as the eternal search for truth, solace or the Divine, whatever we may choose to call it. Like Cynthia Craig, Michel Raynal has also come to India with a purpose. He tries everything in his quest for truth and solace --- gods, god men, temples, ashrams, astrology etc. He even gets married, but breaks up soon after. He is back to “homespun kurtas, sandals, Vedas, yoga, Yajnavalkya, the Himalayas, the Gurus.” (111) Despite this, “... there is no law which says that disillusion can’t get you by the balls in Bharat Varsh, and things of Bharat Varsh.” Michel Raynal is no exception. Therefore he is disillusioned by all these and finally finds that satisfaction and solace stem from simple things in life; even marriage can make one merry, provided it is with the right person.

The three stories *Life in a Big City*, *A Job Like Any Other*, and *Monologue in Harsinghpur Golac* can be grouped together, for they present the perceptions of a policeman with a poet’s heart. They deal with the world of crime, but with a difference. All forms of creativity and media have presented the conflict between criminals and police; sometimes criminals are shown as having evil inherent in them and sometimes they are a product of overwhelming circumstances; even policemen are shown as inhuman people, involved in crimes themselves or conversely as ideal heroes. These stories are different and unique for they show petty policemen as vulnerable human beings, equally subjected to perils as any commoner or criminal, and puppets in the hands of politicians and powerful seniors. In *Life in the Big City* inspector Trijuginarain Misra is caught in a conflict between the Chief Minister and the Governor. To make things worse Thakur's idol is stolen, whom the inspector considered his saviour. If God betrayed him, who would save him from the mess in which he

found himself for doing his duty sincerely and honestly. The poor man cries in desperate exasperation like any other victim of society:

"Thakur," he railed at Lord Shiva, "What have you done? What have I done to deserve this? Why have you let me down? Show me a way out!" (141)

In *Monologue in Harsinhpur Gola* Sub-Inspector Ramteerth Singh has a tough time investigating the murder of Lalwan Gadarya. He "had no time to have pooja done in new house and feed some poor *bhookha* Brahmin,"(165) or "to sprinkle Ganges water on floor and walls" (165) of his new house. The murder demands immediate investigation. He doesn't know how to handle Ramkali who, after the murder, "has lost her senses, including that of shame." (168) He is as nonplussed as any other ordinary man would have been: "No goonda can curse the way she is cursing, Huzoor. Colour comes to face just to hear her, ear lobes turn red." (168) He looks up to his superior for guidance, which he doesn't get, as expected; yet he is forced to say:

Very good, Sir. SP's orders are clear and I have clearly understood them. I should visit scene and bring to bear on it my twenty-seven years of experience. Very explicit, Sir. SP's instructions are most enlightening.(169)

Discipline and decorum of duty demand this. The third monologue in this story presents an introspective criminal Harak Singh, who lands up in 'misadventure' and like Sub-Inspector Ramteerth Singh, finds himself in a mess. Like the inspector he introspects: "Harak Singh, where the hell have you landed. What kind of mess have you got yourself into? And for what?"(170) *A Job Like Any Other* shows how an accomplice to a crime is a part of it much against his will, and is helpless to prevent it from happening. He is an unwilling witness, a passive participant, and in the end after the crime, the author says "the young watcher sobbed. And he sobbed." (156) All the three stories present an ugly face of society, where reality cannot be relished and characters, both criminals and policemen, are in the grip

of grim irony. Since Daruwalla was a police officer by profession, he was able to see the seamier side of life the way no other story writer was able to perceive or faithfully depict; but as he confesses to Ambika Ananth, “a documentary depiction, would have been too brutal.”

The rest of the five stories are very moving and leave a lasting impression. They deal with different facets of human relationships, and *Trojan Horse* is even about human-animal relationship. It shows how animals forge, value and cherish emotional bonds and are disturbed and dejected when they disrupt. When the master Sabur deserts the Trojan horse he is shattered and reflects:

There can never be an escape from what has happened. Don't try to get rid of it or wish it away. Live with the past, it's a nice thing to live with. (56)

Perhaps he feels the poignancy of Sabur's love for Ilione much more than the lover himself. He was loyal to the lovers and risks his own life to save Sabur. But for his valour, Sabur would have been shredded to smithereens. In return Sabur deserts him. *The Trojan Horse* is also a love story fraught with dangers and exciting escapades. Like most love stories it neither eulogizes love nor ends in a tragedy of the immortal lovers. The lover surrenders to fate and states prosaically: “There is nothing like a murderous chase by three knife-welding things to change your perspectives on romance.” (54) His dreams turn to disillusionment and he accepts: "Distance sets in like a season - winter this time." (54) Once the sweetness of love turns sour, bitterness and sadness sets in. He decides:

I might as well go. Smyrna suddenly loses its appeal. The dust and the scent of the road call. And I leave my regrets behind.... (54.)

An Ache in the Arms is also a love story different from the run-of-the mill sort. Unlike the *Trojan Horse*, it is set in the familiar present day urban India. It is different because love here is not expressed verbally. It sprouts unseen, grows gradually and engulfs stealthily. It is not the mundane variety founded on physical passion but the gentle, caring, understanding

kind of intensity which is not needed to be expressed, so as to be felt. The lovers, Surekha and the narrator, "Both are in the middle of the noonday of their lives." (32) In the process of saving Surekha from an accident the narrator hurts himself. Surekha is saved, but he develops 'an ache' in his arm. Both the lovers share a similar fate. A strange invisible bond binds them. In contrast to the urban love story of *An Ache in the Arms* the first monologue of *Monologue in Hasinghpur Gola* reveals a relationship between two rural and illiterate lovers, where the woman is very young (only fifteen) and the lover Vedraj Lekhpal is thirty five, perhaps forty. Ramkali leads a life of utter wretchedness with her retarded husband Lalwan. She manages to pull on somehow but is shattered after her child dies of pox. Then Vedraj walks into her life 'casually'. He comes as a breath of fresh air and brings with him bits of a better life. For sometime, Ramkali 'lives'. They brave many pressures from the society too, but ultimately she is forced to return to her retarded and epileptic husband. Her relationship though not sanctioned by the society has a certain air of sanctity about it. She is hurt and heart-broken. She allows Vedraj to go to marry his brother's widow. She sees tension writ large on his face and understands his inner turmoil: "Anyway, what else could he have told me? You can't tell someone you are glad to be rid of her, not after you have lived with her for some years." (164) After Vedraj leaves, 'her senses and sense of shame' also leave with him. In a strange sort of way, Ramkali and the Trojan horse seem alike. Both are discarded by those whom they held dear.

Going, the first story in the volume also depicts strong bonds of love, but of a different kind. It shows the love between a grandmother and a granddaughter. It describes the last days of the grandmother, just before her death when the granddaughter visits her. It is a touching account of how the both of them miss each other's birth and death by a few moments. Grandma leaves the room for a few moments and the narrator is born; the narrator leaves the room for a few moments and Grandma dies. The story does not portray a sequence

of actions but a situation. *The Jogger* takes us to a locale abroad, on the East Anglian Coast, describing the plight of an Indian doctor with a passion for jogging. The doctor is forbidden to use the jogging track meant for athletes, so he takes to the road, where he meets with an accident. Though he is rendered disabled, yet his spirit remains strong. *The Retired Panther* is the story of a disabled boy, who emerges stronger in spirit after misfortune, like the jogging doctor. He loses his job because of the panther's attack on the herd he tends. But he becomes strangely eloquent and expressive after the incident. He mimes and conveys the happening to everyone.

Irony reigns supreme in these stories. The end of *The Jogger* is very sudden unexpected and ironic. It is much like the endings in O Henry's stories. Though the condition of the doctor, that he is disabled, is described in the beginning, a reader becomes aware of its relevance only in the end, and then the irony of the situation hits hard. This also holds true for the Trojan Horse. Irony pierces the sensibility when one realises that the horse risks death and saves the man, but the man saves himself and deserts the horse. In *The House in Ranikhet*, the minister for justice turns out to be the very fraud against whom Freny goes to make a complaint to the minister. In *Of Mother* the vultures that the mother always wants to drive away are not to be found when she dies and they are needed. Similarly Inspector Ramteerth Misra finds to his utter dismay that the very idol to whom he has been praying for protection cannot protect itself and is stolen. Similarly the other stories are heavily laden with irony. It is not the loud and apparent kind of irony, but that which creeps in stealthily and ultimately overwhelms you completely.

Despite the undercurrent of irony that runs through his stories, they are immensely enjoyable. "One of the hazards of a single-author collection is monotony. But in this work, Keki N. Daruwalla offers such a variety of voices that boredom is kept away," says Shashi Deshpande. Being seasoned with pathos, as well as spiced generously with humour they are

extremely palatable to the mind and heart alike, leaving a sweet-sour after taste, which is pleasant to the senses for a prolonged period. Humour arises sometimes from the observations of the narrator and sometimes from the language the characters speak. Have a sample from *Monologue in Harsinghpur Gola*. Inspector Ramteerth Singh says: “One thing I have learnt, Sir. Whenever husband is old and wife young, husband ugly and wife beautiful, a policeman should be ready to be introduced to Mr. Adultery and Sir Homicide.”(166) Comparing allopathic and homeopathic doctors the author observes, “...a homeopath does become a confidant and a counselor of sorts, a position an allopath would find himself uncomfortable in. Moreover, businesslike as always, a doctor would have examined three patients in that time, made three times the money and prescribed an over-dose of antibiotics to the lot of them.”(62) Commenting upon Vijay Singh’s behaviour in a condition of near bankruptcy he says, “If you are not well off you want to show off.”(78) Very often the way English is used by the characters is the source of much mirth. Consider for instance, in *A House in Ranikhet* Dr. Tripathi, the homeopath frequently says "the same, the same"(63) to emphasize or to agree. Again in *Monologue in Harsinghpur Gola* Inspector Ramteerth Singh says to the SP: “SP is right and I am sorry to be translating and explaining such simple things to such a complex person.”(169) Or this: “Beg pardon, Sir. I am not beating in bush, as SP says .About bush, sorry, Sir. In fact I have been coming to point for last half hour.”(169)

The author's forte being poetry, his prose often breaks into poetic passages. The stories often begin with a very poetic passage which provides either a background to the story or sets the moods for it. In the very first story *Going*, the narrator describes the aging of her grandmother thus:

She was much frailer than I had anticipated, the bone working its way out of flesh and skin. Time seemed to have burrowed into her checks and turned them

hollow and her breath wheezed in and out of her tired lungs with some difficulty. (2)

Or consider the passing of time being described thus: "Time doesn't tick away here, it ripens, like evening light turning to amber. It slurs past like river water flowing over a pad of moss."(13) In *An Ache in the Arms*, the narrator frequently remembers Surekha, for whom he has developed an intense fondness: "For an instance, she was a candle on his window-sill. Then fog and the dark took over."(31) When talking of his mother in *Of Mother*, the narrator says: "Pleasure could flicker on her face fleetingly like the light of a moving car, low on battery, on a glass window."(29) In the story *Of Michel Raynal* he observes, "The jungles are more or less the same and concrete has not eaten into the landscape."(106); "We sat on cane chairs in the veranda, hearing the breeze rummaging through the cedars."(113) Natives of an island are described vividly in *Islands*: "Flesh had disappeared from their buttocks and shoulders, and the little that was left hung from their frames like wet scarves from a clothesline."(188) The prose abounds in alliterating language and is rich in sense-stirring images, which leave an impression that life has been observed from very close quarters and very intently too.

Reviewing Daruwalla's volume of short stories Sreekumar Varma says:

What do you expect when a poet tells stories? Heightened qualities of sound, rhythm and song, words wrapped in the mist of a poetic imagination? But it isn't words alone that benefit from a poetic sensibility. ideas and their associations, a sharpening of the collective memory, an insight into history as well as ordinary things that happen to us---the poet-storyteller is blessed with a different perception altogether.

Praising his short fiction, Namita Gokhle voices much the same sentiment, when she says, that the " ... sensitive historical and cultural understanding combined with Daruwalla's ear

for enigmatic silence make this collection of poetic stories a truly valuable contribution to Indian literature.”

Reading Daruwalla's stories is like observing the setting sun. An observer is so lost in the beauty of the sunset that he is unconscious of the movement of the sun; once it is finally gone over the horizon completely, then he comes back to himself and realizes the experience. Similarly, a reader gets lost in the slow unfolding of events and situations in his stories laced with touching pathos, subtle humour and fine poetic sensibility and language. Once the end gets over the reader finds himself in the grip of grim irony, reflecting on the realities of life.

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