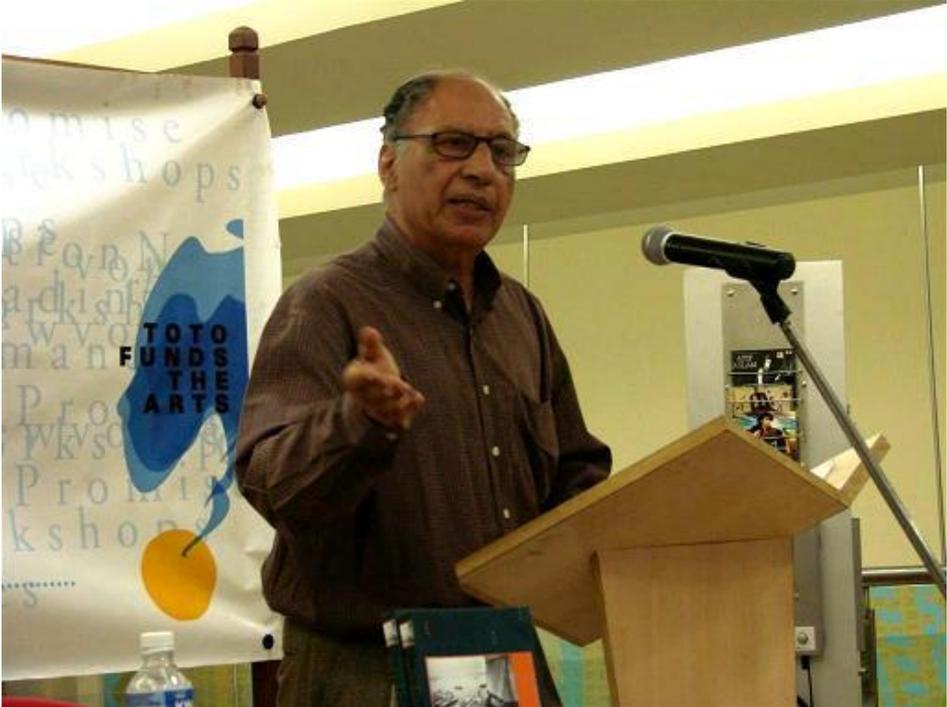


The Poetic Cosmos and Craftsmanship of a Bureaucrat Turned Poet: An Interview with Keki N. Daruwalla

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Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla (1937-) occupies a distinctive position in the tradition of Indian English Poetry. The poet's inimitable style, use of language and poetic ambience is fascinating. Daruwalla was born in pre-partition Lahore. His father Prof. N.C. Daruwalla moved to Junagadh, and later to Rampur and Ludhiana where the poet did his masters in English literature at Government College, Ludhiana (affiliated to Punjab University). In 1958, he joined the Indian Police Service and served the department remarkably well until 1974. An analyst of International relations in the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), he retired as Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat and as Chairman JIC (Joint

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Intelligence Committee). In 1970, he published his first volume of poetry *Under Orion* and has subsequently published several more: *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *The Keeper of the Dead* (1982), *Landscapes* (1987), *A Summer of Tigers* (1995), *Night River* (2000), *Map Maker* (2002), *The Scarecrow and the Ghost* (2004), *Collected Poems 1970-2005* (2006), *The Glass blower – Selected Poems* (2008) and *Fire Altar: Poems on the Persians and the Greeks* (2013). He has five collections of short stories and two novels. *For Pepper and the Christ* (2009) is a significant novel while *Sword & Abyss* (1979), *The Minister for Permanent Unrest & Other Stories* (1996) and *Love Across the Salt Desert* (2006) are notable short story collections. A Sahitya Akademi Award winner in 1984 for his poetry collection *The Keeper of the Dead*, he received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for Asia for his volume *Landscapes* in 1987. Nissim Ezekiel avers that Daruwalla's poetry is "a fine blend of freedom and discipline, metrical rhythms and a word-order of prose, compact, harsh, alliterative phrasing and relaxed movement" (Sinha x). Depth of feelings, originality of insight and theme, free verse and symmetrically arranged lines and precision are the salient features of his creativity.

Daruwalla portrays the socio-political and cultural ethos and concurrently blends Romantic, Victorian and Modern sensibilities, which make his verse both local and global. P.C.K. Prem rightly observes that Daruwalla

is inclined to Indian culture and heritage but interest in English culture and language remains intact and he turns elitist, which might appear snobbish. His unconscious penchant for English style and attitude does not irritate but adds colour to poetry. The poet graciously moves from one thought to another and in the process, history and myths intermingle. He is striking and authoritative without being overwhelming. He impresses with the originality of thought-communication, which at times, does not seem quite fresh but the tonal and sound emphasis makes it natural and quite refreshing. (Qtd. in Dominic 62)

Daruwalla draws images from nature and natural settings that guide him to unique enlightenment. In *Winter Poems*, *Map Maker*, *Apparition in April*, *Night River* and *Crossing of Rivers* he reveals chaste sublimity, compassion and malevolent aspects of nature. Quite appropriately, he takes up puzzles of identity crisis, rootlessness, death, despair, socio-cultural ethos and corruption, religious and political hypocrisy, violence, poetic creation, symbolic interpretations, poetic diction, dramatic forms, historical allusions, Indian philosophy, Islamic religious practices, man's contemporary anxieties and the poor social status of women.

This interview was conducted via email in 2016.

Sir, kindly tell us how an IPS and Intelligence Officer turned into a prolific poet, short story writer and novelist? Has your experience of working as an administrator helped you while writing creative pieces, mainly poetry?

Each individual has multiple identities. Most poets today are University professors. What is so special about teaching bored students that makes them better poets than doctors or police officers or civil servants? I was lucky to have a father who was a Professor and loved English literature.

Yes, my experience as a Police officer (11 years), working on the Indo Tibetan border (5 years) and as an analyst on world affairs for 25 years, obviously taught me a great deal. If I had been a university professor, much of all this experience and knowledge would not have come to me first hand. Raw primary experience in the field makes one a different writer, hence nothing derivative seeped into my writing, or shall we say, very little of it, because after all if you have been reading literature all your life, some of it becomes a part of your psyche. Touring the Indian countryside and mixing with the peasantry is also an enriching experience, with each individual carrying his own story on his back.

Can you please share your experience as a bureaucrat?

What experience do you want me to share? Now and then one felt stifled working in intelligence, but all that is a part of the game. And look at the numerous people in Intelligence who became famous writers in the 20th century, Somerset Maugham, Le Carré, to name just a few. If you take a close look at my poems then you can discover that my poems are pungent satire at the working of some government officials.

At what age did you begin to write poetry? What are the prime sources of your inspiration?

During my childhood days I discovered my fascination for poetry and wrote a few pieces. But really it was after I got into service that I started writing poems. I have no particular sources of inspiration. I write spontaneously. Initially it was the contact with Indian reality in the rural outbacks which resulted in poetry in my first two volumes. In my masters program we were studying Aristotle and Longinus, imagine the contrast! I admire a host of poets, but consciously refrain from getting obsessed with any one poet, for then it would have influenced my work, which would descend to pastiche. But the English poets of the thirties, along with European poets, have influenced me. I came to Auden rather late, regrettably.

Are you aware of the contemporary Indian poets writing in English? Who are the poets whose works you would want to read?

Yes I am aware of the contemporary Indian poets writing in English. I have been writing on and reviewing Indian poets for forty years. There are a host of new poets who are very vibrant and exciting. Among the new established poets I would name Jeet Thayil, Ranjit Hoskote, Arundhathi Subramaniam, Sridala Swami and C.P. Surendran. And then there's the Bombay gang – Anand Thakore, Anju Makhija, Menka Shivdesani and many others. I love reading poetry and the list would be too long if I start to mention their names one by one. I love to read the works of Auden, MacNeice, Thomas Hardy, Paul Celan and European poetry in general. And yes I love to read the works of Rilke, Brodsky, Anna Akhmatova, for they are my favourites. Yes, and I have written ten poems on Mandelstam, sometimes taking off from his own text!

What is your definition of poetry? What are the unique poetic features of Mr. Daruwalla that set him apart from other contemporary Indian Poets writing in English?

I have no definition of poetry. No definition can encompass an art as ancient and as wide as poetry. I like to keep myself away from definitions. But I do think that poetry should do to language what prose does not and that the feeling, emotion and thought that propel poetry should be more intense than it would be from the pen of a political analyst or a journalist.

I don't believe in categorisation. Poets write from their experiences and I think poetry should derive its strength from a poet's social consciousness and his sense of commitment. All decent poets struggle with life, with their art, wish to make sense of the world they live in and the world that inhabits their inner being – that stream of angst and dream.

You are a poet, short story writer, novelist, critic and reviewer of books. Have you faced any challenges while doing all these? How do you maintain a balance between your administrative career and your creative pursuits?

Yes I have faced challenges while writing fiction. In fiction you have to create your own world and people it with characters, and move along with their destinies. But you aren't god. The characters and the plot move often on their own, the pen becomes a slave to their destiny. I am pretty happy with these two novels and am focusing on my third one. We all balance our various facets, every scavenger, poet and university professor. In life we have to maintain a balance. We have multiple identities – all of us human beings.

One can see an abundance of nature images in your Night River, Crossing of River, Apparition in April, Map Maker and Winter Poems. What is your philosophy of Nature? At the same time, your poems are eco-critical by nature. How far do you think of yourself as an eco-socialist?

It is nature that has given birth to us, isn't it? And we are a part of the planet just as plants and birds and animals are. My next collection of poems will have some poems sparked off by bird life. I feel Indian poets keep their eyes closed when it comes to landscape and the wilds. I have also lived in the wilds – Joshimath from 1963-66 for instance, when it was a wild place. I have also been a part of a team that rode through the Himalayas by car – from the Siachen glacier through Garhwal, Kumaon, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim right up to Kibithu. And I have trekked through a Himalayan pass or two at 18,880 feet. Yes some of my poems – very few – are sparked off by ecological concerns.

What were the immediate reasons for your composing poems on the Persians and the Greeks? Tell us about that project.

Why are Hindus stuck on the *Mahabharata*, answer me? The past has often attracted me. I was asked by a publisher to write a book on the Parsis. I burrowed into our history, carrying a Herodotus to England where I was posted as a Minister Counsellor in our High Commission. After writing twenty pages I realised that writing on the Parsis was beyond me. When the project fell through, the poems came. I have written these poems in two years (1991-1993). You can call the book a requiem. Here you can see 'The great Persian Empire which stretched from River Indus to the Mediterranean. I have toyed with the idea of turning the past into poetry and my trip to Iran and of course to Persepolis and Pasargadae clinched matters.

Can you elaborate a bit on the structure and thematic variety in your Fire Altar? Of all the poems in the volume which is your favourite one?

I started with "Pasargadae Sonnets," "Persepolis Sonnets" and "Euphrates Sonnets to Letters from Tomyris." Then there is a play entitled *The Battle of Arbela (or Gaugemala)* between Alexander and Darius III from the play *Darius Codomannus*. My trip to Iran and my reading of Thomas Hardy's *Dynasts* impacted the poetic narrative. Very few writers are concerned with poetic drama in India. These poems are not narrative verse in the old sense of the term – telling a story in verse. All the poems here are placed and slotted in a certain era.

Among all the poems, "The Boat to Delphi" is my favourite from the section entitled with the same name. This poem and six other poems from *Fire*

Altar were first brought out in *Poetry Review*, London. "The Boat to Delphi" talks of an event which is well known. I am telling a well-known story. Croesus, his coffers brimming with gold, asks the Delphic oracle: if he attacks Cyrus, who will win? The oracle, speaking through Pythia, the priestess, replies: if he attacks, a great empire will fall. After he loses, Croesus complains. The oracle replies "when I told you a great empire will fall, did you bother to ask, which one?" This is typical of the sophistry astrology relied on. What is not generally known is that various oracles were asked what Croesus would be up to at a particular moment. All got it wrong except Delphi. So tell me is it an interesting tale or not? To make it more clear I am reading the concluding lines from "The Boat to Delphi": "The stars are bright, the text is clear./Go back, old man, and tell your sire/if he attacks, a great empire/will crumble. Look to your sides/for Greek allies and forge your links./Her hissing suddenly subsides."

Your poems like "Notes," "Harbour Count," "Comet and Dream," "Coral Poem," "Walking to the Center," "The Poem," "Old Sailor," "The Night of the Jackals" and many others are full of similes, abstract and concrete images, metaphors. Why have you used so many rhetorical devices in your poems?

Readers and critics will answer these questions in a better way. These are not "devices" as you call them, they come naturally to a poet. I speak through images, as much of modern poetry does. The poem, or a particular line in a poem, turns almost visual. Devices did you say? Will you ask a playwright or a novelist why he or she uses the 'device' of conflict in the play or the novel?

One can't ignore the influence of Ted Hughes on you as far as your depiction of animals is concerned. Do you think so?

Firstly about the poem "Hawk," which critics think is derived from Ted Hughes' poem. I read Ted's "Hawk" after I had written mine. My poem goes into politics, modern day politics in the end. There is a background to it as well, autobiographical. In the end the hawk becomes a metaphor, a proxy for state power. Another point is being made here, human cruelty is worse than what predators in the wilds inflict on their victims. It is the same point I am making in "Wolf" – the slaughter of wolves, and gun barrels now hedging my daughter's dreams. "My mother said/his ears stand up/at the fall of dew/he can sense a shadow/move across a hedge/on a dark night;/he can sniff out/your approaching dreams;/there is nothing/that won't be lit up/by the dark torch of his eyes./The wolves have been slaughtered now./A hedge of smoking gun-barrels/rings my daughter's dreams."

Your poems are packed with symbols which you have used precisely. How have you used symbols in your works? Your treating of inanimate objects with human attributes links you with Wordsworth's use of pathetic fallacy. Do you agree with me and what do you achieve by this use of pathetic fallacy?

I just fail to understand the question. Image and symbol are the bread and meat of modern poetry. I stay away from the 'Pathetic fallacy', as academics call it, and am not sure you understand what it means. So does the great Wordsworth. If I were you I wouldn't be taking WW's name and mine in the same breath... I never ascribe human attributes to inanimate objects. Where did you get the idea from? In "Agni Sutta" (Fire Sermon of Lord Buddha) I say "a bird cried out in agonized distress/we passed a haze of lamentation/over a burning ghat." A bird is animate(!) and it is crying over the death of its other half. Have you gone through "Calendar, Starting in June?" "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./Only the blind koel, the stupid koel/talks of rain in the mango grove." The above passage is a way of putting things across, it is a graphic description of heat and the drought-prone summer we faced in the seventies. The pathetic fallacy you refer to, a favourite of some of our language writers, comes through if one says 'O even the skies were weeping with rain.'

What is your opinion about poetic language? Can you tell how you use poetic diction in your work?

Sorry, no comments. I don't understand the question, too nebulous for me.

Irony and satire are also present in your works which set you as a postmodern poet. Do you agree with me? Sometimes your poems look like a lifelong quest for rootlessness, identity crisis and other existential issues. How would you justify this?

This will need a chapter to answer. With the world around you – Donald Trump, Hindutva brigades – obviously satire is your only weapon. Yes, every serious writer has to deal with existential issues, the way we deal with them differs from age to age. I suffer from NO identity crisis, and have no hang ups as far as "rootlessness" is concerned. I am firmly rooted, in my land and city and culture, in my beliefs and in separating right from wrong.

Your handling of dramatic monologue in poems like "The King Speaks to the Scribe," "Church," "Old Sailor," "Nativity Poem," "The Hebrew Professor" etcetera reminds your reader of Robert Browning. This use of dramatic monologue is not very much

seen among contemporary Indian Poets writing in English. What is the purpose behind using dramatic monologue in your poems?

Your questions are too broad brush. If I write about the wilds, you think of Ted, monologues – you bring up Browning. Sonnets, there are more than twenty in my latest poetry volume *Fire Altar*, you could well bring in Petrarch!! A serious poet deserves more nuanced questions.

The dramatic monologue is a challenge; you get into another person's being and write from that particular angle. It is the poet's version of a novel written in first person by a character in the novel. Both my novels are written in the first person but you obviously have not read them. Yes, in college I was attracted to Browning and his extensive use of the dramatic monologue. But I left college in 1958!

Do you believe that the poet is a social reformer? How far is your poetry committed to social reform?

You can't help writing about issues that affect society. But poetry is not just about social issues. I raised these issues when other Indian poets writing in English were not doing so. I have written papers on "Poetry as Witness," and "Committed Poetry." But this is just one dimension of poetry. I published my volume *Winter Poems* against the Emergency AFTER Mrs. Indira Gandhi came back to power in 1980. This needs to be noted.

Why is there so much violence and terror in your poems? Your poems like "Graft," "Caries," "Jottings," "A City Falls" and others show political and religious corruption on a large scale. It is also worth mentioning that your later volumes show your maturity and capability of understanding the nature of life itself. So how would you justify your evolving poetic maturity?

I don't have to justify anything. You can clearly see terror and violence only in my earlier poems. Most of the poems you have mentioned, I have dropped from my *Collected Poems 1970-2005*. My later poems do not touch upon violence. I think poets like Jayant Mahapatra and even Meena Alexander write a lot about violence. You can't discuss violence and wrongs all the time.

Poems like "Calendar: Starting with June," "Pestilence in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta" and "Notes" deal with poverty, pestilence and death. So, do you think Daruwalla's vision of the past, present and future is essentially pessimistic? I had thought that you had always dreamt of a utopian society. Please explain the kind of society you wish to see in the future?

You have to see things in their context. I was describing a drought, had gone with the Prime Minister (I was his Special Assistant) in a helicopter touring drought affected states. You can trace a note of optimism in my latest poems. I started as a bit of a satirist earlier on. I suppose I look for a society which is rational and non-violent, and not hooked to ideologies handed down by “prophets” who propounded these ideas and laid down rules (sometimes absurd) fifteen hundred or two thousand years ago. We know more than those men, and have other ideas. Prophets didn’t even know what gravity was, or that the earth moved around the sun. Why is the world hooked to such scriptures?

Your poems such as “Monologue in the Chambal Valley” and “On the Contrariness of Dreams” show your concerns for women. Where do you stand vis-à-vis feminism and what kind of status do you envision for women?

It has been a patriarchal world for three thousand years, as Robert Graves has said. The least one expects is that they should not walk behind their husbands, shouldn’t give a paisa for dowry, should not be expected to touch the dirty feet of the father-in-law and mother-in-law, should stand up to them if they are unreasonable. And she should kick the husband when he wants to have sex with her without her consent.

You seem highly fascinated with legends and myths as your poems “Shiva: At Timarsain,” “Shiva: At Lodheshwar,” “Pilgrimage to Badrinath,” “Vignette II,” “Carvak,” and “The Parijat Tree” demonstrate. What role do these myths and legends play in your work? What is the significance of Indian philosophy and where lies the Indianness in your poetry?

All poets deal with myths, grapple with them, grapple with and manhandle the past. A writer reinvents myth, re-imagines myth. Indian philosophy has nothing to do with my poetry. Frankly I have hardly read anything by Indian philosophers. Nor have I read Spinoza or Immanuel Kant or Hegel. This so called question of Indianness has been brought in by some envious language writers who think they know more of India and that English writers get more publicity. We breathe the same air, grapple with the same problems of living here, hear the same nonsense from politicians on TV and radio, and breathe the same gasoline fumes as the Indian language writer does. Then how are they more “Indian” than us “firangees!” Talking of myth, I often debunk it, read my next poetry column in *The Hindu* next Sunday. And Indianness is of no value sometimes. Otherwise those Lithuanians who write in their lingo would consider such poets better than Miloz who, while being Lithuanian, wrote in Polish. Those who write in Hindi or Tamil or Telugu or Santhali are not more Indian than us? And don’t forget that many of the liberal ideas that our leaders

who fought for freedom imbibed, came through the English language. Not through Tamil and Hindi.

What do you think of the future of Indian Poetry in English? What suggestions and advice do you have for a better future for Indian Poetry in the English language?

The future of English poetry in India is very bright. I am not the typical Indian who when he gets on in age, and has trouble fixing his dentures thinks it his bounden duty to “advise.” In nine cases out of ten those who dole out “advice” are self-important bums. I am not one of them. We have some splendid younger poets – Jeet Thayeel, Arundhathi Subramaniam, Sridala Swami, Ranjit Hoskote and Imtiaz Dharker. Imtiaz won the Queen’s Gold medal for Poetry last year, and Arundhathi was in the short List for the T.S. Eliot Prize. And one should not forget Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Priya Sarukkai Chabria.

Can you tell us about your future projects?

Future projects, yes, I have. I am interested in fiction now. You can’t keep writing poems, you repeat yourself, if not in the content, then cadence-wise. But my next volume (and last) is ready for publication – *Naishapur to Babylon*.

Thank you very much for giving your valuable time. Kindly continue to enlighten us in this way.

You are welcome!

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