

**DARUWALLA'S 'THE KEEPER OF THE DEAD' :
THE POETRY OF HISTORY, TRADITION AND REALITY**

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Abstract

'The Keeper of the Dead,' the title section of KekiDaruwalla's poetry constitutes nine poems. The poem 'Hawk' projects the violence as a core motif. In 'The King Speaks to the Scribe', KingAshoka giving order to his scribe to engrave the message of love and peace. 'Pestilence in Nineteenth Century Calcutta' depicts the large scale death in Calcutta. The poet ironically presents the picture of 'The Revolutionary' to show how innocent people were arrested thinking them as revolutionary. The poem 'You, Slipping Past' is an attempt to review past hours. The poet in 'The Mistress' is making an apt description of Indian English, 'Mehtar Ali, The Keeper of the Dead' presents myth and history. KekiN. Daruwalla occupies a unique place in Indian English poetry. His poems are marked for poetic craftsmanship, flawless and picturesque depiction, the aspects of landscape, variety of themes and subtle use of irony.

KeyWords: *Hawk, Scribe, Pestilence, Revolutionary, The Mistress, Mehtar Ali, Tartar*

Higher Education &
Research Society

**DARUWALLA'S 'THE KEEPER OF THE DEAD' :
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Keki Daruwalla's the title section-'The Keeper of the Dead' constitutes nine poems-'Hawk', 'The King Speaks to the Scribe', 'Pestilence in Nineteenth Century Calcutta', 'The Revolutionary', 'You Sleeping Past', 'The Mistress', 'Comet and Dream'. 'Kohoutek' and 'Mehtar Ali, The Keeper of the Dead'-covers a wide range of themes. 'Daruwalla's poetry also has immediacy and anger. It contrast the naturalness of violence, aggression and sexual desires with repression, hypocrisy and deceit' (King 122).

The opening poem 'Hawk' deals with the burning problem of ever-growing exploitation of the weak and innocent. Hawk stands as the symbol of revolt. The bird of prey is a symbol of destruction and even rebellion. S. C. Narula sees symbolic meaning-'The predatory hawk burns with the characteristic scorn and hate of the emancipated modern man for the established order. He is a rebel waiting to destroy it'. (18) He wishes to get lost into air:

The land beneath him was filmed with salt:
grass — seed, insect, bird —
nothing could thrive here. But he was lost
in the momentum of his own gyre.
a frustrated parricide on the kill.

The fuse of his hate was burning still (*The Keeper of the Dead* 9)

His power and supremacy is inviolably established. This 'the wild hawk-king' returns homeward and takes shelter in the groves.

.....he hovered above
the groves. a speck of barbed passion.
Crow, mynah and pigeon roosted here
while parakeets flew raucously by. (9)

Daruwalla's hawk appears to be burning with hate against man. He is powerful

but also a victim of man's machination. The tamed hawk is worse than the wild one for 'he is touched by man'.

The tamed one is worse, for he is touched by man.

Hawking is turned to a ritual, the predator's
passion honed to an art;
as they feed the hawk by carving the breast
of the quarry bird and gouging out his heart, (10)

The hawk makes his line of action clear. He assumes the power of destructive-agent. He is in a wait for opportune moments only because he is sure that the oppressors would start trading in the sorrow and suffering of the multitude. Then, once again the poem becomes a monologue spoken by the captive hawk. In his hatred and fury, he presents-

I will hover like a black prophecy
weaving its moth — soft cocoon of death.

I shall drive down
with the compulsive trust of gravity,
trained for havoc,
my eyes focused on them
like the sights of a gun. (11)

In the words of Bruce King, 'Daruwalla's 'Hawk' is one of the best on the subject and contrast the natural violence of the bird with the more terrible brutality of man. The hawk is not innocent, his violence is seen in hate, rape, parricide; but, man is trained to use violence as a conscious art within society' (104). In 'Hawk', the poet has presented a moving picture of the reign of anarchy let loose in the world and India in particular. This poem reveals the poet's firm determination to fight down the rule of injustice and exploitation perpetuated here.

The violence in his poetry must be understood in the context of an acute awareness of injustice in society. It is possible to argue that Daruwalla does not consciously write as a social reformer, but there is a great deal of implicit social criticism in his poetry (Sinha 67).

'The King Speaks to the Scribe' is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker is Ashoka, the Great Mauryan King of the 3rd century B. C. The great

Ashoka is seen agonising over the senseless slaughter engendered by wars and musing over hollowness of victories carved by arms. All these things left him to renounce the war and even beast hunting. The King was so much shocked that he was ever ready to have the words of peace and love engraved on his very soul.

I speak
of atonement, that is, if blood can ever
be wiped away with words. We will engrave
this message on volcanic rock, right here
where the earth still reeks of slaughter. (12)

The commoners always suffer, and not the people attached in way either with the King or his administrative machinery.

First talk about the sorrows or conquest
and other miseries attendant on
enslavement. In all land live Brahmins,
anchorite and householders, each enmeshed
in the outer skin of relationships, (13)

Ashoka's sorrow is difficult to express. He asks the scribe, 'How will you touch that weed-ridden lake-floor / of my despair and keep from drowning?' Overwhelmed his sorrow, the king gives instruction that it would pain him greatly. He says

Say simply that of all people killed
or captured, if the thousandth part were
to suffer as before, the pain would overwhelm me. (13)

He has abjured pride. He will not answer even if the lowest person can abuse him. He wants his head to be covered by the dust of humility. He is ready to forgive everyone. He invites tribal to turn away from crime and promises that they 'will not suffer'. The words of Ashoka must be 'Cut deeper than the cuts of my sword'. He also instructs his 'scribe' to engrave the message in 'the language simple, / something the forest folk can understand'. He is not speaking to the king and so does not require high flown language. He is not speaking to the gods-but 'Men don't have enough fuel to burn their dead'. Ajit Khullar says,

He seems to speak to himself as the king washed of all pride speaks to Kartikeya : "Your words will have to reach across to them like a tide of black oxen crossing a ford " (P. 14). Again : I am not speaking to kings I am not here to appease gods (P. 14). Surely, Keki is a poet of the Indian landscape (224).

C. N. Srinath thinks that 'Here is history turned into poetry of insight and intensity.' (165)

'Pestilence in Nineteenth Century Calcutta' presents a moving picture of the death-toll caused by calamitous diseases like cholera, plague and dysentery. The beginning has a slightly dramatic flavour when the Sahib's barber informs him —

'Black Fellow die, much',
said the sahib's barber to him
referring to the ghettos
beyond the esplanade
where people writhed
in the groaning callisthenics of cholera. (15)

We read of bacteria and bacillus thriving in the wells and nestling under the spawnbeds and killing freely. ' In this land / of mud and mire, death was everywhere'. Everybody has fear of impending death whether he may be a Sahib or 'black fellow', .death does not distinguish between the white and the black.

.....the Rheinharts
De Bussys, Claude Martins.
the Smiths and the Lawrences,
British and French and Dutch,
interred in the same loam,
mourned by the same tolling bells
their remains bristling with like crucifixes (15)

Describing the lightning attack of the disease, the poet further adds the apprehension and the fear of the unpredictable death :The poet mockingly narrates that the whites carry the fear of death 'like a slipped disc through their lives'. They would pay the doctor 'one gold mohur / for a visit':

.....One rupee for an ounce of salts,
two for an ounce of bark, paid him
for blood – letting, for being cupped and leeches
and blistered with hot irons
and fed on opium and mercurous chloride. (16)

The Sahib was so perplexed with the fear of death when he was informed about the death of 'his Sikh abdar' on his winter tour to the Hooghly, that he voluntarily opted to meet the funeral expenses.

The bill presented on a tray next morning
made him blink. It read,
'Five rupees for roasted Sardar'. (17)'

'The Revolutionary' ironically put how many innocent people were hanged to death in the apprehension of their being revolutionaries by the Britishers. Actually, some of them had nothing to do either with the revolution or with its ideals because they were too coward to do anything. Citing an example who has been arrested of the type, Daruwalla opens the poem:

It had never come burning
burning across his skin
like a hot dye.
And yet he shook, a leaf of the wind,
sweated like the floor-plinth of stalactite
at the mere thought of it,
a lash-burn smoking on his back (18)

The poem shifts into flashback and the reader is given the background of a 'revolutionary'. He was a timid. As a schoolboy when hoodlums mugged his friend, he was shaking more than his friend who was beaten with cycle chains. Such a boy grows up into a 'lean and volatile' young man. He plans his move carefully. He becomes active in a 'year of the drought'.

The results of the revolution are posters on the walls that grow 'like fungus', the severed head of the statue, its 'face smeared with tar' and the throwing of petrol bombs on a police outpost. Such a weak man was arrested in the morning when 'cozy in his quilt' he was 'dreaming at his mother'. He is taken to the police-station and feels extremely frightened:

They took him to a room where the stones

were as damp as his brow,
where the lash dangled from a rusty peg,
and he shivered-from cold or fear or both,
I cannot say. (19)

After confining him into a cell at night, they summarily tried him and hanged him to death. Daruwalla questions the kind of justice awarded to the so called revolutionary.

And far into the night, as Orion crashed
groundwards, a shadow
that fell tree-like across his cell,
was that the angel of death
or a lawyer wringing his hands
pleading for hail ? (20)

'You, Slipping Past' is an attempt on the poet's part to review his past hours. Daruwalla wittily remarks that in order to alarm him of the slipping past, the dogs growls touched the periphery of his uneasy-dreams :

Now I know why dogs kept vigil
at the periphery
of my uneasy dreams.

Your ghost had spidered past
the blue spine of the road. (21)

The poem 'The Mistress' displays Daruwalla's sense of wit at the distorted and improper use of English words by the Indians. The poem opens with this reprehensible aspect of the Indian English.

No one believes me when I say
my mistress is half-caste. Perched
on the genealogical tree somewhere
is a Muslime midwife and a Goan cook.
But she is more mixed than that.
Down the genetic lane, babus
and professors of English
have also made their one-night contributions. (22)

The poet satirically expresses his feelings about her-
When I sleep by her side

I can almost hear the blister-bubble
grope for a mouth through which to snarl.
My love for her survives from night to night,
even though each time

I have to wrestle with her in bed (22)

Daruwalla offers us a cunning figure for his own language, not as a lexical code but as poetic discourse: 'She is not Goan, not Syrian Christian. / She is Indian English, the language that I use' (23). Talking about the use of language, Norman Simms comments,

It is, of course, ironic for Daruwalla to speak this way of his own language, to see it as a tarted up things; but the irony is not a suppression of something else entirely, not a replacement of one set for another. That is not his design. The structure of his poetry is precisely to enfold within its texture the richness, the overtly elaborate — the rococo experience of a modern poet in India :a man seeking to master the archaic, the traditional. the spiritual, the secular, the modern of his own life (41). '

'Mehar Ali', the Keeper of the Dead' is about a person who has descended from the Tartars. He is the keeper of the Tartar cemetery. He still has a hope that someday goddess will descend to cart away the dead. Pointing towards their belief the poet mockingly reproduces:

In the year of fire-serpent,
the prophecy runs
lightning will chop the cumulous
into chunks of meat.
Red rain will fall
as the goddess descends,
her rain-red hair
streaming backwards in the wind,
to cart away the dead
in the folds of her mists. (27)

We are told how the Tartars lost their way and came to this cluster of low cliffs. Only 'Two of them survived' and 'Married Bhot women and begot children'. This happened nine generations ago. Mehar Ali is the last of the line,

'his days slowly embering into ash'. Sketching the survivors of Jenghiz Khan and their wives, Daruwallahumourously presents 'The two survivors lie here/and these their Tibetan wives (28). Mehar Ali shows people round the graveyard, pointing out the graves of the men. He also shows the visitors the 'miniature on the wall' which has faces done 'in old paint'. The American visitors are amazed by the legends of the Tartar. They ask Mehar Ali if he traces his lineage to JenghizKhan :

The Colifornean female ask:

'Wolf-slayer'? Where did he slay the wolf?

'MrMehar Ali, do you trace
your lineage back to Jenghiz Khan? '

Its amazing this Muslim cemetery
in a semi-lama country!

And this local prophecy, do you think
the goddess will ever come ?' (28)

MeharAli, appears in the poem as a man of serious disposition. He rarely replies to queries of the visitors of tombs of his forefathers, on which he is keeping continuous watch. When it rains hard and the moaning high wind blow, he speaks to the dead and then 'speech starts fermenting in his mouth / and bursts out / in bee — stung incoherence'. He waits for the sky woman to descend and to cart away the dead.

for the sky-woman,

her hair flaming red.

as she alights upon the shroud — grey skin

that keeps him whole —

Mehar Ali, the keeper of the dead! (29)

'The poem creates a world of silence in which the idea of death is a constant presence' (Sinha 107).

Daruwalla has presented Mehar Ali, the last descendant of Changez dynasty as an idol of honest faith and belief. S.C. Narula reads the idea of retribution in the poem and states that 'this world turned into a vast sepulcher, is, perhaps, the retribution for the violence done to this world of tranquility by the marauding intruders -Mehar Ali's Tartar ancestors' (22). Mehar All is a person who has to live in the world of people by the memories of

ancestors. Being the last line, he considers it his duty to look after the tombs of his ancestors.

Daruwalla's *The Keeper of the Dead* is remarkable 'for its thematic variety, vivid imagery and poetic sensibility, the work has been hailed as an outstanding contribution to contemporary Indian English literature' (Khullar, 222). He has successfully evoked the Indian landscape in his poetry. Like Nissim Ezekiel, he tries to identify himself with the landscape of the country. Contemporary life has appealed him and he writes on various aspects of it. He portrays vividly and minutely the contemporary Indian socio-political world with touches of irony and sarcasm. He has used highly eloquent, suggestive and picturesque expressions, when occasion demands. *The Keeper of the Dead* occupies a unique place in Indian English poetry.

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