
Postmodern Sensibility in the Poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla

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Abstract : *Postmodernism in Indian English poetry is a recent trend which began to emerge after 1980. A group of poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, A.K.Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Shiv K.Kumar brought in a wave of resurgence and lended “ a local habitation and a name” to India English poetry. If Salman Rushdie’s ‘Midnight’s Children’ marked the beginning of postmodernism in Indian English fiction, the works of the above mentioned poets can be said to embody the postmodern characteristics in the field of poetry. There is also another significant name and he is Keki N.Daruwalla who also shows his inclination towards postmodernism both in form and content. His poetry shows originality and Indian sensibility in respect of his frequent use of irony, humour, satire, intertextuality, new idiom, pastiche etc. Besides this, his presentation of human passion, love, nature, Indian landscape, socio-cultural scenario and above all his dramatic detachment from his subjects, open thinking etc registers his place among the postmodernists. The purpose of my present paper is to probe the postmodern sensibility in Keki N.Daruwalla’s poetry*

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Indian sensibility, Irony, Humour, Passion, Nature.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tennyson once said -

“Old order changeth yielding place to new,

And God fulfils himself in many ways,

Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.” (“Idylls of the King”)

Literature goes through constant process of change since time immemorial. Since the mid 1980s a trend in the name of postmodernism set in in the field of art, literature, music, architecture, film technology and the so on. It marks a definite break with the tradition and is characterized by intertextuality, pastiche, paranoia, irony, humour, rejection of grand narrative etc. Indo English literature tended to be postmodern after 1980. A group of poets showed their inclination towards postmodernism in form and content. Keki N.Daruwalla also followed this track. A selective study of his poems would suffice it to say how he showed a genuine interest towards postmodernism.

If irony is a hallmark of postmodern literature, Keki N. Daruwalla excels most others in this field. He was an I.P.S. officer by profession and, as such, he had the experience of life in the raw. With bitter ironic, satiric tone, he ridicules the vices, follies and foibles of post independence India. In his “ Forward to the Poetry of Keki N.Daruwalla : A Critical Study”, A.N.Dwivedi says -

“ As a poet Daruwalla raises his powerful voice against the rampant corruption and moral degradation of modern man.”

About the new aesthetics of Post Independence India Makarand Paranjape says-

“Delayed by the idealism of nationalism and romanticism of Tagore and Naidu, the aesthetic found rapid acceptance in the disillusionment of Post Independence era. Instead of ushering in the promised golden age, independence India became a typical third world country, backward, corrupt and hypocritical.” (Paranjape, 1993)

Daruwalla is a spokesman of the society ‘out of joints.’ In his poem ‘Graft’, the poet with bitter irony and satire shows the all pervading nature of corruption. The poet condemns the very mindset of the people where foodstuffs are also raped and adulterated :

“You may adulterate oils, make tablets out of chalks

Sell meat turn maggots, fish turning stale,

Switch sawdust for jute, at the worst of times

The right buck at the right time tips the scales." ('Graft')

The poet does not also spare the moral bankruptcy of the so called priests-"To legalize a bastard, you've to bribe a priest."('Graft')

Even a non-jew can be married to a jew if the priest is bribed.

In 'Monologues in the Chambal Valley', Daruwalla has his ironic say -

"In this fissured valley everything cracks"

With bitter satire Daruwalla shows how corruption has made its inroads in the legal system also. The bandits who hijack and sell young girls goes unconvicted :

"You'd like to know how I escaped, wouldn't you?

It was graft all the way, first the judge's stenographer.

'It's the rope for you', he said. We bribed him more

and he didn't type the judgement on the given day."('Monologues in the Chambal Valley')

The corrupt political leaders also come under his critical gaze. With bitter irony and satire, the poet unmasks their double face. The supposed nation servers carry all the qualifications of a seasoned criminal :

" He is an old leader after all

who has gone thrice to jail

Twice for home rule

and once for sodomy "(Food and Words, Words and Food')

But the irony is that they bear a clean image in the eyes of the society :

"he may not be given to liquors, females, betting.

He is handsome, sauce and a family man; his wife thinks this is overtime he is getting."('Graft')

Daruwalla deflates such morally shallow politicians who befool the commoners :

"In the city house remains as it was,

Cows and goats tethered in front,

People must still think that he was,

Simple, one of them,

Only in bedrooms air conditioners, hummed

And thick rugs covered it wall to wall."('Caries')

Irony is also found in socio-cultural ideologies too. Superstition is deeply rooted in Indian psyche. With pungent irony the poet shows how a patient of epilepsy is being cured in the poem 'At Bansa'-

"In low melodic murmurs he intones

suras from the Quran

-kindled arabesques

that unwind from his moat

like a thread of light

with With a black finger end he smears

mascara on her eyelash

Daughter! Your troubles are at an end.”(‘At Bansa’)

For the postmodernists, no text exists in an isolation and that works of literature can only be created using stuff that already exists. Postmodernism is all about the connection between texts, including the various ways in which one text references another. This technique, i.e., to another text to shape its meaning is what Julia Kristeva called intertextuality. There are all kinds of techniques like pastiche, parody, direct references that the authors can use. Daruwalla employs these techniques very well and in this he seals his place among the postmodernists. In his poems he alludes to Biblical, Hindu and Greek mythological texts, Zoroastrian, Hindu and Islamic culture, history and literary texts to shape his meaning. While satirising the post independence social milieu, Daruwalla in his poem ‘Collage II’ uses literary references -

“Go to Auden and Sartre”, they said

“for a vocabulary of defeat “(‘Collage II’)

It is ‘a landscape of meaninglessness’ where “ corruption is the chemistry of the flesh”, and, as such, Daruwalla makes the bold remark :

“Then why should I tread the Kafka beat

Or the Waste Land

When Mother, you are near at hand

One vast, sprawling defeat.”(‘Collage II’)

In addition to this Daruwalla sparingly refers to Indian mythology to shape the meaning of his poem. In ‘Ruminations at Verinag’, he portrays the scenic beauty of Verinag. Here he gives a mythical reference of Shiva and Parvati :

“They came in summer thirst for their passion

Parvati and Shiva

She asked for water, and when he found none

he stuck the mountain

in the hot noon of his anger and the snout

appeared. The blue flame jetted out.”(‘Ruminations at Verinag’)

Again in ‘The Round of the Seasons’, he uses myths referring Kama to illustrate human passion like love, sex. In ‘The Parsi Hell’, the poet refers to the Zoroastrian concept of hell which has to be crossed by all souls after death. In ‘Speaking to Mandelstam’, there are also historical allusions of Troy and the Trojan horse :

“the Achaeans were hammering in the last nail

into the ribs of the wooden horse

The belly had a secret door so that

The Greeks could creep in some had to be forces.”(‘Speaking to Mandelstam’)

Apart from these in his presentation of Indian landscape, nature, socio-cultural scenario, family relation, human passion in a new way register his place among the postmodernists. In his introduction to the “Two Decades of Indian Poetry”, he writes :

“My poems are rooted in landscape which anchors the poem. The landscape is not merely there set to the sense but to lead to an illumination, it should be the eye of the spiral. I try that, poetry relates to the landscape, both on the

physical and on the plane of the spirit. In "Ten Twentieth Century of Indian Poets", R. Parthasarathy said that there is "an obviously Indian elements in Daruwalla's verse, especially in his use of landscape." (Parthasarathy, 1979)

Daruwalla is not a typical nature poet like Keats. He shows nature in relation with human being, and in this we trace anti-modernist sentiment in him. M.K.Nail says-" Daruwalla's mind is continuously busy establishing meaningful relationship between Nature and Man, in various ways and in different contexts..." (Naik, 1988) In his poem 'In My Father's House', Daruwalla describes winter season in a beautiful way :

"Nothing is new
around this place
except the snow,
except the quiet
monastic vows
of wizened bark
of skeleton tree.

The ribs too are monastery

When seasons do not change within." ('In My Father's House')

Phrases like 'wizened bark', 'skeleton tree', 'ribs', suggest the desolation of the place whereas the loneliness is suggested by the word 'monastic.'

In 'Map Maker', Daruwalla describes the beauties of nature and the sublime pleasure one gets beholding it. His pictorial quality in a glorious way here lends his poetry a postmodern touch :

"The world's richest place
was in the African interior,
between the Sahara
and the rain forest, dark as stimulus
between the brown savannahs
and the grey scrub of the Sahel." ('Old Map Maker')

Again in 'The Ghaghra in Spate', the poet gives a scenic description of the river in a new way :

" In the afternoon she is a grey smudge
exploring a grey canvas
When dusk reaches her
through an overhang of cloud
She is overstewed coffee.
At night she is red weal
across the spine of the land." ('The Ghaghra in Spate')

Besides this, Daruwalla relates the matters like love, sex, passion in relation to nature and landscape. In his poem 'From Snows to Ranikhet', the poet describes the moments of man's sexual excitement and the process of his being like down through the images of 'falcon fury and dove':

"And heal with your own bodies,
That is the crux of love.

The faloon fury of the moment

Turns into the dove.

The face as spirit, the face as flesh

Blend in the face as love.”(‘From Snows to Ranikhet’)

In his ‘Winter Poems’ the poet beautifully describes the effect of the crippled age on man’s life. In this stage a man parts with passions as do the flakes of dandruff:

“the expressions ripped away

like torn wings

its passions flaking off

... ..

like dandruff, like falling hair

blown back like maenad hair “(‘Winter Poems’)

In ‘The Round of the Seasons’, Daruwalla shows how human passion changes in five seasons. The poet uses the symbol of Kama to relate love and passion :

“Kama, in this torrid summer

Let something remain cool:

Her eyes reflecting the waters,

The smell of Jasmine in her hair,

Her body dripping with the cold river

As she steps out on the that's.”(‘The Round of the Seasons’)

Again in ‘Love among Pines’, the poet depicts the erotic passion of the lovers with nature imagery :

“What is there in my hand that when

it sidles into your blouse

it prowls like an animal that makes you writhe

turning your nipples into a black

sprout of berries.”(‘Love among Pines’)

Lovely and sensuous sights incite sensual desires in him and he whispers :

“destiny lies

in parting of hair

In the parting of grasses

in the parting of thighs “(‘Love among Pines’)

Being an I.P.S. officer by profession, Daruwalla saw life in the raw. The poet like a detached observer sees and describes what happens all around us. In a mock serious vein he shows the funny aspects of our rituals and way of life. In the poem ‘At Bansa’, the poet shows how rituals and superstitions go hand in hand. A patient of epilepsy is being cured in the following lines :

“In a low melodic murmurs he intones

Suras from the Quran

-kindled arabesques

that unwind from his moat

like a thread of light

with a black finger end he smears

mascara on her eyelash

daughter! your troubles are at an end.”(‘At Bansa’)

Again in the poem ‘Death by Burial’, Daruwalla mockingly shows how conflicts in the name of rituals rape humanism itself :

“...But here Providence, scurvy till now ,

could still intervene;

half the village could be Hindu, and half Muslim

Enough cause for a riot,

with half the village shouting

‘death by fire!’

and the other half

‘death by burial!’(‘Death by Burial’)

Large scale death in India due to hunger, violence, disease demoralized the poet. What is interesting, the poet deals with all these shocking reality in a non-serious romantic vein which is indeed a postmodern trends. In ‘The Parsi Hell’, the poet quite unambiguously states his death consciousness :

“Throughout life a man carried his death

even as a woman carries her child “(‘The Parsi Hell’)

In his poem ‘Ruminations’, the poet does not lament death . Like a postmodern he here decenters the meaning of death. Being fed up with the ‘thorns of life’ all around he wants death wish as an alternative :

“Death I am looking

For that bald bone-head of yours!”(‘Ruminations’)

The wish finds a link with John Keats who also in his ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ shows death wish from an aesthetic point of view :

“...for many a time I have been in love with easeful Death.”(‘Ode to Nightingale’)

Daruwalla also romanticizes death in his poem ‘Pestilence in Nineteen Century Calcutta’:

“The fires burnt higher

and the dead went up

like fragment of liturgies

Lost in a great wind.”(‘Pestilence in Nineteen Century Calcutta’)

Like a true feminist Daruwalla also shows the subjugation of women in Indian society. The mediaeval mentality still reigns supreme here and the women are treated as an object of entertainment, dominance :

“Women must be confined to the zenana

like quail in a wicket basket.”(‘On the Contrariness of Dreams’)

Again in the poem 'Monologues in the Chambal Valley', the poet shows the exploitation of women. They are treated as saleable commodities. The bandits chief recalls her merchandizing thus:

"Do you recall how it was with the women

When we started? Taut breasted ones from the hill

brown ones from Bihar - soft and overripe

daughter of the desert

daughters of the forest tribe

And where did we not sell them?

In holy fairs, in cattle markets..."('Monologues in the Chambal Valley')

Again in the poem 'Of Interiors', Daruwalla shows the dark living of a widow in Islamic community. She is veiled by net, an act of obedience, modesty, purity, righteousness, faith and bashfulness. The concept of veil is deeply rooted in religious faith where the Islamic society considers it as a part of cultural identity. In all these Daruwalla emerges as a poet of the province. However, though he depicts everything with a touch of Indianness, it makes a universal appeal also. This global thing in the local context and the vice versa make him a postmodern poet indeed.

Modernism shares the belief that human society is fractured, threatened, fragmented and they also lament at this. Postmodernism also shares the same belief, but unlike modernism, they embrace this fragmentation in a playful manner. A close reading of Daruwalla's poetry also substantiates that he also views the post independence India as 'a landscape of meaninglessness' where corruption, misery, violence, poverty, hunger, death, disease loom large. But like a postmodernist he also shares pessimistic optimism. In the poem 'Notes', he makes a balance between life and death and he unites these two disparate world through artistic weapon:

"I want the two birds

always fighting

or always making love

or half the time fighting

and half the time making love."('Notes')

Last but not the least, in respect of the creation of new idiom, Daruwalla affixes his place among the postmodernists. His poetry is not born out of dogma and he doesn't confine himself to a particular type, theme and technique. His new poetry demanded a new use of language and new idioms and creates new themes by writing about post independence Indian society. In doing so he subverts the tradition so that Indian English poetry assumes an indigenous identity. In 'The King Speaks to the Scribe', Daruwalla suggests:

"write whatever

You chance on. Don't look for a white - quartz boulder

Anything will do, a mass of trap rock

Or just a stone sheet. And the language simple,

something the forest folk can understand."('The King Speaks to the Scribe')

2. CONCLUSION

Daruwalla is thus somewhat successful in reflecting the spirit of post independence, better to say, postmodern trends. He gives an identity and a sense of direction to Indian English poetry. He has successfully evoked the Indian landscape in his poetry and availed himself of contemporary reality to such an extent that he stands supreme along with the other new poets as a postmodern poet. At times his poetry yields irony, humour, death, corruption, violence, dehumanizing socio-cultural reality. Simultaneously he unveils a beautiful picture of nature, human

passion and an undying hope for a better regenerated social order, and in all these he shows his inclination towards postmodernism.

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