

A Critical Approach of Keki N. Daruwalla on Religion and Mythology

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Abstract : Abstracts: Keki N. Daruwalla, recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award (1984) and The Commonwealth Poetry Prize (1987) for Asia, has composed poems on variety of themes which includes stories from various epics, cultures and religions. Although he was born in a Parsi Family but influence of Hindu and Greek mythology, Islam and other ism can also be seen in his poems along with popular folk tales from his own Parsi community. However, most prominent influence on Daruwala's mind was of Hinduism and he tries not only to depict the legendary characters from the Indian epics and myths but also tries to reveal the truths and acute philosophy behind these mythical stories.

Keywords: *Myth, Religion, Hinduism, Philosophy*

Daruwala was an acute observer of the society around him but his writings revolved around the rural India rather than the urban population with whom he spent most of his time during posting. Talking about the Indianness of Keki N Daruwalla which according to K S Ramamurthi, "The Indianness of Daruwalla's poetry derives not so much from his portrayal of Indian life as he has seen and experienced as a police officer in duty nor from a conscious effort to make his writing Indian but from the rural Indian landscape which has inspired it." Daruwalla emphasized on how people living in India are very religious. But there are some evil practices which is so deep rooted in all the spheres of society. Corruption, which Daruwalla believes has been one of the reasons of under development of India, has become a medium not only to earn money but to exploit the innocent in the society. Corruption has clinches all the institutions of country including government, public and social.

'Graft' is one such poem published in "Under Orion" which hammers the corruption which is institutionalised and so deep rooted at all levels in this country that it can't be eradicated. In the poem Daruwalla satirizes the hypocrisy of the religious- heads who allow people to do every kind of evil deed; even the priest legalizes a bastard when his palms are greased. In the event of the birth of a bastard the priest has to be bribed:

You may adulterate oils, make tables out of chalk

sell meat turning maggots, fish turning state

switch saw dust for jute, at the Worst of times

the right buck at the right time tips the scales

To legalize a bastard you've to bribe the priest

the catechism also has its price

he'll wed you to a turk or Rabbi's daughter

even through you may be uncircumcised" (Graft)

This poem depicts the vicious practice of bribery which is an uncontrollable problem in this country. It has now gone far beyond the dimensions which had in the days when Daruwalla wrote this poem. The narrator says that dishonesty takes place in many forms such as a dishonest man may make tablets out of chalks and sell them as medicinal tablets to cure certain diseases. He may sell meat which is already infected and therefore, dangerous. The priest may even perform a marriage ceremony between a non Jew and the daughter of a Jewish priest. Above all to be corrupt, no one needs to be a drunkard, a gambler or a womanizer. Unlike any scary face he could be a handsome, fair and a family man. Daruwalla is fully aware of the tentacles of corruption penetrating every sphere of Indian life. He highlights social corruption as well. Adulteration is another such phenomenon in the society and with money power anything can be easily manipulated.

‘Death by Burial’ published in “Under Orion” is all about the extremist attitude of the Indians guided by their religion and their age-old beliefs. The story moves quickly and a feeling of suspense is created in our mind as we go ahead with it. The first stage of the story focuses smuggling by the law- breakers and their trade in drugs. The next stage comes when the bandits indulge in sexual assault on women and in looting their cash as well as their ornaments. Then a stage comes when the bandits are captured by the villagers in the course of their raid on a village:

They sewed them up in gunny-sacks alive

But the providence, Scurry till now could still

Intervene; half the village could be Hindu half

Muslim. Enough cause for a riot with half the

village shouting death fire and the other half.

Death by burial (Death by Burial)

Ironically the bandits turn out to be fools. After two months they again attack the village with one country made pistol only which does not fire and they are beaten almost to the point of death and sew in gunny-sacks alive. The Concluding stanza is an eye opener, for it describes what religious fanaticism could bring. Finally, comes the surprising climax a communal riot breaks out when the Muslim population of the village insist on burying the prisoners while the Hindu population insists on their being burnt to death . Meanwhile the Bandits got a golden opportunity to escape.

Daruwalla has covered different time periods in his poems because of which some writers have called his poetry the storehouse of rich cultural heritage of India and mythological tales and legends. The influence of Hindu philosophy can be seen on Daruwalla’s writings. He, using his poetic expertise, tries to make his reader familiar with many mythological tales. He understands the taste of Indians who are highly religious and believer of folk-tales. He can be seen either strengthening those beliefs or sometimes demolishing them.

A poem with similar theme is ‘The Three Vignettes’ published in ‘Crossing of Rivers’, which presents striking images of death, diseases and destruction. In Vignette I, the poet presents a city when the day dawn. A sense of pervading disappointment again takes the poet in its hold, after the sunrise.

The sun comes up

like the outer husk

of some Fiery disappear.(3)

But the poet feels that the sacred river Ganga remains unchanged and flows as usual “The Ganga flows swollen with hymns.” In this poem the poet has displayed how the life in city starts with the sunrise. With the beginning of the Hindu rituals the lepers, beggars and dwarf also start their daily business of making living that presents a moving picture of the pitiable sight:

Lepers huddle along the causeways

like stunted shrubs

black with frost-burns.

A thin dwarf, smeared blue with ash, Spiked with a beard,

Forested with matted hair,

Cavorts ape- like. Overhead the monkeys Gibber. (Vignette I)

The Ganga , *a voice in this desert of human lives*, without doubt is a river of faith for the Hindus. The poet satirizes the internal and external deformities of the city; “Beggars hoist their deformities as boat hoist their sails.”

‘The Second Vignette’ depicts the holy city as the repository of elites and “tonsured heads” where faith has dwindled considerably and where the people and the pandas have become ritualistic and superstitious. In “Vignette-II,” Daruwalla refers to several sacred rituals of the Hindus such as, pinddan, and the visit of, Panchtirtha, as well as the incantation of sacred hymn known as ‘mantra’ and ‘Gayatri.’ It also displays the devout performing these sacred rites:

Tonsured heads explode along

The water surface

All is spider thread ritual here

Sandal- paste and mantra

Chanting of the Gayatri

Shaved head and the pinddan (Vignette II)

Here again one notices Daruwalla’s feeling of bitterness against the Hindu rituals coming to surface as he considers them outdated. ‘Spider- thread’ ritual symbolizes out dated, ugly and dirty rituals. Mentioning the Hindu myths, Daruwala writes in an ironic tone:

You go the round of the Panchtirtha

starting from the ghat where Durga

had dropped a sword

to where she dropped an earring. (Vignette II)

The poet presents a true picture of men and women bathing in the river:

Women do not take off their saris

As they enter the water;

Men leave their clothes behind

The dead leave their bodies. (Vignette II)

Again talking about the sight of ugliness and deformities of the bank of the Ganges, the poet writes:

A blind man's fingers grope across my face

A Sadhu eyes me Unblinking from his navel. (Vignette II)

The poem thus presents a true picture of superstition and conventional beliefs which still linger in Indian society.

“Vignette-III” depicts Varanasi as a dying city to Daruwalla, it is a symbol of death, decay, misery, lifelessness and immorality. The poet's melancholy mood does not change in Vignette III. He matches with unblinking eyes the naked dam of confused mankind with the puppet strings of inexorable fate and chance, such a mood may have silver living here and there, but on the whole it remains gloomy and despairing:

The light is greening

despair turning to mould

in a pickle Jar. (Vignette III)

The poet does not try to conceal his gloomy temperament at all: he rather makes it an integral part of the landscape itself:

The landscape is so grey

They are milking the sun for light. (Vignette III)

Daruwala doesn't deliberately malign Varanasi. He tries to portray things as they really are, not as they ought to be. He claims that Varanasi is like many other ancient cities of the Hindus despite the fact that it is taken to be the abode of Gods and Goddesses.

Let thought fly away like a scatter of birds

to some other town. but where? (1 Vignette III)

To this question the poet himself offers reply:

All cities are the same at night

when you work barefoot

across their blistered back. (Vignette III)

In ‘Mothers’ Daruwala presents the Ganges as holy mother, crippled with age, and traumas caused by her own children. Even after this traumatic experience, the poet does not find any abatement in her love for the dear children. Speaking of the receding light and brilliance of the Gangetic water but her unwinding love, the poet writes:

Your eyes don't sputter with the same fires

as they discharge

the arrows of your love.(Mothers)

Referring to the widowhood of the Ganges, the poet makes the old myth alive again. It hints towards the wedding of King Shantanu and hence since the time of his demise, a sense of separation seems to be running through her veins:

I think something shrivelled

within you, Mother,

the day you broke your bangles

and shook the lion- dust

of my father from your brow.(Mothers)

The poet laments the growing heaps of dirt and squalor around the river's bank and also the pollution of its water. He says "Grey monastes/ half- light/ mud-scapes" are scattered around you. The poet feels that owing to the attitude of ignorance or indifference of her own children towards her glorious past, the mother Ganges grows when the river enters the plains, she becomes oblivious.

You have forgotten them, the years

When brooding and over anxious

You saw your children-tribes tottering

Past the shadow of your early traumas. (15)

Referring to the Quran and prophet's sermon, the poet remarks sarcastically what is the use of this prayer when the latter preaches:

Is he speaking to the sunset or the Kabba?

What emotion is coming to prayer?

The words of the prophets come to mind

Heaven was built

Under the feet of mothers. (16)

The poet thus feels unhappy about the gradual determination and growing population of the holy river.

A poem which highlights poet's religious beliefs and ideas is 'The Parsi Hell' published in 'The Keeper of the Dead'. The poet feels that the present poem is the imaginative product of the religious heads. A man who suffers from the torments of desires actually carries death with him. Suppression of desires is painful like death and hell. Thus, the poem reveals poet's own religious conviction. Being a realist, his notions about hell and heaven are also realistic. He doesn't believe in religious subtlety. Daruwalla's pervading sense of religious alienation is quite expressive in the poem. It is also an attempt on the poet's part to substantiate his own points of view logically as to hell and heaven variously talked about in different religions. Daruwalla is deeply influenced by the Hindu philosophy. His poetry never speaks of a golden tomorrow because his poetry is deeply rooted in the past and present. His poetry is coupled with the mundane experience with which he is familiar with. Actually with highest calibre of poetic acumen he tries to make his readers familiar with many mythological tales. He understands the pulse of Indian who are highly religions and believer of folk- tales and he tries to firm that belief or rather to deconstruct the myth. He tries to expand his reader's imaginative range and in this context he comes closer to Nissim Ezekiel.

'Apparition in April' contains some poems which show mythology and philosophy on a large scale, Here he throws light on two legends rather tragic figures from Indian epic Mahabharata. These two are Karna and Charvak. Here the poet is believer of Charvak's philosophy which sometimes appears cynical and perversion for not believer of his philosophy. But for Daruwalla charvak's philosophy is no less perverse because it has a firm ground and deep 'Shraddha' are nothing but Brahmin's way of income and all the

divine hymns are the voice of Brahmins. These are really harsh truth and this Philosophy is hard to accept for Brahmins. Charvak even does not believe in hell or heaven or after life myth.

He had seen the lie embodied in pain

and the corrupt fantasy in the other

a sidelong glance and he passed on to the fire – after

where they waited. (Apparition in April)

In ‘Charvak’ there is a strong under- current of violence, both physical and intellectual. The poem is based on an incident describe in ‘Shanti Parva’ of the Mahabharata. Charvak gave Philosophy of Lokayata, a kind of materialism and Epicureanism rolled into one. This philosophy challenged the other worldliness of the Brahmins. Charvak believes that pain and suffering are not necessary for attaining salvation. In fact, the very idea of salvation is an illusion for him. His philosophy thus, attacks the established belief of the time and in this sense is a kind of violence to them. This violence in the realm of ideas leads to physical violence in which Charvak is burnt alive for his views. The scene in the poem is the home coming of the Pandvas after Kurukshetra. At a time when Brahmins welcome Yudhisthira, Charvak curses the victorious king for having killed his brothers. It is then that Charvak is burnt alive for his heresies. There is a reference to ‘Kama’ to whom Charvak is compared. The story of the love-god being burnt to ashes by the third eye of Shiva is alluded to. There is an implication here that in this land of myths, the force of tradition is extremely strong. Any voice against it is forcibly silenced. But violence cannot be successful in wiping out a new philosophy. Charvak is burnt and only a stance is left. It is the stance that cannot be destroyed by violence. Here, death appears to lose to the force of belief.

Thus Charvak is dead but his philosophy of enjoyment of life is here and now become permanent. Charvak’s body burnt alive is the central image which suggests the desperation and defeat of the Brahmins who do not have arguments to dismiss Charvak’s Philosophy and so they use violence against his body.

In his ‘Karna’ from ‘Apparition in April’ he describes this mythological figure from the epic Mahabharata. Karna is the outcome of the rape of virgin Kunti by Sun God as described by him. So Karna is the biological son of Kunti. The poet says:-

“Sun-rape

The god descending

From he fire-chariot

A blade of light

Burning through her

Virginal members

And you were born

To the adolescent Kunti

A rape child by the sun (Karna)

In this poem the poet praises Karna and places him in a position of one of the greatest warrior even better than Arjuna. He has given the full circle of Karna who is socially marginalized from the very beginning. Karna is possessed within the celestial armour from his birth and these armours and ear-rings are the boon from Sun-god which will protect him from forever and these armours are rooted in his body and flesh.

Karna is also the universal giver with a larger heart and kindlier hand. When lord Indra realizes that Arjuna can't defeat karna then he comes in disguise as a Brahmin and alms these armours from Karna. Karna is really the heroic figure in Mahabharata and Daruwalla by glorifying karna wants to give karna a larger than life character. He wants to create reverential attitude for Karna in everyone's heart. Karna is always seen from a negative point of view but he is actually the vice of the marginalized people and if he is given a chance then he can defeat everyone there in the battle. The poet says:-

Armours one can take off

But this was shell- skin

Rooted in flesh

And when you ripped it off

Nerve- root and flesh-root

Still clinging

In bluding fidelity

And handed to the Brahmin India Too late you discovered

That God too have castes (Karna)

The poet also shows the reader glimpses of the battlefield. He says that it is Lord Krishna who repeatedly saves Arjuna from Karna. Finally he is killed by Arjuna when he forgets all his training to protect and defend himself and chariot wheel is stuck in the mud. Really Karna is betrayed throughout his life and those curses help him to attain his death. All these are predestined and it is not possible to forget Karna easily. The poet says in the concluding lines.

Radheya you were dead

Before the falcon- arrow found you.

..... we can't forget you in a hurry (Karna)

In "Shiva: At Timarsain" a poem in Under Orion, the style is vivid and brings to life not only the images of the place but also those associated with the popular conception of Shiva. In the beginning of the poem itself the images of the Himalayas and Shiva merge into one complex of visual imagination:

Lord of the stalactite

I have seen

Icicles growing from your tonsure

Overhead a pair of morals

Kept vigil over the crags (Shiva)

Strong references to the religious memory are made and the poet infuses the landscape with divine energy:

The crags here are rock temples

Of some abandoned cult

That brood over strips of alp

And upland pasture,

Limb and shoulder of rock

Rearing from frozen land slides. (Shiva)

The reader is prepared for the movement and energy of the divine/ orgasm by the description of “limb and shoulder of rock” rearing from frozen landslide. In this poem the poet makes a remarkable use of contrasting words- those suggesting rest and movement. The mountain is the Objectification of the principle of rest, while Shiva stands for divine, moving energy. The focus shifts to the pilgrims who bring “Oleander flower / and leaves of Angles marvellous” They clutch the iron phallus of the bell and “sent in clanging against a man in universe.” The sound is so unexpected in the silence of the mountains that it claves the hills like a sword-edge. The poem ends with a question asking Shiva if he would “leave these heights” and let them tame “him and pat his” Ice cone sharpness/ into abounded lingam. The poet feels sympathy and admiration for the pilgrims who “brave inclement dement wealthier for their genuine faith in their duty.

Daruwalla has used myths and legends. The spiritual and moral values of the past embodied in this myths and legends remain in the background. But at times they are juxtaposed with the lack of all values in contemporary life as a measure of the depth of confusion and anarchy prevalent in our age of anxiety. The contrast between the past and the present is quite glaring and has been constantly emphasized by Daruwalla. Man has never been perfect creature every age of human history has been quality of those follies and crimes which are disfiguring human life in our age. Yet within the days gone there was a reasonably wide spread faith during a set of ethical and non secular values which constituted the permanent standard for measuring the dignity and degradation of society. One of the conspicuous features of Indian English poetry is the use of mythology as a prominent theme in the poetry and Keki N. Daruwalla, like A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel, is not an exception. Not only mythology, he also interprets the subject of various religions in his poetry. Being a poet of postmodern era, it is his duty to question the so called truth and he exactly does so by distorting religion and mythologies to attain correct information. It may also his attempt reconstruct India’s cultural past and dismantle the venomous serpents of religion.

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