

Interrogating the Norm: Ecological Concerns in Select Poems of Keki N Daruwalla

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Abstract: The poetical works of Keki N Daruwalla depicts how consumerism, capitalist enterprises, along with the socially constructed (mis)interpretations of the world of nature have led to a major lacuna in our relationship with nature. He explicitly argues that preservation of nature should not only be for the sake of humans but also for its intrinsic value, and his poetical works do not present a romanticised or idealised picture of the natural world. The paper would make an attempt to analyse how Daruwalla debunks the cornucopian and anthropogenic views which perceives nature only in relation to human society. Daruwalla has seriously engaged himself with his surrounding space. The lines of his poems reflect his sense of ethical responsibility he feels towards the environment. The fact that nature has been stripped of its spiritual qualities disturbs him and he handles the issue with dexterity by contesting the anthropocentric approach.

Keywords: Nature, Ethical Consciousness, Cornucopia, Anthropocentric

Winner of Sahitya Academi Award (1984) and Padmashree Award (2014), Keki N Daruwalla, one of the well-known modern Indian poets writing in English, started his poetic career with the publication of *Under Orion* (1970). His poems explore a plethora of themes of social and ecological relevance, while environmental consciousness manifest as the major theme in his poems. Daruwalla's poems like, 'Death of a Bird', 'Hawk', 'Wolf', 'The Last Whale', 'The Last Howl' explore the complex panorama of relationship human beings share with the environment. As revealed by the poet human domination over the world of flora and fauna has led to a crisis in human environment and Daruwalla's negotiation of the conventional approach to the environment merits consideration. Anthologies like *The Keeper of the Death* (1982), *Landscape* (1987), and *A Summer of Tigers* (1995) reveal Daruwalla's intricate understanding of the physical world around him. Consumerism, capitalist enterprises, along with the socially constructed (mis)interpretations of the world of nature have led to a major lacuna in our relationship with nature. Daruwalla takes a radical stand in representing such

crisis in his poems, where he explicitly argues that preservation of nature should not only be for the sake of humans but for their intrinsic value. In his own words 'Nature poetry in twentieth century is vastly different from Wordsworth's "sweetness of common dawn."' (Daruwalla, 128). Thus Daruwalla's poetical works do not present a romanticised or idealised picture of the natural world. Rather they are concrete and direct in their approach to the environment.

Murdering them by the shoal
(nine hundred) for 'research'
Is big business in Japan.
For fifty million years whales cruised the
oceans,
As intrinsic to the sea as tide
as reefs, as molluscs, as sea-anemones,
now slaughtered to discover
how they survived so long. ("The Last Whale"
17-24)

The above lines debunks the cornucopian and anthropogenic views which perceives nature only in relation to human society. Humans hierarchize reason to achieve control over nature, however Daruwalla's poems beseech the same cognitive to draw attention to the crisis of our actions. The lines invoke an interrogation of the conventional cornucopian perspective of human race where nature cease to matter once it is beyond the limited meaning inscribed by human reason. 'Reason became the means to achieving total mastery over nature, now conceived as an enormous soulless mechanism that worked according to knowable natural laws[...] Ecocritics attack this view as 'reductionist', claiming that it substitutes a fragmented, mechanical worldview for a holistic, organic one.' (Garrard 2012: 69)

On a similar vein, Daruwalla argues for a need to shift from a human centric stand to a nature centred system of values. However, Daruwalla does not complicate the presentation of nature as a pastoral or Edenic retreat. He understands that environmentalism in a nation like India cannot be

severed from the issues of daily livelihood and social justice.

Like most of the ecocritics of our contemporary times, Daruwalla rejects the socially and linguistically constructed notions of nature. The spatial depiction in his poems traverses trajectory of the binaries of control and chaos, freedom and violence, civilisation/development and nature, instinct and reason/ideology; all amalgamated to defamiliarize the pre-conceived notions of reader's perceptions.

The wolves have been slaughtered now.
A hedge of smoking gun barrels
rings my daughter's dreams. ("Wolf" 26-28)

Or,

They sniffed the wind and moved into myth,
into childhood dreams, allegory, fiction;
and catching the scent of their own death
they tracked it to extinction. ("The Last
Howl" 37-40)

In the above lines, the cliché regarding wolves as figures lurking in the dark or on their hunt is done away with – they themselves are transformed into hunted figures. The readers' attention is drawn to the fact that they are at the verge of their extinction. The conception pertaining to wolves as a threat to human life is questioned and loss of equilibrium in nature is suggested. Further, a series of overwhelming questions are posed in the poems mentioned: Who is really the source of greater threat – man or animal? Who has invaded whose territory and carried out great mayhem like 'murder' of whales or killing of wolves? What has modernity with its huge arsenal of weapons and ideology of 'development' done to nature and animal kingdom?

One perceives a sense of immediacy and responsibility in this regard in Daruwalla's poems as is evident in poems like "The Last Whale," "Wolf," and "The Last Howl." One does not miss the apocalyptic vision that may be found in lines like the following:

more aircraft carriers and submarines. No whales.
("The Last Whale" 38).

The present context of disruption of the organic wholeness serves as a co-text to substantiate Daruwalla's apocalyptic view. His anger and ironic undertones not only reflects his faith in organic interconnectedness but also his sense of ethical consciousness. The discussions of the poems towards the end of this paper would clarify the matter.

Now, if we consider poetry with ecological concerns, we see that it is always attentive to the

socio-cultural economic changes which adversely affect our environment. Poetry as a genre has always been aware of the physical space surrounding the subject. Lawrence Buell observes in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, that in one or the other form the idea of nature had been a dominant or residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since such genre came into being (Buell 2005:2). More recently, we find that this keen awareness of the world of nature is accompanied by a sense of ethical concern. Glotfelty comments in *The Ecocriticism Reader* that "ecocriticism is the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment [...] ecocriticism takes an earth centred approach to literary studies" (as quoted in Garrard 2012: 3). Ecocritics not only study the presentation of nature in literary works but also takes into account the interplay of complex dynamics of socio-political and economic scenario involved in the process of signification of 'nature' from various theoretical perspectives. Nature itself is a cultural construct and hence is subject to serious scrutiny. Raymond Williams in his famous book *The Country and the City* (1973) has discussed how culture has played a crucial role in constructing the meaning of nature by associating it with various tangents like the countryside, the gardens, the landscape, Edenic retreat, poverty, sublime and the like. Our contemporary culture and its artefacts play an important role in constructing our perceptions of nature. In light of the above, Daruwalla as a poet with ecocritical concerns is always cautious and critical of the various nuances of culture that defines nature.

Moreover, critical reading of Daruwalla's poems exhibits a spatial concern which runs parallel to his sense of environmental consciousness. Spatial concern encompasses both environmental and cultural space, and the very interaction between them. It is in the landscape that Daruwalla historicizes nature when he talks about changing seasons and diminishing fauna. Landscape is a witness to historical flux and becomes a character in this very process. Landscape for Daruwalla is not just a source of aesthetic pleasure but also a subject for deep reflection about ethical responsibility of the human beings. He observes:

My poems are rooted in landscape, which anchors poems. 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 and to the plane of the spirit. (1980: 21)

The poems also takes into account the environmental issues in post-colonial Indian context. In the poem 'Death of a Bird', included in the anthology *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), the poet critiques the validity of our reason. The speaker shoots a king monal with his 'barrel' while it was making love to 'the female brown nondescript.' That no symbolic language is sufficient to describe the world of nature is suggested by the use of the word 'nondescript'. The 'barrel' carries with it the historical process of enlightenment and consequent colonialism which is responsible for large scale exploitation of nature. Daruwalla ironically depicts that the legacy of dominance of 'reason' continues when the king monal is killed instinctively. Violence seems to be an essence of human beings. The speaker in the poem also strikes the pony on its shanks so that it runs faster. The pony falls a thousand feet below to a 'roaring river.' Words like 'ciphers,' 'forgotten code,' 'hieroglyphs' suggest that there is an urgent need to encode something but the speaker is unable to do so. Caught up in the dusk, the speaker shoots the animals of wilderness like bears, jackals and wolves. Later, the speaker as well as his partner is so guilt ridden that the scream of the pony and the shriek of the bird linger in their mind even while making love. Daruwalla tries to reflect on the shortcomings of our reasoning power and critiques our sense of insecurity while we negotiate the world of nature. Nature is the 'other' and is treated with fear as well as wonder. This mixture of opposite attitudes is sarcastically presented in the poem "Haranag" from the same anthology. This 'haranag' is a creature of wilderness too. Its abode is an untamed 'arthritic bamboo jungle' which could not be burnt after rains. '[T]oo green,' it could not be burned during the month of June as 'half the town would go cindering with it.' Hence it is an untameable forest to be brought under human control. We as human beings often justify our wrongs against nature. In order to legitimise the killing, the narrator raises the issue of the human fear and insecurity pertaining to the 'haranag' – that it supposedly brings ill-omen with it.

For after each serpent-dawn
disaster struck
news of sickness, news of death
and near home once after he appeared
a dehydrating baby
itching towards delirium. (2, 9-14)

Superstition prevails. When the narrator's wife, while undressing, sees the haranag, he kills it in anger. Towards the end of the poems the narrator

and his wife feel guilty of killing the snake. They try to atone it by offering milk and grain to the dead haaranag. Daruwalla reveals human hypocrisy when he points out that the members of the same community worship animals and at the same time kill them for material benefits or for their unjustified fear. Both these poems ends with sense of guilt and apocalyptic vision where the poet reminds us that we must pay one day for our anti-environmental activities.

'It's the queen-monal! We are accursed!' she said.
'Just watch it's eyes!' For though the bird was near death

It's eyes flared terror like bits of dripping meat.
("Death of a Bird," 72-74)

Thus what is part of a mere peripheral setting for most of the poets of modern Indian poetry becomes a matter of serious concern for Daruwalla. Images of animals like wolves, bears, jackals, hawks pervade his poems. He takes an earth-centric approach when he mentions how the narrator in "Death of a Bird" shoots animals like bears and wolves. Such activities lead to the extinction of many species from the face of the earth. Wolves once had a reputation amongst the younger generation which made them acquire a mythical status. 'Prowler, wind-sniffer, throat-catcher', the 'half silhouette and half myth' creature was much feared (Wolf). Daruwalla's ethical consciousness for environmental crisis is once again perceived when he laments that:

The wolves have been slaughtered now.
A hedge of smoking gun-barrels
rings my daughter's dreams. (Wolf, 26-28)

In the poem "The Last Howl," the poet subtly shows that it is not the wolves who invade the human space. It is the other way round. Human beings start blaming the wolves for attacking their children and cattle. They also approach the sorcerers to evade the wolves but no avail. However, the poet remarks that 'their (wolves') myths increased'; which hints that anthropocentric activities have led to the extinction of these animals. They are now only alive in our myths and imagination. Daruwalla in this poem has successfully deconstructed the common human perception regarding wolves by making the readers contemplate on the vulnerability of wolves due to human activities over a period of time.

And howled for the last time the howl of no
hope
They sniffed the wind and moved into myth.
Into childhood dreams, allegory and fiction;

And catching a scent of their own death
They tracked it to extinction. (36-40)

“Fish are Speared by Night” (*Landscapes*, 1987) is a poem which can be well contrasted with “The Last Whale” (*A Summer of Tigers*, 1995). While the former is about sustainable kind of fishing for daily livelihood, the latter is about large scale fishing for capitalistic enterprises which is the reason behind the decrease in the number of whales. The organic connection which these fishermen share with the sea is found lacking in the highly mechanised and indifferent method of fishing used by ship in sea. Daruwalla envisions the moment when the last whale will be drawn out from the sea. In the name of research, necessity of high protein diet and the like whales ‘intrinsic’ to the sea are murdered in ‘shoal’. Violent images of ‘blood darkened seas,’ ‘harpoon stuffed with explosives,’ ‘power saws’ are used to validate the inhuman activities. Patriarchal and capitalist ideologies is the factor behind the perpetuation of environmental degradation, while wars would only add fuel to the fire. ‘It is no coincidence that this view of nature took hold mostly with the rise of capitalism, which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint on availability’ (Plumwood 1993: 111)

The same number of icebergs, more or less;
More oil slicks certainly and tanker fleets,
More aircrafts and submarines. No whales.
(The Last Whale, 36-38)

‘Hawk’ from the anthology *The Keeper of Death* (1982) is a poem that well juxtaposes the nature-culture binaries. Hawk is a merciless bird of prey of immense strength that soars the heights of sky. The poet refers to its power and skill by associating with it violent and misogynist images. With repressed anger the hawk ‘drills the sky’ (3). He is

a frustrated parricide on the kill.
The fuse of his hate burning still
...
a rapist in the harem of sky.(7-14).

Immediately after presenting this fearsome image of a wild hawk, the poet remarks that the tamed hawk is worse still as he is contaminated (‘touched’) by human civilisation. Before taming the hawk, humans momentarily blind the hawk by sewing its eyelids. Then ‘morsels of vision are fed to his eyes/ as he is unblended stich by relenting stich.’ (26-27). With repressed anger the hawk re-discovers a new earth and sky. He turns out to be more violent and worse during the act of killing his prey. At a time when the whole world of nature would be contaminated with

human activities ‘the dove will look up for clouds, and it will rain hawks’ (4, 23).

The poems discussed above depicts how Daruwalla has seriously engaged himself with his surrounding space. The lines of his poems reflect his sense of ethical responsibility he feels towards the environment. The fact that nature has been stripped of its spiritual qualities disturbs him and he handles the issue with dexterity by contesting the anthropocentric approach. The relationship of human beings with nature has always been determined by and structured through a series of cultural processes. These processes often seem to be determined by capitalistic discourses governing the society. For example, when he says that “The tamed one is worse, for he is touched by man” in the poem “Hawk” while referring to the tamed hawk, he is directing the readers’ attention towards the contamination of the world of nature by that of culture. We need to re-think about the human interaction with nature which is based on our assumption of our superiority over nature. The power of reasoning that human beings possess is usually attributed to this superiority. Daruwalla is successful in placing his argument that ‘Reason’ has only become a means to, to use Garrard’s words, “achieving total mastery over nature, now conceived as an enormous, soulless mechanism that worked according to knowable natural laws. Animals too ... were understood in such ‘mechanomorphic’ terms” (69). Daruwalla’s spatial concern lies not in presenting nature from an aesthetic point of view but in informing the various exploitative ideologies at work which are responsible for environmental degradation. There is a major ‘lacuna’ in our approach to environment and the poems of Daruwalla that I have discussed in this article throw light on this view. Daruwalla lays stress on the organic wholeness of our existence and the environmental depletion of our physical space shall only further our devastation. Hence, the apocalyptic vision in his poems.

However, the poems like ‘Fish are Speared by Night’ depict that environmental challenges in a country like India are different from those in the western world. Again repeated use of ‘guns’, ‘barrels’ in his poems show that the legacy of ‘colonialism’ is being continued for domination and control. Relation between Nature and Empire needs a re-interpretation. Economy, social justice, development, bio piracy, conservation, consumption are issues which need to be addressed while

considering a physical space in a postcolonial context like that in India. Moreover, a non-human environment is not possible. Deep ecology which prioritizes environment over human beings has the tendency of falling into the trap of capitalistic enterprise. Wilderness preservation, 'return to nature' is at times a romanticised picture of the Asian world—subject to western hegemony as far as deep ecology and biocentric views are concerned. Daruwalla's poems are very much contextualised in postcolonial India. He depicts in most of his poems how the problems like overpopulation and superstition play an important in the extinction of certain animals. While, his poems like "The Last Whale" show his global concern regarding environmental issues.

Thus, we see that Daruwalla's poems resists 'structures of thought' (Clark 2011: 203) which determine our relationship with the environment. The formulation of an appropriate structure of thought in this regard constitute the very challenge of Environmental criticism. When Daruwalla's poems critiques the culturally conceived assumptions regarding environment, he is aware of where our actions are leading us to thereby levitating ecological concerns. This justifies his ethical responsibility and his spatial concerns. Daruwalla's poetry is a landmark in modern Indian poetry in English as it marks a departure from looking inwards by the individual to the world outside. He is conscious of the environment we shape which, he knows, in turn will shape our lives on the planet called Earth which is our home.

ⁱ Mechanomorphism: representation of animals as machine-like... considered by some critics of science to be the cultural foundation of environmental crisis' (Garrard 2012:208)

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