



## Remembering Keki

Jagdish Batra\*

On 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2024, we lost one of the greatest Indian poets of our time. Padma Shri Keki N. Daruwalla was a unique personality who wrote brilliant poems, stories and novels, besides commenting through newspaper columns regularly on current developments. Acclaimed critic Harish Trivedi places him alongside AK Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel, and calls him “patron saint of budding Indian English poets”. Visualizing him as a top cop and also as a top poet always posed a puzzle to people. His brilliance of mind, clear vision, dedication to certain values along with real hard work kept him at the centre of the Indian literary world for such a long time. As a human being, his pleasant demeanour and unmatched modesty attracted the young and the old alike. Many a budding poets and writers benefitted from his advice and works.

The writer of these lines had the privilege of meeting Daruwalla, affectionately called Keki, on several occasions. For three consecutive years, he was an honoured guest at the international conferences organized annually at the O.P. Jindal Global University where I worked. He was never demanding, and put up simply with whatever arrangements for his conveyance or accommodation were made which, I must admit, were not always very comfortable. I remember how when during one of his stays there, his hearing aid got lost, but apart from making a casual mention of it, he did not make it an issue. Not only did he grace our conferences, but also obliged me when I invited him on behalf of other universities as far as Jaipur and he readily obliged by attending the events there. He was such a loving person who never let his high stature come between our relationship and would talk like a friend. I would rather request him to drop the honorific ‘ji’ while talking to me. Such a humble and lofty soul will always be missed deeply by the lovers of literature in India as also in other countries.

Born in Lahore in 1937, Keki had to accustom to living in different places since his father N.C. Daruwalla, an eminent professor, who taught in Government College Lahore in undivided India, moved to Junagarh and then to Rampur. He obtained his master's degree in English Literature from Government College, Ludhiana, University of Panjab followed by a year at Oxford as a Queen Elizabeth House Fellow in 1980–81.

Daruwalla joined the police service in 1958. This again offered him opportunities to work in different parts of the country. He witnessed the harsh realities of life from which he drew substance for his literary pursuits. Subsequently, he worked as Special Assistant on International Affairs to the Prime Minister, Charan Singh during 1979-80 and as Special Secretary, RAW. He also worked as chairman, Joint Intelligence Committee, in the rank of Secretary, and post-retirement, as a member of the National Commission for Minorities from 2011 to 2014.

His varied duties did not hamper his interest in literature. So, his first collection of poems *Under Orion* was published by the Writers Workshop, Kolkata in 1970. Leaving aside a gap of eight years following this publication, Daruwalla's pen did not stop and anthologies of poems and stories, and later novels too continued to appear regularly till his departure from this world. He won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984 and Padma Shri in 2014.

Coming to his works, one is surprised to note that Daruwalla has a large corpus with 17 books of poetry, short stories and novels. Many of these have been translated into foreign languages like

---

\* Prof. & Ex. Dean, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India Email: [drjagdishbatra@gmail.com](mailto:drjagdishbatra@gmail.com)  
The article was received on 15/05/2025 accepted on 13/07/2025 and published on 30/07/2025



German, Swedish, Russian, Spanish, etc. His great scholarship is reflected in his ideas which relate to human psyche and society, his Parsi roots as also other faiths, natural and socio-political events happening over time, etc. His special interest lies in history and geography indeed overshadows his works. Critics have tried to trace the impact of various English poets and writers, but the fact is that he is 'sui generis'.

There are plenty of themes which Daruwalla has touched upon, and it would be impossible to even give a specimen of each one of them here in this short article. He has been criticised for his supposedly overmuch focus on the dirty and ugly. Critic Vijay Kant Dube comments: "The mind cannot go elsewhere barring death, violence, bloodshed, hatred, vengeance, jealousy, cold blood or bad blood murder which is but the one side of the picture while on the other plague, malaria, diarrhoea, cholera and others take the centrespaces of his poetry. Famine, drought and floods present the scenes and sites." But that's half the truth. Granted that as a supercop, his attention must be drawn towards these ugly aspects of society, but human predicament also expresses itself in tender sentiments, as in the poem "Gulzaman's Son," Daruwalla depicts a shepherd who is often taunted by the village community for not having begotten a son. When a sheep begets its calf, he feels he has got a son. What a beautiful emotion!

His poetry as also prose works reflect a cosmopolitan outlook. Though a Parsi, he had grooming in Punjabi culture from both sides of the dividing line. Hence you could find the mention of place names:

Going back in time is  
also tough.  
Ask anyone back-trekking to  
Sargodha/or Jhelum or Mianwali and  
they'll tell you.

Landscapes find a leading place in his poetry. His job took him to many places in the world and for a poet, such an opportunity provides ample scope to draw pen-pictures even though the pictures come, for Daruwalla, along with musings on related aspects. The titles of his anthologies like *Naishapur and Babylon*, *Landscape* and *The Map-maker* clearly provide the hint to his interest in geography as also in anthropology. The locations are everywhere – in India as in other parts of the world. Place is important in his stories too. "Love Across the Salt Desert" – one of the earliest stories that has been prescribed in secondary classes since long takes up the Kuchh area of Gujarat as the locale of a love story, ingratiating at the same time the smuggling activities rampant in that area which his police eyes could not have avoided. Similar is the locale of Alipur of undivided India in the story "How the Quit India Movement came to Alipur" where the British collector's orderly serves mistakenly dog biscuits to the visiting local residents turning them from lackeys to revolutionaries as the biscuits are rumoured to have meat in them.

Daruwalla's interest in history is too evident to be missed. It effectively manifests in his novels too. He started writing novels quite late – at the age of seventy. His first novel *Of Pepper and Christ* goes back to the time when in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, following Vasco de Gama, Portuguese sailors undertook the sea voyages to India. It was primarily to beat the Arabs in trade but at the same time, Christian missionaries too thronged to the Indian subcontinent. Hence the title. The narrative depicts graphically and lyrically the journey of one such group and captures the intrigues of maritime trade through the souks and lanes of Cairo, Mombasa and Calicut. One wonders how Daruwalla filled the empty spaces of history with colours to make them lively.



His other novel *Ancestral Affairs* focusses on the Partition of India. What transpired in the state of Junagadh is a fascinating aspect of history for all Indians because the Nawab there wanted his princely state to accede to Pakistan and Sardar Patel dealt with him with an iron hand. Daruwalla had been living there when his father shifted to that place in 1945. Prof NC Daruwalla was the tutor of the prince as Saam Bharucha, the character in the novel is. While the first part of the novel deals with the goings-on on the political front, the second deals with the adolescent Rohinton, very likely the alter ego of Keki, falling in love much like his father. So, from the national level politics, the reader is thrown into a romantic issue at the family level. A comic undercurrent marks the lyrical work.

Daruwalla had always championed the cause of freedom of expression. Besides, he stood for human rights and tolerance. Remember, how he returned the Sahitya Akademi award because he felt the literary body had failed in securing the freedom of expression. In one of his articles, he had castigated the judges giving police remand of an accused as per request from the police! His third novel *Swerving to Solitude: Letters to Mama* takes up the history of India from the imposition of the infamous Emergency in 1975 to Operation Bluestar in 1984. The locale shifts from Delhi and Lucknow in India to Canada, US and Mexico, placing action during the period of the First World War. Proof enough of Daruwalla's interest in history and his cosmopolitan outlook. In Mexico, the story revolves around the now-forgotten Marxist revolutionary M.N. Roy who migrated from India. Daruwalla, a former super-cop, could not have stayed away from weaving in spy operations and so it becomes an acutely international plot with the famed Mata Hari put to work, eliciting information in bed from the Superintendent of Police (Special Branch of CID), Calcutta who is under order to arrest Roy! So, the international politics is sought to be linked to national politics. The story is told in the form of a monologue of a young, married woman Seema though she addresses in the form of diary jottings it to her dead mother!

Coming back to poetry, I also remember the advice that Daruwalla gave to young poets: "If you want to be a poet, you must fall in love with words." That was indeed his poetic credo. His poetry stands out on account of the meticulous use of words, so even when he writes in prose, lyricism perforce enters there. A large number of poems have beautiful imagery as in the following lines:

...the ibex looking down  
quizzically  
at our car from cliff  
the croc sunning corrugated hide  
on the banks of the Rapti  
as I cross the river rolling on elephant back  
wary elephant treating riverbed like a mine  
trundling diagonal across the current.

Daruwalla also shows economy of words like T.S. Eliot. This economy comes in handy in his dramatic monologues. As the police officer, he has the eye for the crime and the unlawful, as in case of rioting mob or the loud-mouthed politician, and so his poetry turns acerbic and satirical dripping with "bile and acid". So, the prevalence of images of violence stands out: "light spills on the road like a patch of blood". Daruwalla is wit incarnate, if nothing else! Irony runs through his lines in a very subtle manner. And where the two combine, satire must appear like the "leaves come to a tree". Mark the element in a pedantic professors' condolence:

Your brother died, you said?  
Eleven years old and run over by a car?  
I was so terribly sorry to hear it!  
Pardon me, not tragic, as you said just now.



Unfortunate is the word, terribly unfortunate.

Daruwalla will always be remembered for his deep knowledge of men and matters pertaining to our as well as of the olden times. Besides, his poetry and prose works reflect his unique penmanship. He trod the literary world as a colossus and has left behind a rich treasure trove of his literary works that is enjoyable as also enlightening. May his soul rest in eternal peace!



Dr. Jagdish Batra is Professor Emeritus of English, SRM University, Delhi-NCR Prior to this, he was Professor and Dean (Languages), O.P. Jindal Global University. Positions held earlier by him are Principal and Head of PG English Department in different colleges. He has around four decades of teaching and research experience and has guided 50 research scholars. His areas of specialization are Indian English Literature and Culture, on which he has presented papers at and chaired many international conferences in India, Europe and South-East Asia. Recipient of many awards and a former Rotary Study Exchange Scholar to USA, Prof. Batra has published ten books, 70+ research papers and a number of general articles.