

# Painting Riverscapes with the colour of Poetry: the Unvarnished Reality in K N Daruwalla's River Poems

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## **Abstract**

In present times, poetry as a genre is gaining less popularity as writers, and researchers are hankering after lucrative fictions, and hence under such circumstance, this work essays to ensure the progression of Indian English poetry by ascertaining the poetic oeuvre of Keki N Daruwalla's river poems under study, in which the poet skillfully portrays riverscapes with the colour of his poetry. Historically, the Post-Independence Indian English poets can be grouped together according to their affinity in issues, sensibility, poetic style, or geographical location as they have tried especially to maintain the harmonious relationship between socio-economic values and environmental values. The social milieu which dominated their creative process hasn't completely blurred their concern for natural and environmental influences and inflexions. Nar Deo Sharma opines, "New Indian English poets are sincerely committed to social, political and religious perspectives to the extent that they do not feel shy of poetizing stark realities which might not satisfy the parochial norms of the good and the beautiful altogether, but highlight the unvarnished truth in poetry" (Sharma 1984: 49-50). Since, there has been an emergence of innumerable poets in the last sixty years; the researcher's focus is restricted to K N Daruwalla, who has a distinct poetic quality in manufacturing landscapes and more importantly painting riverscapes. Anguished over the decay of the profaneness of the Indian rivers, the poet seems to convey the idea that nature has made everything beautiful but man has rendered it ugly because he has lost the sense of wonder and beauty and the poet has succeeded in presenting this idea through contrastive pen-pictures. The present article is an assessment of Daruwalla's understanding of the environment while creating poems.

[**Key Words:** Landscape, Riverscape, Sacred Rituals, Indian Sensibility, Nature]

"The environment designed to be used exclusively by humans, to serve the needs of humanity, is in the profoundest sense of humanity's source and support; its ingenious, inventive life giving matrix" (Rowe 1994: 106). Many Indian English poets have written poems on and about rivers. The impact of rivers on the poets' lives fascinated the poets so much that their poetic images are drawn mostly from various aspects of the river. The rivers have strong presence, especially in the works of poets who live in Bombay; Ezekiel celebrates the sea in 'Love Sonnet'. In the poem 'O My Very Own Cadaver', Gieve Patel imagines the association of water and body. A K Ramanujan depicts the river Vaikai in 'A River' to contrast the attitudes of the old and the new Tamil poets towards human suffering. The poet writes about the cruelty of the river floods in Madurai City. According to V S Skanda Prasad the river is God's beautiful sublime expression. To R Parthasarathy the river Vaikai has become a sewer of the city. He bewails the degradation to which the

sacred river of the sweet city has been turned. Jayanta Mahapatra too has written poems which deal with rivers. However, his poem 'Evening Landscape by the River' is deceptive in its title as it is a view from the riverside while the poem, 'Again, One Day, Walking by the River' tells the readers about the stoic presence of the unchanging river and the sun while the miserable and the helpless forms of human beings pass on. K B Rai in his poem 'The Sacred Ganges' beautifully portrays purity, peace and tyranny of the Ganges and says that great cities on the banks of the Ganges got great names and holiness. K N Daruwalla is certainly one of the major voices in then Indo-Anglican poetry, who won the Sahitya Academy award and he writes with obvious Indian elements in his verses, especially in his use of nature, landscapes and human passions. Basically he is a nature poet; he romanticizes nature with a sense of ecstasy. There is an abundance of nature in his poetry collections. These collections affirm strong emotions, which is experienced in confronting the sublimity of and its picturesque qualities. Nissim Ezekiel writes:

"By putting Daruwalla among his contemporaries one sees how he scores over them. By depth of feeling, economy of language and originality of insight, Daruwalla commands respect" (Ezekiel 1998: 65).

His presentation of both the malevolent and nurturing aspects of the nature convey his understanding of the natural world, which is absolutely other in comparison to the divided nature of man. Like many British romantic poets like Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly and Indian poets, Daruwalla also uses many symbols and images from nature and landscape. Especially, the natural architecture, one finds in the river has a grandeur which humbles and ennobles him and stimulates him to write poetries. The river for R N Sinha means a different thing at different places, but generally it stands for the principle of change and continuity. Similarly, Daruwalla's poems are also abundant with the use of rivers as symbols, which emerge with different connotations. R N Sinha comments, in his collection *Night River* the river symbolises peace, a continuity of life and sublimity. Daruwalla's third book *Crossing of Rivers* contains some remarkable pictures of nightscape, riverscape, mudscape in poems like 'Boat-ride along the Ganga', 'Nightscape', 'Vignettes I, II & III', 'The River-Silt', 'Crossing of Rivers', and 'Harang', in poems like 'Vignette I' the river is powerful, sacred entity "swollen with hymns". Again in 'Vignette II', river is "solitude", there is equally realistic and authentic imagery in the poem entitled 'Crossing of Rivers'. Here much of the imageries are presented through the use of metaphors. For instance, the river "coughs" and "eddies" and "converses with the mud". The waters are placid, and "glassed with green moss". Then there is a picture of a young man jumping into the water and finding himself in great danger. The young man's head is rising about the surface of the water, then sinking below it, alternately, till a fisher-girl comes to his rescue. Here too we have imagery which is charged with emotion. According to Vilas Sarang, Daruwalla is at his best when he works with selective image and metaphor, as in 'Vignette I'. Poems like 'Dream Log', 'The Room', 'The House' and 'Melons' from *Night River*, reinforce the worries, the anxiety, stresses and desires of the conscious mind. The poet treats inanimate natural objects like river with human feelings, thoughts, and sensations to create empathy.

This unique quality of empathising with nature and the inanimate objects deepen the intensity through the unification that even the current, running under the stillness of water makes the sky pulsate, this makes the person question: "What makes the sky throb here?" (Daruwalla 2006: 14). His images are tense, taut, and suggestive and they also reflect his experiences. Vilas Sarang writes:

Daruwalla is at his best when he works with selective image and metaphor... juxtaposed effectively, and described with economy, achieving an intense, dramatic effect. (Sarang 2000: 228)

He responds to a questionnaire given by Satish Kumar: "For me poetry is firstly personal-exploratory, at times therapeutic and an aid in coming to terms with one's own interior world. At the same time it has to be a social gesture, because on occasions I feel external reality bearing down on me from all sights with a pressure strength enough to tear the ear-drums" (Kumar 1990: 225). As in the poem 'Grass', Jayant Mahapatra tries to find out relationship of sun, grass, loneliness and activity, Daruwalla wants to hear the echo of his heart in nature. Another poet Kulbhushan Kushal endears trees and mountains, intends to know them, to understand their language and through their language he hopes to refine his own language. Likewise Daruwalla's escape into the natural world is not to be treated as a romantic's shying away from the burdens of reality. It is only to redefine his perception of unvarnished reality that he drowns his perception deep into the rivers.

Daruwalla's poetry is suffused with the varied aspects of Indian sensibility. Daruwalla, in an interview confesses that if he moved out of the country (India), he cannot write poetry. Therefore like Nissim Ezekiel, he too felt safe in India to write poetry. His poetry is conspicuous for the vivid and picturesque portrayal of the variegated landscape of North India. Its rivers, hills, plains and pastures are beautifully described. Daruwalla writes to Sathish Kumar: "I am not an urban writer and my poems are rooted in the rural landscape. My poetry is earthy, and I like to consciously keep it that way, shunning sophistication which, while adding gloss, takes away from the power of the verse" (Kumar 1990: 228). Daruwalla's landscape is essentially Indian. R. Parthasarthy remarks: "when it isn't ornamental, the landscape comes alive as a presence as its own. The language then is pared to the bone. Images are concrete and exact" (Daruwalla 1979: 39).

In most of his river poems the scene is laid in Varanasi and the central metaphor here is Ganga, 'with all its primal, religious and emotive connotations'. Ganga appears in these poems, Vrinda Nabar writes:

The River's Rhythm is that of life and death, of birth and rebirth, of passion and rejection.

In and round it are all signs of stagnancy the tonsured heads, the fossilised anchorites, the tattooed harlots, and the dead who are brought to it shrouded in the anonymity of white. (Nabar 1980: 223)

In Daruwalla's first collection entitled *Under Orion*, there is a very powerful river poem called 'The Ghaghra in Spate'. The poem invites a comparison with A K Ramanujan's 'A

River'. Both poets describe the river as a violent force. The river in Ramanujan is the unseeing, all-powerful fate, while in Daruwalla's poem she is a cunning animal. Daruwalla's poem is more intricately structured and the river has almost an animal presence as the angry river eats up the village:

Twenty minutes of a nightmare spin  
and fear turns phantasmal  
as half a street goes  
churning in the river belly.

... a buffalo floats over to the rooftop  
where the men are stranded. (Daruwalla 2006: 14-22)

The Ganga is known to wash away sins and to "lighten misery, but here it flows not to lighten the misery but so show it" (Daruwalla, 2006: 40-41). The real damage, which the river does, becomes evident only after the flood has subsided and the water had retreated. The land, where the flood waters had stayed for a number of days, begins to sink; the houses in the village, which had withstood the fury of the flood, are now seen almost on the verge of collapse; and the rice-fields, into which the flood-water had brought plenty of fish, now begin to dry up and the fish begin to die. The fish are killed by mud and the heat of the sun. but in spite of this huge loss men do not indulge in curses or in any crazy kind of talk because they are familiar with the behaviour of this river. Moreover, they do not even pray to God for help because they know that their prayers in this situation are futile.

K N Daruwalla in his collection of poems *Crossing of Rivers* evaluates his obsession with rivers and the associated images of life and death, journey and sojourn. In the words of Vrinda Nabar, "appears here with all its primal, religious, and emotive connotations. The river's rhythm is that of life and death, of birth and rebirth, of passion and rejection...." (Nabar 1980: 10). Daruwalla's poetry represents the composite religious culture of secular India. The purification rituals associated with the Ganga as the sportive framework extend his poetry to tradition, to antiquity, to myth and to the symbolic, even spiritual dimension. He freely uses words which are indicative of rituals and religious aspects of many cultures. In yet another poem 'River Silt' Daruwalla compresses the entire creation from the beginning into the three parts of the poem by crowding the poem with images drawn from afar in space and time and the overriding image of river journey where the boatman forgets to shift the sails on the waters of life. It is an accurate picture of the progress of mankind from time immemorial on the river of memory. His words about the sacred Ganges are:

Flow, O flow, forever flow  
O symbol of purity  
O harbinger of peace  
O subduer of tyrants.

We look in consort at the distant sea,  
And feel it turbulent and salty there,  
A passionate and perpetual mystery.

I see my body float on waters  
That rush down the street,  
Like a leaf that humps its way  
Over pebbles. (Daruwalla 1980: 81-82)

The opening poem 'Boat-ride along the Ganga' presents a vivid and realistic description of the Ganga whose banks are littered with flaming pyres:

And once more the pyres; against a mahogany sky  
The flames look like a hedge of spear-blades  
Heated red for a ritual that bades no good.  
The mourners are a cave painting grotesque  
Done with charred wood. (Daruwalla 2006: 35-39)

There is a sense of the unreal in the opening of the "ghat-amphitheatre" which unfolds like "a diseased nocturnal flower in a dream". The idea of disease is reiterated in the simile of "freak" ones. The contrast between the timeless "legend-talk" of the *Panda* and the "sewer-mouth" trained "like a cannon" symbolises the violence done by the city to the holy river. The *Panda* who calculates, "the amount of merit that accrues to you", represents the fact that Varanasi stands a place to die and to get an instant salvation. There is a hidden satire there in these lines of the poem. A N Dwivedi while discussing the 'Second Vignette' takes up this argument and says: "It is not that Daruwalla deliberately denigrates Varanasi: he rather discovers it to be no better than many other ancient cities of the Hindus ....His 'seeing' eye enables him to grasp things as they really are, not as they ought to be" (Dwivedi 1984: 176). The scene along the river Ganga could not have been depicted in a shorter compass than has been done in the poem "Vignette I". This whole poem is written in lines each of which is strikingly short and yet vivid and adequate. Then we come across the following two lines which contain a striking simile and also convey the idea briefly and yet most effectively:

Beggars hoist their deformities  
As boatmen hoist their sails. (Daruwalla 2006: 40)

This irony is more clear in the poem 'Vignette I' is not lost on the reader wherein the poet while praising the religious supremacy of the river Ganga:

The Ganga flows swollen with hymns  
The river is a voice  
In this desert of human lives.  
The Ganga flows through the land. (Daruwalla 2006: 40)

The Ganga is known to wash away sins and to lighten misery, but here it flows "not to lighten the misery but so show it" (40-41). In 'Vignette II', the religious face of Varanasi is highlighted. The landscape peopled with pilgrims is drawn vividly. Description merges with myth here:

You go the rounds of the panchtirath  
starting from the ghat where Durga  
had dropped a sword

to where she dropped an earring  
 and the Panchganga Ghat where four rivers  
 are said to meet the Ganga,  
 like this river of faith going down  
 the stone-steps to meet the river. (Daruwalla 2006: 40-49)

The poet brings to life the rituals on the bank of the Ganga:

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*. (Daruwalla 2006: 53-58)

The expression “spider-thread ritual” indicates the poet’s cynical attitude about these rituals especially the Hindu rituals like “chanting of gayetri mantra”, “shaving head”, “pindadan” etc. In ‘Naryal Purnima’, the poet expresses superstitions about the rain. The poem concludes with an ambiguous note on the eventual result of the ritual: “The rains may truly fail this year. Our prayers may go unheard” (Daruwalla 1980: 67). All these rituals have a spider-web quality; they are designed to trap the unsuspecting pilgrim. The “river of faith” then becomes blind faith making people vulnerable to crafty priests. The river is a witness to all that goes on its banks, but she does not say anything:

Only the river doesn’t speak here.  
 She is thought itself,  
 a soundless interior monologue. (Dauwalla 2006: 70-73)

Arun Kolatkar in his ‘The Boat Ride’ creates this kind of hypnotic stillness in spite of some minor activities like noises of birds, water, sound, etc. poems in this collection are thus enriched with naturalized details, marked by precision and detachment. It very often verges on the surrealistic form.

The earthiness of his poetry exhibits itself in descriptions which, according to Gopal Gandhi, have “a three-dimensional quality”. Of course, his ability to describe a scene is exceptional, a quality which P D Chaturvedi terms “almost Hardy-esque”. He goes on to say:

He paints a landscape which acts not only as a backdrop to his poems, but also participates in its action and movement. The Essential poetic significance of the landscape is the question of reflection which that scene evokes in us. (Chaturvedi 1987: 95)

In his poem ‘Dawn’ he portrays an excellent landscape of the Ganga and a holy city on its bank (probably Varanasi). This describes the rising sun personified as a bald headed devotee. The lines remind the reader of Shiv K Kumar’s ‘Banaras : Winter Morning’, although the difference between the two poems is one of tone as Shiv K Kumar’s persona is almost in a state of ecstasy , while the voice in Daruwalla’s ‘Dawn’ is somewhat cynical. The dawn on the Ganga is a bizarre illusion in case of Daruwalla, while the dawn in

Kumar's poem is "sacrosanct". In 'The Dip', the river is a warm and comforting presence. When approaching the river all doubts disappear:

These are the stone-banks  
where the ship of doubt is wrecked. (Daruwalla 2006: 43-44)

Entering into the river is like leaving behind all the infirmities of the body. These doubts are momentary only. The poet "shooes away" his thought and finds himself "in her warm, dark heart". The river is almost a different world quite separate from the cacophonous life on her banks. The life on the banks of the river has been described in terms of animal images, like those of a dog or goats on a cliff. The poet expected to feel the frozen paws of the river, but found it warm and welcoming. In a poem like "Mother", there is a complete identification of the poet with the river:

Sleeping on your banks  
as you flow by  
I find you flowing within my body. (Dauwalla 2006: 11-13)

M Sivaramkrishna finds a sudden heightening of the basic perception and believes that "the mother is the landscape, the river and to a certain extent one's mother too" (Shivaramakrishna 1984: 16). The description of the different stages in the life of the river is extremely vivid. Unlike the "grey monotones" and the "half-light mudscapes", the river in its infancy is a "dialect of colours":

foam-white  
and kingfisher blue  
and the pure, transparent green  
in which grass could not be reflected? (Daruwala 2006:15-18)

The preponderance of 'r' and 's' sounds in these lines re-creates the sound of swiftly flowing water over smooth pebbles. The clear water reflects the blue sky, a reflection that merges with the white and green of the river. An element of drama creeps in when the poet speaks to the river and asks her if she remembers that purity and beauty now when she is slow and laden with filth:

Can you recall  
the abyss-floor at Rishikesh,  
the rapids of *Bhabar*  
your devotees at Hardwar ?  
Do you dream of them  
the grottoes that nestled at your side,  
ploughed fields – one vast furrow  
across the mother-silt,  
mango-groves. (Daruwalla 2006: 30-38)

The poet has glimpses of the unvarnished nature of life; man is submissive to his ultimate fate. The poet do not think that these silly religious rituals which are more or less spoiling the profaneness of the rivers. Man can never have a cleansed feeling as one

gets while walking the temple after a river bath. But unfortunately man can never experience the cleansed feeling as sin sticks so deep that sophisticated man is incapable of redemption. In his poem 'Notes', included in *Collected Poems*, in the last stanza, he presents the "solitude" of river bank, which is utilized by the lovers to engage in illegal sexual activities secretly. Bruce King while commenting about this poetry, he writes: "...it is an adult poetry of someone who has disciplined himself of the moral ambiguities and irresponsible conflicts of human condition" (King 2001: 47). It is because of the sex hungry males and females using the river bank as their bedroom for doing illicit sexual activities, making it a red light area during the dark hours.

An eminent critic M K Naik has called Daruwalla, "one of the most substantial modern Indo-Anglican poets" (Naik 1984: 21). But although he is certainly one of the major voices in the Indo-Anglican tradition of poetry, not enough attention has been paid to his works. Naik further states:

It is rather surprising and disappointing that a poet of calibre as a poet, who has equalled Nissim Ezekiel's achievement in the field of poetry even though his themes and his style are entirely different. (Naik 1984: 22)

His thematic canvas and subject matter which includes hope, search for identity, nostalgia, death, violence, corruption, love, sex, nature, apocalypse, riverscapes, transcend the boundaries of India and stretches itself into then abroad. Like other Indian English poets, Daruwalla, often in his river poems, bewails about the unvarnished reality of the degradation to which the sacred rivers of India have been turned. It has become a storehouse of junk, a place for unhealthy and unholy activities. As an environmental thinker, the poet seeks fundamental changes in values, attitudes and behaviour of the individuals and social institutions through poetries. Therefore, he presents poetic images and picturesque details of Indian riverscapes in his poetries, so that it may fascinate the readers and change their perception about rivers.

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