

# *The Idiom of Autochthon: A Note on the Poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla*

K. VENKATACHARI

WITHOUT ASSERTING THAT Daruwalla's successive volumes of poetry are predictable it is not unwarranted to think that they reflect an evolving design answering to a kind of psycho-aesthetic necessity. Indeed, his success lies in the reconciliation of the demands of the individual poem, aesthetic and thematic, with those of an encompassing phylogenetic pattern. The pattern derives from the profound concern of the poet — in fact, any poet — with the apprehension of man in relation to nature and his identity as “a present culmination” of a process of development, historical and otherwise. This pattern Daruwalla seeks to realize in his poetry without relying on any perspective afforded by the transcendentalism of any theology, which, in his view, is of little help to the ordering or explaining of the life of experience. Moreover, Daruwalla's sense of reality demands an exploration of the Autochthon, the singular power of the place that accounts for the distinctiveness of the kind of life it sprouts. Indeed, India, the land of his birth, becomes a landscape capable of engaging and invigorating his imagination intent on realizing a significant being for it. Alone among the contemporary Indo-English poets, Daruwalla plays a “documentary” role in striving to project the stark reality of Indian landscape — a home that is at once generative and regenerative of the Indian sensibility:

Behind the heat-haze rising from the fires,  
Objects shimmer, dance, levitate.  
You face reality on a different plane  
where death vibrates behind a veil of fire.

There is no lament. No one journeys here  
to end up beating his breasts. This much the mourners learn

from the river as they form a ring of shadows  
 within whose ambit flesh and substance burn.

.....  
 What plane of destiny have I arrived at  
 Where corpse fires and cooking fires  
 burn side by side?<sup>1</sup>

Daruwalla does more than merely document what defines the Indian milieu or its symbolism, since he also discloses the play of the dialectic of decadence and regression that has come to define the Indian people today:

They who trampled on the words today  
 were taken in by the same words tonight  
 by cadaverous clichés pressing at their throats  
 — never knowing what was strangling them —  
 accepting burdens “for their own good,”  
 accepting their sin-load  
 and the atonement in silver  
 which the priests prescribed  
 accepting decrees and destiny  
 hail-harvests and drought  
 and a couplet from Surdas  
 with the same apathy,  
 somewhere the echo of a half-lilt  
 souring in their bellies  
 as they starve dreamlessly  
 wrapped up in their intestines.<sup>2</sup>

Daruwalla's view of Indians, though expressed here in acerbic accents, draws attention to the loss of their individual dynamic will and even to the sense of *Bildungprozess* vital to their regeneration and progress. Implicit in lines like the following:

We have inaugurated crematoriums  
 with an unclaimed corpse  
 a V.I.P. has opened  
 the sluice-gates of a drain  
 and given it an epithet  
 “the drain of hope”

.....

If we had plague  
 Camus style  
 and doctors searched for the virus  
 there would be black-market in rats.<sup>3</sup>

is his exasperation at human debasement and degradation, remi-



Daruwalla has spoken of his wanting to “write a series of intensely personal poems — all interconnected and nailed around the scaffolding of a personal myth.” In writing a poetry “immersed in site” — a poetry distilled from the idiom of the Autochthon — he has created what may be called the Indian Poem which projects an India that has grown pathetic and tragic:

The landscape is so grey  
they are milking the sun for light.

Walking into the gynaec ward  
I find it is the mortuary.

In the corpse-mart people bid  
for the dreams of their childhood,  
for their lost, enchanted selves.

.....

In the street of the Lord  
the sepia teeth of *pandas*  
In the street of virginity  
the raucous laughter of whores.<sup>7</sup>

In tune with what is projected in the lines quoted above is his sharp imaging of the havoc wrought by “the forces of entropic destruction” in the Indian self and history as in the following:

Somewhere in the dust and drift of history  
you lost your good-luck amulet  
and your face

Today you are an empty slogan  
that walks an empty street  
— walls tarred with slogans

.....

Then why should I tread the Kafka beat  
or the Waste Land  
when Mother you are near at hand  
one vast, sprawling defeat?<sup>8</sup>

His poetry does, indeed, perspectivize India as a disturbing tableau of decadence and defeat, which may be attributed to his moral activism that does not admit of any toleration or hope. His wit, largely irreverent, ranges over the entire landscape of Indian sensibility for targets and startles the reader at times into

a fresh perception of his social milieu, which is needed to recognize its distinctiveness :

Her spinsterhood alone is alien  
 The rest of her, overt and salient  
   is indian to the bone.  
 The thing rotarian about her hips  
 The rotary grind as she does the twist  
   the rest is rooted stone.

.....

I could believe anything  
 — in the cosmic flux across the street  
 in the power of amulets displayed on sidewalks  
 in a horoscope spread out like a graph of death  
 I would believe in karma itself and afterlife  
 if only her misery were not a caricature  
 if only I didn't associate  
 nirvan with that toothless grin  
 and those sockets smiling at the absence of eyes.<sup>9</sup>

Adopting a form that is open, Daruwalla enlarges and narrows "his units of attention," and elongates and shortens his line-lengths so as to enact the I's response to reality in its engagement with experience. The resultant poetry often becomes laconic in its phrasing and assumes an ironic character suited to his vision and purpose which is to invoke a way of life, an inscape of Indian experience which, though disturbingly frank, makes for the idiom of Autochthon.

#### NOTES

- 1 Keki N. Daruwalla, "Boat-Ride Along the Ganga," *Crossing of Rivers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 11.
- 2 Keki N. Daruwalla, "The People," *Apparition in April* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971), p. 21.
- 3 Keki N. Daruwalla, "Collage," *Under Orion* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1970), p. 53.
- 4 "Graft," *Under Orion, op. cit.*, p. 85.
- 5 "Dialogues With A Third Voice," *Under Orion, op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 7 "Vignette III," *Crossing of Rivers, op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 8 "Collage — II," *Under Orion, op. cit.*, p. 55.
- 9 "Charity — 3 Faces," *Apparition in April, op. cit.*, pp. 47, 49.