
UNIT 4 DILIP CHITRE AND KEKI N. DARUWALLA

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit is meant to acquaint you with the phenomenon of the 1980s and 90s in India's cultural life in general and Indian poetry in particular. In the context, the poets analyzed in the present unit speak of the concerns of this era as life became increasingly opportunity-centric and literature looked inwards to point at its own incapacities. Dilip Chitre and Keki N. Daruwalla are the poets we shall be focusing upon in this unit. You would be able to notice in the poems analyzed here a shift in thematic concerns and change of the poetic style. Importantly, during the period, disillusionment among poets turned to cynicism as there was little that inspired writers. They took for expressing ordinary themes and wistfully looked at life.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As has been mentioned in the previous units, Indian English Poetry became more and more self-oriented in the post-Independence period. It turned to self-interrogation and focused on creating an identity for it, particularly distancing itself from the concerns of the poor and deprived. Indian English poetry tried to emulate the western literary trends and chose to merge with what was considered mainstream writing. In order to make a mark for itself and to be seen as a distinct entity, Indian English poetry had to generate a new kind of expression by turning to customs and traditions; those would be redefined and made relevant. Linguistic skills were attended to with gusto. The formal in writing was sought to be replaced by the popular and aggressive. The writers of the 1960s made the individual a common reference point to which the poet returned after having traversed other areas of interest. The issue of identity was sorted out in this manner. Kamala Das, and later Eunice de Souza brought in freshness of ideas and created a concrete feminist framework for literary emphasis. Later still, came on the scene poets making a choice to be political in their stance—both Agha Shahid Ali and Arun Kolatkar in their own way made it a point to comment on the problems of the day. Likewise, A.K. Ramanujan made Indian poetry crisp and succinct. His care with language and a humanist perspective gave the required push to Indian English

poetry. In Dilip Chitre, the urban westernized perspective is more pronounced and there is a blurring of the poetic position as he persists with the artistic world and shuns social concerns. In Daruwalla there is both sophistication and a humanist approach that forces the fellow writers to take a second look at their roles. Initiative and sense of independence are the markers of contemporary Indian English poetry. Shirish Chindhade has observed that “It is a paradoxical fact that Indian poetry in English has flourished with the native colours, situations and experience chiefly after independence. It has boldly divorced itself from the mainstream of English poetry in an effort to be an independent entity and has emerged as part of ‘Indian’ literature (28).

4.2 DILIP CHITRE: AN INTRODUCTION

Dilip Chitre (1938-2009) was born in Vadodra, Gujarat. Although his mother tongue was Marathi, he knew Gujarati equally well, and because of his early education in a Jesuit school he learnt English when young. He was well versed in Hindustani language, too, that was spoken in a larger part of the country in the pre-independence period, Chitre attained a comprehensive view of Indian cultures and languages owing to the different places he stayed in his formative years. When he was twelve, his family moved to Bombay. Exposure to many languages enabled Dilip Chitre to take up for expression both Marathi and English. He also translated Marathi works into English. He is best known for his translations of the Bhakti poet Tukaram. A writer, critic, translator, and filmmaker, Chitre also penned a novel titled *Morphysus*. He was a leading figure in the “Little Magazine” movement that took shape in Marathi literature.

Two things find specific mention in Chitre’s poetry, the urban surroundings and broader social concerns. We are struck by his stress on the modern outlook that is critical of the mundane. He has successfully delinked himself from the values of the National Movement. It is the emerging India that takes his attention. It is progressive in the apparent sense. At the same time though, the erosion of modernity in outlook worries him. Not to shed tears for peace and harmony being targeted by the neo-rich in the country, Chitre would have us take a position on the drift happening towards dogma. He appears to be a misfit in his surroundings that are pressed hard by the mighty in society. This may have taken him to the solace in the saint poet Tukaram. So far as social concerns are concerned, Chitre is not with the model of planned development. He sees in it an increasing influence of the state. The poet in Chitre would find powers of the regime daunting since there lie the many restrictions on free enterprise and dynamism. The way left in the context is of seeking shelter in the world of art. It is also noteworthy that Chitre would not be sufficiently aware of the pitfalls of the Cold War active in literature. He was a known votary of keeping literature outside the pale of social influence and commitment. For him, it would be better if the writer confined himself to the world of individual sensitivity and the processes of the mind.

Chitre’s first collection of Marathi poems was published in 1960 titled *Kavita*. His English poetry collections include, *Ambulance Ride* (1972), *Travelling in a Cage* (1980), *The Mountain* (1998), *No Moon on the River Karha* (2000), *Post-climactic Love Poems* (2005), and *As Is, Where Is: Selected Poems* (2007), among others. His translation of Tukaram’s poems under the title *Says Tuka* (1991) and the book *Shri Jnande’s Anubhavamrut: The Immortal Experience of Being* (1996)

drew critical notice. For him, the postcolonial era opened up new avenues to establish intercultural discourse. He considered it a “truly pluralistic global literary tradition” (126). In many ways, Chitre represented this pluralistic global tradition in writing. Being a poet from urban background, Chitre speaks from the point of view of the modern upper-middle class that saw life from the prism of the metropolis. In the urban centres, he recognized diversity. At the same time, he finds himself alone, often isolated. This leads him on to the path of cynicism. In his poems, the immediate moment is crucial, the here and now, which expands to include the commonly experienced emotion, the universal experience. Even when he offers a view of space and time, it is either a generic view or specifically meant for the urban city-dweller. Consider how Chitre outlines this idea in the poem “Absence from Myself”—

Spaces, spaces, spaces
 Time leaves no detail untouched
 And time takes all details away
 My ancestors and so is my successor
 That leaves me no space but here and now.

The “here and now” is the focus of the poem where the poet is placed between ancestors and his successors both of whom are dead and the poet alone is alive. The poem in your course “Ode to Bombay” also engages with the question of the present moment and its transience as also the question of life and death. Both are of ephemeral nature. At one level, the poem is about the city, then Bombay. He associated this place along with other metropolitan cities as governed by ideas of ambition and acquisition. The spread of ambition and acquisition that make the citizens alienated in their surroundings do harm to the mental health of society. We need to critically evaluate the poet’s point of view and think about the causes behind such an assessment of contemporary India. Does he approve or disapprove of such circumstances? Does he remain non-committal? This would bring us closer to the worldview of a writer. Let’s look specifically at the poem in our course and gain clarity on the issue.

4.3 DILIP CHITRE’S POEM “ODE TO BOMBAY”

Let us read the poem.

“Ode to Bombay”

I had promised you a poem before I died
 Diamonds storming out of the blackness of a piano
 Piece by piece I fall at my own dead feet
 Releasing you like a concerto from my silence
 I unfasten your bridges from my insistent bones
 Free your railway lines from my desperate veins
 Dismantle your crowded tenements and meditating machines
 Remove your temples and brothels pinned in my skull

You go out of me in a pure spiral of stars
A funeral progressing towards the end of time
Innumerable petals of flame undress your dark
Continuous stem of growing

I walk out of murders and riots
I fall out of smouldering biographies
I sleep on a bed of burning languages
Sending you up in your essential fire and smoke
Piece by piece at my own feet I fall
Diamonds storm out of a black piano

Once I promised you an epic
And now you have robbed me
You reduced me to rubble
This concerto ends.

By convention, an ode is a poem addressing a particular person, season or place. The ode is lyrical and might be sung. It does not follow a particular meter or rhyme scheme and is irregular in pattern. It is made a poem by the tone the poet adopts or a picture and image the poet uses to communicate something important for the benefit of the listener. That description is wholly sustained by the “Ode to Bombay” in which the city with the name Bombay is spoken to. The poet speaker is the observer and has the city in front of him which engages him and binds him to the place. The poem begins with the writer making the statement “I had promised you a poem before I died.” The tone is personal. The question arises, why the poet brings in the theme of death in the opening line? See the queries arising from the mention of death. Is the poem precisely about death that may apply to the poet, and by association to the city as well? If we move to the third line, we note that the writer refers to his own dead feet and releases the city (you) from there. The sole purpose is to share with the city the loss of quality suffered by the speaker. It is not a simple poem. The word that comes to mind about the piano is a conscious selection of the details of the picture. It poses problems. For instance, the piano has black keys but the poet has turned that into blackness. To complicate it further, diamonds are shown as storming out piece by piece. The link of concerto with the piano is logical—the instrument gives out a musical composition with the poet’s silence being its medium. Once again though, the help is offered by the poet as silence has a close affinity with death. Indeed, one might call the first stanza entirely devoted to the subject of death through a metaphor that is extended further to cover a whole variety of details in the city’s life. Those are—bridges, bones, railway lines, dismantling of tenements or small structures keeping company with temples, where people go to worship, and to brothels that symbolize carnal pleasure. Imagine the vast range of the first stanza and likewise of the city under view. All this is achieved through deployment of the metaphor of death.

The poem explores the conflicting relation the poet has with the city of Bombay that excites him and at the same time hurts him. There is both endearment and detachment experienced by the poet for this city. In this city, diamonds fall from blackness—"Diamonds storming out of the blackness of a piano". This is how the poet visualizes the city of Bombay. What does this reference suggest? At one level, it is a reference to the city of dreams that Bombay became famous for during the latter half of the twentieth century. Bombay was the place of glamour, films, arts and commercial cinema where people with starry eyes came from all parts of the country to fulfill their dreams. It became a symbol of gaining quick success and fame. See that diamonds aptly project the city, they shine against the background of a musical note such as that of a piano. At another level the phrase stands in sharp contrast to what follows it: "Piece by piece I fall at my own dead feet". The picture of glamour and amazement is replaced by the poet breaking apart as if he were made of pieces that begin to fall. It is an expression of how the city has broken him, shattered him and taken away from him his own being. A similar expression occurs in the closing lines of the poem—"you have robbed me/ You reduced me to rubble". There is a constant reiteration that the city has consumed the poet and reduced him to what he calls a rubble. It has taken the essential human quality from him and yet this deserves to be called an epic according to the poet, as he claims: "Once I promised you an epic." The poem is worthy of being sung in an ode. The complete destruction of the poem is the final stroke with which the concerto ends—the concerto of the poet's own destruction and death.

Meanwhile the poet remains engaged with the city for it seems to have an overwhelming presence in the poem—as if poet were a lover and the city a beloved. It is clear from the poem that the poet finds himself in the clutches of the city and wishes to break free from it. He says, "I unfasten your bridges from my insistent bones/Free your railway lines from my desperate veins". There is also the suggestion that the city has entered his very being, in his veins and bones, and that he can barely escape its influence. The reference to railway lines and machines tells us that the city is moving towards industrialization and turning mechanized. The poet finds the new life almost unbearable, yet he is stuck to the place. The only way he can sever ties with the city is in death—"You go out of me in a pure spiral of stars /A funeral progressing towards the end of time". Note that the poet has lived to see riots and murders that abound in the city "I walk out of murders and riots". He knows the city's brothels and its underbelly. These leave an impact on him as he helplessly goes over them, "I fall out of smouldering biographies/ I sleep on a bed of burning languages". He cannot come out unscathed from these as he says he breaks into pieces and the pieces fall on his feet. The picture in the poem turns violent as also oppressive, and yet there is a sense of moving on. The wide range of the poem makes it appear as a concerto with its high and low notes, its climactic moment and its tragic close. It appears like a musical composition where the poet is the composer, narrator, observer and the victim. The strong force of the city of Bombay acts upon him and consumes him. The subject poet is a passive entity, a site on which this dramatic composition is played. The city of Bombay is the active agent that has its way and has capability to destroy the poet subject.

In the poem, we come across the attitude of despair that might remind us of English poets such as T.S. Eliot. Indeed, Eliot was there in the cultural air in that period and had entered the English syllabi in India's universities. Look at the

images in the poem and compare them with those in Eliot, particularly the ones he wrote around the time of the First World War. One might specifically refer to the *Waste Land*.

Let us now turn our attention to another poet who deploys locales skillfully and makes them palpable like human beings with the situations in which they are placed. We observe that places are not outside the influence of human beings, as independent geographical entities with no social characteristics enshrined in them. They are invariably merged with human motives, aims and aspirations and express the dynamic of life the same way as humans carry in their gestures the flavour and fragrance of the places. Let us see how far it may be true of the poet Daruwalla.

4.4 KEKI N. DARUWALLA: AN INTRODUCTION

Born in 1937 in Lahore that later became a part of Pakistan, Keki N. Daruwalla grew up in an educated Parsi family that moved to Junagarh in 1945. His father was a professor in the Government College, Lahore and the family constantly kept moving from one place to another. Keki Daruwalla kept changing different schools to keep pace with the movement in the family. In consequence, the young man who would one day become a poet gained deeper knowledge of the world of words, images and the sound patterns inherent in the social circumstance. The result was that Keki N. Daruwalla, as he grew up, became well versed in English, Hindi, Gujarati and Punjabi, and attained a working knowledge of Urdu which he studied for two years in school. For Daruwalla, English is very much an Indian language that has over decades been coloured by the local idiom. It easily fits in with other languages.

In 1958, Daruwalla joined the Indian police service and grew in rank to become the special assistant to the prime minister on international affairs. He was engaged in cabinet secretariat roles till retirement. A recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award which he won in 1984 for his collection *The Keeper of the Dead*, Daruwalla took up for depiction in his poetry the marginalized communities much like his own to comment on life. He is often seen as a landscape poet whose poetic vision is expansive as his scenes vary from Moscow and England to Kashmir and Banaras. The natural world and its depth remain engaging subjects for Daruwalla who finds that pictures of a place add to the feel of a region, bringing to life its community and people. The two are in fact inseparable in his poems. According to James Finn Cotter, Daruwalla has combined “perfect narrative tension with psychological perception, so that the reader is drawn into the scene and then let go”. Take for instance his *Crossing the Rivers*. It is rich in vivid descriptions that are at the same time symbolic. As he claims in the Introduction to *Two Decades of Indian Poetry 1960-1980*, “My poems are rooted in landscape which anchors the poem. The landscape is not merely meant there to set the scene but to lead to an illumination. It should be the eye of the spiral. I try that poetry relates to the landscape, both on the physical, and on the plane of the spirit. For me a riot-stricken town is landscape (21). This identification of the place with a feeling and an event is typical of Daruwalla’s writing. You as young readers would be able to trace it in the specific poem meant for study in your course.

Daruwalla’s ten volumes of poetry include, *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing the Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *The Keeper of*

the Dead (1982), *Landscapes* (winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Award, 1987) *A Summer of Tigers* (1995), *The Map Maker*, *The Scarecrow and the Ghost* (2004). His stories have been collected in *Sword and Abyss* (1979) and *The Minister for Permanent Unrest and Other Stories*. He has also written a novel *Pepper and Christ*. Daruwalla was awarded the Padmi Shri in 2014.

4.5 KEKI N. DARUWALLA'S POEM "CHINAR"

The poem "Chinar" by Daruwalla is a fine example of landscape poetry. It evokes the image of the tree chinar and that gets extended to Kashmir. It also brings alive the river Jhelum and the lakes of Kashmir. At the same time, the moment of dusk when the faint light touches all the static elements is vividly evoked in the poem—the visual imagery that sets him apart from other poets of his generation. Let us now read the poem.

"Chinar"

The chinar confronts the sunset
with its own dusk.

You can hear the drip of crinkled leaf.
Isn't this what they call dry rain,
this slow, twisting dead-moth descent
from the sapless branch?

In the eye of the lake
and the running eye of Jhelum
it holds you, this bonfire death
that slowly drips fire,
these smouldering rusts
without the clank of metal.

A wind alights on the tree
and the eye cannot follow
each bronze-scale severed
from the mail of the dying giant,
each clenched child-fist of a leaf,
the largesse of it
the aching drift of it
the flame and the fall of it.

The title of the poem "Chinar" is indicative both of nature and social place. It is linked with the arrival of autumn in Kashmir. The indications come from words such as "dry rain" and "sapless branch" that characterize the season's change. We note that the poet does with effort catch nuances of the season and of contemporary history. There is something in nature that leaves him dissatisfied

with it. We are fascinated by mention of the eye of the lake and the running eye of Jhelum. The two are one and yet different. The former is relatively fixed and the latter is a symbol of movement. The active river is connected with the crinkled leaves of the chinar. Has the water of the river not reached the trees that stand next to it? Is it a metaphor of the source not giving life to the surroundings? In an answer to this, we may say that for the poet, something inexplicable has happened to the valley and its inhabitants. Chinar is a symbol of the people of Kashmir who are strong and dignified but have lost verve and positive spirit over time.

The poet is consistent in his use of the details that speak as loud as the words in the poem. Take a look at the first stanza. What is signified by the dusk of the chinar? Does the word denote change or decline? It might speak of the mix of the hopeful and its opposite. For the poet, as stressed earlier, chinar is more than a tree, it is a cultural icon of stability and strength. Its shade is protective and sheltering, yielding a soothing space that preserves life. If all these are threatened in a specific situation, the different parts of the tree will have to bear the weight of the issues confronting the community of Kashmiris. Additionally, what does the sunset stand for? Does it give character to the place or the tree that is affected by it? The two questions draw a line of distinction between the two, the tree and the season, but we remain aware of the sense of distance between them. That gives the reader a sense of unease. For us, it is not a sense of wonder but of worry. The poem is subtle in its message and the writer's sympathies appear to lie with that possible integration between nature and social life which is sadly missing at the time the poem is composed. We realize that the poem symbolizes a disturbed scene in nature carrying the burden of political turmoil and turbulence in the region. In a positive way, the writer visualizes the state of things as community-oriented. Thus, the selection of the symbol helps us understand the discourse as secular and material, not airy and ephemeral.

To us, the poem has steered clear of the mysticism that is a cliché often used about consciousness of the people. The poet has a sense of control running through the poem in terms of a bond of nature. A careful avoidance of political divides and ideological gaps between the hegemonic ideas of the nation and those of the highly sensitive periphery ensures a deft balance; it keeps the poem stuck to the theme of pain and worry than of suggesting easy solutions. How the identity of the place gets merged with the mission of joining a broader politics of nationalism comes to the fore as the poem proceeds towards the end. The same are observed in the poem "Chinar" that you have for reading and analyzing. Note that the poet is barely visible in the poem. He offers to us a description of a moment—the transition of seasons and of the day, as dusk takes over. The image of transition is central to the poem. And yet the poet is not at the centre of it. The absence of the 'I' in the poem makes one aware that the poet is nowhere talking about himself or the impact that the scene has on him—he is somewhere on the sidelines from where he observes the phenomenon. Of course, the poetic voice is present in the way things are projected. The poet remains hidden but not his viewpoint that helps in shaping the poem. The conscious choice to remain in the background is part of Daruwalla's larger politics. His poems are seldom self-referential, that is, the focus of the poem is not the poet but the place he is describing. He foregrounds the picture that begins to speak independently to the reader with minimal intervention of the poet. Even as the descriptions are the poet's, the interpretation appears to be that of the reader. This adds to the aesthetic quality of the poem.

Shirish Chindhade, while referring to Daruwalla's poem "Boatride along the Ganga" (from the collection *Crossing the River*) and specifically the lines "What plane of destiny have I arrived at/ where corpse-fire and cooking-fires burn side by side", has observed that,

Daruwalla's lines embody an entire mode of faith embraced by a people. This kind of intense awareness of his environment and its roots is what precisely makes Daruwalla an authentically or legitimately 'Indian' poet—not even an urban poet but the poet of his native hills, plains, rivers and faiths. (11)

Here, Chindhade has emphasised the 'Indianness' and authenticity of expression in Daruwalla, his Parsi identity notwithstanding. On the other hand, Chindhade is of the opinion that "Chitre, though born and brought up in the Indian culture" fails to find his "roots here" (123). Even as Daruwalla spent most of his time in urban centres, he is hardly an urban poet, quite different though from Chitre in whom urbanity is quite pronounced.

About Daruwalla's poetic sensibility, Norman Simms has observed that "by meaning less than it speaks, the [Daruwalla] poem is more than its words: what it signifies is less than what it designates". Brevity of expression enhances the meaning of his poems. His is a poetry of keen observation and social comment. Daruwalla seldom writes political poetry, yet he is often satirical towards blind faith and superstition. His poetry springs from various cultures, projecting myths and legends that abound in Indian life. He takes a critical look at the phenomenon with a humanist's eye. Even as some of his poems appear word-heavy containing complex image structures, his poetic craft is not compromised as the meaning of the poem is taken to its logical end. Add to this the fact that his vision is of a liberal humanist; it keeps the poem open-ended. There is a diversity of subject matter in Daruwalla, and the poet portrays the concerns sensitively. While being rooted in reality, Daruwalla takes the actual experience and feeling to a mystical level where the poetic spirit gets specifically projected. Daruwalla is conscious of the use of word-structures, images and the voices submerged in the situation he deals with. He sensitively combines these under an honest liberal perspective.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has provided an analysis of the poems "Ode to Bombay" and "Chinar" by Dilip Chitre and K.N. Daruwalla respectively. The thematic concerns of both poets might have become clearer to you in the process. These two poets provide a concrete view of Indian English poetry as the concerns expressed in them have an allegiance to the urban experience. Their poetry is influenced by the larger trends active in our culture. There is a conscious attempt in them to stick to the roots and to the place one might call one's home. This gives uniqueness to their works. Chitre draws inspiration from the universally felt emotion in his reach. In the case of Daruwalla, the projection of the place and its people together create urgency. Keki N. Daruwalla belongs to the same period as Dilip Chitre. That gives us an opportunity to go into their respective sensibilities and see their distinctions as well as similarities. Daruwalla has a marked streak of rationality and value-based social stand. He is highly sensitive to the needs of culture in modern surroundings and alive to the humanist values existing in our world.

4.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) Comment on the metaphor of death in the poem “Ode to Bombay”.
- 2) What is an Ode? Is the title of Chitre’s poem justified in your view?
- 3) Comment on the use of the landscape in the poems of K.N. Daruwalla and Dilip Chitre.
- 4) Discuss the symbol of Chinar in Daruwalla’s poem.

4.8 REFERENCES

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4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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