



NATURE AS A NARRATIVE FORCE: THE EPHEMERAL DICHOTOMY OF NATURE IN KEKI DARUWALLA'S POEMS

Haridas Adhikary

Research Scholar, Dept of English, Seacom Skills University

Paper Received On: 20 July 2024

Peer Reviewed On: 24 August 2024

Published On: 01 September 2024

Abstract

In Keki Daruwalla's poetry, nature is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic narrative force that shapes the thematic and symbolic dimensions of his work. This article, explores how nature acts as a powerful narrative device in four major works: "Boat-Ride Along the Ganga," "Fire Hymn," "Hawk," and "The Ghaghra in Spate." These poems highlight the poet's intricate portrayal of environmental forces, transforming landscapes into symbolic agents of cultural and personal reflection.

"Boat-Ride Along the Ganga" reflects the sacredness and the complexity of human interaction with the river, not only as a site of ritualistic purity but also as a reminder of death and life's transitory nature. "Fire Hymn" presents nature as an element of destruction and regeneration, where fire becomes a powerful symbol of human suffering, loss, and cleansing. In "Hawk," Daruwalla employs the predator as a metaphor for predation, authority, and freedom, suggesting an inherent brutality within natural cycles that mirror human violence. Finally, "The Ghaghra in Spate" uses the imagery of a river in flood to depict nature's unpredictable and uncontrollable power, symbolizing the fragility of human constructions against the forces of nature.

Daruwalla's environmental imagery is not merely descriptive but deeply allegorical, reflecting broader themes of life, death, violence, and human frailty. By exploring these four poems, the article delves into how Daruwalla's portrayal of nature provides both physical and metaphysical insights into the human condition, positioning nature as a protagonist in the narrative of human existence. Through his poetic lens, nature serves as a mirror for humanity's spiritual and existential dilemmas, inviting a reflection on ecological responsibility and the sacred relationship between humans and the natural world.

This study seeks to deepen our understanding of Daruwalla's environmental imagery, arguing that his use of nature serves to challenge anthropocentric perspectives, offering instead a vision of nature as an equal, if not dominant, force in shaping human destiny.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Keki N. Daruwalla, Indian English Poetry, Environmental Imagery, Myth and Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Climate Change, Nature as Protagonist, Ecological Destruction.*

Introduction

Keki N. Daruwalla is widely recognized for his intricate portrayal of nature, weaving it into the fabric of his poetry with remarkable vividness and intensity. His works transcend traditional literary depictions of the environment, allowing nature itself to act as a narrative force that shapes the human experience. Daruwalla's poems, such as *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *The Ghagra in Spate*, *Nightscape Vignettes*, and *Map-maker*, showcase his mastery in depicting nature not merely as a backdrop but as an active agent of change. These poems highlight the complexities of nature and its ability to influence, interact with, and reflect the human condition.

The Poise of Landscape

Daruwalla's poetry is deeply rooted in the landscapes of India, especially the northern plains, riverbanks, and mountains. In *Crossing of Rivers*, for instance, the imagery of the river is not only a physical entity but also a metaphor for the constant flux and unpredictability of life. The river "coughs," "eddies," and "converses with the mud," transforming into a living force that reflects both tranquility and turmoil. Similarly, *The Ghagra in Spate* presents nature as both awe-inspiring and terrifying, where the river in flood becomes a powerful symbol of nature's destructive and regenerative cycles. These vivid depictions underline Daruwalla's ecocritical perspective, where nature is not just a passive presence but an essential component of human survival and spiritual reflection (Daruwalla, 1976).

Ecocriticism in Indian Poetry

Ecocriticism, as a lens in Indian English poetry, has evolved into a critical approach that not only addresses environmental themes but also investigates how nature's presence shapes cultural and political realities. Indian poets like Keki N. Daruwalla offer a unique perspective, where environmental degradation and ecological concerns emerge in complex, layered ways. Daruwalla's works explore the interaction between human activity and nature, where both elements often exist in a tense, conflictual relationship (Jha, 2015). His poems are rich with symbolism and imagery that highlight the profound impact of human interference on natural landscapes, revealing a larger ecological consciousness.

Recent ecocritical analyses suggest that Indian poetry is becoming increasingly relevant in the global conversation on environmentalism (Sikha, 2011). Daruwalla, a prominent voice in this tradition, stands out for his evocative landscapes and the deep ecological connections his poetry draws between nature and human strife. His ecological concerns, as articulated in "Crossing of

Rivers” (1976), position him as a vital voice in the discourse on ecological destruction and human responsibility (Daruwalla, 1996).

Nature as a Protagonist

In Daruwalla’s poetry, nature is not merely a backdrop but often a dynamic force that shapes the narrative and characters. Nature’s role transcends mere description and often becomes the central subject that drives the thematic core of his work. For example, in “Boat-Ride Along the Ganga,” nature emerges as an uncontrollable, almost malevolent force, reflecting human estrangement from the environment (Daruwalla, 1976). This vivid portrayal of the Ganges, a river symbolic of purity and life, juxtaposed with its degradation, forces readers to confront the consequences of environmental neglect. Critics argue that Daruwalla uses nature as a metaphor for human loss and disillusionment, drawing attention to the ethical responsibilities humanity bears toward the earth (King, 2009).

In this regard, nature in Daruwalla’s poetry functions as a protagonist that actively interacts with human beings, often illustrating the latter’s destructive tendencies. In “Fire Hymn,” the destructive capacity of fire is compared to the way humans consume and exploit natural resources (Daruwalla, 1976). Ecocritics like Karmakar et al. (2020) suggest that through such depictions, Daruwalla critiques the anthropocentric view that prioritizes human desires over ecological balance.

Myth and Ecology

Daruwalla’s poems often integrate mythological elements with ecological themes, creating a fusion that speaks to both India’s cultural heritage and its contemporary environmental crises. This blending of mythology and nature underscores the spiritual and material connections that Indian culture has historically maintained with the natural world. In “Hawk,” the poet uses the image of the hawk to symbolize power, freedom, and destruction, contrasting these with the vulnerability of nature at the hands of humanity (Daruwalla, 1996).

Ecocritical readings suggest that Daruwalla’s work engages deeply with myth as a narrative device to explore environmental degradation. The interplay of mythology and ecology in his poetry not only highlights India’s cultural heritage but also emphasizes the universality of ecological concerns, thereby linking ancient stories with modern environmental struggles (Velmurugan, 2012).

Expanding the Dialogue

Keki N. Daruwalla’s engagement with environmental issues places his work within a broader global dialogue on ecocriticism and sustainability. Scholars argue that Daruwalla’s poetic

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vision anticipates some of the central themes in contemporary environmental debates, such as the effects of climate change, deforestation, and water pollution (Shelton, 2019). This makes his work not just significant in the context of Indian literature, but also globally relevant in discussions around ecological responsibility.

As Daruwalla navigates the tension between tradition and modernity, his environmental concerns become all the more pressing in a world facing unprecedented ecological crises. His works, such as “The Ghaghra in Spate,” offer a somber reflection on the irreversible changes inflicted upon the natural world, urging readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment (Daruwalla, 1996).

By exploring how nature acts as both a literal and symbolic force in Daruwalla’s poetry, this paper seeks to illuminate the ways in which his works contribute to contemporary ecological discourse. The four major poems analyzed here—“*Boat-Ride Along the Ganga*,” “*Fire Hymn*,” “*Hawk*,” and “*The Ghaghra in Spate*”—demonstrate Daruwalla’s multifaceted approach to environmental concerns. Through these poems, Daruwalla emerges not only as a chronicler of India’s landscapes but also as a poignant commentator on the precariousness of human survival in the face of ecological destruction.

In the following sections, this article explores each of these poems in a more nuanced manner.

Boat-Ride Along the Ganga

In *Boat-Ride Along the Ganga*, Keki Daruwalla masterfully intertwines the sacred and the profane, portraying the Ganga as both a river of life and a carrier of death. The Ganga, a deeply revered entity in Indian culture, symbolizes purity, spiritual cleansing, and the eternal cycle of life and death. However, Daruwalla’s depiction of the river transcends mere reverence; it becomes a site of existential contemplation, where life’s fleeting nature is starkly juxtaposed against the timeless flow of the river. The poem’s tone is both meditative and disquieting, a journey that confronts mortality while simultaneously honoring life’s spiritual dimensions.

The Ganga in this poem functions as more than a geographic landmark; it is a dynamic force that reflects the complexities of human existence. Daruwalla’s precise imagery invites readers to explore the delicate interplay between human ritual and the natural environment. The poem’s boat ride on the river, a seemingly mundane journey, transforms into a metaphor for life’s passage, echoing the Hindu belief in the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth (Daruwalla, 1976). Daruwalla’s use of vivid and tactile imagery, such as the river’s “corpse-laden” waters, challenges the reader to confront the paradox of a river that both purifies and pollutes, nourishes and destroys.

Scholarly interpretations of this poem often focus on its ecocritical dimensions, highlighting how Daruwalla critiques the commodification of nature and the environmental degradation of sacred spaces. Sabitha (2023) has argued that the poem's depiction of the Ganga underscores the tension between spiritual reverence and ecological neglect, calling attention to the ways in which human actions desecrate natural landscapes. This interpretation aligns with Daruwalla's broader poetic project, which often critiques humanity's disconnection from the natural world. By presenting the Ganga as both a life-giving force and a witness to death, *Boat-Ride Along the Ganga* forces readers to reckon with the dualities inherent in human existence and our relationship with the environment (Sabitha, 2023).

Fire Hymn

Fire Hymn is one of Daruwalla's most powerful and evocative poems, drawing on the elemental force of fire to explore themes of destruction, renewal, and human suffering. Fire, as both a destructive and purifying element, has deep symbolic resonance in various cultural and religious contexts. In this poem, Daruwalla harnesses fire's dual nature to reflect on personal and collective trauma. The poem begins with a vivid portrayal of a fire that consumes everything in its path, evoking both awe and terror. Yet, amidst the destruction, there is also a sense of cleansing, as fire becomes a metaphor for spiritual and emotional purification.

Daruwalla's handling of fire imagery is particularly poignant in its exploration of human loss. The poem reflects on the devastation caused by fire, not only in a literal sense but also as a symbol of inner turmoil and grief. The fire that ravages the landscape becomes an external manifestation of the speaker's internal anguish, a burning away of old pains and memories. Scholars like Inamdar (1991) have noted the poem's deep psychological resonance, arguing that Daruwalla uses fire as a vehicle for exploring themes of guilt, redemption, and the human capacity for resilience (Inamdar, 1991). This interpretation is supported by Daruwalla's use of stark, almost brutal imagery, which forces the reader to confront the painful realities of destruction while also offering the possibility of renewal.

From an ecocritical perspective, *Fire Hymn* can also be seen as a commentary on the destructive impact of human actions on the environment. The fire, while a natural element, is portrayed as being unleashed by human negligence or violence, suggesting a broader critique of humanity's reckless treatment of the natural world. In this sense, the poem aligns with Daruwalla's broader body of work, which often emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and environmental suffering. Fire, in *Fire Hymn*, is not only a force of destruction but also a symbol of hope, a reminder that from the ashes of devastation, new life can emerge.

Hawk

In *Hawk*, Daruwalla shifts his focus from the elemental forces of nature to the animal kingdom, using the image of the hawk as a symbol of predation, power, and freedom. The hawk, with its keen vision and ruthless hunting instincts, becomes a metaphor for human ambition and violence. The poem's portrayal of the hawk is both awe-inspiring and unsettling, reflecting Daruwalla's ambivalence towards the natural world. On one hand, the hawk represents the majesty and raw power of nature, a creature that embodies freedom and independence. On the other hand, the hawk's predatory nature serves as a reminder of the brutality inherent in natural and human systems.

Daruwalla's use of the hawk as a central figure in the poem allows him to explore themes of dominance and survival, both in the natural world and in human society. The hawk's relentless pursuit of its prey mirrors the competitive, often ruthless nature of human ambition. Scholars such as Padmanabhan & Geetha (2022) have argued that Daruwalla's depiction of the hawk serves as a critique of human power dynamics, suggesting that the natural world's hierarchies of predation reflect similar structures of dominance and oppression in human society (Padmanabhan & Geetha, 2022). This reading is reinforced by Daruwalla's use of stark, visceral imagery, which conveys the violence and inevitability of the hawk's predatory instincts.

At the same time, the poem also reflects Daruwalla's fascination with the beauty and efficiency of nature's mechanisms. The hawk, though a predator, is also a creature of grace and precision, embodying the harsh yet balanced laws of nature. In this sense, *Hawk* can be seen as both a celebration of nature's power and a meditation on the darker aspects of human existence. The poem challenges readers to confront the violence that underpins both natural and human systems, while also acknowledging the awe-inspiring beauty of these forces.

The Ghaghra in Spate

In *The Ghaghra in Spate*, Daruwalla returns to his familiar motif of the river, using the image of a river in flood to explore themes of destruction, vulnerability, and the uncontrollable forces of nature. The Ghaghra, like the Ganga in *Boat-Ride Along the Ganga*, is more than just a body of water; it is a living, breathing force that shapes the landscape and the lives of those who inhabit it. The poem's portrayal of the river in flood highlights the fragility of human constructions and the futility of trying to control nature's power.

Daruwalla's depiction of the Ghaghra in flood is both terrifying and awe-inspiring. The river, swollen with rain, surges through the landscape, carrying with it the debris of human

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settlements and the remnants of past lives. The poem's imagery is vivid and chaotic, reflecting the destructive power of the flood and the sense of helplessness it evokes in those who witness it. Hema et al. (2021) have noted the poem's ecocritical dimensions, arguing that Daruwalla uses the flood as a metaphor for the environmental crises caused by human activity. The Ghaghra, in this reading, becomes a symbol of nature's retribution, a reminder that human attempts to control or dominate the natural world are ultimately futile.

At the same time, the poem also reflects Daruwalla's deep respect for nature's power. The river, though destructive, is also a source of life and renewal, a force that shapes the landscape in both creative and destructive ways. In this sense, *The Ghaghra in Spate* aligns with Daruwalla's broader poetic vision, which often emphasizes the dualities of nature and the need for humans to live in harmony with the natural world. The poem challenges readers to confront the consequences of ecological imbalance while also celebrating the raw, untamable power of the natural world.

Conclusions

In the twilight of Keki N. Daruwalla's poetic landscape, nature emerges not merely as a backdrop, but as a living force, a sentient entity that reverberates with the pulse of life and death. Through the poems *Boat-Ride Along the Ganga*, *Fire Hymn*, *Hawk*, and *The Ghaghra in Spate*, we have traversed the sinews of a world where nature's beauty is interwoven with its power, its capacity for renewal shadowed by its potential for destruction. In each work, nature is not an indifferent witness, but an omnipresent force that shapes human destinies, echoing through Daruwalla's chilling, somber, yet mesmerizing verses.

Much like the rivers that flow endlessly in his poems, time too slips through the cracks of human hands, and Daruwalla's environmental imagery captures this ephemeral truth. In *Boat-Ride Along the Ganga*, the river becomes a symbol of life's brevity, an eternal current that washes away the remnants of human existence. Yet, even as the Ganga devours all in its path, it also purifies, reminding us of the thin line between decay and sanctity. Through *Fire Hymn*, fire is both a destroyer and a purifier, a force that consumes but also renews, standing as a grim testament to the cycle of destruction that precedes growth. Daruwalla's fire is not the comforting hearth of warmth but the wild, untamable inferno that razes cities and hearts alike. The *Hawk*, with its piercing eyes and sharp talons, soars through the skies as a harbinger of death, its predatory nature a mirror to human savagery. In the hawk's merciless flight, Daruwalla sees a reflection of mankind's own ruthless pursuit of power, a hunger that feeds on the weak. But even in this stark portrayal, there lies an uncomfortable beauty—an

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acknowledgment of the grace and precision of nature's violence, the same violence that governs human history.

In *The Ghaghra in Spate*, the river floods not only the land but also the reader's senses with an overwhelming force that is both destructive and awe-inspiring. The floodwaters tear through the landscape, obliterating human constructions and reminding us of the fragility of our dominance over nature. And yet, there is something almost divine in the river's wrath, a primal force that humbles humanity's arrogance, reminding us of our place in the natural order.

Thus, Daruwalla's poetry is a meditation on the inescapable relationship between man and nature, one where the elements hold dominion over human life. He does not allow us to turn away from nature's dark heart; instead, he demands that we confront it, in all its terror and splendor. His environmental imagery is not meant to comfort but to provoke, to challenge us to see the world as it truly is—a realm of beauty shadowed by death, of power tempered by fragility.

In closing, Daruwalla's nature is not the idyllic paradise of pastoral poetry, but a wild, untamed force that both nurtures and destroys. His work beckons us to consider our place within the natural world, urging us to find meaning in its mysteries, even as we are swept along by the currents of time and fate. The rivers, fires, and hawks of Daruwalla's world are not distant symbols but visceral, living forces that shape the human experience, leaving us haunted by their indelible mark.

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