

KEKI DARUWALLA 'NURSE AND SENTINEL'

Professor Tess Maginess

KEKI N. DARUWALLA



Picture source: <https://www.loc.gov/acq/ovop/delhi/salrp/kekidaruwalla.html>

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- Keki Daruwalla is a leading figure in Indian poetry in English today. He is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1984) and the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (1987) for Asia. Born in Lahore, Daruwalla holds a Masters degree from Punjab University, Chandigarh. He joined the Indian Police Service in 1958 (the recurrent theme of violence in his poetry has frequently, and somewhat reductively, been attributed to his choice of profession). He is retired and lives in Delhi.
- Source:
https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-2725_Daruwalla
- See also:
 - [Keki N. Daruwalla -- English Writer: The South Asian Literary Recordings Project \(Library of Congress New Delhi Office\) \(loc.gov\)](#)
 - [Keki Daruwalla - - Video Search Results \(yahoo.com\)](#)
 - [keki_daruwalla_2012_4.pdf \(poemhunter.com\)](#)

DARUWALLA'S POETRY

- His poetry displays 'certain strong distinguishing characteristics: an **ironic stance**, an evocation of the multi-layered **contradictory realities of Indian life**, a preoccupation with **diverse cultural, historic and mythic landscapes**, a **terse, vigorous and tensile style**, supple **imagism**, sustained **narrative drive**, an ability to segue between **metrical patterns and free verse**, and a capacity to combine an **epic canvas** with a **miniaturist's eye for detail**.'

[Keki Daruwalla - India - Poetry International](#)

See also:

- [The Poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla: A Critical Study - Ravi Nandan Sinha - Google Books](#)
- [The Maker of Myths - Poetry International](#)
- [Critical spectrum : the poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

- What do you think of the **import of the poem?**
- What does it tell us about **ageing?**
- What is the **focus?** On the carers?
- Is **caring** gendered?
- What is the **point of view of the speaker?**





A CLOSER READING

‘Reading poems on a hospital today


**By a poet who attended on her
grandmother,**

**I thought of you and your brittle-
boned father.’**

What strikes you here?

**That first ‘sentence’ is quite indirect,
even convoluted.** What is the subject? It
might appear to be a hospital, but then we
swerve to a poet and then to her
relationship to her grandmother – not that
word ‘attended’ and finally we arrive at the
‘you’ – the speaker’s dead wife, if we are to
go by the title. But from the wife we fetch
up, finally, at the wife’s father.

Is he **brittle boned** because he has that
medical condition, or because he is an older
person, whose bones have become brittle?

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- The **first three lines** form a sentence.
 - But this sentence seems to begin in the middle (*in medias res*) and it has a kind of **informal feel**, as if the speaker were talking to a friend or kinsman/kinswoman.
 - And we also have the sense of a **complex web of relationships**, one possible story seeming to bring forth another. And we have the common theme of **‘attending’**.
 - What do you think the speaker is suggesting about the importance of **care** and of the role of the **family women**?

‘Four months in a nursing home you stayed with him,

Sleeping on a cane sofa, opening the windows

**During half-charred nights, and taking in
the tarred air outside.’**

- Note the **differences in how the care system operates in India and in Northern Ireland.**
Relatives would not stay with loved ones in nursing homes in Ireland or the UK.
- Why does the speaker use **images of fire and tar**?
Is this a time of burning and violence? Like the time of the partition of India?

‘You came home only for lunch

And cooked for him and took his food back, things he liked.’

What impression do you get here?

She is clearly very **devoted** to her father and, furthermore, attends to him, not just by being **sentinel and nurse**, but also by **wanting to give him pleasure** – cooking things he liked.

**‘Once there wasn’t any lunch for you—
You faced these blackouts rather well.
When people forgot you existed at all!’**

- Why does the poet use the term **‘blackouts’**?
- Blackouts could mean **forgetfulness** (but on the part of other people), or the word could indicate the **difficult environment** the wife had to work in because of electricity outages, perhaps due to civic unrest?
- The sentence also pays tribute to his wife for her **valour and stoicism** in facing the blackouts.
- And, indeed, he restores her, acknowledging that people forgot she even existed – either her own family (perhaps including the speaker) or **the wider society which forgets carers and takes for granted their ‘love labour’**.

(Why can't we define existence as something
That lives only in the awareness of others?
Do you exist if no one knows you do?)

- Here the poem moves from the concrete, particular situation of his wife to a **more philosophical questioning**. The speaker emphasises the importance of **awareness**; the need for us to enable people to exist by being aware of what they do, to be tuned to that; this seems to the speaker to be at the core, to be the quintessence of existence.
- The thought is very pertinent – not just in relation to **carers**, but in relation to **older people**, who are sometimes seen in the West as **invisible** – to be discounted, absent in the awareness of the young (and the policy makers) or, if they are frail – as a burden.

‘A thousand miles apart we talked on the phone—

The nights were bad, you said, but never mentioned

Bedpans and things, cough and sputum.’

- Suddenly, the *mise en scene* of the poem expands and we realise that this caring wife is vary **far away** from her husband.
- And yet, he is not resentful or begrudging, but rather admiring her.
- Here, he focuses especially on her **discretion**, her **delicacy** in not mentioning the objects and aspects of her care that make the nights ‘bad’.

‘How you trusted the imagination of others!’

- What do you think this line means?
- Is he being **ironic**, perhaps, acknowledging that he does not want to imagine the difficult realities of being nurse and sentinel?



The second section of the poem is like a **second chapter**. It begins in hope, the watchful nursing has been a success:

‘The bones healed, you made him walk.’

There is a hint that the wife is **very determined**, she makes him walk. Or perhaps this means that she ‘makes him’ to walk (the phrasing of the Christian bible), almost **miraculously causing him to heal**.

**‘But time is a disenchantress.Years later
He died and you took care of the ceremonies.’**

The poet reverses or inverts the common idea that time is an enchantress – implying a **mood of disillusion or deflation.**

Is the speaker suggesting that, once again, in death, as in life, **the wife takes care** – literally?

- The speaker implies a **distance between himself and Parsee death rituals**, even though the poet, Daruwalla, is Parsee (Parsi) himself.
- A parsee is a 'member of a group of followers in India of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra). The Parsis, whose name means "Persians," are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who emigrated to India to avoid religious persecution by Muslims. They live chiefly in Mumbai and in a few towns and villages mostly to the north of Mumbai, but also at Karachi (Pakistan) and Bengaluru (Karnataka, India). Although they are not, strictly speaking, a caste, since they are not Hindus, they form a well-defined community.

Source: [Parsi | Religion, History, & Facts | Britannica](#)

Parsi funerals begin in a way familiar to many faiths: prayers are chanted and mourners pay last respects.

The Parsi corpse is exposed to the rays of the sun, and the corpse is consumed or devoured by birds of prey — vultures, kites and crows.

For Zoroastrians, burying or cremating the dead is seen as polluting nature. So for centuries, the Parsis in Mumbai have relied on vultures to do the work — that is, until the entire population of vultures in the city vanished.

Source: [Vanishing Vultures A Grave Matter For India's Parsis : NPR](#)



PARSI DEATH RITUALS

Pictures source: image search results on yahoo.com



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**‘Night-long nasal chanting,
Sandalwood slivers
Smuggled into the fire fringe,
Priests scurrying around,
Birds hanging in the air—
Don’t bring on other deaths.’**

The tone seems, at the outset, to be **ironic**, even **sneering**, but then, how do we interpret that last line?

Is the speaker suggesting that Parsi death rites are not like other kinds of death – violent and the cause of more deaths?

The body goes back into nature; it does not contaminate, it does not provoke more death?

- The speaker then returns to the **indirect stance which opens the poem.**
- The speaker invokes his wife's mother and her approbation of her daughter's skill in taking care of the death ceremonies.

But there is **a surprising ending:**

‘And for once you answered back:

I looked after the living also, Mother.’

This is not impudence or unseemly defiance, but rather a **gentle rebuke to her mother**, who like others, has forgotten her existence as a carer for the living.

It is she, not her mother, who has been caregiver to the old man.

FORM

- The poem appears to be **free of western conventions in terms of rhyme**, though there is a **perceptible rhythm**:

Read /ing poems/ on a hosp /ital today/

By a poe /t who attend /ed on/ her grand /mother

I thought/ of you/ and your britt /le-boned/ fath /er

- Most lines have **four beats** or **metrical feet**.
- The pattern is roughly one weak stress followed by a strong stress – **iambic pentameter**.
- There are exceptions, eg, the poem starts with a strong stress followed by a weak stress - **trochaic**. This is quite common in English poetry, e.g.

‘Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness’

- and helps to create a bit of top spin.

- Some patterning is created also through **alliteration** (repeating consonants) and **assonance** (repeating vowels).

- Examples:

‘**S**andalwood **s**livers/**s**muggled.’ There is also repetition of ‘l’ and ‘d’.

‘**F**ire **f**ringe.’ There is ‘f’ alliteration and ‘l’ assonance.

- The effect is to create **musicality sonorousness** here.
- But, elsewhere, the effect is to **emphasise the sinister or menacing**:

‘Half-charred nights, and taking in

The tarred air outside’.

You can hear the almost muffled or silenced ‘a’ sounds and the harshness of the ‘d’ alliteration.

- The diction or register of the language is **plain, conversational**, though rising to a **philosophical plane**.
- There are no metaphors or similes, so this makes the poem very **direct and spare**.