

Keki N Daruwalla's *Crossing of Rivers*: An Ecocritical Approach

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Abstract

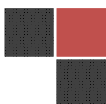
Ecocriticism, an Interdisciplinary study of Ecology and literary criticism focuses on representations of nature and environment in literature as it sets out to assess culture from the perspective of human-nature interaction. In the process, it more often than not, gets coloured by the local scenario with varying cultural valencies and gradually broadens towards a socio-centric direction on the cornerstone of nature writings. It is thus, closely connected to the dictum of, "Ecopoetics" which has been defined by Jonathan Skinner, the editor of the journal of *Ecopoetics* as, "an" ecotone...between ecology, poetry and ethnopoetics." (Skinner 5-8). The origin of Ecocriticism is almost inextricably bound with Ethnopoetics, which Jerome Rothenberg treats as "looking away from the modern and experimental to focus on ancient and autochthonous cultures" (Rothenberg 6) James Englehardt, on the other hand opines, "The Ecopoem must connect to the culture and society that it inhabits....when thinking about an ecology, it's easy to overlook aspects." (Englehardt 1). Patrick Murphy rightly gauges Ecocriticism in his declaration that, "Ecocriticism should remain localist, rather than global, in its grounding orientation...Localist in orientation would mean being always attentive to particular and specific places, entities and events." (Murphy1). This paper ventures to scrutinize Keki N Daruwalla's (1937-) portrayal of Ganga and the locale of Varanasi in *the Crossing of River (1976)* from an Ecocritical perspective to fathom the Ecopoetics inherent in his poetry as he sets out to connect nature and Ecology with culture, which, according to Englehardt is a product of Non-human nature.

Keywords: polluted urban water bodies, Ganga, Varanasi, anthropocentrism, biocentric equality, ecopoetics.

The term, "Ecocriticism" first appeared in William Rueckert's essay, "Literature and Ecology: an experiment in Ecocriticism" (Rueckert 71-86) where it has been defined as, "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" and received a new spurt when advocated by Cheryll Glotfelty in the meeting of Western Literature Association in 1989. Skinner believes, "Eco...signals...the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth. "Poetics" is used as poesis or making...Thus: ecopoetics becomes a house making (Skinner 5). Pramod K Nayar feels, "Ecocriticism aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself with other ecological sciences and approaches." (Nayar 242). Peter Barry in *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* adumbrates a pertinent ecocritical motif when he mentions of the fate of rivers and water-courses in built-up urban environments, "...the one natural feature which towns and cities found it difficult to absorb were the streams and rivers, which often suffered pollution and degradation in the process of urbanisation, and in extreme cases...became open sewers...often with periodically disastrous consequences." (Barry 22)

Details of rivers and polluted waterbodies accentuating the sordid urban settings of built-up urban environments have been reflected in the works of many poets. The French poet Verlaine's poem, "Parisian Nocturne" evokes an image of Seine as a filthy river to emphasize the squalid aspects of the city. In, Pope's *The Dunciad*, the despoiled fleet becomes a correlative of the city's moral and spiritual decline. James Thomson infused almost similar details in his poem, "A real vision of sin" being influenced by Dante. "The Fire Sermon" in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* also focuses on the pollution of river. Allen Fisher's "Place" and Roy Fisher's, "Birmingham River" are further illustrations in point. Though these poets were not immediately associated with Ecocriticism, they overtly contributed to a sustained critique of one of the detrimental consequences of modern urbanity in their representations of urban spaces, conveying, "A sense of system, overloaded, threatening to choke up with its own waste products and generating toxicity, pollution and entropy rather than energy." (Fisher 11)

Similar Ecopoetics inundate the vignettes of Ganga, the sacred mythological river, worshipped by the Hindus and Varanasi, the holy city, in *Crossing of Rivers* (1976) by Keki N Daruwalla, "essentially a fierce castigator of the socio-political-cultural reality of contemporary India...who openly question values, fearlessly clobber the prevailing social order...[as his] concern is to create for future betterments." (Prasad 62) Benares or Varanasi, the holy city of the Hindus, supposed to be the abode of Lord Shiva, gets considerable mention in his poetry. Like Jayanta Mahapatra, who preoccupies himself with the temple towns of Orissa and brings out a feel of Indian urbanity quite different from the cosmopolitan concerns of another renowned Indian English poet, Nissim Ezekiel. The four largest cities of India - New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras were founded by Europeans, unlike Varanasi, initially known as Kashi, the city of light, when it was the capital of the kingdom of the same name around 500 B.C. Therefore, an inclusion of Daruwalla's portrayal of Varanasi and Ganga vis a vis an analysis of Ecocriticism is bound to be a rewarding one, particularly because the poet himself once declared, "I try that poetry relates to the landscape, both on the physical and on the plane of the spirit" (Daruwalla, *Two Decades* 21). A picture of Daruwalla's Varanasi remains incomplete without a mention of the Ganges which has been a palpable presence in his poems. His depiction of the river, the ghat scenes and the humdrum

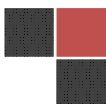


living in the holy city, against the backdrop of the sacrosanct river, belies the faith associated with it in innumerable legends, epics and folklore. Daruwalla's etchings, cannot help being sarcastic since Varanasi, the spiritual city of yesteryears, has in the present days degenerated into an "Octopus City" "I walk the octopus city, lost in the dark/like an undersea shadow" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 19).

Traditional beliefs associated with the holy city of Benaras still beacon pilgrims to flock there in search of redemption, "Perhaps they come to Varanasi/the unloved, the hungry/ looking for their souls like/the blind looking for their lost children," in "Vignette 3" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 19); still sharing Nehru's belief that, "... the story of the Ganges ...is the story of India's civilization and culture...of the adventure of man and the quest of the mind...of ups and downs, of growth and decay, of life and death"(Nehru38). Daruwalla captures how the believers throng the "Magnet streets," the "fly-paper streets" of Varanasi, "In creaking ekkas/perched on the tool-box/of a truck/hoisted on sweating shoulders/they come death-rigid/and shrouded in white/those born of the void/inheriting the void" in 'Death Vignette' (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 22). But solace eludes the afflicted devotees in Varanasi, the once city of light whose present, "...landscape is so grey/they are milking the sun for light." in "Vignette3" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 19). Such severe anthropocentric use and reuse of the divine Ganga to cleanse and purify the devotees, body and soul, from times immemorial has entirely tarnished the ecological balance. The aggrieved poet vents his ecological concerns, when in "Mother" he cannot but notice, "...a cataract in your eye/films the world with a brown haze" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 30) and suffers from a claustrophobic confusion in "Nightscape" as he questions, "Is this a ridge/black with pine/rising out of the mists/or a city of the dead/brooding over a ghost scape?" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 13)

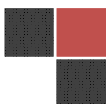
At this juncture it will be worthwhile to note Glotfelty's ecocritical postulate, "All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture" (Glotfelty 19). Such interconnections loom large through the text of Daruwalla's *Crossing of Rivers*. The failure of the Ganga Action plan to combat the problem of pollution caused by urbanisation, population explosion, untreated sewage, cremations, dumping of solid wastes, floral offerings, half-cremated bodies and animal carcasses seems to get presupposed in Daruwalla's portrayal of the, "phantom panorama" as the river, "coughs and eddies/and converses with the mud" in Vignette1(Daruwalla, *Crossing* 37), flows through the land/not to lighten the misery/but to show it" and thus rings in issues of Eco-poetics, the social poetics which emerge from ecological concerns and similar reflections; relating questions of poetic form to the more comprehensive socio-political and moral philosophy inspiring them.

Statistics prove that Ganga river pollution is at a level about three thousand times over the limit. The limit is not an arbitrary one rather on the contrary it has been suggested by World Health Organization (WHO) as safe, thus affecting about four hundred and twenty million people who depend on the river for water, food, agriculture etc. and the hundreds and thousands of believers who flock the ghats of Varanasi in the hope of spiritual salvation to leave behind the penury and nervous disorders which have so far bogged down his existence as mentioned in, "The Dip", "Migraine, vertigo and nausea/I leave on the ghats as hostages, / and chain them as you chain a dog/which broods anxiously and yelps/as you go down. (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 25). Daruwalla's, "Nightscape" scans a nocturnal scene when, "...flesh turns to carbon on the Ghats/ and the



rivers keep moving/ dark as gangrene" (Daruwalla, *Crossing*13), ejecting a lament from the poet in "Mother" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 29) "Your waters are brown now; / the years have scrubbed/the gloss from your skin". The situation is, all the more lamentable as the Ganga basin is the second richest in Asia in terms of bio-diversity (Chatterjee np). Devall and Session's admonition, "Present human interference with the non-human is excessive and the situation is rapidly worsening"(Devall70) gets reiterated when Daruwalla angles at a menacing pulverization of biodiversity in "River silt", "All will be death-silt in your valley/as in other valleys/Birds will chart new route over Kailas,/for there will be no slugs to fed on here./On a rain-sluiced evening, three/spacemen from some other planet/will dig through your silt-flanks/and come upon a half-burnt skull/as the Magi came upon the Christ."(Daruwalla, *Crossing* 33) or as in, "Death Vignette" "...Walking with death on/their copper-shoulders/acid-etched/on the horizon,/as a part of the landscape on which they are walking" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 23). Daruwalla's poetry and his exploration of the nature-human binary elucidates a statement made by eminent historian Ramchandra Guha in his book, "Environmentalism: A Global History", Nature becomes a source of cheap raw material as well as a sink for dumping the unwanted residues of economic growth." (Guha 4) The Ecocritic in Daruwalla is also in sync with Rueckert's (Rueckert 71-86) opinion that Culture acts like a great predator and parasite upon nature often ruling out any reciprocating energy-transfer, into a recycling relationship with the biosphere as he sets out to etch the, "Octopus City" in Vignette III.

Anthropocentrism, by regarding humans as the most significant species on the planet often verges on an over utilisation of nature merely as a source for humans, decimates ecological balance and runs counter to the concept of Deep Ecology, "that all life has the right to exist, that no one species is more important than another" (Drengson 106). The impending danger is writ large over Daruwalla's necropolis, the town itself is, "a bas-relief of death" in "Death Vignette" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 22) where, "At dawn everywhere the radios crackle with death/ the newspapers drip with bile and acid/...The serpent skins of death hang from the windows like buntings" in Vignette III and the "city's fiery tongue" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 19) robs it of the healing touch of seasons, "If only seasons changed here/and leaves of blood flowed down/the river in autumn!/If only ice came crashing down in June!/If a patch of earth along the ghats could nurse/grass shoots instead of wizened stone!" It has been aptly commented that, "The Waterfront" section of *Crossing of Rivers* is "virtually a hymn to Ganga, although the poet repeatedly presents the ugliness and squalor that define the locale." (Sinha 55). A repetitive strain also runs rampant through the images of sacrilege and avarice in the, "Vignette" sections where, "corpse fires and cooking-fires/burn side by side" in, "Boatride along the Ganga" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 12) whereas in, "Vignette", the lepers, "huddle along the causeways/like stunted shrubs, "(Daruwalla, *Crossing* 16) a thin dwarf, "cavorts ape-like" and beggars, "hoist their deformities/as boatmen hoist their sails," city streets echo the raucous laughter of whores and make the poet confess, "All is spider-thread ritual here;/sandal-paste and mantra/chanting the gayatri/shaved head and the pindadan." in "Vignette II" (Daruwalla, *Crossing*19). Daruwalla's Eco-poetics reminds how the fate of the humans is intertwined with the fate of the environment. A strange omen of death shrouds Daruwalla's Varanasi. In "Boatride along the Ganga" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 12)," Dante would have been confused here/where would he place this city/In Paradise or Purgatory, or lower down where fires smoulder beyond the reach of piety?" The gloom intensifies since the microcosm of Daruwalla's Varanasi points towards an appalling urban microcosm, "All cities are the same at night/when you walk barefoot/across their

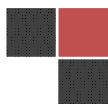


blistered backs." Similar Eco-poetics fleet through many a poem of other significant Indian English poets, like A.K. Ramanujan's, "A River", R Parthasarathy's, "Homecoming," Shiv K Kumar's, "Crematorium at Adikmet, Hyderabad," C.P. Surendran's, "Roadshow", P Lal's, "Boat on the Hooghly, Allen Ginsberg's, "Describe: The Rain on Dasaswamedh Ghat" etc. Peter Barry's ecocritical perception of lost watercourses, "invested with large amounts of our cultural baggage, becoming the symbolic icon of a lost pre-industrial Eden" (Barry 22) is shared by Daruwalla in, "Mother", when the poet-persona questions, "Can you recall/the abyss floor at Rishikesh, / the rapids of Bhabar/your devotees at Hardwar?" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 29).

A close perusal of *Crossing Of Rivers* leaves the indelible mark of the poet's subtle advocacy for a bio-centric world view, a recognition of bio-centric equality; acknowledging the inherent value of water resources, since culture and human existence are inextricable from the natural world. The poet, thus, champions the cause of bio-centric equality," that all things in the bio-sphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self realisation within the larger Self Realisation." (Devall and Sessions 67). Daruwalla's specific plea to preserve Ganga in its natural form and to protect nature in general in, "Vignette III" unfurls his commitment to environmentalist praxis and vindicates," *Crossing of Rivers* as an eco-poem, "If a patch of grass along the ghats could nurse/grass shoots instead of wizened stone!" (Daruwalla, *Crossing* 19). Daruwalla averts himself from waxing eloquent in any utopian strain as found in the epic *The Mahabharata*. The high happiness, which one enjoys by a residence on the banks of the Ganga, can never be his who is residing even in Heaven" (13.XXVI.138). Instead, the poet, achieves a messianic feat by showcasing how ecological concerns teemed with social awareness may incite the realization, "The real values are within nature, mind and into liberation." (Honninghausen 231)

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