

# Keki Daruwalla's Swerving to Solitude: Attacking Emergency with a Sheathed Sword

Jagdish Batra

**Abstract**—The poetry and short stories of Keki Daruwalla, the leading Indian English poet, have been enjoyed by at least two generations, Long fiction is his recent offering. My paper finds his latest novel *Swerving to Solitude: Letters to Mama*, a stylistic tour de force. The thematic part touching on a sensitive phase of Indian political history, however, fails to move the reader. The author attacks the Emergency but falters when it comes to questioning the instruments of Emergency. This is intriguing because, having been part of top administrative set-up, he was aware of a lot of behind-the-scene machinations and manipulations.

**Index Terms**—Emergency, Indira Gandhi, postmodern, new historicism, Indian English fiction.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Acclaimed poet Keki Daruwalla's interest in history of remote past as also not so old is well known. It is this that has probably drawn him into novel writing even as his stories were always popular. He likes to juxtapose the political with the personal so that there is more than a single narrative in his fiction. His first novel *For Pepper and Christ* [1] dealt with the early sea voyages to India by Europeans. The two major motives, hinted at in the title were doing business and spreading Christianity, which later got intertwined with struggle for power. His second novel *Ancestral Affairs* [2] focussed, apart from the love life of a youth, on the period around Independence and the simultaneous Partition of the country. How the Junagadh state wavered before joining India and the role of the Dewan, a Parsi, is graphically portrayed. It must be said that apart from Amitav Ghosh, Daruwalla is the other important novelist in the genre of Indian English Fiction, who does meticulous research for his novels.

*Swerving to Solitude: Letters to Mama* takes up the history of India from the period of Emergency (1975) to Operation Bluestar (1984). The locale shifts from Delhi and Lucknow in India to Canada, US and Mexico, placing action during the period of the First World War. The story is told in the form of a monologue of a young, married woman Seema though she addresses it to her dead mother! Obviously, there is no response, so it is safe to take it as a diary with a difference. For the lack of response, the novel can be compared to the Booker prize winner Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* in which the protagonist sends regular mails to the Chinese Prime Minister, of course, without any sign of getting a reply.

That should not in the least lead us to believe that the two are similar in other aspects too. Adiga's strategy, were it to

be used today, would be outdated for the tremendous progress that China has made so that its premier would hardly need tips on business from an Indian! Besides, Balram Halwai of Adiga's novel is a village-grown semi-literate chauffeur who picks up the ways of the city capitalists fast enough and soon comes one up on them. Here, in the present novel, Seema comes out as an educated, ideologically committed person though she does not fire shots like her mother did in her youth. Her conduct is unconventional and befits her intellectual integrity. This liberated woman can utter the word *lulu* (local term for genitals) publicly – something rare in Indian society. [3]. On the other hand, her constant reference to “Mama” brings out the child-like innocence in her, for she is supposed to be frank with her mother, and it goes to the credit of the novelist that both her innocence and fighting spirit of an ideologically committed journalist are juxtaposed in an artistic manner.

## II. EMERGENCY PERIOD

The time is the infamous period of Emergency imposed by the then Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi and the locale is Lucknow in the state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). Seema, wife of Nishant, an IAS officer, is a budding journalist with the *Lucknow Chronicle*. She is an outgoing, outspoken, Left-leaning intellectual type. Her friends Shilpa, Rabia and Zaira make a mirthful company and in their private conversations make fun of Indira Gandhi and her actions. Seema is kind to her maid's hysteric daughter Elham whom she accommodates in her house so that she is not taken for a possessed girl and referred to some exorcist by her superstitious mother.

Seema's rebellious instinct shows itself when she has a 2-night stint in jail (cooler) for slapping a policeman who had hit an innocent person in the street while he was watching the sealing of a Jan Sangh cadre Shambhu Nath Pandey's shop. Alfred Hemmings (Alfie), known to her through her friend Shilpa, is a foreign journalist working in India for the *Christian Science Monitor* and has sympathy for the opposition parties. He later persuades Seema to take a packet containing money to Pandey.

The writer is able to bring alive the Emergency days by describing how the opposition parties and their sympathizers worked under that reign of terror; how even a lowly maid is picked up because her daughter, in a psychic state of mind, predicted jail for Indira Gandhi; how the journalist Alfie goes missing. It was the time when you became a celebrity if you were on the side of the government, like that sweet seller

Anupam became. People were under strict surveillance and so the 'special branch' is alerted when Seema goes on a rickshaw to Pandey's house some distance away from her own, resulting in the visit of a cop to her house and the institution of a court case later.

We do read about people being rounded up for vasectomy operation during the Emergency period. How some of them run out of the operation van even as a fellow is undressed makes for a funny, even though, grim reminder of those black days, but it is not a detailed exposure of the Emergency days as many others like Rohinton Mistry in *A Fine Balance* [4] have done. Daruwalla and Mistry are on the same page even though Daruwalla obliquely criticizes Mistry as a "second rate writer" referring to the novel *Such a Long Journey*, [5] also dealing with the Emergency days. Many journalists, historians and other writers have written a lot on the Emergency.

*Swerving to Solitude* now shifts to the period after Indira lost elections and the new government was formed. But what does not change is the modus operandi of the bureaucracy at whatever level. While the upper echelons have a *bhaichara* or fellow-feeling based on region, the lower functionaries, here in the police department, continue with their brash and idiotic ways. So, the cops visit Seema to record her statement as to what she knew of Pandey. It is reported that he had murdered his wife and the suspicion is that he must have been involved with some other woman, meaning Seema.

There are comments on the working of the pressmen and women in the capital and about the demographics of the capital. Quite a few chapters centre around what happened in the Press Club or Seema's reminiscences of her Balbir Uncle and her mother's past as also the several mother-father tiffs. Daruwalla reminds you of Shashi Deshpande's rummaging through family history, albeit in an ironic vein.

### III. INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Structurally, the section captioned "Mother's Journal (1910-1920)" [6] seems dispensable, as it deals with the history of Seema's parents and grandparents, but the personal history is intertwined with the history of the immigrants in the US, Canada and Mexico during the heady days of India's freedom movement coinciding with the eruption and ending of the First World War. The tenuous link that this section has with the main narrative appears to be to locate Seema's revolutionary DNA in her family genes and so the journal ends with: "A minority always has to rule, the mass can't rule by itself. But it is the stir among the masses that brings about a revolution. Never lose faith in October 1917" [7].

Shail's father shifted to Mexico, where Shail became secretary to M.N Roy as she was good at Spanish language. His meeting with a certain ammunition supplier becomes the albatross around her neck. As a loyal worker, she tries to shoot some attackers too. One fine day, Roy disappears. Later, she learns from someone that he had left for Soviet Russia which was then in the making. The Mexican politics with its protagonists Madero and Diaz is described: "The country seemed a cauldron with revolutionaries going around as bandits, and bandits going around as revolutionaries" [8]. An attempt has been made to highlight Roy's role as he does not find wide mention in the history of the Communist

movement, according to Daruwalla. In this, it is a "reflective historical novel", as Turner would say. [9], as he is trying to fill up the gaps – little known aspects of Roy's life – through innovative details.

For Roy, however, the Communist movement mattered more at the world level rather than in the confined space of India as is evident from his comment to Ramos in which he explains why he turned a Socialist: "I thought the good of mankind, which means the proletariat, is a better cause than the good only of Indians" [10]. This is also confirmed by Balbir uncle's assessment of Roy: "Shail had followed her mentor MN, who had forgotten his country, or I should say for whom revolution came first and India next" [11]. True, Roy's brief surfacing in Bombay as Dr Mohammad is described but nothing of his activities in India finds mention. This disputes the committed critic Manohar Shetty's view that the novel is the story of Left-wing politics in India and that Roy tried to get support of European leaders to "expel the British from India" [12].

Daruwalla, a former super-cop, could not have stayed away from weaving in spy operations and so it becomes an acutely international plot with the famed Mata Hari put to work, eliciting information in bed from the S.P. Special Branch of CID Calcutta, Jeffrey Denham who is under order to arrest Roy. Shail is now under scanner for having served Roy. The story undergoes a twist at this point as it is told in the form of letters of Seema's mother retrieved from a safe locker the key to which also comes to her like it would to a spy (after all her mother had been part of the secret movement!). From the letters, Seema learns that her mother had been imprisoned in America during the days of McCarthyism.

The Emergency period is infamous in history not only for draconian laws and authoritarianism but also for height of corruption. Back to present, Seema is now dragged to court to appear as a defence witness in the case of wife's murder by the Jan Sangh member and businessman Pandey. She admits in court that she spent two nights in jail for slapping a cop, which fact gets reported in press and becomes a sticking point in her family relationship. However, Seema hits upon some disturbing skeletons in his cupboard: he had swindled a hefty amount from a Swiss bank, where his former boss – a minister had stashed away ill-gotten wealth. Seema can now relate the acquisition of an old BMW and his gifting her the expensive Swarovski crystalware and Mallorcan pearl necklace. Seema, an idealist is not able to digest this and calls it quits. This is her "swerving to solitude". She is ready to lead life alone even though the tumult within her is not expressed in as many words as if she did not want to hurt her mother! This is indeed a tribute to the innocence and the ingenuity of the individual who dares to take her own course in life.

### IV. TAKING ON HISTORY

The novel *Swerving to Solitude* deals with recent history. Now, the nexus between history and fiction is an old one having originated with novelists' attempt to be faithful to history. Walter Scott's novels have been praised even by the likes of Gyorgy Lukacs for their allegiance to history. However, scope always remains to fill in the gaps left

unattended by historians, who are more obsessed with the political aspects of history and deal with the high and the mighty only. Yet, the novelist was, in the past, obliged to take up historical personages or events, without which the novel would not don the glamorous “historical” tag.

At the same time, the question arose as to which period could be considered history; it won't be prudent to include the present times in history, after all. The limitation of the time period advanced by literary historians like Avrom Fleishman as around fifty years before the writing of the novel was criticized as an arbitrary and artificial categorization. Joseph Turner's distinction between documented historical novel, the disguised historical novel, and the invented historical novel broadened the area on pragmatic bases. [13]. When the novelists took the liberty to supplant actual personages with similar ones, theorists like F.J. Tickner reminded them: “The actual personages who appear in its pages must resemble, more or less closely, the real persons of history; the fictitious characters must behave, more or less, as if they had been living at the time” [14]. An advance was made when the focus shifted from historical personages to historical time and society at large. Keeping this as background, the novelist could coin characters other than the lofty Aristotelian ones.

In postmodern times, the hierarchy is sought to be obliterated in literature and the novelists now feel free to re-write totally history and historical figures. That is an extreme position and a fake one, for it then dons the term “historical” without basing details on any evidence. This becomes crucial when recent history – still fresh in public mind – is taken up. However, there are always differing perceptions even with regard to recent past also.

Daruwalla's novel is a “historical novel” in the sense that it has a historical background and there is clear mention of the historical figures like Indira Gandhi, even though Daruwalla avers in his first novel *For Pepper and Christ*, “A historical novel is neither history nor fiction” [15]. He has located his characters in different time zones. While the international politics under the section titled *Mother's Diary* pertains to the period 1918-1922, the rest of the novel is placed in the time zone 1975 onward. As a novelist, his choice is to study its historical impact on an ordinary individual in Indian society. His interest in world history is responsible for linking an individual to a historical figure; in this case protagonist Seema's mother to M.N. Roy.

Daruwalla's thoughts on history are revealed somewhat in the present novel through Seema who comments on the biographies of contemporary politicians as a literary writer would do:

Have started wondering about people who are still alive and kicking, reading their biographies. It will be just that swatch of politics which will show in the life of a politico, elections won and lost, parties changed (no mention of barter money) and of course none of the mistresses will be named, and if it's a woman politician, then the studs in khadi. If one is writing about Mata Hari, it will just be her affairs and espionage. What about fits of anger and spasms of regret and interludes of love? [16].

Indeed, history writing is very selective in content. When it comes to the biography of a historical figure, what is left out in the context of a biography is probably life itself, as

Seema points out at the end of this -- what should be the longest sentence in the novel:

What of a bad dream that turns your morning tea bitter and you don't want to even touch the paper, what of failure and dejection, looking back and ruminating on destiny and how one has drifted, for we drift like a fallen leaf in the wind, we need to respect the scratch and scrape of a dry leaf as it moves with a halo of dust around it, dust and leaf propelled by the wind, like sisters drifting into marriage; a night of love kept away from the world's eyes' the fear of acne, the guilt of squeezing a pimple; and distractions – even memory and thought are distractions, you sit down to write and think of the fate of the editor, or the smell that comes from the mouth of the sub sitting in the same cubicle as you; the gallop of blood in anger or in lust; the lighting of an incense stick, the pouring of milk in the dog's bowl, or the terrible regret in the office for having forgotten to pour the milk in the dog's bowl. [17].

Daruwalla is drifting towards Eliotean theory of poetic process here.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that the adaptation of history into fiction by a novelist is also a poetic enterprise. One needs poetic imagination to seek and illuminate vague truth, and so, a novelist presents life –like characters with the help of his powerful imagination.

In postcolonial fiction writing, however, the novelist finds himself in a dilemma. There are multiple stakeholders in any political situation and siding with one invites allegations of partiality and ideological commitment from the other. If a writer is ready to withstand such insinuations, he goes ahead and we get novels like Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which, going by Roy's political activist record and the major portion of the book reveals her sympathies for the terrorists fighting a proxy war for Pakistan in Kashmir. [18].

However, the angle of ideological inclination is something that still has a bearing on any writer, unless one is way above mundane considerations and judgments. The novel *Swerving to Solitude* does hint at Daruwalla's effort to steer clear of biases. It is obviously critical of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi way back in 1975. But this is a known fact that the Left parties were in cahoots with the government at that time, as is borne out by the confession of CPI leaders: “Forty years after it had supported the Emergency, the Communist Party of India (CPI) leadership has said it was a political mistake. While CPI general secretary S. Sudhakar Reddy said the party had failed to understand political reality by supporting the Emergency, veteran party leader Gurudas Dasgupta said it was ‘a great political mistake’” [19].

The Communist sympathy for Indira Gandhi could be due to the fact that Soviet Russia provided a model of governance during the Emergency and its spies had infiltrated the Indian establishment in a big way by bribing and even honey-trapping those who mattered, as the Mitrokhin Archive papers released to public some time ago showed. [20]. The press was denied freedom and strict censorship was imposed.<sup>2</sup> The Jan Sangh and RSS leaders as also other followers of the movement led by Jai Prakash Narayan were behind bars and their workers were hounded. According to a historian, “The Emergency was followed by arrest of over 10,000 opponents of the government. There were countrywide arrests of non-CPI opposition leaders and some

Congressmen. The government also imposed pre-censorship of the news under the Emergency Proclamation” [21]. The officials put in charge of censorship would screen news minutely and issued from time to time a number of instructions to newspapers regarding what was to be published and what not. Journalist Kuldeep Nayar’s book *Emergency Retold* reproduces many such instructions verbatim [22]. Even leaving blank space after censor had scissored certain news item was declared a crime. [23].

Here, in the novel, if the protagonist Seema is Left-leaning, her antipathy to the Emergency regime is hardly justifiable from historical point of view. However, her action in saving a Jan Sangh functionary and helping him unconsciously suggests a measure of transcendentality to her – but just a measure – for the help is rendered without any idea of Pande’s political affiliation. As an enlightened intellectual, Seema seems to be unconcerned about the social taboos and prejudices and has the gumption to take on the world. That is why she obliges Alfred and goes to deliver the packet to Pandey’s house.

Daruwalla’s aversion to present-day BJP leadership is evident in the form of a forecast from the minor character Elham, who, true to her name, has intuition or dreams which foretell the fate of Indira Gandhi. The latter’s loss at hustings and her death are forecast by her leading to threat to her own life too. The novel concludes with one such dream which she is coaxed to share with Seema: “A huge man riding on a wild donkey, with a *barcha* in his hand, a *barcha* with three spearheads, with lots of followers also on wild asses, will be riding towards Delhi” [24]. Here, the present Prime Minister is portrayed as leading a crowd of trident-wielding people on ass-backs, but Daruwalla desists from naming Narendra Modi. That is a fictionist’s artistic privilege to keep the veil on and yet make intent clear!

Secondly, there is not much detail of the behind-the-scene machinations of politicians – Indira Gandhi’s coterie<sup>3</sup>, for example – which helped her maintain the Emergency regime. This is in contrast to his earlier novel *Ancestral Affairs* in which politics at the highest level in the state of Junagadh has been depicted in great detail. The description of the events that unfold in the wake of the declaration of Partition is indeed absorbing and realistic in that novel. Daruwalla spent four years as a child in Junagadh and while writing the novel, he was privy to the then Commissioner of Junagadh’s papers received from the latter’s son as Daruwalla declares in the Acknowledgements section of that book.

Daruwalla, a retired senior government official having worked with the Prime Minister’s Office besides holding other important charges in the police department under the Home Ministry is witness to a lot and has the status of an insider. His ethnicity aligns him to an elite minority of India – the Parsi community. His poetic interests bring him closer to the ground so that he can empathize with ordinary people and provide the reader with insight into philosophical musings. Going by this yardstick, there appears no reason to believe that Daruwalla does not have knowledge of the goings-on at the highest level. He could share more information about the way Emergency was imposed or perpetuated for 19 months but he has chosen not to step into that area.

## V. CONCLUSION

As a novelist, Daruwalla is influenced by the novella form, so that in his novels, one can easily identify two distinguishable narratives brought together at some point. In *Ancestral Affairs*, it was the life story of a father and son, the former neck-deep in politics of Junagadh state and the latter knee-deep in youthful love. Here, in the present novel, the story of the daughter crosses the story of the mother as also the grandmother. Ironically, while the mother is a helper in the communist movement in Mexico, the daughter is at the receiving end of the Communist Party of India-supported Emergency regime in India.

On the whole, the novel is an artistic tour de force. Daruwalla’s innovative style in making the protagonist address her dead mother has the advantage of her being truthful in a uniquely endearing way. Seema becomes a child when she writes the narrative for her mother: “The police call it embossing, Mama. So does the army. Ever heard the term?” [25] or “There has to be more to a family than just your name, Mama” [26]. But she also abstains from using overmuch mushiness probably for fear of upsetting her mom! In this and elsewhere too, the writer has maintained a distance that is able to bring in a kind of alienation effect that Bertolt Brecht would have been jealous of.

The language of the novel is befittingly colloquial – something that comes as a surprise for readers of Daruwalla’s short stories and even many poems couched in rather difficult English. The novelist uses Indianized English portmanteaus like “dialoguewala”, words redolent of spoken English like “pheedmale” [27], and coinages like “debussed”, etc. A poet’s rich fund of similes and metaphors is there for the readers to enjoy, as e.g., “Dreams or hallucinations also come in series, like M.F. Husain’s paintings on horses” [28], or “The Nation is a bank without guards, don’t you see?” [29]. The pen pictures with a touch of poetry are so haunting:

Remember it was winter, grass yellowing, trees black-barked, a wisp of a ground mist that vanished soon. I was observing the scene, goat tracks scissoring away from the main road, pine needles soggy because of a shower, straggling shrubbery. In the town, I remember a dhaba cook slapping dough on an inverted griddle, a shuttered paan kiosk being opened lazily by a Tamboli in his dhoti, a chained Bhotia dog who did not bark at us, meaning driver and me, a goitered hill woman carrying fire wood on her head. [30].

The novel is full of witty wisecracks with symbolic undertone. When the protagonist, making an analogy of the captured house rats, comments that “Those who know they are boxed in deserve another chance. It is only those who are unaware of being trapped who don’t deserve a thing” [31], we can sense Seema’s rebellious nature. Also, Daruwalla’s characteristic wit is reflected all over the novel: “The past has a habit of digging its way up like a rodent sometimes” [32]. “His thoughts tumbling over each other like boulders in an avalanche” [33]. A country becomes backward because of backward beliefs which sit on our shoulders like Baital on the shoulders of Vikramaditya” [34]. Daruwalla takes a dig at the Parsi community too. They used to be fighters once, he says, now they only fight in courts! [35].

It is a lively narrative laced with humour that keeps the reader engaged. This novel balance the political and the personal in a charming manner. The narrative is indeed

“nuanced with just the right measure of storytelling elements that highlight an engaging perspective on politics, history and human beings, in this order” [36].

#### NOTES

- 1) T.S. Eliot wrote on the poetic process in his famous essay “The Metaphysical Poets”: “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary mind’s experience is chaotic, irregular and fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet the experiences are always forming new wholes” [37].
- 2) Regarding censorship, writer Nayantara Sahgal noted: “The censors in New Delhi and the state capitals whose job it is to black out news and opinions inconvenient to the government - and they cover the whole territory of newspapers, magazines, commentary, fiction, theatre and films - may be dispensed with once the emergency is lifted, but control of all media will continue. Radio and television are government monopoly in any case, and in the past Mrs. Gandhi has used them blatantly to promote herself and her party and distort happenings in India. Now a single news agency, *Samachar*, feeds the press in India with official handouts. Respected editors have been thrown out of their jobs and replaced by sycophants, and newspaper management, already government manipulated will soon be its complete tool in what the minister for information and broadcasting picturesquely describes as re-structuring and entire newspaper industry so as to make accountable to the people” [38].

Eminent author Shashi Tharoor, now a Congress leader, has to his credit the following criticism in his allegorical novel *The Great Indian Novel*: “Duryodhani censored the press, stifled public debate, and placed restrictions even on the reporting of the speeches of the few opposition stalwarts left in the House to criticize the new laws she was bulldozing through parliament like the steel - rimmed Chakras of an invincible juggernaut” [39].

- 3) Indira Gandhi’s coterie, also called “‘Kitchen Cabinet’ was the expanded version of the ‘Back-Benchers Club’, formed during the Shastri years. Her Kitchen Cabinet, a wheel within the wheel, comprised of Dinesh Singh, I.K.Gujral, Nandhini Satpati and Ali Ahmed. This ‘Nucleus of Power’ assisted and advised the prime minister Indira Gandhi’s crucial decision making” [40].

Regarding the coterie of Sanjay Gandhi (Indira Gandhi’s son and extra-constitutional authority during the Emergency period), John Dayal (2015), co-author of a book on Emergency observes in an online article: “Sanjay Gandhi never occupied any office in government when his mother imposed the Emergency. He was not a Member of Parliament at that time. And though several members of the Youth Congress became part of his coterie, and threw their weight about, the people ‘obeying’ his orders were cabinet ministers, senior bureaucrats, ranking police officers. Among them were ministers such as Vidya Charan Shukla, in charge of Information and Broadcasting; Om Mehta, the junior

minister for Home Affairs; Jagmohan, the vice chairman of the Delhi Development Authority; PS Bhinder, a top functionary of Delhi police; Municipal Commissioner B R Tamta; and the governors, chief ministers and chief secretaries of several states” [41].

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**Jagdish Batra** is currently posted as professor of English at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, India, which he joined in 2012 as the founding head of English Language Centre. Prior to it, he worked as Principal, Hindu Institute of Competitions & Foreign Languages, Sonipat, and head of PG Dept. of English in Hindu College, Sonipat. He has more than 30 years of teaching experience and has guided 33 M.Phil. and 10 Ph.D. scholars. Indian

English fiction is his area of special interest on which he has presented papers as also presided at several international conferences in India, UK, Ireland, Italy, France, Romania, Singapore, Belarus, Thailand, Indonesia, etc.

He is the convener of five annual international literary conferences organized at Jindal Global. A former Rotary Group Study Exchange scholar to USA, Dr Batra has published eight books besides more than 50 research papers in leading journals. He is on the editorial boards of three literary journals including *The Commonwealth Review* and *The Indo-American Review*, and research panels of many universities.