UNIT 7: KEKI N. DARUWALLA: “WOLF”

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Keki N. Daruwalla: The Poet

- 7.3.1 His Life
- 7.3.2 His Works

7.4 The Text of the Poem

- 7.4.1 The Explanation of the Poem

7.5 Major Themes

7.6 Style and Language

7.7 Let us Sum up

7.8 Further Reading

7.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

7.10 Model Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- gain a brief idea on the life and works of the Indian poet Keki Daruwalla
- explain both the content and context of the poem “Wolf”
- explore the relevant themes pertaining to the text of the poem
- grasp the style and language employed in the poem
- appreciate the poem from a child’s perspective

7.2 INTRODUCTION

Nature and its changing elements find a strong expression in the works of the Indian poet Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla. While reading his poems, one feels instantly drawn into the world of nature enraptured in its mysterious elements and driven by its powerful forces as also reflected in his works. In particular, his nature poetry leads the reader into the depths of the unknown wilderness and directs one’s sensibility into probing the significant aspects

and realities mirrored in his poetical landscapes. In the present unit, we shall first gain a brief insight into the life and works of the poet and explore one of his selected poems titled "Wolf" which contains a touch of sadness and wonder in the imagination of a little child.

7.3 KEKI N. DARUWALLA: THE POET

Let us begin by reading a little about the life and works of the poet keki Daruwalla, who is also considered one of the major Indian English poets.

7.3.1 His Life

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in the year 1937 to a Parsi family in Lahore. His family had moved to Burhanpur in Madhya Pradesh and then to Rampur, well before the Partition. As a child he had to change several schools and much of his childhood was spent in India where he received his early education and also completed his higher studies. Daruwalla had completed his post graduation in English Literature from Government College, Ludhiana. Prior to starting out as a poet and a writer, he had begun his career in the Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1958. In addition to this, he had also served as the special Assistant to the Prime Minister on International Affairs and had retired as the Cabinet Secretariat.

7.3.2 His Works

To his credit, Daruwalla has written over twelve books that comprise both anthologies of poetry and short stories. His first poetical work to be published by the Writers Workshop was titled *Under Orion* in the year 1970. This was shortly followed by his second anthology of poems titled *Apparition in April* in the year 1971 for which he had also won the Uttar Pradesh State Award in 1972. Some of his other notable works are: *In Morning Dew*, *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *The Keeper of the Dead* (1982), *Landscapes* (1987), *A Summer of Tigers: Poems* (1995), *Night River Poems* (2000), *The Scarecrow and the Ghost* (2004), *A House in Ranikhet* (2003) and *For Pepper and Christ* (2009). The anthologies of his short stories are

titled *Swords and Abyss* (1979) and *The Minister for Permanent Unrest and Other Stories* (1996). The recurrent themes in his writings include portrayals of Indian life, nature, wild life, rivers, landscapes, birds and animals evoked through striking and powerful imagery.

Throughout his challenging career as a police officer, Daruwalla continued to pursue his interest in writing. Today, he is one of the leading Indian English poets also received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984 for his anthology of poems titled *The Keeper of the Dead*, and also the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for Asia in the year 1987. Daruwalla was honoured with the Padmashree in 2014 and has held the post of President of The Poetry Society (India). As noted in the *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (2007) and extracted from the poet's work *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960-1980*, the poet opines thus,

"…but I feel even in poetry content is more important than form. For me poetry is first personal-exploratory, at times therapeutic…At the same time it has to be a social gesture, because on occasions I feel external reality bearing down on me from all sides with a pressure strong enough to tear the ear-drums. My poems are rooted in landscape…[It] is not merely there to set the scene but to lead to an illumination. It should be the eye of the spiral… For me a riot-stricken town is landscape." (page)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. How did Daruwalla begin his career before starting out as a poet?

Q2. Name the work for which Daruwalla had received the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Q3. When was Daruwalla honoured with the Padmashree?

7.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

Let us begin with a reading of the prescribed poem before exploring its content, themes and relevant context. The poem captures the image of a frightened wolf out in the darkness of the night with searching eyes for a hiding place.

"Wolf"

Fire lit
half **silhouette** and half **myth**
the wolf circles my past
treading the leaves into a bed
till he sleeps, black snout
on **extended** paws.

Black **snout** on sulphur body
he **nudged** his way
into my **consciousness**.
Prowler, **wind-sniffer**, throat-catcher,
his cries drew a ring
around my night;
a child's night in a village
on the forest edge.

My mother said
his ears stand up
at the fall of **dew**
he can sense a shadow
move across a **hedge**
on a dark night
he can sniff out
your approaching dreams;
there is nothing
that won't be lit up
by the dark touch of his eyes.

The wolves have been **slaughtered** now
A hedge of smoking gun-**barrels**
rings my daughter's dreams.



Silhouette: the dark shape and outline of someone or something seen against a lighter background
Myth: an imaginary being
Treading: walk in a specified way
Extended: hold out a part of one's body
Snout: the projecting nose and mouth of an animal
Nudged: touch or push gently
Consciousness: the state of being conscious, one's awareness of something
Prowler: an animal moving in a restless or a stealthy way
Wind-sniffer: detecting smell carried in the wind particularly by animals
Dew: tiny drops of moisture that form on cool surfaces at night
Hedge: a hedge formed by closely growing bushes
Slaughtered: kill (people) in a cruel or violent way
Barrels: a tube forming part of a gun

7.4.1 The Explanation of the Poem

The poem begins with a vague image of a form, a figure or silhouette lurking in the dark, in the wilderness as though it were hiding under the cover of darkness. This form is that of a wolf that haunted the imagination and thoughts of the poet as a child. Thus, the imagined presence of a wolf occupied the poet's mind as a child as wolves were known to be hunted down at night by men. This imaginary wolf prowls in the dark with careful and calculated movements out in the dark and falls asleep on a bed of leaves, by resting its snout on its paws. The presence of the wolf (whether it is in the dark outside the poet's home or in the poet's imagination) happens to stir up an amazing sense of wonder and bewilderment in him. The poet describes the radiating presence of the wolf to a lit fire and to an unknown or unknowable myth.

The mysterious form of a wolf (in trouble) captures the mind of the child in a very powerful way that it seeps ('nudges') into the consciousness of the child. You may very well imagine how certain mysterious aspects create a deep impression and reside in the crater of the mind in little children for a very long time. In the same way, the poet reminisces how as a child, he had been haunted by the ringing cries of wolves at night. These cries were probably not the usual howling of wolves but the painful ones when they were hunted down. It might have confused the child on how such a splendid animal as a wolf who had the freedom of prowling around its territory and hunting its own food ("wind-sniffer, throat-catcher") was now a victim of the human world suffering the fate of the 'hunted'. Earlier, wolves were hunted not as much for game as for human security in the villages. The poet's village home was at the edge of a forest and perhaps, for this reason the cries of the wolves were clearly audible to him as a child.

In the days of his childhood, his mother would often narrate to him bed-time stories of wolves, describing how the sensitive ears of the wolves would pick up signals or any movements in its territory at midnight, out in the cold when dewdrops fell in the silence of the forest. You may perhaps know how animals are gifted with the sense of smell whether for their food

or for their sense of security. The poet remembers how his mother would tell him of wolves sniffing into his dreams and leaving in him a sense of emptiness as she tries to put him to sleep. Those were the days of the poet's childhood but now there were no more wolves left in those forests as they were all killed by ruthless men. There was no more of those haunted presence of wolves or their tearing cries, all that was left was their 'absence' alone. The dark bodies with lit eyes and radiating presence were long gone with their radiating presence. All that remained were images of smoking gun-barrels that stood for violence and bloodshed of innocent animals. The poet as a father now to a little girl is only left wondering how there were no more wolves to capture her imagination or dreams as there were in his time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4.What does the imaginary wolf do in the dark?

Q5. What did the poet's mother narrate to him in the days of his childhood?

7.5 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the major themes that emerge from the poem "Wolf" are as discussed below:

Fragmented Memories

The narrative voice of the poet reverts back to a time when he knew of wolves that lived and prowled around their neighbourhood. The poet reminisces how his mother would put him to bed at night, when he did not want to sleep. She would simply make him believe that if he did not fall asleep, the wolves with their sharp sense of smell would find and reach him easily. You may have noticed this common bed-time trick that all mothers try on their little children just so that they become obedient and sleep on time. The poet vividly recalls the memories of hearing wolves cry at night in the nearby forests that bordered their village home. Perhaps, this is why the poet had always felt that the wolf or the pack of wolves were never far away from him as a child.

In fact, through the wonderful description of the poet, anyone reading the poem would feel as though a curious wolf was hiding from the reader somewhere nearby. The haunting quality of memories that remain ever fresh in the mindscape even with the passage of time is beautifully captured in the words of the poem. Although, the poem only represents the poet's 'imagination' of the living wolf or wolves in the form of fragmented memories, we receive a complete picture of what it must have been like in the past, when we put all of these images together. Memories have a surprising way of approaching our thoughts and leaving us emotionally charged. Sometimes they come to us in a rush and appear unexpectedly and at other times, they come in flashes and in fragmented forms. We may not always remember or recall certain memories but memories have a way of making themselves felt, just as the memory of the wolf does in the mind of the poet.

Animals in Danger

The wolf in the poem occupies the mind of the poet, long after its kind ceases to exist in their vicinity. The existence of the wolf or wolves in that area almost turns into a myth which saddens the poet. If the 'presence' of wolves had haunted the mind of the poet as a child, it is now their 'absence' that disturbs him. The poem thus expresses the alarming concerns of animal killing and the everyday threat to their existence. Further, it points towards the dangers of the widespread 'man and animal conflict'. For an instance, closer home you may have heard or read news reports on the burning issues of 'rhino poaching' even within the protected areas of Assam's National parks. If such inhumane and illegal practices go unnoticed then, perhaps the day is not far when the future generations will find these vulnerable animals in the list of extinct species. The poet leaves an impression of a similar concern, while wondering how the wolves are now unheard of in the forests bordering his village. This is a special fragment of memory or feeling that the poet's daughter shall never know of, as he did in his childhood.

Animals are often seen as insentient beings but in truth they are more sensitive than most of their human counterparts, who instead of living in harmony with the natural world, turn into destructive forces. The poem

contains a hidden message that if animals are wiped out so mercilessly, the future generations will never know the value of animal life to mankind. It is necessary for us to respect the natural world first and to ensure that the children of the future learn to respect the invaluable gifts of nature in the form of animal life. Nothing can really justify the killing or slaughtering of animals.

7.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The poetry of Daruwalla contains striking imagery that easily captures the imagination of the reader. In the poem "Wolf", the opening lines creates a 'hypnotic' effect on the reader's mind with the revelation of the mysterious presence of a wolf in the poet's memory as expressed in the opening lines: "Fire lit/ half silhouette and half myth/ the wolf circles my past." In the words of the poet, the wolf almost 'nudges' into our 'consciousness' the moment we read through the poem. Thus, the central image in the poem is the silent 'wolf' and this is emphasised through short repetitive phrases such as "half silhouette"/ "half myth," "black snout on extended paws"/ "black snout on sulphur body." Moreover, the poet recreates the haunted midnight memories of his village home at the end of the forest just he remembers wolves prowling "around [his] night/ a child's night" of the bygone years.

The learner will note that the poem has a dream-like quality as the wolf literally exists in the realm of the poet's imagination. The poet is almost drawn back in time, almost lost in his dream-like memories of those old nights when even his mother would scare him saying wolves would sniff out his approaching dreams if he did not fall asleep. He is reminded of the same on seeing his daughter lost in her own dreams. And thus, the play of memory, the to and fro into the then and now is skillfully presented in the poem. Also, one can almost feel the silent and measured movements of the wolf in the dark forest followed by its piercing cry that ruptures the tranquil of those old nights. There is a silent restlessness in the recreation of the imaginary wolf outside the poet's childhood home, the memory of his own restlessness as a child and the restlessness thinking about the slaughtered wolves.

Thus, in a few vivid images the poem leaves a deep impression on one's mind and we imagine the wolf, true to the memory of the poet who describes the wolf as "prowler, wind surfer, throat catcher." Also, one finds that the image of the wolf is not only dream-like but is also received in fragments where the reader is gradually introduced to the fire lit presence of the wolf with its black snout, extended paws, sulphur body, standing ears, sharp sense of movement, quick nose and dark gleam of his eyes. The poem is easy to comprehend as it is written in simple language but the fine style of writing and expression is unique to Keki N. Daruwalla.



7.7 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you will be able to discuss the life and works of Keki N. Daruwalla. A thorough reading of the unit will enable you to further explain the content, context and the relevant themes pertaining to the text of the poem "Wolf". Also, you will be able to grasp the poetic techniques employed in the prescribed poem. The study of the unit shall enable you to explore and enrich your knowledge on the other interesting works by the poet.



7.8 FURTHER READING

1) www.poemhunter.com

2) www.poemhunter.com/keki-daruwalla/biography



7.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No1: Prior to starting out as a poet and a writer, he had begun his career in the Indian Police Service

Ans to Q No 2: He had received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984 for his anthology of poems titled *The Keeper of the Dead*.

Ans to Q No 3: Daruwalla was honoured with the Padmashree in 2014.

Ans to Q No 4: This imaginary wolf prowls in the dark with careful and calculated movements out in the dark and falling asleep on a bed of leaves, by resting its snout on its paws.

Ans to Q No 5: In the days of his childhood, his mother would often narrate to him bed time stories of wolves, describing how the sensitive ears of the wolves would pick up signals or any movements in its territory at midnight, out in the cold when dewdrops fell in the silence of the forest.



7.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Discuss the life and works of the Indian English poet Keki Daruwalla.

Q.2. Give a detailed explanation of the poem "Wolf" in your own words.

Q.3. What are the main issues or themes highlighted in the poem "Wolf"?

Q4. Analyse the style and language employed in the poem "Wolf"

Q.5. Explain with reference to context:

a) "Prowler, wind-sniffer,
throat-catcher
his cries drew a ring
around my night"

b) "a child's night in a village
on the forest edge.
My mother said
his ears stand up
at the fall of dew"

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