


KEKI DARUWALLA 'NURSE AND SENTINEL'



Queen's University Belfast & University of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives"

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

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

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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?**

- 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?

- What impression do you get of the **daughter's quality of care** for her father?
- 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.



WHY DOES THE POET USE THE TERM 'BLACKOUTS'?

- **Blackouts** in the poem 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.
- 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'**.

- The poem's speaker then moves from the concrete, particular situation of his wife to a more **philosophical questioning**. The speaker emphasizes 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.

- Suddenly, the *mise en scene* of the poem expands and we realise that this caring wife is very **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.
- Is he being ironic, perhaps, acknowledging that he does not want to imagine the difficult realities – especially the **messy physical 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.
- There is a hint that the wife is very **determined**, she makes the old man walk. Or perhaps this means that she 'makes him' walk almost **miraculously** causing him to heal.

- The poet reverses or inverts the common idea that time is an enchantress – implying a mood of **disillusion or deflation**.
- The old man dies, anyhow, years later, inevitably.
- 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.

- 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.

- The daughter's response to her mother 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.