

## **Borders, Winds, and Memories: Negotiating Love, Identity, and History in Keki N. Daruwalla's *Love across the Salt Desert***

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### **Abstract**

Keki N. Daruwalla's short stories traverse landscapes that are at once geographical, cultural, and psychological, situating human dilemmas within the shifting tides of history and memory. This paper examines five representative stories i.e. *Love Across the Salt Desert*, *In a High Wind*, *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur*, *The Jahangir Syndrome*, and *A House in Ranikhet* to uncover how Daruwalla weaves together themes of love, displacement, identity, and political turbulence. In *Love Across the Salt Desert*, cross-border desire becomes an act of rebelliousness against communal and national boundaries, foregrounding the tension between human intimacy and political division. *In a High Wind* presents the force of nature as both literal and metaphorical turbulence, testing resilience and altering destinies. *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur* revisits the freedom struggle, showing how collective history is mediated through personal narratives of suffering and hope. *The Jahangir Syndrome* explores the lingering shadows of colonialism and the complexities of cultural inheritance, while *A House in Ranikhet* reflects on belonging, nostalgia, and the fragility of human attachments to place. Taken together, these stories reveal Daruwalla's literary project of negotiating between the intimate and the historical, the individual and the collective, the border and the memory it seeks to erase or preserve. By foregrounding the interplay of love, identity, and history, this paper highlights how Daruwalla's fiction contributes to a deeper understanding of postcolonial anxieties and human resilience across divided landscapes.

**Keywords:** Keki N. Daruwalla, short stories, borders, memory, history, identity, love, postcolonial fiction, resilience.

### **Introduction**

Keki N. Daruwalla occupies a distinctive place in contemporary Indian English literature. Known primarily as a poet, he has also carved a significant niche as a short story writer, crafting narratives that probe the intersections of history, geography, and human conflict. His short stories are not simply fictional exercises but literary engagements with the complexities of postcolonial India-its divided geographies, contested histories, and enduring struggles for belonging. (Daruwalla, p. i)

The stories selected for analysis in this paper-*Love Across the Salt Desert*, *In a High Wind*, *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur*, *The Jahangir Syndrome*, and *A House in Ranikhet*-

span diverse settings and themes, yet they collectively reflect Daruwalla's concern with human resilience in the face of fragmentation. Whether confronting political borders, ecological disasters, colonial legacies, or personal nostalgia, his characters negotiate survival through memory, love, and the search for identity.

This paper argues that Daruwalla's fiction consistently situates individual lives within larger historical and cultural frameworks, revealing how personal experiences are inseparable from collective realities. By closely analyzing each story and then bringing them into comparative dialogue, the study highlights how Daruwalla maps the tension between fragility and resilience, division and belonging.

### **Negotiating Borders: Love Across the Salt Desert**

Keki N. Daruwalla's *Love Across the Salt Desert* is among his most celebrated short stories, foregrounding the interplay between human intimacy and rigid socio-political borders. Set in the Rann of Kutch, a desolate yet symbolically charged frontier landscape, the story traces the romance between Najab Hussain, a smuggler's son, and Fatimah, the daughter of a wealthy trader across the border in Pakistan. (Daruwalla, p. 9) The salt desert is not merely a backdrop but a living metaphor-harsh, barren, and seemingly impenetrable, echoing the political hostility and cultural suspicions between India and Pakistan. Yet within this hostile terrain, love emerges as a subversive force that refuses to acknowledge man-made divisions.

At one level, the story dramatizes the tension between tradition and desire. Najab, though conditioned by the clandestine and dangerous livelihood of his family, embodies a youthful yearning for connection beyond prescribed boundaries. His act of crossing the border to unite with Fatima transforms the smuggler's path into a metaphorical pilgrimage of love. Daruwalla subtly critiques the arbitrariness of national and communal lines that fracture human relationships, showing that personal desire can challenge and even transgress political realities. In this sense, Najab's journey is not just physical but symbolic of a larger struggle against imposed separations. (Daruwalla, p. 10)

Daruwalla's narrative technique emphasizes the irony of human resilience in hostile conditions. The salt desert, which historically functioned as a space of separation, becomes the very site of union. This inversion foregrounds the transformative potential of love, even in terrains shaped by suspicion and hostility. Moreover, the interweaving of cultural references-the shared language, food, and customs-underscores the porousness of cultural identity, complicating the rigid categories of nationality and religion. By doing so, Daruwalla presents the desert not simply as a natural frontier but as a contested space where identity and belonging are constantly renegotiated.

Thematically, *Love Across the Salt Desert* resonates with postcolonial concerns of Partition and its lingering legacies. The story illustrates how ordinary lives continue to bear the scars of political cartography, where borders slice through communities with little regard for human connections. Yet unlike narratives of pure tragedy, Daruwalla injects a note of optimism by centering on love as a redemptive, border-crossing force. This balance of realism and hope renders the story both politically poignant and emotionally compelling.

In brief, *Love Across the Salt Desert* exemplifies Daruwalla's skill in blending personal narrative with historical and political undercurrents. Through Najab and Fatimah's love story, he highlights the futility of rigid boundaries and the enduring human quest for intimacy and belonging. The salt desert thus emerges not as a symbol of desolation but as a paradoxical space of union, where love defies the dictates of politics and history.

### **Winds of Turbulence: In a High Wind**

Keki N. Daruwalla's presents The motif of "winds of turbulence" In a High Wind as a powerful metaphor for the social, political, and psychological upheaval surrounding July 1947, a moment marked by fear, uncertainty, and the imminent violence of Partition. Though the title foregrounds a high wind as a physical condition, the narrative quickly transforms this natural element into a symbolic force that unsettles both space and consciousness. The wind becomes an invisible agent of disruption, echoing the unseen threats that haunt everyday life. The writer writes:

He hadn't switched on the light. He couldn't. Who knew what was out there gunning for you? Where all is dark, and the dark itself is curfew clamped, you don't switch on the light at three in the morning and expose your innards, as it were. An empty street could take a pot shot at you. Much better for the world to be lighted and the observer cocooned in the dark, thought Khurram Bakht. (Daruwalla, p. 71)

At the physical level, turbulence manifests in the uneasy stillness of the street, broken only by shadows and half-light. Darkness is no longer a neutral absence of illumination but an active presence governed by curfew and fear. Khurram Bakht's refusal to switch on the light reflects an instinctive survival strategy: visibility equates to vulnerability. The disturbed atmosphere mirrors a city where normal civic order has collapsed and safety depends on remaining unseen.

Symbolically, the wind represents the violent currents of history sweeping across individual lives. The turbulence of the air parallels the turbulence of political transition, where identities are under threat and trust between neighbours has eroded. The story suggests that Partition's violence is not confined to public riots or borders but infiltrates domestic interiors and private thoughts. Fear circulates like wind-uncontrollable, pervasive, and impossible to escape.

Psychologically, the winds of turbulence create a state of heightened alertness and paranoia. Khurram's perception of the street as capable of "taking a pot shot" illustrates how external chaos reshapes inner reality. The mind, like the environment, becomes unstable, governed by suspicion and dread. The observer's desire to remain "cocooned in the dark" reflects a broader human impulse to withdraw when the world turns hostile.

Overall, the story uses the imagery of wind and darkness to dramatize how historical convulsions translate into intimate human fear. The winds of turbulence thus signify not only political disorder but also the fragile condition of humanity caught in the crosscurrents of history, where survival often depends on silence, invisibility, and endurance.

### **Memory and History: When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur**

In *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur*, Keki N. Daruwalla explores the relationship between collective memory, historical trauma, and everyday life, situating Gandhi's arrival not within the grand narratives of political history but in the lived experiences of ordinary people. The story reconstructs an episode from India's freedom struggle, when Gandhi's presence in Gorakhpur coincides with unrest, violence, and popular agitation. Instead of focusing on Gandhi as a towering national leader, Daruwalla foregrounds the anxieties and sufferings of common villagers, emphasizing how historical events filter down into personal lives in ways often absent from official accounts.

A central theme of the story is the tension between idealism and violence. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and civil disobedience is juxtaposed with the harsh reality of rural discontent and colonial repression. The peasants of Gorakhpur, caught between exploitative landlords, British authorities, and their own poverty, interpret Gandhi's message through the prism of their desperation. For them, Gandhi becomes less a saintly figure and more a symbol of hope, yet their actions often blur the line between non-violent resistance and violent revolt. Daruwalla captures this paradox with irony and poignancy, suggesting that the translation of ideology into practice is never seamless.

Equally significant is the narrative's focus on memory. The story does not unfold as a straight forward chronicle but as a recollection, interweaving fragments of oral testimony, rumour, and local lore. This stylistic choice reflects how history is often preserved and transmitted at the margins not through official archives but through remembered stories that blend fact and imagination. Daruwalla thereby questions the reliability of historical memory, while also affirming its vitality as a source of cultural identity. Gorakhpur becomes a microcosm of the broader Indian struggle, where the meaning of Gandhi is less about doctrinal precision and more about collective aspiration. (p. 102-103)

Daruwalla's portrayal of colonial authority further deepens the narrative. The British officials, depicted as fearful and repressive, attempt to contain unrest through violence and intimidation, exposing the fragility of colonial control. Yet the real weight of the story lies not in their power but in the enduring spirit of the people, who continue to remember Gandhi's visit as a transformative moment despite the chaos that ensued. Here, history is less about political outcomes than about the persistence of hope amid suffering.

Moreover, *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur* exemplifies Daruwalla's ability to render history intimate and human. By shifting focus from the national stage to the local experience, he highlights the complex ways in which ordinary people interpret, misinterpret, and live through political upheavals. The story foregrounds memory as a contested but powerful space, reminding readers that the freedom struggle was not only a political event but also a deeply personal encounter with hope, fear, and resilience.

### **Colonial Shadows: The Jahangir Syndrome**

Keki N. Daruwalla's *The Jahangir Syndrome* is a sharp, satirical exploration of India's continuing struggle with colonial legacies and the cultural mimicry that persists long after

independence. Through its ironic title, the story signals an obsession with grandeur and imitation, suggesting a psychological condition in which individuals measure themselves by borrowed standards rather than indigenous values. Daruwalla uses this narrative to critique the enduring fascination with colonial habits, mannerisms, and hierarchies that shape modern Indian identity. He writes:

He had talked politics late into the night and voiced all those sentiments which he realized he should have possessed, but did not. There was no pleasure in merely watching the roaches crawl over the unwashed dishes of that vast corroded sink that passed off under the name of an empire. He was not going to let himself be flushed down the sink by history. The next day he had some minor repairs done to their car and the petrol tank filled up at his own cost... Within two days, members of the plain-clothes squad started hovering near his house... He knew the call for what it was, a tactical ploy to scare him.” (Daruwalla, p. 130)

The Jahangir Syndrome powerfully illustrates how colonial shadows persist even after political independence, shaping administrative behaviour, moral choices, and psychological responses of individuals placed within the machinery of governance. Kunwar Tejbhan Singh, a former zamindar and honorary magistrate, embodies this lingering colonial mindset. Though independence has arrived, the habits of authority, fear, and self-preservation cultivated under colonial rule continue to govern his actions.

Daruwalla presents colonialism not merely as a historical event but as a residual structure of power that survives in bureaucratic instincts and moral evasions. Tejbhan’s past role as a feudal authority—dispensing justice arbitrarily, unquestioned, and unaccountable—mirrors colonial judicial practices where power flowed downward without ethical scrutiny. His reflection on past judgments, particularly involving Ram Din, reveals how colonial justice normalized violence and silenced the marginalized while allowing the powerful to justify cruelty as duty.

The quoted passage foregrounds the metaphor of the “corroded sink”, a striking image that equates the British Empire with decay and moral rot. Independence, instead of bringing clarity or renewal, exposes individuals like Tejbhan to anxiety and uncertainty. He fears being “flushed down the sink by history,” indicating a deep insecurity produced by the collapse of colonial hierarchies that once protected him. Yet rather than embracing ethical responsibility, he retreats into strategies of self-preservation—repairing his car, appeasing officials, avoiding confrontation.

The presence of the plain-clothes police and tactical intimidation highlights how colonial surveillance mechanisms continue under a new political order. Authority remains coercive, opaque, and fear-driven. Tejbhan’s hesitation to assume responsibility after Muslim magistrates leave for Pakistan further exposes the vacuum left by colonial withdrawal—a system dismantled politically but not morally restructured.

Ultimately, The Jahangir Syndrome critiques the failure of decolonization at the psychological and ethical level. Daruwalla suggests that true freedom demands more than a transfer of power; it requires dismantling inherited colonial attitudes of dominance, fear, and moral convenience. The story thus reveals colonial shadows as enduring forces that distort justice, governance, and human conscience in postcolonial India.

**Nostalgia and Belonging: A House in Ranikhet**

In “A House in Ranikhet,” Keki N. Daruwalla explores nostalgia and the longing for belonging through Cynthia’s journey into memory, loss, and place. Having lost her father decades earlier in the malarial foothills, Cynthia returns not merely as a traveller but as a seeker of emotional anchorage. Her visit is driven by a desire to reconnect with a forgotten childhood and to locate herself within a personal and historical continuum. Daruwalla writes:

Graveyards peg memory and sentiment to place, site. Visiting them has very little to do with flowers or a short prayer. You want to be with yourself for an hour or two. Just you and your thoughts about the person interred. Yet, at the end of it all, you fall into the usual trap—a photograph of the cemetery—flowers, weeds and all, and a close-up of the headstone with its slightly archaic language... She felt resentful that her mother had got nothing engraved for her father. Just the name and the regiment and the two dates. (Daruwalla, p. 202)

Daruwalla presents nostalgia not as sentimental indulgence but as a reflective, often uneasy engagement with the past. The graveyard becomes a powerful symbol of belonging, where memory is “pegged” to physical space. Cynthia’s disappointment over the sparse inscription on her father’s grave reveals her yearning for permanence, recognition, and narrative fullness—things denied by time, colonial bureaucracy, and emotional restraint. Names, dates, and regiments reduce a life to fragments, intensifying her sense of loss rather than easing it.

As Cynthia travels onward to Ranikhet, the landscape itself begins to compensate for emotional absence. The quiet hills, October light, oak trees, and distant snow peaks create a sense of calm intimacy, allowing her to momentarily belong to the place. Unlike cosmopolitan spaces she once frequented, Ranikhet offers rootedness rather than movement, silence rather than distraction.

Eventually, the story suggests that belonging is not inherited automatically but reconstructed through memory, place, and acceptance of loss. Cynthia’s nostalgia does not restore the past; instead, it reshapes her present, allowing her to claim a fragile but meaningful connection with the landscape. Daruwalla thus portrays belonging as transient yet deeply human—emerging where memory, grief, and place quietly intersect.

**Comparative Analysis**

Taken together, Keki N. Daruwalla’s short stories—*Love Across the Salt Desert*, *In a High Wind*, *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur*, *The Jahangir Syndrome*, and *A House in Ranikhet*—reveal a body of work deeply invested in the intersections of history, memory, and human resilience. While each story unfolds in a different setting, their shared concerns enlighten Daruwalla’s larger vision: that individual lives are always shaped by forces of geography, politics, and cultural inheritance, yet within these constraints, people continue to seek love, belonging, and dignity.

The motif of borders runs strongly across the collection. In *Love Across the Salt Desert*, political and communal boundaries are challenged by the courage of personal love, while in *A House in Ranikhet*, the border is less political and more existential—the fragile line between

permanence and transience. Both stories expose the vulnerability of human connections to external disruptions, yet also affirm the persistence of intimacy as a mode of resistance.

Similarly, turbulence and disruption emerge as recurring metaphors. The literal storm in *In a High Wind* mirrors the metaphorical storms of history and in *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur*, where villagers are swept up in the chaos of colonial resistance. In both cases, individuals face forces larger than themselves-natural or political-that destabilize their worlds. Yet Daruwalla's narratives give emphasis to not paralysis but endurance: the ability to rebuild after destruction, to find meaning amid uncertainty.

The question of identity, cultural or personal, underpins *The Jahangir Syndrome* as well as the other stories. While *The Jahangir Syndrome* exposes the lingering colonial mindset that distorts self-perception, *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur* demonstrates how collective identity is forged through memory and struggle. Both suggest that identity is neither fixed nor autonomous but shaped through negotiation with history and external pressures.

What binds these stories most powerfully is their attention to resilience. Whether it is Najab's defiant love in the salt desert, the villagers rebuilding after the storm, peasants interpreting Gandhi's message, or characters haunted by colonial mimicry and nostalgia, Daruwalla highlights the capacity of individuals to endure fragmentation. His landscapes-desert, storm, colonial town, Indian hill station are not passive backdrops but active participants in shaping human experience.

In this comparative frame, Daruwalla's stories collectively emerge as meditations on the tension between fragility and resilience. His characters are rarely heroic in conventional terms; rather, they are ordinary individuals negotiating extraordinary challenges-be they the harshness of the desert, the devastation of a storm, the pressures of colonial rule, the psychological burdens of mimicry, or the ache of nostalgia. The emphasis on ordinary lives grounds his stories in realism while also imbuing them with symbolic significance, making them accessible yet layered.

Another point of convergence is Daruwalla's narrative technique, which blends irony, satire, and lyricism. His use of satire in *The Jahangir Syndrome* critiques cultural mimicry, while his lyrical evocations of the salt desert and the hills elevate the landscapes into symbolic entities. This stylistic versatility allows him to navigate different registers of human experience-comic, tragic, historical, and contemplative-without losing coherence.

Furthermore, his engagement with history is not straightforward but always filtered through personal or local lenses. *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur* is less about Gandhi as an icon and more about how his presence shaped the collective memory of villagers. Similarly, *Love Across the Salt Desert* reflects not just the Partition's legacy but also its impact on individuals struggling to find love across hostile frontiers. Daruwalla thus demonstrates that history is never abstract; it is always lived and remembered in intimate, fragmented ways.

Ultimately, these stories invite readers to reflect on the endurance of human spirit in fractured landscapes. By weaving together personal narratives and historical realities, Daruwalla

reveals that while the forces of nature, politics, and memory may destabilize lives, they also create opportunities for resilience, intimacy, and meaning.

### Contemporary Relevance

Daruwalla's stories, though often rooted in mid-twentieth-century contexts, resonate powerfully in the contemporary world. In *Love Across the Salt Desert*, the question of borders and human connections echoes ongoing debates about nationalism, migration, and cross-border identities. At a time when political boundaries continue to divide communities worldwide, the story foregrounds the futility of rigid separations and the enduring relevance of empathy and love.

In *A High Wind* the storm is no longer a distant literary metaphor but a pressing reality, testing the resilience of communities across the globe. The story reminds us that survival lies not merely in resisting nature but in adapting and rebuilding within its cycles of disruption.

Similarly, *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur* speaks to the current moment of political polarization, where historical figures are invoked in competing narratives of national identity. By highlighting the complexities of interpreting Gandhi at the grassroots level, Daruwalla urges us to reconsider how history is remembered, contested, and mobilized in contemporary politics.

The satire of *The Jahangir Syndrome* remains strikingly relevant in a globalized world where cultural mimicry and aspirational consumerism continue to shape identities. Postcolonial nations still wrestle with the legacies of colonial power, often internalized in ways that foster alienation. Daruwalla's critique of this psychological dependency invites readers to reflect on authenticity, cultural confidence, and the politics of representation today.

Finally, *A House in Ranikhet* resonates with the widespread human experience of displacement, migration, and nostalgia. In a global era of mobility—where millions leave homes in search of work, security, or opportunity—the longing for a place of permanence acquires new poignancy. Daruwalla's exploration of memory and belonging speaks to the universal condition of rootlessness and the fragile ties that connect people to place.

Collectively, the contemporary relevance of these stories lies in their ability to bridge the historical and the timeless. Daruwalla's narratives remind us that while contexts change, the human struggle for love, identity, resilience, and belonging remains constant.

### Conclusion

Keki N. Daruwalla's selected short stories reveal a remarkable ability to blend the personal with the historical, the intimate with the collective, and the immediate with the timeless. From the salt deserts of Kutch to the storm-ravaged villages, from colonial Gorakhpur to the quiet hills of Ranikhet, his narratives map the contours of human resilience across diverse geographies and historical moments. What unites these seemingly disparate stories is

Daruwalla's consistent concern with borders—whether political, cultural, or psychological—and the ways in which ordinary individuals negotiate them in pursuit of love, dignity, and belonging.

In *Love Across the Salt Desert*, love becomes an act of defiance against the rigidity of national boundaries, while *In a High Wind*, wind stands for a metaphor for human endurance amid turbulence. *When Gandhi Came to Gorakhpur* demonstrates how historical events shape local memory and identity, emphasizing the vitality of collective narratives. *The Jahangir Syndrome* exposes the lingering shadows of colonialism that continue to distort cultural self-perception, while *A House in Ranikhet* poignantly reflects on nostalgia and the fragility of attachment to place. Collectively, these stories exemplify Daruwalla's literary vision: history and politics may fragment human lives, yet resilience, memory, and the pursuit of intimacy persist as enduring forces.

The relevance of Daruwalla's fiction extends beyond its historical context. In an era still defined by border conflicts, ecological crises, contested memories, and cultural anxieties, his stories continue to speak with urgency and resonance. They remind us that while individuals cannot escape the pressures of history or nature, they can negotiate these forces through love, resilience, and memory. Ultimately, Daruwalla's short stories affirm the human capacity to survive in fractured landscapes, offering narratives that are as instructive for the present as they are reflective of the past.

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