



Poetry as Psycho-Social Analysis: An Exegesis of Eunice de Souza's Select Poems

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The history of Indian English poetry is very vibrant, rich and vast, and the contributions made by women poets attest to their determined efforts to carve a niche of their own in the field of poetry. Indian English poetry written by women came into being as a definitive genre by itself only in the 60s of the last century. The post-independence phase of Indian English poetry by women not only bears the stamp of a woman's sensitivity and perceptivity of the realities of the commonplace, but also acknowledges the complex nature of the problems confounded by women in the contemporary society. The postmodern era has witnessed the birth of several Indian women poets whose poetry very often becomes a reflection of their experiences and sensibilities. The present article proposes to examine the select poems of Eunice de Souza that are considered to be representative of her role as a woman-poet, and in which Eunice has deftly tracked the emotional and psychic growth and development of feminine consciousness towards acquiring a sense of selfhood in a social order that allows no scope for the exploration of her inner urges and creative potentialities.

A look back at the history of Indian poetry written in the English language shows the profound and revolutionary of poetry written during the last few decades. It is obvious that in the last fifty years Indian English poetry has experimented with a variety of themes and has also come under varied influences. During the pre-Independence phase of Indian English poetry, Indian English women poets showed an affinity to the British Romantic poets, and so their poetry was highly sentimental and romantic in their approach. But in the latter half of the twentieth century, Indian English women's poetry came to the centre stage, and became more allied with the social modes of behaviour and life. Poetry, thus, evolved as a significant and effective medium to capture and analyse the sensibilities and ethos of modern Indian socio-cultural life structured around patriarchal value systems. Poetry by women poets therefore transcended the borders and boundaries of the domestic spheres of life to emerge as powerful voices representing the collective consciousness of the women community. The modern Indian English women poets, unlike their predecessors, display their non-conformist stance by questioning the socio-cultural, economic and political conditions of the times in which they lived. In this regard, Indian English women's poetry can be viewed as an attempt at self-revelation, as there are determined efforts on the part of the women poets to carve out

an individual space of their own in the familial as well as social life. The relationship between the poet's self and the surrounding society forms the crux of many poems penned by women poets writing in English especially during the late 1980s and 1990s. Having decided to break the walls of silence, these women poets focus on the subservient position of a woman forced lead a life of psychophysical subjugation, and this in turn brings in questions related to the very existence of woman in society. The long inventory of Indian English women poets of the post Independence era includes Mamta Kalia, Sunita Jain, Gauri Deshpande, Suniti Namjoshi, Meena Alexander, Imtiaz Dharker, Sujata Bhatt, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Melanie Silgado, Eunice de Souza and so on.

Born in 1940 into a Goan Catholic family Eunice de Souza studied [English literature](#) with an MA from the [Marquette University](#) in [Wisconsin](#), and received a Ph.D from the [University of Mumbai](#). She taught [English](#) at [St. Xavier's College, Mumbai](#), and was Head of the Department until her retirement. But it is as a poet that Eunice is better and widely known to the world, for she has emerged as one of the most powerful poetic voices of contemporary Indian English Women's poetry. Trudging along the path travelled by most of her contemporaries, Eunice de Souza has also treated poetry as an effective medium to translate one's (woman's) experiences, and thereby to transform society. She has derived the subject matter for her poems from her own personal experiences, and quite succinctly and poignantly relates and connects herself against the larger context of the political and socio-cultural milieu. Her prolificacy as a writer is attested to by her literary output. As a poet, she has produced a consistent body of work, and her collection of verse includes *Fix* (1979), *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988), *Ways of Belonging* (1990) *Selected and New Poems* (1994) and *A Necklace of Skulls* (2009). She has also edited *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology 1829-1947* (2004). She also holds the distinction of being the only woman poet to be included in *Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992). Besides this poetic output, she also has to her credit two novels – *Dangerlok* (2001) and *Dev and Simran: A Novel* (2003).

In the poem "Catholic Mother" from her first collection of poems *Fix*, Eunice de Souza's exposes her concerns of the life of the Goan Roman Catholic community. Having been brought up in a typical conservative family of Catholics, Eunice herself has had a first-hand experience of discrimination based on gender. While dealing with the gender-based discrimination faced by woman, it is relevant to note that the inequalities that exist between man and woman are based on social constructions. But it may be noted that it is her physical inadequacies that make a woman vulnerable and susceptible to sexual attacks and assaults. This kind of a subordination of woman to oppressive powers is perpetrated and further reinforced by social institutions like family, marriage, religion and so on. "Catholic Mother" stands out as an excellent critique of the representation of a traditional woman as weak, docile and seductive whose sentiments are firmly rooted in the social ethos that permit and justify such subjugation and oppression. In the poem, Eunice brings out, in cryptic and bitter terms, her sense of disillusionment at the subordinate role enacted by a woman in a patriarchal social structure, and whose role is validated and accepted by the society as the accepted norm. She finds her self to be torn between her individual needs and the societal

pressures. But what is important is that a woman's self becomes a site of conflict, changes, and negotiation. Even the title of the poem is ironic, for it opens with a reference to a Father though it is the "Mother" who is at the centre of the poem. As a representative of the Catholic Church, Francis D' Souza is referred to as the "Grace of God" and the "Pillar of the church," and is pictured as a popular public figure endowed with spiritual qualities. At the same time, Eunice is not without reservations when she expresses her feelings of resentment at the sexual prurience of the Father. On a religious plane, the Father carries the burden of the whole congregation with him, and on a personal level too, the Father remains true to his name:

Francis x D'Souza

father of the year

By the grace of God he says

We've had seven children

(in seven years) ("Catholic Mother" 39).

Francis D' Souza who is described as the "father of the year" (1) claims to instil fellow feelings in his followers. But he becomes an utter failure in his personal life as he has failed to realise the inner potentialities and to acknowledge the sensibilities of this wife as an individual. Weighed down by the pressures of a patriarchal society, the Father's wife is deprived of her social, economic, familial and even fundamental human privileges and rights. The pathetic plight of the Father's wife is reflected in her consecutive impregnation for seven years, and her deplorable plight is a clear indication of the gender inequities prevailing in the existing social order. In this context, it is to be noted that through Eunice's frank portrayal of the idiosyncrasies self-important hypocritical nature of the members of her Goan Catholic community, she throws light on the stereotyped projection of a woman as mere objects of sexual lust and desire in an essentially patriarchal framework that disallows woman to have her own space. Eunice's discussion of the Father's obsessive sexual interest raises fundamental questions about woman's oppression under patriarchy. Created as a model traditional character, the Father's wife shows great devotion to her husband, and is always polite, submissive and self-effacing willing to sacrifice her personal feelings and happiness. Placed against the conceptual framework of paternalistic ideologies, her role and duties as a woman are defined only in relation to those of her husband.

"Catholic Mother" also focuses on the Roman Catholics and their sense of alienation from the mainstream Hindu society. The latter becomes the subject of server criticism for as Eunice observes that just as the Father pays no heed to the demands and needs of his wife, so also at the macrolevel, the Hindu religious community shows its high handedness in its attitude and dealings towards the minority communities.

In the next poem "Forgive Mother", Eunice talks about the tutored perceptions regarding the birth of a boy which is considered a welcome sign for the entire family. Such a romanticisation of a boy child is furthered by its symbolic equation of boy with power and authority. Despite being a woman herself, Eunice's mother holds a biased attitude towards her as she feels disappointed in having given birth to a girl child like Eunice. It is no wonder that Eunice's mind is filled with a sense of ill-will towards her mother whom she feels has

not fulfilled her moral responsibilities as a mother. Eunice de Souza observes that it is patriarchy which promotes the oppression, discrimination and exploitation of woman through the process of socialisation or gendering. As a differential treatment in relation to the respective roles of a man and a woman in a traditional society is indoctrinated right from their infancy and childhood onwards, they willingly or unwillingly internalise the stereotyped roles for their gender identities are psychologically, socially, culturally and historically determined. Eunice finds fault with her mother for not morally and psychologically supporting her, and wilfully overlooking her daughter's interests and likes. According to the poet, her mother can be considered as a representative of the traditional societal order which allots and assigns a significant role to man and this in fact accounts for the reason why Eunice pours out her resentment against her mother with whom she had a difficult relationship. Instead of appearing as an icon of selfless love, care and sacrifice, Eunice's mother strikes the readers as lacking in self confidence and courage to defy the orders issued by the male chauvinistic society.

Further, Eunice's mother refusal to acknowledge her daughter's autonomous self is grounded in the social belief of the supremacy of man. Even the birth of a girl child serves as a source of psychological turmoil for women like Eunice's mother, and it is generated as a result of the conflict between a woman's cultural and biological roles, and between social expectations and her own aspirations. Through her poems, Eunice made attempts to revolt against the conventions and traditions in a society that dominate and deform the "second sex." She was not prepared to accept that women had to remain condemned forever as mere docile, passive beings, and that they had no right to assert themselves. The patriarchal oppression, the pressures exerted upon her as a woman, the social norms, the taboos as well as the gender roles which she was expected to accept coupled with her desire for absolute freedom result in conflicting attitudes. As Bruce King remarks: "De Souza is in tune with the feminist movement in contemporary poetry, in her directness of speech, self-revelation and non-nostalgic memories of family life"(42).

In "Sweet Sixteen," Eunice probes into the psychic and emotional insecurity faced by a woman in a patriarchal society. In the contemporary society, the needs and desires of a woman are under the complete control of society's oppressive restrictions, and this, in turn, contributes to her disadvantaged and unprivileged status. The dominant society around tries to suppress a woman's feelings and brushes aside her mental agony.

*Mamas never mentioned menses.
A nun screamed: you vulgar girls
don't say brassieres
say bracelets ("Sweet Sixteen" 116).*

It is obvious that a girl, a Goan Catholic Girl is not allowed to speak her body, as she is forced to be bound by the philosophy of gender inequality, sex subordination and subjugation in an unjust patriarchal order. Her feminine urges and sensibilities are completely ignored as they are not allowed to represent and express themselves. In this respect, "Sweet Sixteen" offers a realistic portrayal of the female psyche caught in the oppressive structures that have suppressed a woman's desires. The mother in the poem is a typical figure who is more concerned with the preservation of the stereotyped patriarchal order of things. According to the

Eunice, her mother is a representative of an arbitrary power as she performs the role of an executor of patriarchal will. To her, the usage of words like “menses”, brassieres” etc are taboo as these purely personal words which do not find a place in the communal life. The intimate, private life of a woman is at odds with the politics of the conservative Catholic religious community. In a society that mutely follows the centuries-old relationship between man and woman based on rigid sex roles, and that which allows no space for a woman, it is therefore, not surprising that Eunice’s mother considers the blatant use of such words by the poetess as having a demeaning and demoralising impact on the society around.

The undue importance given to a son the traditional Indian household, in fact, dates back to the ancient times for as Manu pointed out that a man conquers the world by the birth of a son, and he enjoys eternity by birth of a grandson and as a great grandfather, he enjoys eternal happiness by the birth of a grandson’s son. Eunice herself has experienced the shame and humiliation of being born as a girl child, and has remained on the margins even in her own house as a victim of indifference. Her parents’ ardent desire to have a boy stems from the long-preserved patriarchal notions of the superiority of the male sex for traditionally man has been regarded as the protector, master and guardian of woman.

“Miss Louise” presents in mocking tone the story of middle- aged Catholic lady who is conscious about her beauty. But she exploits her enchanting beauty in order to entice men including the priests at the church. The character of Miss Louise provides the poet with an opportunity to bring out the pretensions of the highly complacent attitude of the Catholic religious community. The traditional practices and religious rituals of the Goan Catholic community exert such a profound influence on its members that their sense of individuality and aspiration for freedom and fulfilment and crippled. As a socially committed artist, Eunice deems it her duty to portray the emotional distress faced by a woman in a repressive, tradition bound society.

Eunice de Souza’s disillusionment with the follies and foibles of her religious community in fact makes her probe into the traditionally established gender roles and acceptance of value systems that cater only to the male interests. In the poems under study, we find that the poet has focused on the ‘otherness’ of woman who has no space to lead a life of her own in a spirit of self-assertiveness. It is obvious that Eunice’s interpretation of the human society is based on her own marginalised experiences as a girl and later as a woman.

A woman’s life, according to Eunice de Souza is a struggle for self-realisation as she has to choose between feminist goals and traditional codes. In tune with the sprit of the new generation of Indian English women writers, Eunice also fixes her attention on the struggle to break the age–old boundaries of tradition that have limited the role of a woman and also endeavours to unveil the psychic rupture and mental agony of a woman caught in the whirlpool of the oppressive and callous society Eunice de Souza’s poetry can, therefore, be read as an exhortation to modern women to emerge as powerful beings with self-confidence and self–determination to overcome the oddities of life. As Neeru Tandon notes:

With the rise of feminism in India in the seventies, the feminist literary critics came to believe that women had to create a literature of their own, in which the feminine sensibility

could consider and confront the peculiarly feminine issues and experiences. It was essential to do so, because a large part of the feminine experience is out of the reach of the male psyche and, therefore, an authentic and sensitive portrayal of the conflicts and traumas, in all their nuances, ambiguities and contradictions, could be achieved only by women writers.

References

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