

RESENTMENT THROUGH EXPRESSION: A STUDY OF EUNICE DE SOUZA'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Words are the most powerful drug used by mankind. Writing is a means of creating a place in the world. The use of the personal voice and self-revelation are means of self-assertion. Women's poetry leads to view the psychological fabric of literature, to assess the newly evolving non-traditional roles and situations of women in a fast developing society, the consequent problems and gender issues. The desire to weave words beat in the heart of the poet taken for study. The main aim of this research paper is to examine the poetic features of Eunice de Souza's poetry.

This study of her poetry displays what kind of language is used in terms of the grammar and other poetic elements like irony, symbols, satire, imagery etc. Using these poetic features she wants to write in her own voice and makes poetry a medium of communication to the world. With her poems, de Souza takes the reader on a journey from an external experience to internal one. She uses these means in a very controlled way, feeling to lead the reader to see that every word has a possible double meaning and every image may bring to mind some inner working of the speaker.

KEYWORDS: Assertion, Irony, Patriarchy, Resentment, Self-assertion.

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INTRODUCTION

In a patriarchal society, women have been forced to occupy a secondary position in relation to men in spite of the fact that they constitute at least one half of human race. Taking the examples of her Goan-Catholic community in which she brought up, Eunice de Souza shows her resentment towards patriarchal system through her poetry. Her poetry focuses on the expression of women's revolt against this oppression in such patriarchal society. Poetry for her is the means to come out of this space of patriarchy and to subvert the 'discourse of silence'. She uses gender-switching to express masculine oppression met out to women in relationships. She selects elements like irony, symbols, satire, imagery etc. in her poetry in a very effective way which helps her to fulfill her aim. Using these linguistic features she wants to write in her own voice and makes poetry a medium of communication to the world. With her poems, de Souza takes the reader on a journey from an external experience to internal one. She uses these means in a very controlled way, feeling to lead the

reader to see that every word has a possible double meaning. This research shows de Souza's resentment through her poetry.

Irony is used as a necessary element for maintaining the distance between the poet and the reader. In *One Man's Poetry*, the persona says:

Irony as an attitude to life
is passé, you said
so be it, friend.
Let me be passé and survive.
Leave me the cutting edge of words
to clear a world
for my ego. ("One Man's Poetry" 1-7)

She uses irony as a defense not only against the onslaughts of racism and sexism, but as a means of foregrounding the displacement she experiences within her own country. Her satirical approach to catholic values, sexual prudery, hypocrisy and prejudices is quite notable. The act of writing itself is a weapon of self-defense. For de Souza, creativity is a constant process of re-defining the world and re-locating herself within it. To tackle the male supremacy she moves to and fro between repression and full vigilance which results in a creative product. In a critical essay on an Austrian poet George Trakl, Maire Jaanus Kurrik writes:

We uphold the creation of art as something created by the whole psyche, by the conscious and the unconscious. We accept that *a temporary regression from the world of rational consciousness may be a necessary moment in poetic creation*, but we stress conscious ego control no matter how much unconscious material an artist absorbs or how much use he makes of the primary process, that is, the processes operating in the id, to structure his creations. (Quoted in Graziano 50)

Eunice de Souza articulates her sense of milieu through bold ironies and paradoxes. As Kamala Das speaks of her Dravidian Brahmin family at Malabar in Kerala, de Souza talks of her Goan-Catholic community. Her tone in her first collection *Fix* is bitterly ironical, as the poet ridicules the prejudice, hypocrisy and duplicity in the traditional Goan Catholic society in which she grew up. She satirises the Catholic middle class hypocrisy in Goa in this collection. It is partly an album of snap-shots, of her Goan family in Poona. In a conversational idiom, de Souza expresses the feelings of resentment and despondency. Veronica Brady feels:

Many of the Catholic characters which appear in the poems are an embodiment of the complacency, the closed heart and mind which constitutes evil in de Souza's world because it entails the refusal of freedom, the "passion for the possible" — as distinct from the cultural religiosity she attacks here. (Quoted in Sree 42)

In *For Rita's Daughter, Just Born*, Eunice de Souza returns to the imagery from nature. She addresses the new born girl as "luminous leaf." The speaker of the poem adds her wishes in a carefully structured sequence of five stanzas. The poem starts with a stanza of three lines and ends with a seven-syllabic line in the wishes:

Luminous new leaf
May the sun rise gently
on your unfurling

in the courtyard always linger
the smell of earth after rain

the stone of these steps
stay cool and old

gods in the niches
old brass on the wall
never the shrill cry of kites. ("For Rita's Daughter, Just Born" 1-10)

As the leaf needs sun and rain for its growth, similarly the child requires care from his social and cultural environment for his overall development. The imagery in this poem reflects the influence of nature

and culture on human life. The small object of her poem hides the emotions of anger, tenderness, pity and sadness.

Marriage is criticized as a narrow existence by de Souza within cultural paradigms where men and women are not considered equal. In the marriage market, woman is considered as a commodity. Luce Irigaray, in her book *This Sex Which is Not One*, expands the role of woman. She says:

— Just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for a man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. [H]er value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body. (Quoted in Perry 85)

In *Catholic Mother*, de Souza raised her voice against bearing number of children and unawareness for family planning among people. Francis X.D' Souza, "father of the Year" (1), has seven children in seven years and declares, "We're One Big Happy Family" (8) and there is his silent, suffering and always pregnant wife: the pillar's wife/says nothing ("Catholic Mother" 17-18). Her poem *Miss Louise* is a naughty, light satire on the snobbery of beauty-conscious women of her community. It is about a woman who bullies of her possessing charming beauty and is sure that even past youth she is capable of shaking men, including priests at the church:

Shaking her greying ringlets:
 'My girl, I can't even
 go to Church you know
 I unsettle the priests
 so completely. Only yesterday
 that handsome Fr. Hans was saying,
 "Miss Louise, I feel an arrow
 through my heart." ("Miss Louise" 10-17)

Unlike the earlier generation of women poets who appeared to believe that the problems of life could be solved through a man's love, there are no such love poems in de Souza's early poetry. Instead, poems like *Miss Louise* satirise notions of romantic love, marriage and upbringing of children by patriarchal system. *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 a social ethos that permit and justify such subjugation and oppression. In this poem, Eunice de Souza brings out in cryptic terms, her sense of disillusionment at the subordinate role enacted by a woman in a patriarchal social structure. She finds herself to be torn blow her individual needs and the societal pressures. 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. Using irony, de Souza also concentrates on the ordinariness of women's life and adopts a confessional tone in her attempt to overcome the aggression faced by them in the male-oriented world. Many of her poems are written in a:

Confessional mode similar to Sylvia Plath's miming of deep fears and resentments which are expressed through self-ironic wit. The subjects of her satires are the church, marriage, motherhood, colour prejudice, sexual prudery and alienation felt by many Goan Catholics towards Hindu India. (King 156)

De Souza also makes use of memories of her cultural background of Goa in her poetry. But her memories of Goan Catholic life in Poona are of its repression, bitterness, prejudices, social injustices and the place of women. The anger and bitterness is expressed by using ironical language. The experiences found in her poems are just as real, and sometimes more significant. The poems reflecting de Souza's Catholic childhood are a means to gain control over private fears, anxiety and angers. Such poems are in the confessional vein, where instead of consistency of character there is a combination of guilt and desires, especially how one's emotional life has been formed by the past. Self-exposure is a defense. Bruce King observes, even though the work of poets like Eunice de Souza might not have liberated Indian English poetry from 'an inhibiting formalism', it definitely shows that

Their imaginations are more engaged in detail, more focused on places; people are named, distinctions are noted, and the society of their poem is more textured, denser, richer, and

present. The poet's speech and that of the characters is more colloquial, direct, and contemporary. (King 131)

Disappointed with the patriarchal hegemony she becomes comparatively bitter and harsh in her tone. Her use of irony is bitterer than other contemporary poets. As Sunanda P. Chavan says:

. . . irony becomes far more meaningful in the poetry of Eunice de Souza than that of Mamta Kalia because it is the exclusive means through which she can come to terms with her Goan-Catholic identity. (Chavan 200)

Eunice de Souza has resorted to the adoption of irony as a means of expression. Her poems are major attempts to invoke introspection in the readers. She adopts an observant tone full of anger in her poems. The symbols that she uses in her poems not only describe woman's position in a patriarchal culture, but also reflect women's desire for setting themselves free from their "womanhood attributes". She prefers sometimes to soften the blows by switching gender and speaking with a man's voice in order to foreground the marginalisation of women, as in *He Speaks*:

. . . She was an affectionate
creature and tried hard, poor dear,
but never quite made the grade. ("He Speaks" 14-16)

Ironic language is used to undermine the structure and logic of imperial binarism. This exposure of binarism is revealed to great effect in the closing lines of poem *He Speaks*. He may think of rejecting her, dejecting her but she cannot. On the other hand, a man speaks of her love relations with so many women.

After that pathological display
I decided there was only one
thing to do: fix her.
The next time we were making love
I said quit casually:
I hope you realize I do this
with other women. ("He Speaks" 28-34)

Simone de Beauvoir asserts the same in *The Second Sex*:

she [woman] has no right to sexual activity outside marriage; . . . but man, as worker and citizen transcending towards the universal, can savour contingent pleasures prior to marriage and outside the married life: in any case, he finds satisfaction in other ways; but in a world where woman is essentially defined as female, she must be justified wholly as a female. (de Beauvoir 462)

Eunice de Souza desires to move from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion, and from weakness to strength. Her poetry becomes a tale of lacerated psyche and at this time she yearns for peace and tranquility: "God rocks, I'm a pilgrim. / Tell me — / Where does the heart find rest?" ("Pilgrim" 11-13). This poem reveals the poet's use of interrogative method. The repetition of lines of her poem *Eunice* shows her confused psyche which is the result of her dwindling between self-isolation and self-assertion.

the limbs keep flopping
the sawdust keeps popping
out of the gaps
out of the gaps
out of the gaps
sister. ("Eunice" 10-15)

The confessional mode of de Souza reveals the insecurity of her mind. In her later poems, she seems to be yearning for comfort and peace at the price of her inner and suppressed desires, yet there is a constant undercurrent of frustration and depression. This struggle of self-realisation and freedom is presented in poem *Choose Not to Marry You, Love*. The established belief is that marriage is the only destiny of a woman. She is born and brought up just for the attainment of this goal. A woman has to choose feminine goals and traditional codes to live happily in the future. The same thought is pictured in the poem *And She Lived Happily*:

And she lived happily ever after.
.....

Now the grey sky is a sky

.....

not always there,

but on call, often enough. ("And She Lived Happily" 1, 6, 15-16)

Happiness is the main objective of life. A woman should acknowledge this and come out brushing aside the deeper sense of failure and self-recrimination. She should draw strength from a natural environment, self-determination, self-awareness and self-confidence. This is the voice of woman consciousness found in the poetry of Eunice de Souza. A close examination of her language is suggestive of de Souza's rebellious resentment of the suppression of the female and gender prejudice.

Eunice de Souza rejects the refined lady-like idiom of earlier women poets to register her rejection of the norms of patriarchy. To raise her voice against the social and sexual inequalities suffered by women in patriarchal society, she resorts to the rejection of the politics of patriarchy. As it is clear throughout the course of this chapter, the use of images, metaphors, and irony lend de Souza's poetry the elements of briskness and free it from unidimensionality. Commenting on the poetic style of Eunice de Souza, Syd Harrex writes:

Each poem is a compact sum of unflated experience, a poetic arithmetic (when the form is realism) or algebra (when a symbolic nuance is emphasized) which gives thought and passion their equal due . . . this achievement (of feminist perception and enunciation) is enhanced by the cool control de Souza exercises on her potentially volatile material and craft. (Quoted. in de Souza xix)

CONCLUSION

Thus, the use of these techniques help her alters not just the style of writing but also the manner of its interpretation. Her experimental use of irony and ordinariness thus adds new dimensions to Indian English poetry and also offers new grounds along which poetry writing can be further taken. Eunice de Souza's voice of rebelliousness and bitterness is mainly because of the common parental attitude – unwelcoming towards a girl child and indifference with women in patriarchal society. The mentality of the society towards a girl child and the effort to condition her to fit in stereotypical roles irritates her.

Female subjectivity has been constructed by patriarchy through language. So women should adopt the same strategy and reflect resistance in language. They need to evolve a female centered language to transform the andocentric language. Eunice de Souza uses language to transform her frustration and tackle her depressed feelings through it. She penned her emotions with utmost naturalness and volunteered to speak on behalf of thousands of women. Her bold, frank and honest expressions with rich feminine sensibility are a topic worth studying and analysing. She takes poetry as a mean to react to the world around her.

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