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## Poetry of Loss and Self-Disgust: A Study of Eunice de Souza

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### Abstract:

Indian English women 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. Women poets of the post-independence era include Mamta Kalia, Sunita Jain, Gauri Deshpande, Suniti Namjoshi, Imtiaz Dharkar, Melanie Silgado, Eunice de Souza and so on. They give voice to their dissatisfaction, bitterness, and frustration. Eunice de Souza is one of the most famous confessional poets of second half of twentieth century. Her poetry allow us to peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche on the one hand and the paradox and complexity of the female psyche on the other hand. She reveals the tensions and frustrations which a woman faces because of the discrepancy between the way she wants to behave and the way she is made to behave. De Souza's dealing with love and sexuality in her poems show how she is dissatisfied with the society which demands silent acceptance from a woman. She adopts an aggressive attitude, yet she is quite aware of the "growing unrest" of her life that gives her pain and suffering.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Assertion, Frustration, Inner anguish, Self-disgust.

### Research Article:

Coupled with the desire for autonomy and self-definition is the fear of becoming a victim and treated as a deviant if a woman dares to defy patriarchal structures. Living within this socially imposed identity she feels alienated, both emotionally and socially. This alienation and resultant unresolved tensions breed confusion and depression. The mind of a woman is always filled with a sense of fear:

A woman's life is constantly bogged down by fear and it is one of the main hindrances to the attempt at self realization. One of the main reasons why women are oppressed by patriarchy is that it is capable of inducing fear into them. (Jena, 12)

The same fear resulting in delusions of persecution can also be seen in De Souza's poem as when she claims:

I thought the whole world

was trying to rip me up

cut me down go through me

with a razor blade. (“Autobiographical” 23-26)

Eunice de Souza exposes several instances, delivered in the tone of alienation which beautifies her work.

. . . Prabhu was no fool

and got the best of both worlds.

(Catholic Brahmin!

I can hear his fat chuckle still). (“de Souza Prabhu” 4-7)

Here the sense is one of a desperate compromise; Prabhu aspires to the status of Brahmin whilst at the same time claiming a catholic identity. This shows his impression of alienation despite his efforts. Eunice de Souza is also displaced by her own ambivalent relationship with masculine hegemony and by a personal alienation both within her own culture and the wider Indian state.

These useless efforts of holding back her feminine feelings and trying to prove herself a boy make her tone harsh and sardonic so much so that her own community denounces her as “betrayer” (De Souza 38). Her *Fix* has been denounced from the pupil at St. Peter’s in Bandra, and Adil Jussawalla said that if she continued in the same vein, she would soon be condemned at St. Peter’s in Rome. She even rebels against her family upbringing. Some of her poems show her conflict with her parents. While addressing her mother she says:

Forgive me, mother,

that I left you

a life-long widow

old, alone.

.....

In dreams

I hack you. (“Forgive Me, Mother”, 1-4, 11-12).

In her desire 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 such times she craves for peace and tranquility. She longs for a heaven of peace.

God rocks, I’m a pilgrim.

Tell me —

Where does the heart find rest? (“Pilgrim” 11-13)

Similarly, the inner anguish of Eunice de Souza makes her negative about herself and her poetry becomes tragic and pessimistic revealing her horrifying experiences from which she says she hasn't learnt anything. Throughout her poems the elements of discontentment is pervasive: "I heard for the abyss with/ monotonous regularity ("Autobiographical" 6-7).

Poetry emerges as a creative safeguarded by turning the terror away from waging war against others to waging war against oneself; by shifting the battle ground from landscape to mindscape. Because poetry is an absolute text of crisis, the poet, with her sheer faculty of imagination, transforms the very environment of terror with weapons of love and peace. Right now, amidst the overwhelming presence of hatred and cruelty, that poetry has, as Keki N. Daruwalla writes, a more significant role in the 'reconciliation of the inner worlds with the complexities of the outer. It is in this context that we can place the poetry of Eunice de Souza that comes as a harmonious link between one's self and society.

Eunice de Souza is probably one of the least prolific among the modern Indian English poets. But her poems stand out because of their poignant, succinct and daring style as well as for the diversity of themes that they deal with. As A. K. Mehrotra says in his introduction to her poems in the anthology, *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, "Eunice de Souza's poems have the brevity, unexpectedness, and urgency of telegrams". Like most Indian English poets of her generation, De Souza draws heavily from her personal life and she successfully manages to connect her personal experiences to the broader context of the cultural and political milieu around her.

In *Women in Dutch Painting* Eunice compares the women in Vermeer's paintings to those whom she knows in real life experience with understanding and acceptance. There is understanding and even a note of appreciation in De Souza's analysis of these women. The serenity seen in the paintings and also in the women the poet knows (the aunt, Anna who writes poems) stems from consciousness of a life – embracing perspective, not from resignation or a lack of understanding: an indication of inner strength, not weakness. Although one can recognize a current of anger in De Souza's poetry at the social and moral attitudes towards women in general and those of the Goan Catholic community in particular, there is also compassion and sympathy for their victimization caused by their passivity, conformity, illusions and acceptance of feminine norms set by a society hostile to them. There is understanding for the compulsions that make a woman silent and compliant.

The parenthetical dedication provides a certain ironic tone to the poem. Eunice de Souza's student, Melanie Silgado is herself a poet, who writes in an acerbic tone about women's issues of the social concerns and pressures associated with being female in the patriarchal Christian world to which she belonged. *Studies in Indian English Poetry* compliments De Souza's self-assertion which is completely bare and stripped. The authentic reference to her social, cultural, and personal experiences made her poems stand out in excellence and aesthetic sense.

(for Melanie Silgado)

The afternoon sun is on their faces.

They are calm, not stupid,

pregnant, not bovine.

I know woman like that

and not just in painting—  
 an aunt who did not answer her husband back  
 not because she was plain  
 and Anna who writes poems  
 and hopes her avocado stones  
 will sprout in the kitchen.

Her voice is oatmeal and honey. (“Women in Dutch Painting” 1-11)

Set within the context of Catholic faith, the poem *Catholic Mother* interrogates the fructification given for the enhancement of the family. ‘Francis X D’ Souza’, is an imaginary person with a common Goan name. The strong satirical tone of the poem drives home the crucial role played by faith in matters of everyday life. The expression ‘God Always Provides’, reveals that the fantastic attitude of Indians and how faith overrules commonsense. The incorporation of the national policy on family planning, the aggression evident in the criticism of other faiths and strongly insistent patriarchal structure that guides the narrative, undercut the issues of motherhood in the poem. These Hindu buggers got no ethics; displays a mindset evocative of a talent communal tension prevalent among all Indians.

In fact, it is the experience of motherhood which is weighed down by the rhetoric of loyalty: the mother, who stands behind the father, Frances X D’ Souza, is not considered as an individual at all. ‘The pillar’s wife/ says nothing’; the punch line of the poem, reflect this intrusive. Poetic observation ridicules all the dominant voices in the poem; the silence of the subaltern is haunting and brings to mind Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*. She passively absorbs the commands of two dominant institutions: patriarchy and religion. Eunice de Souza’s poetry reveals struggle of a brave intelligent woman to maintain herself in a world i.e. actually, life-denying. Keki N. Daruwalla in his article *Confessional Poetry as Social Commentary: A view of Indian Poetry in English by Indian Women Poets* while speaking about De Souza says:

One is not conscious of the poet suffering from any persecution complexes or hallucinatory fears as one reads her. And yet only a part of the above statement is true. (Daruwalla 57)

The underlying meanings of her poetry disclose an atmosphere of subdued tensions, hidden sexuality, and frustrated emotions. Her poetry is the poetry of loss and self-disgust. In the “Introduction” written by Keith Fernandes in De Souza’s *Selected and New Poems*, Fernandes expresses her own attitude towards the poetry of Eunice de Souza “There are poems which speak of failure, isolation, disintegration and loss” (xvi). There is a deep sadness in her verse. She has attempted to work out her traumas through her poetry.

Eunice de Souza appears to substantiate Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement: “One is not born a woman; one becomes one” when she writes of how she was ‘a burly little girl/who knocked her sissy cousins down?’ (“Visit” 4-5). But as she grew, there was embroidery sister forcing her into developing “feminine skills”, subsequently, she was one of a row of small girls in first communion dresses, and then again, in school, she clutched Sister Flora’s skirt and cried “for my mother”

who taught across the road. The conditioning to adjust into a phallogocentric society left her confused and anchorless, “now she wears lipstick and / now she is a Bombay girl” (“The Road” 11-12). The poet also confesses that: “I am still learning/ to cross the road” (21-22). The “otherness” of women seems to be the chief concern in *Advice to Women*:

Keep cats  
 if you want to learn to cope with  
 the otherness of lovers  
 Otherness is not always neglect—  
 Cats return to their litter trays  
 when they need to. (“Advice to Women” 1-6)

Poet’s confessional mode here reveals the insecurity of her mind. She seems to be yearning for peace and comfort at the price of her inner and suppressed desires, however there is a constant undercurrent of frustration and tension. An increasing awareness made them to raise their voice against inequality and oppression. This new generation of women poets have emerged as — unafraid, motivated of feminist ideologies. The conflict in their minds between feminist learning and tradition-bound roles has left them bewildered and perplexed.

The poetry appears as an expression of the psychic striptease of a woman who is denied what she hungers after. The poets are revealing their dilemma without hesitations. Eunice de Souza’s poems are major attempts to invoke introspections and subjective reflections in the readers. She adopts an observant tone with a detached voice and underlying rage in her poems. She expresses her resentment against the Goan-Catholic society in this way that it makes her tone strident. Many of her poems are the exposure of her this harsh attitude:

No matter that  
 my name is Greek  
 my surname Portuguese  
 my languages alien.

There are ways  
 of belonging.

I belong with the lame ducks. (“de Souza Prabhu” 8-14)

In these above lines, the trans-cultural associations of her name, and the self-destructive conclusions she reaches are delivered in an ironic tone. The word 'alien' is used to describe her chosen language, English. This shows a tantalizing ambivalence because we are not sure if the writer feels the language is alien to her, or alien to her culture. Like many other Indian poets, she probably feels she has no choice but to use English; whether she feels comfortable with the choice or not. Sacchidanandan refers to Eunice de Souza's preference to use self-asserted language choice, irony and self-construction with flat and unpoetic tone. He compliments the experimental style of writing adopted by her as "Eunice de Souza's anthology with concerns of gender and nationality emerges as a great poetic genre" (Sacchidanandan 2006).

Ferdinand expresses her attitude towards the poetry of De Souza — "There are poems which speak of failure, isolation, disintegration and loss" (xvi). She has attempted to come out her traumas through her poetry. Her self-expression gets completely exposed, stripped of all gloss and her sense of betrayal.

Keep Cats

if you want to cape with

the otherness of lovers. ("Advice to Women" 1-3). .

Post-independence literature written by Indian women expresses their desire for freedom and self-assertion. "Patriarchal society, cultural practices, social taboos, superstitious believes and harmful practices – these are some of the factors that deprive women from essential life indicators" (Vigyan Prasar, 2011). An exploration of self and search for identity became an utmost need of the hour and this wave of contemplation primarily sprang up from Indian women writers, who used their written and imaginative expressions to describe the varied dimensional approach to femininity. Anup Beniwal discusses the tensions in the poetic-sensibility of contemporary poets as

The Indian women's poetry thus operates within two divergent pulls – an impulse towards a genuinely independent definition of the self on the one hand and the strong hold of patriarchal social reality towards their self-effacement on the other. (Beniwal, 72)

The study of Indian writing in English exposes the self expression of Indian women poets, their individual approaches and styles. They made a consequential subscription to the aggrandizement of Indian English literature similar to their male counterparts. They own the art of characterization and portray the psyche of women and the crises in their lives in a male dominated society. Their search is not only for knowledge but also for identity as women. So their writing is not merely self-expression but also a means of self-exploration and self-assertion. Among them Eunice de Souza is quite notable for her strong confessional voice and self-assertion. She transformed her poems to a mirror towards feminine sensibility.

De Souza's verse is made upon her memories of Goan Catholic life in Poona and represents the community's repressions, prejudices and ignorance. Discontented childhood experiences as part of this community form the stuff of much of her poetry. Her verse expresses her private fears, anxieties, anger, guilt, depression, desires and hopes. Though satirical and ironic in tone, De Souza never lapses into sarcasm. Instead the message is conveyed by ironic juxtaposition of details. With economy of expression, abrupt endings and easy diction lend to De Souza's poetry naturalness and charm that is

distinctive. The poems evidence a high level of consciousness of the situation and problems faced by women, though expressed in ironic understatement rather than in overt comment. As Bruce King states:

While it has no affiliations in politics, community, humanistic ideals, religion, it is feminist in its kind of awareness, female vision, and affinities to the mode of her women poets rather than in a proclaimed commitment.

A close examination of her language is suggestive of De Souza's rebellious resentment of the suppression of the female and gender prejudice. Like other women writers Eunice de Souza rejects the refined lady-like idiom of earlier women writers to register their rejection of the norms of patriarchy. To raise their voice against their marginalized position, and the social and sexual inequalities suffered by women in patriarchal society, they resort to "the rejection of the language those in power created for the politics of patriarchy".

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 Eunice which she reveals in her poems. She inquires the andocentric Indian society and thus became a representative of female literary modernism.

As a vibrant poet Eunice de Souza penned down her depressed desires with utmost naturalness and volunteered to speak on behalf of the thousands and millions of Indian feminine voice. She gives bold, frank and honest expression to her hidden emotions with rich feminine sensibility. She takes the poetry as a mean to react to the world around them. Eunice de Souza also feels terrified with the existing society and takes poetry as a means of self-expression.

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