

## Quest for identity in the poetry of Eunice De Souza

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### Abstract

In this post modern period, we have come across so many Indian women poets and their poetry shows so many aspects as they find being a woman . Their poetry shows their perception regarding the realities of commonplace and also the problems they have to face in the society they live in. They want to create their own space and identity in the family and also in the society. They have broken their long silence. In this paper I want to reveal how Eunice De Souza shows the quest for identity in her poetry.

**KEYWORDS:** identity, alienation, self - revelation, resistance.

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#### Introduction:

Quest for identity is basic to the human in a society without the grandeur and dignity human life becomes meaningless. He wants to attain personal and world view of life which makes his life meaningful and worthy. In Indian women writing ,quest for identity is seen in the poetry of Taru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. Their poetry is an assertion of national identity. After post Independence era there is a drastic change in the writing of women in their themes, form, language, diction, attitude and so on The period is going through a transformation from traditional to modern not only in the socio historical background but also in literature. Like the new born Country, India the writers also quest for their identity in the tensions of that age.For women it is a double quest- identity as a woman and as a human being.women writers become bold and frank to express their personal experiences in their writings. The writers are Kamala Das, Gouri Despandey, Suniti Namjoshi, Eunice De Souza, Mamta Kalia, Manika Verma and so on.

#### Discussion:

Eunice De Souza is one who takes poetry as self - expression and adds a new dimension to Indian poetry. She takes poetry as a medium to express her experiences of life. The conception of identity in De Souza's poems has a trajectory which moves from the concrete to the abstract . She is able to create a space and a poetic idiom which can connect different aspects of identity in an abstract philosophical sense as well as within the concrete frameworks of gender, religion and nation. She openly writes about her birth as an unwanted child in her poem , ' De Souza Prabhu'

I heard it said/My parents wanted a boy/I've done my best to qualify./I hid the bloodstains/

On my clothes/And let my breasts sag/ Words the weapon / To crucify .

De Souza's poem 'Forgive Me Mother', describes the stifling and destruction relationship of mother and daughter, which to have maimed the poet for life. She writes

Forgive me, mother,/ that I left you/ a life long widow/ old, alone..... I was never young./ Now I am old , alone ./ In dreams / I hack you.

De Souza describes a similar situation in the poem 'General Ward' . She describes an unfaithful daughter's behaviour towards her sick mother:

Imagine, she has not visited her mother

For three days!

What kind of a daughter'.

In the poem 'Road' , she writes that everyone accused her of transforming herself in to a lipstick wearing Bombay girl and neglecting her mother . She has thus failed miserably by standards of expectation of the role as a daughter. If De Souza has disappointed everyone's expectation at the time of her birth , she is an even greater disappointment as a daughter .

In her poem, ' Sweet Sixteen ' , she shows how daughters are drilled to fit in society:

Never go with a man alone/ Never alone/ And even if you are engaged/ only passionless kisses.

It is ironical to note that pre- nuptial requirements extend to marriageable girls from all communities in India . The poem ' Marriages Are Made' highlights the situation in the Goan Christian Community which negates the saying ' Marriages Are Made in Heaven'. Perhaps this is why De Souza stops her title at ' Marriages Are Made'. The pre- marriage ritual has been elevated to such an unpropotionate degree that marriage becomes every girl's ultimate ambition. They are made to feel that this is the only significant event in their life. De Souza writes

My cousin Elena / is to be married/ The formalities / have been completed/ Her family history examined/ for T.B. and madness/ her father declared solvent/ her eyes examined for squints/ her teeth for cavities/ her stools for the possible/ non- Brahmin worm.....Her complexion it was decided / would compensate , being just about / the right shade/ of rightness/ to do justice to / Francisco X. Noronha Prabhu/ good son of Mother Church.

If girls do not get married they are looked down as frustrated hags . Remaining unmarried is a blemish to oneself and an aberration to society . As Erica Jong remarked ' But a woman is always presumed to be alone as a result of abandonment , not choice and she is treated like pariah'. In the poem 'Autobiographical', De Souza sums up the attitude of male postulates towards unmarried women in the following manner

' My enemies say I'm a critic because / really I'm writing with envy / and anyway need to get married'.

In most Societies and cultures , marriage always been seen in terms of social legitimacy of women. Marriage is regarded as the be-all and end-all of every woman. It is an obligation which imposed on her. In the poem ' Miss Louise ' , De Souza has created the character of Louise who dreamt of marriage, children and house

She dreamt of descending / curving staircases/ ivory fan aflutter / of children in sailor suits/ and organza dresses/ till the dream rotted her innards....

This is a scathing ironic view of the pressures , expectations and the even greater destructiveness caused to a woman's psyche . Marriage creates a false sense of security. Very often the illusion dispelled when marriages do not succeed.

Marriage inevitably leads to the cycle of motherhood. It is a glorified concept and the role of motherhood was considered as woman's destiny . Woman is treated as procreation machine. Its very clearly brought out in De Souza 's poem , 'Catholic Mother':

Francis X . D' Souza/ Father of the year./ Here he is top left/ The one smiling / By the Grace of God he says / We've had seven children / ( In seven years)/ ..... Pillar of the church/ says the Parish priest / Lovely Catholic Family/ says Mother Superior/ The pillar's wife says nothing!

Her silence is a site of resistance . The irony lies in the fact that the clergy do not seem to realise that a big happy family might be detrimental to the health of the mother. The last line of the poem makes it explicitly clear that there is nothing a woman can say on this matter.

Lucy Irigaray says," Just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself , so woman serves as reflections , as image of and for a man , but lacks specific qualities of her own . Her value - invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter : that is , her body ".(Perry,85)

Widows have to submit gendered and social impositions. Even in Christian Community where widows are not as badly off as in other communities in India, they still face some vitiating circumstances . De Souza describes how this ugliness takes place in a refined manner where a widow , her mother, is excluded from the meaningful inner circle of family life. In the poem,' One Man's Poetry', she writes

At family gatherings/ My mother smiled / In her best faded chiffon/.....And travelled third / with her in-laws travelling first/ in the same train.

The poetry of Eunice De Souza portrays the limited and reductive roles women play like daughter, mother and may be widow.

Woman as a wife is treated like a creature by her husband is well depicted in De Souza's poem, 'He speaks':

she was an affectionate /creature , tried hard, poor dear/.. . ....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 realise I do this / with other women.

Language is not only a means of expression for women but a tool of resistance and a source to reclaim lost spaces. It is a way to challenge the paradigms of male centred thinking .De Souza displays a candidness in her poetry to fight against the idealised or romanticized picture of women. She admits flaw and warts in herself even though it might create an unpleasant image of her . She admits in the poem ' Autobiographical'

I have muddled through several affairs/ and always come out badly./ I've learned almost nothing from experience ./ I head for the abyss with / Monotonous regularity./.....yes, I have tried suicide.

Her fight for survival shows that she is not a failure . All her pent agonies is exhausted and in 'One Man's Poetry' , she writes :

The rage is done/ My soul's almost my own.

However, she is in search of herself and her bearings. In the poem ' Road' she writes ' I am still learning / to cross the road' . While learning to cross the road , there is also a search for one's self.

She is unable to sew a doll neatly , like her life . In the poem , 'Eunice' , she writes:

the limbs keep flopping/ the sawdust keeps popping / out of the gaps/ out of the gaps/ out of the gaps/ sister.

Like her needle work , her life too can not be sewn correctly. It seems to be out of her control and there is a desperate plea for help. The seeming disintegration in De Souza's life is also a mode of re- integration or reconstitution of self, however painful that might be . In the poem ' 'Another way to Die' , she explains:

Being eaten by maggots / is fantasy/ the real thing is/ to touch the outlines/ of the hands , the hair/ to find no body there/ in a few hours/ or a few days/ the bits reassemble/ a breast flies back / a dull pain / where the heart should be/ an ache for a touch / or a quarrel./ For a while again/ you are most / human.

Miss Louise' had to pay a price for her reticence. In later years , Miss Louise' s single status becomes the object of ridicule . The poet writes

Shaking her graying ringlets/ My girl, I can't even / go to church you know / I unsettle the priests / so completely.....we know, professors / loved you in your youth / judges in your prime.

De Souza, herself, prefers to stay single because , as she states in her poem , ' I Choose Not to Marry You, Love':

I choose not to marry you , love/ There is poison in my tongue / I maul , I calcify . I am rib again./ I touch the world/ stars turn black holes.

The otherness of women and how to adopt loneliness is well presented in her poems ' Advice to Women' and ' Dutch Paintings'. Hence, her ' Advice to Women', particularly to lonely women, is :

Keep cats/ if you want to learn to cope with/ the otherness of lovers/.....That state of perpetual surprise/ in those great green eyes/ will teach you / to die alone.

Here in context of loneliness Susan's comments are relevant, "(T)he matter of bodies is neither an unformed flesh awaiting human decision , nor the bearer of biological limitations and potentialities. The body is not prosocial, or precultural. For Foucault , the body is that surface upon which society writes , such that it comes to life as discourses appear on its flesh."(Susan,55)

Her frankness and directness is reflected in most of her poems . She has no time or patience with patriarchal notions of what is appropriate or not . The extreme prudery of nuns and parents about normal biological functions come in for a scathing attack . In ' Sweet Sixteen', she brings up subjects which were considered taboo:

Well , you can't say/ they didn't try/ Mamas never mentioned menses/ A nun screamed:  
you vulgar girl/ don't say brassieres/ say bracelets./ She pinned paper sleeves /on to our  
sleeveless dresses.

Prejudices, false modesty, false shame about the body has left many young girls in sexual ignorance about the functions of their body .

De Souza feels alienated because of the cultural conflict between Indian and Goan Christian Community culture.De Souza's identity is marked by various association . She highlights this in ' De Souza Prabhu' :

No matter that / my name is Greek/ My surname Portuguese/ My language alien / There are ways / of belonging / I belong with lame ducks.

But it will not always be so, she asserts . In ' Songs of Survival' , she hopes that:

One day I will find my axis/ and revolve around the sun.

In the poem, 'He Speaks' , she criticizes the condescending attitude that men display towards women. In ' Bequest', she writes:

Some recommended stern standards

Others say float along

He says , takes it as it comes

Meaning , of course, as he hands it out .

Here it is clear that she loses interest in life. In every stage of life woman has to face conflicts and dilemmas - conflict between self - assertion and self - isolation. In her poem, ' Autobiographical' , De Souza describes the utter disillusionment of a woman:

.... the whole world / was trying to put me up / cut me down go through me / with a razor blade.

Simone de Beauvoir says, " There is unanimous agreement that getting a husband- or in some cases a protector - is for her the most important of undertakings..... she will free herself from the parental home , from her mother's hold , she will open up her future , not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, in to the hands of a new master". (Beavouir,355) . Her poetry can be classed as quest for identity of women in the society both in terms of position and security.

Directness and starkness is a method that De Souza employs in her poetry. She rarely uses metaphoric languages or imageries , yet she succeeds in giving her poetry a dramatic quality. Her candour and bold pronouncements on issues like power and position reflect the need for resistance literature to fight against male hegemony and gender constraints.

#### Conclusion:

It is found that De Souza's poetry reveals the pathetic plight and frustration of a woman in a male dominated structure of society. The inequality of opportunities for male and female and the neglect of women's rights result in frustration . Her poetry has endeavoured to express the desire of a woman to break the bonds that have restricted her since time immemorial. De Souza shows a sense of alienation and a struggle for identity. A woman is always compared with man and found inferior. This feeling frustrates the poet and has a deep effect on her psyche . She wants her individual identity in the world .

De Souza shows how girls are reminded of their sex , dressing sense and exclusivity of their sex. From their childhood they are taught to fear the male . women remain always in a dilemma. She gives pleasure and happiness as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother to the respective families. This is exactly what Simone de Beauvoir says , " one is not born a woman but becomes one".De Souza's poetry offers two levels of meaning . One she shows the suffering and humiliation of women and other the complexity and rebellious nature of them. She is a modern woman full of self confidence and she has the determination to change some of these old primitive issues as far as possible.

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