

Eunice De Souza as a Christian Feminist: An analysis of the selected poems from “A Necklace of Skulls”



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Abstract:

From time immemorial, history has been honed like a weapon by the patriarchy to suppress the female. The religious ethics, the notions of class, race, gender and various theological symbols are not God ordained rather constructed by the phallogocentric culture. Christian feminist theologians advocate that, in order to get a complete understanding of Christianity, one need to acknowledge the contributions of female in it. That's why, they want to rewrite the history and reinterpret the Holy Bible from a female's point of view.

Eunice De Souza, a Mumbai based Goan Catholic poetess who revealed the mask of her own community in her early Christian poems to show the hidden dark reality behind the veil of religion. Through her poetical works she not only highlighted various social problems, but also showed a path of Nirvana. My present work is a humble attempt to analyze some of her poems from the point of view of Christian feminist theology.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Hegemony, Christianity, Poetry, tradition.

1.Introduction

Feminism is a discourse on female subjugation in history, literature and culture. From time immemorial history has been honed like a weapon by the patriarchy to suppress the female. The religious ethics, the notions of class, race, gender and various theological symbols are not God given rather socially constructed by the male theologians and historians who have molded the original teachings of God and used the fear of God to validate their supremacy over the female class. For instance, we get a glimpse of the biased psyche of the apostle Paul in his letters. In *1st Corinthians 11.7-8* he wrote “For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels”. Again, in his first letter to the congregation of the church of Corinth, he asserts, “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are

not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.”(1st Corinthians 14:34). Most of the letters are a projection of his biased mentality towards women. He even discards the idea of female priests. In his letter to Timothy he wrote, “I do not permit women to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence”(Timothy 2:12). Throughout the Holy Bible, we find such excerpts which supports the notion of male superiority over female because they are weak. Surprisingly enough, if we observe today, though some Protestant branches of Christianity allow woman priests, but *The Roman Catholic Church, The Eastern Orthodox Church, The Southern Baptist Convention* and *The Church of Jesus Christ of the Later Day Saints* prohibit women from entering into clerical positions. That is why Christian feminists want to rewrite the past and the gospel from a female’s point of view because history can be rectified only from the backward and not from the forward. Feminist theologians assert that in order to get a complete understanding of Christianity, one need to acknowledge the contributions of women in it. They focus on the teachings of Jesus to show that Jesus or God never differentiates between male and female, rather it is the interpreters of the Holy Bible who did so. “For the Lord your God is God of gods, who shows no partiality and takes no bribe” (*Deuteronomy 10:17*). At the same time we need to understand that Feminist theology does not only advocate the female’s position in the theological arena as there were female judges and prophetess in earlier times. For instance, In the book of Judges of the Old Testament we find Deborah, who was the only female judge and prophetess of Yahweh, the God of Israelites (*Judges 4:4*). Even the great leader Moses’s sister Miriam was a prophetess (*Exodus 15:20*). Besides, in the New Testament Dr. Luke mentioned about a woman named Anna the prophetess in the Gospel of Luke. According to him she was an elderly Jewish woman who prophesied about Jesus at the temple of Jerusalem (*Luke 2:36-38*). The problem was they never bother to question the existing male supremacy in liturgical services. Christian feminists not only question the existing gender paradigm in theology, but “also seek to reconstruct the basic theological symbols of God, humanity, male and female, creation, sin and redemption, and the church, in order to define these symbols in a gender-inclusive and egalitarian way. In doing so they become theologians, no simply critics of the dominant theology” (Ruether 4). The important role of feminist theology is well defined by Rosemary Radford Ruether when she asserts,

“Feminist theology takes feminist critique and reconstruction of gender paradigms into the theological realm. They question patterns of theology that justify male dominance and female subordination, such as exclusive male language for God, the view that males are more like God than females, that only males can represent God as leaders in church and society, or that women are created by God to be subordinate to males and thus sin by rejecting this subordination.”(Ruether 3).

Eunice De Souza, a Mumbai based poet, novelist, critic, columnist, editor, anthologist and most importantly a teacher, was born in a Goan Catholic family in Pune in 1940. After completing her master’s in English Literature from Marquette University, U.S.A, she did her PhD from the University of Mumbai and jointed St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai as an English teacher. In an interview she said she never thought of becoming a poet. In fact, she started writing poetry after the age of thirty. His first poetry book “Fix” appeared in 1979. Her early poetry is marked by her own experiences she received in her childhood from her relatives and friends. Her father died when she was only three years old and one can easily understand how tough it was for her mother to lead the family. Her father’s death affected De Souza deeply and somehow a thought took birth in her mind that she is the one responsible for her father’s death. She herself said it in an interview, “*My father’s death affected me deeply. Like many*

children in this situation, I blamed myself and was left with a sense of insecurity and an irrational fear that people will go away. This feeling has affected many of my relationships later in life as well. My poetry, however has escaped its influence, probably because I started writing later in life." Her poetry presents a compact picture of the Goan Christian community with its own customs, ideas and prejudices. In De Souza's poetry we find an Indian version of Christianity, a unique mixture of Christian morality and ethics with the cultural values of India. Besides, her keen observations of the society coupled with the confessional tone and the subtle touch of dark humor make her poetry utterly enjoyable to read. In the poem "Women in Dutch Painting" she asserts,

'The afternoon sun is on their faces.

They are calm, not stupid,

pregnant, not bovine.

I know women like that

And not just in paintings-

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, p.47)

Anju Bala Sharma & Tanu Gupta comments on the poem 'Women in Dutch Painting',

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. (Sharma & Gupta, 151)

Eunice De Souza's mother was a school teacher and a strict woman, partly perhaps she had to play both the roles of a strict father and a caring mother. As she was born into a Goan Catholic family, she came into contact with the ethical ideas of Christianity at a very tender age, because in Christianity and Islam, religious teachings start from a very young age. There she was first introduced to the ideal female characters like Eve and Mary Magdalene, the biblical characters known for their purity faithfulness. As one can observe, from the very childhood they were trained to become subordinate and Goan Christian society forced them to keep mum about their physical and psychological needs. Later when she started her profession as a teacher, she realized the futility of following such age-old rules and customs. That's why in the poem "Remember Medusa?" she writes,

'My dumb ox loyalty is

The frozen heart

The frozen stare

Of long aloneness

Unpeopled even by terror
Remember Medusa,
Who could not love
Even herself?
Better the flailing
The angry words
Burning through the brain

The certain sorrow”(Remember Medusa?,p.54)

Even the Holy Roman Catholic Church does not approve woman to perform clerical duties. A quick look at the administrative framework of the Catholic Church reveals that from the most important position of the Pope to a simple priest, all the major liturgical duties are performed by males. Females are not allowed to become a clergy, they can only become a helper or a nun, and if the priest thinks she is a faithful servant of God, he can promote her as the Mother Superior who will guide other nuns of the monastery. Moreover, they lead their lives under the vow of celibacy of not engaging in any kind of pleasurable pursuits. But after doing so much still they are not suitable to become a priest because the God does not want them to be a priest. De Souza has shown the biased attitude of the priest towards Alleluia D’Souza in the poem “*St. Anthony’s Shrine*”,

‘Alleluia stands by the shrine door

With bread she has

Baked and broken.

‘Take my child’,

She says to each,

‘This is the bread

St Anthony has given.’

‘May the bread turn to

Scorpions,’ says the parish

Priest. ‘The people miss Mass

But not St Anthony’s.’

The bishop says, ‘Alleluia

Is a good soul. She donated

A Frigidaire last year to the

Orphanage.’(*St. Anthony’s Shrine* ,p.10)

The same hierarchy of the Catholic Church is blindly followed by the believers in their families. The little girls are taught to protect their virginity and not to show off their skin to anyone. In the poem “*Sweet Sixteen*” DeSouza asserts,

‘A nun screamed: You vulgar girl

Don’t say brassieres

Say bracelets.

She pinned paper sleeves

Onto our sleeveless dresses.”(*Sweet Sixteen*, p.6)

They are trained to be submissive as the Bible says, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” (*Colossians 3:18*). From their very childhood they are trained to respect the males who will be their future husbands. They are advised to protect their chastity because if they lose it, they will neither be accepted by their husbands nor by God. In the poem “*Sweet Sixteen*” poet says,

“The preacher thundered:

Never go with a man alone
Never alone
And even if your're engaged
Only passionless kisses." (Sweet Sixteen, p.6)

The husbands have been given the similar authority over their wives like the God, for it is written in the Bible, "The husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church." (*Ephesians 5:23*). In the letter to the Christians of Corinth, the Apostle Paul writes, "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ." (*1st Corinthians 11:3*). Chitra Thrivikraman Nair comments on the poem 'Sweet Sixteen',

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. (Nair 126)

De Souza has also expressed her anger on the hypocrisy associated with marriage. The very institution of marriage itself is socially constructed by the patriarchy in the disguise of God's will. In the Gospel of St. Mark, he writes, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (*Mark 10:9*). But between the rhetoric and reality there is a vast difference. In reality, when we look at the Goan Christian community, we see how marriageable girls are viewed as a commodity. The color of skin is a very important factor in marriage as well as age and virginity. But unfortunately nobody asks for any such qualities in the groom. It is enough that he is a male, because in the Bible it is written, "Sons are a heritage from the Lord" (*Psalms 127:3-4*). In the poem "Marriages are Made", DeSouza mocks the institution of Marriage,

'She's not quite tall enough
And not quite full enough
(children will take care of that)
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.' (Marriages are Made ,p.4)

Again in the poem "Mrs Hermione Gonsalvez", we find Mrs Gonsalvez's who suffers from a superiority complex about the color of her skin,

'In the good old days
I had looks and colour
Now I've got only colour
Just look at my parents
How they married me to a dark man
On my own I wouldn't even have
looked at him.'" (Mrs Hermione Gonsalvez, p.8)

We also get a glimpse of the dark sensuous side of the Goan Christian society where in name of so called Christian Parties people are drinking wine and taking very cheaply about the woman folk. For them women are objects of sexual gratification and nothing else. In the poem "*Bandra Christian Party*" we observe how woman has become the subject of male gaze.

'Hubby emerges from coal bin

Bottles under arm

Face a smirk.

Hot stuff he says.

The gathered goans giggle.

Dirty jokes:

Hot stuff and sex.

What personality says Dominic

Such pink lips men and

Look at that chest.'(Bandra Christian Party,p.9)

De Souza has shown how women are treated as a machine which only bears the child. Still there is no such rule regarding abortion in Christianity, rather it is considered as a sin. The men are not advised to use precautions, rather a man's righteousness is measured by the number of children he has produced. This is very much evident in the poem "*Grandmother*". She understood the pain of her grandmother who had seven children.

'She was beautiful

Bore seven children

And often ran home

To her mother.

She and the servants

Spoke the same language

Of silence.'(Grandmother , p.41)

Again in the poem "*Catholic Mother*", DeSouza asserts,

'Francis X. D'Souza

Father of the year.

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.'(Catholic Mother,p.3)

About the poem '*Catholic Mother*' Chitra Thrivikraman Nair says,

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. (Nair 128)

De Souza in her childhood witnessed the plight of two women, one was her own mother, another was her grandmother, who had a profound influence on her. On one hand, from her mother, she learnt how a single woman can lead her life independently and with respect without the support of her male counterpart. On the other hand, she witnessed the ill effects of marriage in the life of her grandmother who got married at fourteen and bore seven children. Perhaps these personal experiences forced her to reject the institution of marriage as something designed by the divine God. She remained unmarried throughout her life. In the poem "Return" she writes,

'Sarla Devi, Kusum Bala, Rani Devi,
All of ill fame.
I read your story in
The morning paper:
You refuse to wear ankle-bells
Worn for generations
You study law
You hear catcalls in the street
Drums and bells behind your books.
Sitting alone in a Bombay restaurant,
Listening to the innuendoes of college clerks
And a loose-lipped Spanish priest,
I know something
Of how you feel.' (Return, p.79)

She refuses the ideas of submissiveness, purity and chastity of female and now she desires to transform herself from the pious Mary Magdalene to the Goddess Kali, the Goddess of destruction. She wants to upgrade her position merely as a devotee of God to Goddess herself. She wants to terrorize the male supremacy and breaks all the notions of hegemonic patriarchal setup.

In "For S. Who Wonders If I Get Much Joy Out of Life", she says,

'As a matter of fact I do.
I contemplate, with a certain
Grim satisfaction
Dynamic men who sell better butter.
Sometimes I down a Coke
Implacably at the Taj.
This morning I terrorized
(successfully)
The bank manager.
I look striking in red and black
And a necklace of skulls.' (For S. Who Wonders If I Get Much Joy Out of Life, p.56)

2. Conclusion

Finally to conclude, we can say that Eunice De Souza has artistically portrayed the hegemony of Goan Christian Community through her unique writing skills. What differentiates her from other feminist writers is that unlike other Christian feminists, she has showed a path of nirvana through her poetry. Perhaps that's why famous Australian poet A.D Hope once said, 'What struck me at once about the poems was their immediacy, their complete impact, their unguarded sense of statement... There is a marvelous irony, delicately and at the same time savagely handled...I have been moved by these poems which have such directness, vigour and such a strange mixture of triumph, vision and agony.' Her attempt to shift her position from merely a devotee of God to Goddess herself can be seen as the eternal struggle of woman class to reach to the center.

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