

Constituting Meaning through Thematic Opposites: A Feminist Introspection into the Poetic World of Eunice de Souza

Ratan Dey

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sundarban Mahavidyalaya

Abstract

Indian English poetry in the post-modern period strives to remap the inscape of an artist, and this becomes a guiding principle in the arena of contemporary Indian English poetry. The instruments used to capture the lived experience of a particular individual in a particular moment are multifaceted and varied: parody, wordplay, pastiche, intertextuality etc. Poetry written at this juncture, especially those by women, often involves themes like tradition, rituals, age-old beliefs, anxiety, women question etc. As a trendsetter of post-modern Indian English poetry by women, Eunice de Souza's poetry moves around several layers of interpretations — 'the mind-forged manacles' inside the Goan Catholic community, the perennial exploitation and oppression of women at the hands of patriarchy, the resultant inner-anguish and frustration and the much-needed call for emancipation. The semantics of de Souza's poetry largely hovers around her clever way of handling words, phrases, sentences, stanzas in her poetry. The present study makes a humble effort to show how the stylistics of de Souza's poetic world are largely determined by her deft handling of a number of literary accessories such as irony, satire, symbolism, paradox etc. and how meaning stems from the thematic opposites.

Keywords: Semantics, Wordplay, Patriarchy, Woman, Meaning, Contrariety

Introduction

Academic discipline of women's writing tends to seek how a socio-cultural construct like gender is used to exclude women from every walk of life. The experiences and concerns they record in their writing drastically differ from their male counterparts just because of their position as women. The pervasively patriarchal set up of human civilization left no stone unturned to exclude women from all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, social, and legal. Consequently, anything feminine comes to be defined either by negative terms or by placing it in stark contrast to the masculine, as if female means something of an 'other', a kind of 'non-man'. In words of Simone de Beauvoir:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate defines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 283)

The women's voice in post-modern Indian English Poetry, with a 'rebellious frankness' and yet hidden irony, wages war against the socio-cultural, socio-economic, and socio-religious subordination of women in patriarchal society. Eunice de Souza's poetry, in this connection, can be seen as 'poetry of revolt' and this revolt is aimed at countering the 'discourse of silence'. This present reading strives to unearth how meaning in de Souza's poetry revolves around the opposites incorporated in the structural framework.

The androcentric discourse always emphasizes on projecting the masculine in a positive light; a man is always active, dominating, adventurous, rational, and creative. A woman, by systematic opposition, always remains passive, submissive, nervous, and emotional. De Souza's *Advice to Women* is structured around such systematic oppositions where she is found to give some 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)

The repetition of the very 'k' sound at the very opening line (as in 'keep', 'cats') sets the tone of the poem and perfectly resides with the confined and caged state of women in society. The second-person pronoun 'you' is intended to highlight the fact that it is high time the 'second sex', the 'caged beauty', should come forward and break down all the shackles. The poet uses the 'otherness' of lovers in microcosm to represent the 'otherness' of society in macrocosm. For a feminist like de Souza, society is always androcentric; hence, her advice to develop patience among women to deal with the otherness of society can be seen as a supreme form of irony, as she is urging women to counter their marginalisation in the earliest:

Don't cuss out of the window
at their enemies.
that stares of perpetual surprise
in those great green eyes
will teach you
to die alone. ("Advice to Women 7-12)

The feline image, previously associated with the feminine, finds some sort of association with the masculine towards the end of the poem. By the same systematic opposition, women are

represented in all negative light: in stark contrast to the masculine adjectives — ‘perpetual’, ‘surprising’, ‘great’, ‘green’ — women are associated with transient, dull, tiny, and grey.

Although de Souza’s poems deal with a number of negative emotions – anxiety, alienation, self-castigation, suicidal attempts – they, however, never fail to uphold the plight of women. Her poetry:

Is not poetry of heroics, or does it seek pity. While it has no affiliation in politics, community, humanistic ideals, religion, it is feminist in its kind of awareness, female vision, and affinities to the mode of other women poets — rather than in a proclaimed commitment. (King 158)

Religion, which should bind together the people of a particular religious community, does exactly the opposite in the context of the Goan Catholic community. Instead of fostering harmony, fellow-feeling, and emancipation, religion in this part of the world subverts its claimed objectives and imposes upon strict restrictions. In *Miss Louise*, Miss Louise’s dream for the ideal ends in frustration:

She dreamt of descending
curving staircases
ivory fan aflutter
of children in sailor suits
and organza dresses
till the dream rotted her innards (“Miss Louise” 1-6)

The poem thus becomes a critique of society’s treatment of women by some external factors that do not have anything to do with their inner selves. These factors are as inconsequential as someone’s social status, and political and economic power. The suffering of a spinster at the hands of patriarchy seems to have no end. The paternalistic society has the remote control to decide whom she will be controlled by: it was the father before marriage, and it is the husband after marriage. When some Mr. Hans says to Miss Louise, “Miss Louise, I feel an arrow/ through my heart” (15-16), the contrasting role of women — woman the creator and woman the destroyer — is hinted at once. The arrow of Cupid, the Roman god of love, will take no time to become the arrow of Lord Rama to destroy the demoniac forces.

Confessional poetry often works through the inner fragmentation of the poet’s self. As if it is a deliberate duplication of her ‘self’ in respect of her ‘other’. This is exactly what de Souza has done in her poem *Autobiographical*:

One day my soul
stood outside me
watching me twitch
and grin and gibber
the skin tight

over my bones
 I thought the whole world
 was trying to rip me up
 cut me down go through me
 with a razor blade (“Autobiographical” 17-26)

The internal suffering of the poetic persona is instrumented by the relentless external pressure, and it gives birth to a schizophrenic voice. The poems *Marriages are Made* and *Mrs. Hermione Gonsalvez* offer a fine reading of contrast: the marriageable women in society are made to nourish some sort of inferiority complex on the ground of height, skin colour, familial background, etc. This inferiority complex in a shorter and darker girl is set against the superiority complex of Mrs. Hermione Gonsalvez stemming from her fair complexion. This androcentric point of view makes thousands of Mrs. Gonsalvez believe that being dark is to be damned and being fair is to be saved, especially from the perspective of marriage-market. Thus, these women, though unconsciously, find themselves caught in the net of patriarchy.

Many of Eunice de Souza’s poems are structured in such a way that the structure of a particular poem helps the readers to drive home the idea expressed through it. For example, the same sense of dichotomy underlines the whole of her *Catholic Mother*. Though the mother figure constitutes the title of the poem, it is the Father, Francis X. D’Souza, the ‘father of the year’, the ‘pillar of the church’ who controls both his wife as well as the scheme of things in the poem. Where the hypocritical and lecherous Father considers having seven children in seven consecutive years is a ‘Grace’ for him, it is indeed a ‘Disgrace’ for the wife, as she had to undergo tremendous amount of pain all these years:

Pillar of the Church
 says the parish priest
 Lovely Catholic Family
 says Mother Superior
 the pillar’s wife
 says nothing. (“Catholic Mother” 13-18)

Thus, the ‘smiling’ of the father at the opening of the poem is set against the crying of the mother at the end; the claimed ‘Happiness’ of the family is bought at the expense of the inhuman suffering of the wife. It is interesting to note that the husband is given a name in the poem whereas the wife is simply called sarcastically ‘the pillar’s wife’ (17), stressing the anonymous nature of suffering that awaits her. Under the apparent simplicity of the verse form of the poem, one cannot simply miss the ironic undertone, which is a key to decoding the meaning. It exposes the essential binary inherent in patriarchy: the showy patriarchal theory of accepting the role of women in different spheres of life and the actual malpractice of excluding women from every walk of life. Thus, de Souza’s poetic practice fits into:

. . . Confessional mode similar to Sylvia Plath's miming of deep fears and resentments which are expressed through self-ironic wit. Where Das's grandmother's house seems an Eden, a paradise lost, de Souza's childhood among the Goan community of Poona appears to have been a hell. The subjects of her satires are the church, marriage, Catholic motherhood, Indian colour prejudice, sexual prudency and hypocrisy, Goan vulgarity and the alienation felt by many Goan Catholics towards Hindu India. (King 156)

The indifferent tone and subtle attitude of the poetic persona in de Souza's poetry pose in front of the readers a different kind of challenge to grasp the flow of thought process. The poem *He Speaks* revolves around the submissiveness of women and the unchallenged defiance of men. It shows how society is keen to maintain its long-nourished idea that a woman can never have desire, as if it is exclusively a property of men. The very idea of a female 'self' is dubiously negated, and she is treated as mere 'creature' without an identity, without any choice to exercise. Very much like the persona in Browning's *My Last Duchess*, it is high time for her male partner to give 'command':

After that pathological display
I decided there was only one
thing to do: fix her. ("He Speaks" 28-30)

De Souza was a great admirer of the British poet Robert Browning, and in many of her writings she refers to one of Browning's representative pieces, *My Last Duchess*. Her poetic canon is full of the Duchess-like figures as well as the figure like the Duke of Ferrara. In this connection, the observation of Melanie Silgado will be a fascinating reading:

She often quoted Robert Browning's poem *My Last Duchess* as having a lasting influence on her. She admired the scope of the dramatic monologue, the changes in tone and voice, the suggestion and the loaded yet unsaid statement — all elements she would come to use herself. Unlike Browning, she used form and structure casually but with just as deadly effect. (Silgado 2019)

As a member of the Goan Catholic family, de Souza left no stone unturned to expose the scriptural biasness. It is even claimed by one of the apostles that woman is the 'glory of man' and that God created woman in the image of man. In *Remember Medusa*, the poetic persona laments how the familial, societal and community pressure to adhere to 'faith' keeps the women confined in the net of customs. This confinement restricts them from opening their minds, causing inner suffocation and depression. De Souza equates herself to the figure of Medusa from Greek mythology and gives her suffering at the hands of various patriarchal institutions a pattern: like Medusa, she also suffered for absolutely no reason. The coexistence of fire ('words/ burning through the brain') and ice ('frozen heart', 'frozen stare') is one of the basic binaries in human existence: the frozen state of heart and stare in the opening section of the poem slowly but steadily will give birth to the burning words.

Eunice de Souza's critique of the institution named church was largely shaped by her practical experiences of the organised religion, particularly in the context of the socio-religious ambience of the Goan Catholic community in the second half of the twentieth century. The rigours of Catholicism never allow a woman to speak up her body and mind. If she does so, she would be reprimanded by the appointees of religion and their chosen agents. This is, in a sense, a kind of double marginalisation of women, and this constitutes the theme of *Sweet Sixteen*. A girl is not allowed to utter the things she wears, if she fails to comply with their assumed code of conduct, she will be subjected to society's moral policing:

Mamas never mentioned menses.
A nun screamed: You vulgar girl
don't say brassieres
say bracelets. ("Sweet Sixteen"3-6)

Here 'Mamas' and 'nun' act as the church's own trained agents who do not hold back in subjugating their own sex. The ironic implication of the title is made explicit once we understand this mechanism of suppressing feminine urges and sensibility — 'sixteen' should not be prefixed with 'sweet', rather bitter is the term that best describes this troublesome period. At the very opening, 'you' is set against a band of 'they': they don't allow you to experience female desire. Chitra t. Nair observes:

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. (Nair 126)

The idea of glorifying the birth of a baby boy is still a common thing in most parts of India. De Souza seems to criticize this largely unhygienic practice in her two poems, *de Souza Prabhu* and *For Rita's Daughter, Just Born*. In *de Souza Prabhu*, a number of opposites amalgamate to bring out the poet's internal suffering and her desperate attempt to find an external outlet for the same. Accordingly, she does her best to fulfil the worst of her parents' expectations, i.e., the expectation of a baby boy. She hides the blood stains on her clothes to unhide the hideous mask of patriarchy. The 'luminous new leaf' at the opening of *For Rita's Daughter, Just Born* is a perfect analogy for a newly born baby girl who comes to this world with a vast range of possibilities. But the 'shrill cry of kites' disturbingly anticipates the pathetic fate that is in store for the newborn.

Nissim Ezekiel, another Bombay-based poet and forerunner of modernism in Indian English Poetry, seems to exert a lasting impression upon the poetic practices of the Bombay-based women poets, including Eunice de Souza. In the words of M.K. Naik:

Just as there is a 'Bombay School of Poets' among the men, a corresponding group of women poets, mostly from Bombay, is also seen to flourish at the same time, owing much to Nissim Ezekiel, like the men. They were associated with the 'Master' in one

capacity or another — either as student or colleague, or friend or associate or disciple or admirer. (Naik 148)

Ezekiel's use of the metaphor of journey in his celebrated piece *Enterprise* has been taken up by de Souza in her poem *Pilgrim*. De Souza is obviously the leader of a group of pilgrims, like the pilgrims in Ezekiel's *Enterprise*, who are on course to their proposed destination. But unlike Ezekiel's *Enterprise* which started with a bang and ended in a whimper, de Souza's enterprise will bring about the long-longed women's liberation and emancipation.

The opening stanza of *Songs of Innocence* clearly echoes Blake:

who made you?

God made me.

why did he make you?

to know him, to love him

to be happy with him forever

in this world and the next. ("Songs of Innocence" 1-6)

Though the title of the poem suggests that we the readers are going to encounter a song that will sing of innocence, the fact is that the poem is equally a song of experience. As in Blake's poetry, childhood symbolises innocence; in de Souza's case it is the lost childhood that stands for the same. Where childhood and flowers stand for innocence in the poem, the world of experience is represented by home and friends.

Conclusion

To analyse any modern text, understanding structure is a necessity. The semantics of a written text is largely determined by its structural units such as words, phrases, paragraphs/stanzas which together constitute the meaning of that particular text. From this perspective, mapping Eunice de Souza's poetic journey would be a fascinating one. The woman question in her earlier works was more of a moderate one, but as she moves on, her poetry becomes shorter, denser, and more outrageous. The timid, submissive and clueless 'second sex', in course of time, gathered courage and took an oath to throw to the winds the existing social structure. The semantics behind *The Necklace of Skulls* is a clue to the readers to decode this growing sense of insurgence: playing the role of a tortured, tradition-bound 'catholic mother' is over now; it is high time she should embrace Mother Kali in 'red and black' and with a necklace of skulls around her neck. The demoniac forces of patriarchy should prepare themselves to face the wrath of Aadishakti.

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