

Feminism in Indian English Poetry: Exploring Gender Bigotry and Marginalization in Select Poems of Eunice De Souza

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Abstract

Indian English poetry can be observed as a force of determined efforts to carve out an individual 'space' in societal levels by the Indian women poets. The term 'Gender' is crucial in understanding the obstruction of equalities and fair treatment among the sexes. Gender 'Gap', 'Discrimination' or 'Bigotry' are the diverse expressions of 'gender' that establishes a patterned web of stereotypes of masculinities and femininities advocating marginalization through 'gender roles' in all fronts including family and workspace. Women's writings aim to expose the hidden agendas by highlighting the oppressive structures of patriarchal ideologies and challenge the way in which gender relations and roles are perceived. Feminism reflects on these oppressive structures that enable women to uncover the hegemonic dominant structures that subjugated them. The research article observes a feminist approach in analysing the borders and boundaries of De Souza's marginalized women at societal and familial level by questioning how women are treated in a patriarchal society through gender bigotry and irregularities. In order to study the gender bigotry in the poetry of Eunice De Souza, the research article is an attempt to observe the experiences and subjugation of women of different generations who experienced marginalization heavily established by patriarchal ideologies.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender Bigotry, Indian English Poetry, Marginalization, Patriarchal Hierarchy

I

One of the confessional poetesses of the 20th century, Eunice De Souza serves as an exemplary voice in Indian English women's poetry. With an insight to transform society, De Souza travelled the same path along her contemporaries Kamala Das, Meena Alexander, Plath or Silgado who treated poetry as an effective medium to translate women's experiences in society. Like many Indian English poets, her poetry draws heavily from personal life experiences of women who are often marginalized in the socio-cultural and political space. Eunice De Souza surveys the eccentricities and complexities of the Christian Goan community by observing the plight of women. Bruce King remarks, "De Souza is in time with the feminist movement in contemporary poetry, in her directness of speech, self-revelation and non-nostalgic memories of family life" (42). She highlights the problems faced by communities of women in an overtly patriarchal society by enlarging the borders and boundaries created for them. As a feminist poetess, De Souza portrays the rebellious sensibilities and eccentricities of the Goan community and the sufferings of women of all age. Bruce King states-

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 prudery and hypocrisy, Goan vulgarity and the alienation felt by many Goan Catholics towards Hindu India. (156)

Women's writings aim to expose the hidden agendas by highlighting the oppressive structures of patriarchal ideologies and challenge the way in which gender relations and roles are perceived. Feminism reflects on these oppressive structures that enable women to uncover the hegemonic dominant structures that subjugated them. Confessional poetry enables the writer to express his/her painful experiences directly without any filter and they often has documentary value. This is why confessional poetry by women poets transcends the boundaries of marginal domestic space to that of a modern community. Modern Indian poets often question socio-cultural, political and economic conditions of the society and attempt to showcase this aspect through their poetry:

To define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes that our consciousness being 'woman' has nothing to do with race, class nation or sexuality, just with gender. But no one becomes a woman because she is female. (Mohanty 55)

II

Marginalization of women is one of the most widespread and the deepest form of oppression in society. It is the process through which individuals are deprived of rights, opportunities and resources available to the other members of society. This exclusion may result from a person's social class, relationships, gender, religion or race, preventing the individual or group to fully participate in the socio-political life. Marginalization is a multidimensional and historical phenomenon that deals with the socio-political and cultural problems of people belonging to various sections of society such as Dalits, Blacks, African Americans, religious minorities and women among others. The question of 'woman' has been central to feminist politics. Feminism has radically questioned the existing gender relationships, discrimination and patriarchy that exist in society. Marginalization of women takes place through numerous grounds like gender discrimination, subversion through the 'traditional image' of women, alienation, and loss of self-identity through the institution of marriage which is observed in Eunice de Souza's poems that "arise out of alienation and the feeling that life is a mess, they are also highly conscious of the situations and problems faced by women." (King 158)

Gender discrimination is a significant factor of oppression that occurs in both societal and familial levels through marginalization. The term 'sex' and 'gender' mean different things to different people. When we hear the term 'gender', the idea that comes to our mind is the basic differences between men and women. However, to actually understand the term in all its complexities, one must look between these mechanisms in order to have a good knowledge regarding both 'sex' and 'gender'. The term 'sex' and 'gender' are crucial in understanding the marginalised status of women in society. While 'sex' is a biological term which is determined by anatomy or external reproductive organs, 'gender' determines the 'socially constructed' roles, behaviours or activities which society deems appropriate for both men and women:

Gender is a socio-political construct that allows hierarchal flow of power between the sexes through which patriarchy functions. Through the acquisition of power, the patriarchal structures take upon a more dominant role, leading to gender 'gap', 'discrimination' and 'bigotry'- the foundations of marginalization. Through gender roles, this marginalised objectification is accustomed to fit into the structures of hierarchy and chauvinism. As such, masculinities and femininities are constructs which are generated by the biasness of patriarchy. This social constructs led to 'gender difference' which is an integral foundation of the structural inequalities between men and women. Gayle Rubin remarks:

...although biological differences are fixed, gender differences are the oppressive results of social interventions that dictate how women and men should behave. Women are oppressed *as women* and “by having to *be* women” (204)

Therefore as a result of marginalization, the gender identities are thus challenged by patriarchal foundations and renders the existing ‘gender gap’ in societal level that has considered women as inferior and incapable of sublimity and rational thinking:

Men have certain fixed ideologies concerning the nature of woman that woman is innately weak, emotional, enjoys dependence, is limited in capacities for work even that woman is masochistic by nature. (Horney 37)

III

De Souza’s cryptic poems express bitterness in tone and style in expressing her resentment against the Indian patriarchal society of quintessential cultural prejudices, marginalization and attitudes that demands mute acceptance from a woman. It is no myth that women are culturally conditioned right from their advent into this world to be subservient to their male counterparts. De Souza attempts to redefine the borders and boundaries of ‘gender’ and the grip it has on ‘gender inequalities’ that leads to marginalization or sub humanization and exclusion from social life. By advocating liberation in her poetry, De Souza highlights the image of Indian women defined by the age old ‘socially constructed’ binaries of male hegemony.

Eunice De Souza vehemently voices the gender issues and reveals the complexities of the woman’s psyche that opposed crimes against women through poetry. She mirrors the changing position of women in post independent India and challenges the role of women in conventional patriarchal society. The marginalized disposition of women finds an ample voice in “De Souza Prabhu” that depicts how women have to face gender discrimination on a large scale in society. The Indian patriarchal society has always favoured a male child over a girl child. Gender bigotry, therefore forms a crucial theme of Indian English poetry. In her efforts to make her parents happy, she reversed the ‘gender roles’ and took over the attributes of a boy depriving her own sexuality. “De Souza Prabhu” reveals the frustrations and discrepancy of a female in a male hegemonic and chauvinistic social structure whose existence is anguished, disgusted and alienated. By painting the portrait of the Goan society where women are constantly subjugated and diminished as marginalised figures, De Souza lends a voice representing all marginalized communities who are left to suffer the brunt of patriarchy silently. At the same time, the useless efforts of holding back her femininity by trying to pass off as a boy also brings blatant criticism from society who overlooks her as harsh and sardonic and a betrayer to her sexuality:

My parents wanted a boy
I have done my best to qualify
I hid the bloodstains
On my clothes
And let my breasts sag
Words the weapon
To crucify. (De Souza Prabhu 14-21)

Women are only treated as “lame ducks” and belittled of their existence to be subservient to the patriarch. Simone de Beauvoir rightly states regarding the condition of women:

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, into the hands of a new master. (355)

From voicing the problems of teenage girls, pain of pregnant women, and favouritism for the male child, afflictions of women in families, life of the spinsters to those women who break all norms and complexities to accomplish freedom, De Souza attempts to observe women at personal, political and societal levels. "Sweet Sixteen" parodies the way society brings up women and satirizes the hypocrisy of the Church. The poem witnesses the gender bigotry and discrimination against the teenage girls whose existence are conditioned by the repressive society. Using the codes like 'menses', 'brassiers' and 'getting preggers', De Souza observes how women are marginalized on grounds of 'conduct', 'civility' and 'feminine sensibilities' fashioned by the patriarchal authority. As a girl undergoes her sexual progression, women are made aware of their status of vulnerabilities and weaknesses. The concept of 'vulgarity' is socially constructed to keep the women in check by conditioning them to screen their inner garments and dress appropriately. 'Brassiere' becomes a shameful word and the nuns prance upon their bare arms to pin paper sleeves to cease the provocation of desire. The teenage girls are taught that word 'brassier' is disgraceful and therefore to be replaced by 'bracelet':

A nun screamed: You vulgar girl
don't say brassieres
say bracelets.
She pinned paper sleeves
onto our sleeveless dresses. (Sweet Sixteen 6)

De Souza displays how women of all ages are treated in society in terms of position, power or security. The condition of a spinster in the patriarchal society is portrayed in the most pathetic but realist manner. The society holds a woman's life dependent firstly on her father and this customs shifts to that of her husband, once she is married. A helpless victim of fate is left with old age and shattered dreams of not leaving her legacy behind.

She dreamt of descending
curving staircases
ivory fan flutter
of children in sailor suits
and organza dresses
till the dream rotted her innards (Miss Louise 7)

However, she aptly voices the social comments and taunts a woman receives from every twists and turns of the society. In doing so, she uses poetry as a weapon in satirizing the society that treats women as a sub human.

..."Yes Louisa, we know, professors
loved you in your youth,
judges in your prime. (Miss Louise 7)

The institution of marriage is one of the existing roots of all dilemmas for women. Through marriage, power relationships are established by the patriarchal authority that renders women in a web of suffering. Before marriage, the woman is brought up under strict control of her father which later on shifts to the husband through the institution of marriage. As the new master, the male rules over the wife's activities and in most families the woman is treated only as a sexual companion by men. As a result, she gradually becomes a marginalized figure to be controlled within the grasp of the husband. De Souza believes that the institution of marriage is a custom where the man receives the upper hand in controlling and regulating the women, thus diminishing her to the status of a mere commodity- a puppet with strings attached. This is how women become an object who is sold to be exploited both physically and mentally through the ripple effects of marginalization. "Marriages are Made"

depicts how women are thoroughly examined by the society both physically and mentally before marriage. Satirizing the notion of romantic love, marriage and children promoted by patriarchy, the truth of a woman's plight is realized in the ironically inclined poem:

My cousin Elena
is to be married.
.....
her family history examined
For TB and madness
her father declared solvent.
Her eyes examined for squints
Her teeth for cavities. (Marriages are Made 4)

Through the significant use of her confessional poetry, Eunice de Souza asserts her true feelings by using imaginary characters from her Goan Catholic community she belongs to. Set within the context of Catholic faith, the poem "Catholic Mother" interrogates the fructification given for the enhancement of the family- the supposed foremost role of a woman. The poem stands out as an excellent feminist critique of the 'marginalized' representation of a traditional woman as weak, docile, seductive and subservient- the 'angel in the house' whose sentiments are deeply rooted in social ethos exposed to subjugation and oppression:

In India, a long history of mother goddess worship legitimizes woman's glorification/deification as the divine mother, the source of energy, power and fertility while the same motherhood is an institutionalized form of oppression and subjugation of women. In a patriarchal kinship structure, a woman's status in the household is determined by her ability to produce male issue for her husband's lineage. Her identity revolves around the wife/mother roles beyond which no individuality needs to be established or recognized. (Dutta 84)

Ecriture feminist Luce Irigaray believes that men silence women not by any magical or mystical sequence of things but by a naked exercise of power. Thinking of her experience she states women are "not allowed to speak; otherwise they challenge the monopoly of discourse and of theory exerted by men" (Cameron 171). The silence of the "pastor's wife" is clearly reflected in the poem that "says nothing" and does not engage in overthrowing the patriarchy. Raising the issue of bearing a number of children as her sole duty, the woman's body is weighed of the pressures of patriarchal society and the tag of stereotypical projection of objects of 'sexual lust' and 'desire' that disallows a woman to have her own space. Her role and duties as a woman is defined only in relation to her husband:

By the Grace of God he says
We've had seven children
(in seven years)
We're One Big Happy Family
God Always Provides. (Catholic Mother 3)

The female desire and positioning of women in patriarchal society is always kept in check but the patriarch can fashion his desires up to any extent he wishes. Fashioning her poem from gender point of view, De Souza depicts the male mentality used to diminish and marginalise women in power relationships. The woman's love is rejected and dismissed to the status of a lovesick 'creature' who is alienated from emotional wellbeing and the superiority of the lover over his beloved is asserted through the ideology of a stuck up patriarch who thinks it is his profound duty to 'fix her' :

She was an affectionate
creature and tried hard, poor dear
but never quite made the grade

. . . After that pathological display
 I decided there was only one
 thing to do: fix her
 the next time we were making love
 I said quite casually
 I hope you realize I do this
 with other women. (He Speaks 21-24)

It is highly recommendable to readers to look at some paintings of women by Dutch painters such as Vermeer or Rembrandt whose portraits of women are mostly set in domestic spheres. Eunice dedicated the poem "Women in Dutch Paintings" to her former student Melanie Silgado who writes about the social concerns the pressures associated to being a woman. De Souza compares the women in Dutch paintings to those whom she knows in real life experiences.

I know women like that
 and 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 in oatmeal and honey. (Women in Dutch Paintings 47)

IV

Eunice De Souza can be deliberately observed as a spokesperson for thousands of Indian women who are marginalized and left silenced. Adopting an observant tone with detached voice and the built-up underlying rage in her poetry, De Souza is dissatisfied to live in a society that demands mute acceptance and submission from women. This is why alienation, inner anguish, assertion and frustration are excellent keywords that best define her poetry. Her verse is stripped down from their bare bones reflecting the "private fears, anxieties, angers" (King 157) containing explicit comments and ironic understatements. In her directness of speech, she states about the 'victimization' of women especially in Indian society. Rajib Bhaumik states:

The anti-centric and anti-traditional annoyance and fury which is prevalent in many of her poems bear the imprint of her frustration at the binary way of thinking about women in India.... Eunice's subject is not a particular 'woman' suffering instability and slippages; hers is 'female' as a cultural performer in a peculiar social context. (306-307)

The partiality for the male child, affliction and alienation of women in family, sufferings of women under the patriarchal hegemony are therefore common themes of De Souza's poetry. The hidden emotions in De Souza's poems are highlighted through her bold and honest expressions while the subject of her poems is the product of her own personal experiences. By writing about women's experiences through the medium of poetry, she justifies the truthful plight of marginal communities of women who have been silently suffering the brunt of patriarchy.

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