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A Feministic Re-reading from Different Perspective of Eunice De Souza's Poems

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Abstract

The Post 1947 era witnesses India's search for her own new identity soon after getting independence and it is partially because she is just a new born nation. This also affects the writings of the contemporary Indian English Writers and Indian English woman poets are no more exception. They also show this search for identity in their poems. But there prevails a difference in thought between earlier generation of woman poets and contemporary woman poets. The poetry of the contemporary new poets is the results of their experience as a woman in a patriarchal society. Their poetry show their woman sensibilities, their raising voice in male dominated society, their desire to get freedom, tensions and frustration issuing out from their forced life style. In that period some woman poets make rigorous attempts to map out new terrains for them and their poetry shows different aspects of feminism in their poetry. One such Indian English woman poet is Eunice de Souza. This paper tries to highlight some features that one can find out in Eunice de Souza's poetry.

Keywords: Alienation, Confession, Loss, Satire, Gender.

1. Introduction

A close look to the history of civilization shows that is the history of woman sufferings and oppression and also it is the history of patriarchal hegemony. This patriarchal domination was developed a long time ago as Sita's story in Ramayana shows the actual position and status of woman from time immemorial. In course of a woman's life, she has to undergo several cumbersome ordeals to prove themselves as a daughter, wife and mother. Not even Ramayana but Mahabharata also give no space and scope for woman. Everywhere it is shown that only man is powerful and woman's role is to support and balance man and society. Woman only plays the role of second fiddle in this society. So woman is showed in a marginalized position from the beginning and there is a sheer need for woman to raise her position and to give voice to her needs and rights. The nineteen and twentieth century give so many women who raise their voice to show the world their actual condition and also want to establish a position in this society. In the genre of literature women writers come forward to show these. In poetry also many women poets arrive who represent the woman in their poetry. Among them notables are Imtiaz Dharkar, Kamala Das, Sunita Jain, Mamta Kalia, Gauri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza and so on. Bitterness, frustration, dissatisfaction and self revelations are found in their works.

Among these Indian English woman poets, Eunice de Souza emerges as a very well known feministic poet who shown how women are treated in a society under patriarchal domination. She firms her position by showing the conscious of the women community by enlarging the boundaries and borders of woman created for them. She is really a poet with rebellious and feminine sensibilities as sometimes she is confessional, sometimes she shows gender biasness and differences, sometimes she shows women's sense of alienation and her protest and satire over all these. She wants to create a position for her and for the whole women being in familiar, domestic and social life. Her poetry also shows the growth of psychological, inner and emotional potentialities. She has portrayed her own experience as a woman also in her poetry. Her collection of poems which seal her position as an Indian English woman poet in world literature are 'Fix', 'Women in Dutch Painting',

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‘Way of Belonging’, ‘Selected and New Poems’ and ‘A Necklace of Skulls’.

Eunice de Souza is a confessional poet as she expresses her anguish, her frustration, her depression. Actually she unlocks her heart to show her pain and also to get some relief from emotional and psychological point of view. She shows her personal life experiences and tries to communicate with the whole woman being socially, culturally and politically. She broadens the border for woman before the world. Woman is the epitome of beauty and this beauty is caged. In a confessional mode she also shows her inner contrasts, conflicts, loss, alienation, gender discrimination and at last satires on the entire male dominated society through her poetry. She is the poet of post modern independence era and her poetry reflects her efforts to liberate the woman soul from primitive, orthodox, traditional male bondage and customs. This confessional mode gives her freedom and flexibility which she uses in a very crafty way in her poetry. In her ‘Autobiographical’, she shares her story. She tells that she is the unwanted child and later she tries to commit suicide to end this unwanted life:

“Right, now here it comes
I killed my father when I was three
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.”
(Autobiographical)

Woman in this patriarchal society suffers from identity crisis and as a result sense of aloofness, alienation, loss and helplessness capture her. In her ‘De Souza Prabhu’, she shows the theme of alienation and cultural conflict. Prabhu wants the Brahmin status and also catholic identity. This is the conflict between Indian culture and her culture. Here she says:

“Prabhu was no fool
and got the best of both worlds.
Catholic Brahmin!
I can hear his fat chuckle still.”(De Souza
Prabhu)

Search for identity is very much present in many poems of Eunice de Souza. Her poems show woman’s position and condition in this patriarchal masculinist society. Her poems echo what Butler says regarding women subjectivity, “encompasses the axis of sexual difference offering a mapping of intersecting differentials which cannot be summarily hierarchized either within the terms of phalliccentrism or any other candidate for the position of primary condition of oppression, rather than an exclusive tactic among many, deployed centrally but not exclusively in the service of expanding and rationalizing the masculinist domain.” (Butler, 19) She shows how girls at schools are reminded of their sex, dressing sense and exclusivity to their sex. She says that from childhood women are taught to fear the male and this fear creates delusion in terms of persecutions. In a poem from ‘Autobiographical’, she says:

“I thought the whole world
was trying to rip me up
cut me down go through me
with a razor blade.

Then I discovered
A cliché: that’s what I wanted
to do to the world.” (Autobiographical)

She shows that a woman always remains in a kind of dilemma. She wants to give pleasure and happiness as a daughter, a wife and a mother to her respective families. But in return she is learnt that they want something more and her efforts are all go in vein. She says that her birth disappoints all the members of her family as they want male child. That is the starting point of a girl’s life where gender biasness is very much present. She tries every possible way to please her parents and in doing so, she controls her feminine feelings which may create barriers. But the result is negative as she says:

“My parents wanted a boy
I have done my best to qualify
I hid the blood stains
On my clothes
And let my breasts sag
Words the weapon

to crucify.” (De Souza Prabhu)

But her efforts to restrict her womanly feelings and emotions sometimes make her voice ironic, satirical and harsh. Her attempt to prove herself as a boy does not fit her. And as a result she is called betrayer by her own feminine society. To some point her poems show there remains a conflict between her and her parents for whom she tries her best to give them happiness. In her ‘Forgive Me, Mother’, she is found in a rebellious mood and comment on her family and their procedures to rear a female child. Here she says to her mother,

“Forgive me, Mother,
that I left you
a life-long widow
old, alone
It was kill or die
And you got me anyway
I was never young
Now I’m old, alone.
In dreams

I hack you.” (Forgive Me, Mother)

Eunice de Souza’s poetry provides various themes as loss, alienation, lifelessness, identity crisis are seen there. She wants to de-center the so called patriarchal value system by coding and de-coding it. In this society full of cultural dominance, orthodox values and primitive foundations with hegemonic scheme, her poetry emerges as freedom fighter fighting for liberty, security for women. She is facing challenges and her poetry challenges the male structured codes, norms and values. What Mohanty says about feminism suits her poetry, “It is the intersections of the various networks of class, race, (hetero) sexuality, and nation, then, that position us as ‘women’. Herein lays a fundamental challenge for feminist analysis once it takes seriously the location and struggles of the Third World Women, and this challenge has implications for rewriting of all hegemonic history, not just the history of people and colour.” (Mohanty, 55) Her poetry raises the women question by decontextualising and displacing the subject and position of Indian women. Her poetry may be therefore interpreted from various perspectives as her poems sets a new trend and seeks new identity, discussion, appreciation and interpretation in socio-cultural and political

arena. Only by strength, biological and bio-cultural superiority, male society set rules for the other colonial subject. In her 'Sweet Sixteen', she shows this domination rather biasness, indifference towards the girl, someone's wife and mother:

"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
Onto her sleeveless dresses
The preacher thundered:
Never go with a man alone
Never alone
and even if you're engaged
only passionately kisses." (Sweet Sixteen)

Through her confessional mode, she shares everything with her readers and thus her local thinking in a global arena connects her with all the women facing same problems. Her poetry shows her anger towards the morality and social customs including the Goan Catholic community and on the other hand she feels sympathy, tenderness, compassion towards those marginalized, subdued and victimized women. Her silence and her rebelliousness are the two edged sword and two qualities of women. In her 'Women in Dutch Painting', She makes a comparison with real life experienced woman and woman found in the painting of Vermeer. Here she makes a critical analysis and appreciation of women with deep understanding. Here she employs her experience, contemporary society's attitude towards woman, patriarchal system:

"(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)

Her chief concern is only the woman and their life. In some poems she gives advice to them and also in some poems she criticizes them in order to change their follies. Whatever she has done that proves fruitful for woman. She is the victim of biased society but she not only shows her biasness towards society. Her poetry shows her bravery, her life principle, her undying optimism and optimistic pessimism to some extent. Actually a close association to her poetry shows her fractured emotion, frustrated relation, unfulfilled dream, isolation, aloofness and many other themes. Daruwalla once writes about her, "One is not consciousness 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) Her 'Advice to Women' is a poem where she

states the dryness of the lost tone with combative, resigns and friendly way. She wants to make the women aware about the pain they receive from others. Here her prime focus is on the otherness of 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.
Don't cuss out of the window
At their enemies
that stare of perpetual surprise
In those great green eyes
will teach you
to die alone." (Advice to Women)

In her 'Miss Louise', she throws light on woman's beauty and says that in youth a woman can even attract the most religious pious man like priest. A woman can do anything if she wants to do it and for this she needs freedom and liberation. It is a poem which at once satirizes on woman's destructive beauty and it is also a poem which shows woman's captivating power and her ability. Thus she is aware of her saying in this poem:

"Shaking her greying ringlets:
'My girl, I can't even
go to Church you know
I unsettle the priests
so completely. Only yesterday
that handsome Fr. Hans was saying,
'Miss Louise, I feel an arrow
through my heart.'" (Miss Louise)

Her way of expression often appears harsh. In her 'He Speaks', she shows the purity, loyalty and trust of a woman. An Ideal woman never leaves her husband even though she is neglected, rejected and hated by her dear ones. She wants to live with that person as her mind is not fluctuated like a man who says words of love to several women. Her poetry often wants to highlight a woman's need and desire in this patriarchal society. Thus her poem deals with several issues circulated with woman. In this poem she describes woman as, "...an affectionate/ creature and tried hard, poor dear, / but never quite made the grade." (He Speaks) In the same poem she shows the man's nature and a woman's loyalty:

"After that pathological display
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 realize I do this
with other women." (He Speaks)

Eunice de Souza's poetry sometimes shows harsh criticism but they are equally enjoyable. She comments on almost all the incidents in a woman's life. Naturally marriage comes under her scrutiny. She says that here marriages are only made. She shows this in 'Marriages Are Made'. Here she shows the orthodox Indian tradition of marriage market where brides are no better than cattle. Elena here is treated as a commodity and this commodity is examined from head to toe, from teeth to skin to see whether this commodity will fit to someone who will marriage her. Here the buyer is not examined but only the

commodity is examined and after acceptance it is used till ruination. Here she says:

“My cousin Elena
is to be married
the formalities
have been completed:
her family history examined
for T.B. and madness
her father declares solvent
her eyes examined for squints
her teeth for cavities
her stool for the possible
non-Brahmin worm.”(Marriages Are
Made)

She is also in some kind of dilemma and confusion. Almost all the postmodern Indian woman English poets feel this confusion, conflict and dilemma. She shows her dilemma openly and sometimes it is issuing out from what to follow by a woman and what she actually wants to. Her poems offer self examination, scrutiny, self observation and introspection. In her ‘de Souza Prabhu’, she tells that she has to use alien English language and the association to trans-culture makes him alien to her culture and language. After that she becomes experimental and this suits her best. Here she shows her anger over the Goan-Catholic society and her search for identity:

“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)

A woman always hankers after for peace, happiness, love and security. She wants to be dominated by someone else. Her poetry shows how woman finds rest and peace and like all other poets, she also takes shelter under the protection and guidance of the almighty. She is in an interrogative mood as she asks the god about her simple desires:

“God rocks, I’m a pilgrim
Tell me-
Where does the heart find rest?” (Pilgrim)

Actually the credit goes to the feminist writers without whom, the conditions of the women remain unknown before the world. Neeru Tandon once says, “With the rise of feminism in India in the seventies, the feminist sensibility could consider and confront the peculiarly feminine issues and experiences. It was essential to do so, because a large part of the feminine experience is out of reach of the male psyche and therefore an authentic and sensitive portrayal of the conflicts and traumas. In all their nuances, ambiguities and contradictions could be achieved only by women writers.” (Nair, 128). Her poetry ‘Eunice’ aptly follows this view as there one can clearly shows the confusion and conflict between self assertion and self isolation:

“the limbs keep flopping
the sawdust keeps popping
out of the gaps
out of the gaps
out of the gaps
sister.” (Eunice)

Conclusion:

In the concluding lines it can be said that Eunice de souza’s poetry offers two levels of meaning. On one hand she shows the suffering and humiliation of women and on the other hand the complexity and rebellious nature of them. A deconstructive reading of her poetry shows all these. Her dissatisfaction with the society, its rules, its attitude towards women and its gender discrimination makes her poetry confessional in tone, dualism in meaning and rebelliousness in nature. Her mode of expression often are satiric, ironic and bitterness in meaning as she is saturated, tired and irritated to see how a girl is treated to shape her and mould her to fit in this society. They are made stereotypical and they are bound to behave according to society. She is not like the early Indian English Women poets as she protests against the inequality of women both physically and mentally. Due to his inner anger, suppression, suffering, pain, oppression, humiliation and gender indiscrimination, she often becomes confessional in order to share her experience and also to get some relief. She takes stand for all the women through her poetry in order to give reaction against all these.

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