

The Prattle and the Pillar of the Church: The Many Selves of Eunice DeSouza

KUKKU XAVIER

Abstract: The paper reads Eunice de Souza's poetry alongside the trajectory that India as a nation has grown and come into its own. The ways that the personal becomes a testimonial for the political and the social is also of interest in the poems of de Souza. The imaginative elasticity of the poet that stretches to include the bio-participants beyond the human, is an interesting pointer to ways that poetry can bring about a more intense consciousness and inclusivity.

Keywords: Indian poetry in English, non-human participants, Eunice de Souza, A Necklace of Skulls, India, Nation and Imagination

Indian poetry in English has often been seen as a genre with a refracted genealogy. The imitative grooves struck by the early poets was seen to be continuing as more and more poets left Indian shores to pursue an education and then, a profession abroad. The need of the day was perceived as literature that sought to discuss the concerns of the nation in the diction of the common man. However, the poetry being written was often of a timbre that was more Western, more alien in its outlook and landscape. The tone suggested an outsider peering in or an insider who was far removed from the grit and dust of India.

But the fifties and sixties saw a turnaround in terms of the semantic and political expressions in poetry, wherein, themes, more Indian in nature, reflecting concerns about urbanization, identity crisis, social, cultural and regional cartographies began to make a strong impact. The personal became actively articulated and so did the regional aspects of Indian landscapes. These selves, increasingly fragmented, painted a picture of not just a person coming to terms with themselves but also that of a nation grappling with a multi-lingual past. This past, which was mostly imaginary, found itself in conflict with the heady

pace of a Nation that was trying to race to its destiny by rejecting any appendices of the colonial era.

The resultant disillusionment or disenfranchisement felt by sections of 'Indians' became a major theme in the poetry of the time.

Take for instance, Eunice de Souza's lines from *Catholic Mother* from her first collection of poems *Fix*

India will Suffer for

her Wicked Ways

(these Hindu buggers got no ethics) (3)

These words are often associated with those who saw themselves as culturally distinct from the vernacular India that emerged post-Independence. An India that had no place for the culturally, socially, linguistically liminal, whose ways of life reflected "unhomed" selves (Bhabha). The Anglo-Indians in particular, and the Parsis, often caricatured in Hindi cinema of the sixties and seventies, found themselves not factored in the participatory political developmental vocabulary of the time. The country that was divided along linguistic lines saw the formation and propagation of states that set forth their agenda of regional pride, regional literature and regional histories. But these were people without a nation- in that sense of the term. The image of the carousing Anglo-Indian, with their frequent mixing in of men at the end of sentences, the quintessential secretary or railroad worker, people of 'foreign origin'- and hence 'lax' morality- began to set in the Indian imagination with the rapidity of plaster of Paris. Films such as *Bobby*, *Julie*- which then went on to be made in quite a few Indian languages did not help the cause either.

The lack of political clout, the fading presence from public spheres of life, the incompatibility of life in a rapidly changing civil society created a yearning for a life that was rooted elsewhere, in a land where they would not be out of place, or to cluster in groups, seek comfort in numbers. Works such as *36 Chowringhee Lane*, the novels of Rohinton Mistry etc, with their sense of alienation, of fading histories being overtaken by

a bright, brave new world of many vernaculars or the energies of a new-born nation, flexing its muscles serve as testimonies.

To slot Eunice de Souza as a chronicler of this disenfranchisement and alienation is to be rather unjust and limited. Instead, one must consider her as a poet who brought to the page, the many selves, the many concerns about what it means to be alive in a world that is rapidly slipping away and taking with it, the stories, the people one knows and leaving in its place, memories that are complicated and labyrinthine.

In school

I clutched Sister Flora's skirt

and cried for my mother

who taught across the road.

Sister Flora is dead.

The school is still standing.

I am still learning

to cross the road.

The Road,

(for Deepak Ananth)

De Souza has constructed whole worlds out of these and other concerns, and is often called a confessional poet- along the lines of Plath and Das. The very associations that come with the word Confessional are problematic. The automatic assumption of a compelling impulse to speak up, to open up, be up close and personal pervades the word. The religious undertones of sin, atonement, expiation, salvation lend their own weight as well. The

confessional male poet is apparently different from the confessional female poet. Bruce King observes,

There are elements, whether formal, narrative distance or tonal, of self-protectiveness in the male poets. By contrast- the women poets—Kamala Das, de Souza and Silgado—increasingly strip away such self-protection and create a world of what appear direct self-revelations. The feeling of unmediated, freely associated expression is, of course deceiving. The poems of the women writers are in their own ways as well constructed as those of the male writers; but the constructions are different, since the women map a psychology of contradictions, humiliations and defeats rather than self-assertions and triumph. Their assertion is of the self in its more characteristic female roles in relationship to father, mother, social restrictions, love, marriage, underdogs, the poor and defeat. (134)

The problem with this statement is that it creates neat demarcations into which ‘women’ writers ought to place their works into. It is expected that their ‘confessional’ poems will be of a higher degree of excoriation and come from a place that is more deeply experiential and relative to their life stories. From a political feminist (is there any other kind?) perspective, it seems as though going the extra mile to extract the last bit of oneself to infuse one’s poetry with is what passes muster as poetry by ‘women’. The ‘male’ brings into his poetry, the sorrow of loss accompanied by street noises and political and philosophical musings. This assumption is laid to rest in the very intimate poetry of Jeet Thayil and Vijay Nambisan, among others, who are unafraid to reveal their vulnerabilities or at the very least, have the poetic courage to imagine the personal in very intimate terms.

Eunice de Souza is not a poet one can easily, dismissively categorise under ‘confessional, femalepoet’. She is many things at once. There is a very critical eye at work in the presentation of the everyday, the exotic and the erotic. The politics of her works originates in her ‘Goanness’- employed with the same devastating effect as the linguistic comedy of Nissim Ezekiel’s *Goodbye Party....and The Professor*. There is an intense consciousness of a sense of unfamiliarity in the Gaze directed towards and by others.

My students think it funny

that Daruwallas and de Souzas

should write poetry.

Poetry is faery lands forlorn.

Women writers Miss Austen

Only foreign men air their crotches.

(My Students, 17)

The reverse happens as well:

My Portuguese- bred aunt

picked up a clay shivalingam

one day and said:

Is this an ashtray?

No said the salesman,

This is our god.

(Conversation Piece, 14)

Says Bruce King,

The Goan satires were among her early poems in which she appears a nationalist; she rebelled against a stifling, crude religious and family upbringing by, in reaction, identifying with the poor, the Hindus and India. This stage was followed by a larger awareness in which, Hindu India, as well as the Goan community is repressive towards women. (157)

What must also be read into these exchanges is the preponderance of faith and the doubts it entails. De Souza comes through as a seeker who looks for a God as a question for the answers she has. The conventionalities of religion, the rituals and rigours of the religious

establishment do not appeal to her sense of the aesthetic as she looks under rocks and personal shrines, such as those belonging to Alleluia D'Souza.

‘May the bread turn to
scorpions,’ says the parish
priest. ‘The people miss mass
but not St. Antony’s.’
The bishop says, ‘Alleluia
is a good soul. She donated
a Frigidaire last year to the
orphanage.’

(St. Antony’s Shrine,10)

The pilgrims seeking God make their way through winding roads that start and end at the self- the figure of authority- the God rock- sits implacable, unmoving, answering prayers at will as he surveys the endless ant-queues that are his devotees. In Pilgrim she asks,

The red god rock
Watches all that passes.
He spoke once.
The blood-red boulders
Are his witness.
God rock, I’m a pilgrim.

Tell me—

Where does the heart find rest? (48)

This train of thought continues in God Rock where the questions of time, immortality, and the possibility of annihilation looms large over the seeming permanence that is all around us.

There's a continent moving

Under my feet, god rock.

In a million years

It will swallow the seas,

Spew out mountains,

Reduce this land

To a handful of gravel.

Give us a sign, god rock.

A city burns. (85)

The tone of the conversation- half supplication, half- conversation suggests an intimacy that is reminiscent of George Herbert's Collar. The god figure in his response seems grave, full of purpose, demanding and giving.

The idea of an ideal Christianity is something that de Souza explores towards an ironic effect. The intersecting lines of Church, the faithful and those clean, absolute lines that are drawn by people thanks to an absolute belief in their own righteousness make for a very acidic statement in terms of the ways they look at the human condition that is subjected to a judgmental, sanctimonious gaze. The word Christian, the ideals of charity, the clergy are

all looked at with an abiding sense of sadness at the shortness of the scope of their vision. de Souza seems regretful of people's narrowness as they interpret piety, devotion and God.

The poet mocks the unshakeable faith that is invested in the institutions of religion, as is seen from the case of Alleluia D'Souza. She regards Christ's bleeding heart with a mix of healthy skepticism and regret at the inability to claim a certain state of innocence which entails complete trust and thereby, security.

I wish I could be a

Wise Woman

smiling endlessly, vacuously

like a plastic flower,

saying, Child, learn from me.

(Bequest, 88)

The society that de Souza forms in the context of the Goan- Catholic permutation is also imbued with the same sense of devastating irony. The inability to comprehend vulnerability as they rush to conclusions and create a canopy of insularity is easily identifiable as that myopia which afflicts most Indian communities.

'Imagine, she hasn't visited her mother

for three days!'

'What kind of daughter.'

Simple Christian sentiments,

simply kindly people who

plait the neglected mother's hair,

fetch her a glass of milk,

ring the bell for recalcitrant nurses.

(General Ward, 89)

Of course, no mention of de Souza's Catholic poems can be complete without Catholic Mother with its acidic portrayal of the erasure of female autonomy in the meganarrative of religion. The foregrounding of the father-figure and his piety and dedication to the Church by sheer dint of number of members (seven children) he has contributed to the Parish is enough to elevate him to being the Pillar of the Church. The idea that the family- any Catholic family- but in particular, this proliferating one is representative of the Holy Family and is an objective correlative for a "Good Catholic Family" is delivered very kindly, innocuously and then blown to bits by the last line, "the pillar's wife/ says nothing" (3)

This sense of irony continues in *Feeding the Poor at Christmas* when the idea of the selfless giver and what charity means is examined ruthlessly under a microscope. The conversational tone of de Souza's poems, in particular in such poems brings the same powerful impact as Robert Browning's dramatic monologues. But it is *This Swine of Gadarene* that is extraordinary in its idea of autonomy. The poem speaks for those that are on the periphery of larger narratives where they are mere props or collateral damage. The poem is about a certain swine from Gadarene into which Christ drives in a demon. While the rest of the similarly possessed swine hurtle down a cliff, this swine decided to stop a while and eat a mouthful of grass. It places an entirely new perspective on the biblical idea of Free Will and also makes us take a re-look at the dispensability of the non-human in the Anthropocene world that we seem to be creating around us. The non-human or the human who is seen as less than some others are subjects that are subalternised by attaching a significance to the well-being of those humans who seem to 'matter more'. De Souza calls attention to the Word that announced that the world and all its treasures have been created for the pleasure of Man alone. The tarrying swine thus, is an act of the non-human writing back- a subversive reading of the way the entire herd is imagined to have leapt off the cliff uncomplainingly, just because it suited the Son of God.

Memory is a key component in the poems of de Souza- be it a communal memory- a memory shared by an entire community or a personal one, her words ring sharp and true.

The sense of loss that comes through steadily losing the grip on an existing, populated world- is presented in excruciating detail. The turbulence that often governs mother-daughter relations, the understanding that generally comes too late, the search for an absent father, the endless conversations in the head with a series of lovers- all are etched in painstaking detail. De Souza looks critically, dispassionately at old age, but it is the loss of memory that worries her- the fear of becoming a dotty old woman. These and other details occupy the landscape of her poems, especially those from *Dangerlok* and her later poems. The image of two parrots, pets to- presumably- the poet- serve as the ways that she deals with the questions of mortality, the narratives of personal spaces and the people who are authorized to lay claim to them-

Sometimes we compare notes

I talk about the parrots

She talks about her children.

She tells me little K cries for effect.

If I get home after dark, I tell her,

They look at me with sad, reproachful eyes.

(Pahari Parrots, 102)

There is a pervasive sense of the unsaid in the poem. A sense of peace that comes from parrots loving people just as children are to love their parents. De Souza doesn't distinguish between the idea of the biological heir and the non-biological one. As one who has written of searing losses- death of her parents, the sense of separation or disconnect that comes from growing up different in a community that insists on conformity and mind-numbing uniformity, de Souza very well understands the ways strange beings and unlikely souls can bond. She mentions one of the parrots returning after, possibly, flying away to survive on her own. She writes of the battered beak and how she rushes to feed it "offerings" of guava and melon. Be it the return of the prodigal son or the roving pet, they are all the same in the world of Eunice de Souza.

There is a very distinct line that can be drawn between Fix and her subsequent works. In her introduction to *A Necklace of Skulls*, Melanie Silgado talks of this progression,

In *Women in Dutch Painting* and *Ways of belonging*, she moves into a more introspective space, but no less challenging. She circles the self, offers advice peppered with the right amount of wit and spite..., writes love poems that bite.... ‘Songs of Innocence’... where she casts her net wide from banal kindergarten Bible study to the deeply moving foraging for ancestral roots to establish a sense of belonging. ...she could write about the minutiae of daily life and the vastness of the universe in the space of a few lines. (xvi)

The poems of Eunice de Souza ask us to reimagine the world very differently from the conventionalities that have come to characterize our ways of life. They ask us to re-read the complexities of relationships and exhort us to try changing the components that we consider essential to our identity. The usual familiar segmentals such as children, community, language, customs that we consider so essential towards defining who we are, are to her facets that can be reorganized, filled with new participants, come to include biologies that may not be human and still provide that sustaining life-force, Love. De Souza treats love quite unconventionally, bringing into it, a quiet dignity- a protagonist who refuses to yearn and pine, and instead seeks to be heard, to be recognised and addressed. Her love poems or rather, poems about love are conversational. The speaker deals with complicated questions of what can be said or must not be said in relationships, the censoring partner- who does not want their relationship to become a poem, the minimal need for words within a relationship that is complete and secure- these and similar themes give her poems the feel of a chronicle. They document the ways that lives unfold and progress from place to place and person to person. As she talks of the economy of words in a relationship, she points self-reflexively to the fact that her address to her love is anyway, “forty-eight words too many” (*Its Time to Find a Place*, 96)

De Souza is a poet who is shaped by the times that she grew up in- an age of transition for a nation that was trying to stand on its own feet. To be a poet of such a generation also obligates one to have a sense of history and a sensitivity towards the role that these shifting sands play in the language, vocabulary, expressions that the self uses to think and speak. De Souza responded to her time with economy, irony and a very critical eye that spared nothing. It was and still is what this nation needs- less rhetoric and more economy of speech and a lot of compassion towards bio-spheres that contain all manner of life.

Bibliography

(All poems quoted here are from the collection *A Necklace of Skulls*.)

Brady, Veronica. ““One Long Cry in the Dark”?: The Poetry of Eunice De Souza.” *Literature and Theology* 5.1 (1991): 101-23. Print.

King, Bruce Alvin. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford U, 2006. Print.

Sharma, Anju Bala, and Tanu Gupta. “Poetry of Loss and Self-Disgust: A Study of Eunice De Souza.” *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies* 1.7 (2014): 149-55. Print.

Souza, De Eunice. *A Necklace of Skulls: Collected Poems*. Penguin, 2019. Print.