

# Beating the Silence of Women through Poetry by Eunice de Souza

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**Abstract-** Eunice de Souza's feminist poems express a variety of themes as she reads out the hearts of the women suffering under the patriarchal society and are kept silent by it. Women, since the childhood to the old age, are not allowed to speak out their voice and choice at home and in the society. They are commanded to follow silently the coded norms built for them by the society. They are given no freedom of life and are treated as non-human beings. Women are sexually objectified by men and are treated as servants. They are kept silent bearing everything in their heart. Eunice de Souza presents the suppressed silence of the varieties of women with a great ambition of changing their suppressed life to freedom. She exposing the reasons behind the silence of women attempts to restructure a gender-free egalitarian beautiful society.

**Key Words-** Silence, gender, patriarchy, domination, power-play, commodity, objectified.

## Introduction

Woman is silenced by the society. She is adorned with the jewel of silence as the best element for her to fit in to the societal customs and traditions under patriarchy. She is taught by the family members at home and by others in the society to bear with everything silently without raising voice against it. The Indian society prefers the woman to live as a bejewelled, lace-draped puppet in the form of a daughter/wife/mother/grandmother. So, the woman is wrought with silence locking her pains and sufferings, angst and worries repressed in her heart. The woman is considered as the second sex and as inferior, and so, she is taken off all the rights of equality, even of speech, that man enjoys. Eunice de Souza (1940-2010), the postcolonial modern woman English poet reads out the sufferings of the women behind their silence and brings it to the notice of one and all in her poetry. To save women from such cage of silence, Eunice de Souza adopts her weapon of versifications to expose the hypocrisy of the man and the patriarchal culture that gets the sadistic pleasure of seeing woman silenced. She also uplifts the women through her poetry to be their own agent to speak out their own voice of joys and sorrows, pains and woes. Eunice adopts the feminist stance while excavating the silence of women in the society.

In India, a female child is un-welcome in the family and a son is excitingly awaited to be celebrated with its arrival. When the female child comes to know that she was unwanted in the family by her parents and they 'wanted a boy', it torments the little heart of the small child. In her childish brain, she tries to hide her womanhood by making her 'breasts sag' and hiding the bloodstains on her clothes to gratify her parents for their obsession of a son:

I heard it said  
 My parents wanted a boy,  
 I've 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”)

The female child ever since her childhood, is kept repressed to silence and is not allowed freedom to live as per her own choice and is imposed with the social norms and codes made for her. The biological process of a woman is not allowed to be uttered in public and the belongings to her also is considered a taboo and should not be discussed openly just as a nun screams at a girl of sixteen years old not to utter ‘menses’ and ‘brassieres’, but advises to adopt hypocrisy by using substitute coded words for the woman’s biological process and her belongings:

Mamas never mentioned menses.  
 A nun screamed: “You vulgar girl  
 don’t say brassieres  
 say bracelets”. (“Sweet Sixteen”)

In this context, Deepa Narayan’s experience can be reminisced when she finds from her interview with a hundreds of young women on their experience as a woman and becomes surprised to find that uttering ‘breasts’ or about the menstrual periods of women is still considered a taboo in the society and she writes in her book *Chup* in the following way:

Even today it is shocking to say aloud that women have breasts.....It is even more shocking for a girl to say aloud, ‘I have my period today’ even though every women bleeds every month for 30-40 years, starting from age 12 or younger. Girls’ bodies are desexed. Some parents go to extremes to deny their girls’ sexual bodies to keep them ‘safe’ from boys and men.(Narayan 131)

In the same poem, “Sweet Sixteen”, Eunice disposes the humiliated sixteen year old girl’s tormented heart who is not allowed to choose a dress of his choice from the wardrobe to put on. She is not allowed to put on sleeve-less dress and her arms are not allowed to be kept bare and so the bared arms of the

little girl are covered by the nun with paper sleeves. Again, she is commanded not to go alone with a man and not to share passionate kisses even with the fiancée:

She pinned paper sleeves

Onto our sleeveless dresses.

The preacher thundered:

Never go with a man alone

And even if you are engaged

Only passionless kisses (“Sweet Sixteen”).

The cultural code is taught to the female child from her very childhood to be abided with. Jasbir Jain also thinks the society to be responsible for such cultural codes meant for women and writes: Most cultures define women’s roles through their bodily behaviour, menstruation and puberty, chastity and marriage, procreative ability and power. Most societies have fostered their own varieties of conduct books. Majority of these have been written by men whether it be *Manu-Smriti* or *Perfecting Women*, or Rousseau’s *Emile*”(Jain xix). Deepa Narayan’s experience on women is also applicable here as what she finds out is expressed thus:

Being a woman is itself a taboo. Not allowed. Invisibility is our manifestation of this cultural training. One way of ensuring that women do not exist is to kill them. A safer and crude way is to train women to disappear. This helps explain the hundred of ordinary, everyday behaviours, proverbs and admonishments that are part of a cultural morass that sucks us all in to perpetuate a culture of non-existence for women. The idea that women should simply not exist explains the deep and persistent inequality between women and men despite laws, education, and wealth across many cultures (Narayan 8).

Eunice brings to the lime light how the young girls at the marriageable age too are repressed with silence, when the matrimonial negotiation process continues. They are not given the opportunity to choose their husbands. Rather they are used as if a commodity to be chosen thoroughly from the marriage market if they are having all the perfect qualities in them to be a befitting bride for a groom as is reflected in her poem, “Marriages are Made”. Cousin Elena is thoroughly scrutinised for the perfection of her height, colour, health, bank balance, and the background etc. criteria to see if she would be suitable “to do justice to /Francis X. Noronha Prabhu / Good son of mother Church” (“Marriages Are Made”). The same situation of suppressed silence of the young bride is again brought by Eunice in another of her poem, “Mrs.Hermione Gonsalvez”, where the very fair and beautiful Mrs.Gosalvez is given no option to choose her husband and is thwarted over to marry a devil looking dark coloured man:

how they married me to a dark man

on my own I wouldn't even have

looked at him ("Mrs.Gonsalvez").

Eunice is surprised to see that the creator of the female child, the mother herself can be so cruel to be partial towards the son; to save him from death she hides the son in a closet and spares the daughters to be killed, when the enemy Nazis came:

The perfect book is

One long cry in the dark.

A novelist said that,

Who spent his life wandering why, when the Nazis came,

His mother pushed him into a closet

And let his sisters go to Auschwitz ("Transcend Self", *WIDP*)

Eunice thinks such gender differentiation in the society pushes women to mental trauma and it should be abolished. The attempt of poets like Eunice de Souza to restructure the society with a gender-free egalitarian state makes Rashmi Bajaj write: The post-independent Indian English women poets have revealed an acute and painful awareness of this gender-generated crisis of being 'nothing, nobody, non-worthy' (Bajaj 1).

Through the portrayal of the women's silence, Eunice picturises the injustice of man committed towards woman, himself occupying the central supremacist position and marginalizing the women to a non-existent, 'the other' position. Eunice's display of such inferior and superior position of women and men respectively in the society is analogous to what Beauvoir writes:

.....even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man's, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage.... Economically, men and women almost form two castes; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages, and greater chances to succeed than their new female competitors; they occupy many more places in industry, in politics, and so forth, and they hold the most important positions(*TSS* 29-30).

Eunice has projected the suppressed silence of a spinster's inner mind, as she had dreamt of her marriage that she would descend the staircases as a bride in the midst of children in sailor suits and organza dresses. But, as the poem conveys that the women are not allowed to express the 'innards' to others and in case of Mrs.Gonsalvez, her dream 'rotted her innards' and her repressed silence left her as a spinster, leaving her with her marriage dream un-fulfilled:

She dreamt of descending

curving staircases ivory fan aflutter  
of children in sailor suits  
and organza dresses  
till the dream rotted her innards  
but no one knew:  
innards weren't permitted  
in her time. ("Miss Louise")

Woman as wife is also suppressed with silence, as Eunice has brought the picture through her poem "Women in Dutch Paintings", where she presents the women's faces silent as reflected in the sunrays. Seeing the silence of the women from the Dutch Painting, Eunice recollects some real women like an aunt, from her real life, who never answers back her husband and some other women who are left silent not because they are plain, but because they are pressurised to be silent:

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. ("Women in Dutch Painting")

Eunice is fierce fully ironic and cryptic to show how woman in the form of a wife is subjugated to silence given with no power and position to speak out her mind. She thinks woman is used by man as an object to satiate his sexual desire and portrays the sexual subjugation of man over woman to silence her in her poetry. For such power play of man over woman, Sally Haslanger defines the two gender, masculine and feminine in terms of "the dominant, privileged class of sex" and the other one as "subordinate" class (Hasl 39). Eunice delineates such domination of man over woman through her poem, portraying a rude, bossy, and dominant husband figure, ironically calling him, "Father of the year", who boasts to be the father of 'seven children' 'in seven years' as he makes his wife pregnant every year to meet the labour pain:

Francis X.D'Souza,  
Father of the year (1)

.....

By the Grace of God he says

we've had seven children

(in seven years).

We're One Big Happy Family

.....

The pillar's wife

Says nothing ("Catholic Mother").

Through the silence of 'the pillar's wife', Eunice speaks out a lot of repressed words of torments and pain of the woman who meets the labour pain every year for being sexually subjugated by her husband. For such literature of the women's writing, Luce Irigaray emphasises upon the feminist language of women to be different and so she suggests it to be read differently to hear the 'other meaning' behind the words the women writer weave. She says:

One must listen to her differently in order to hear an 'other meaning' which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized....Her statements are never identical to anything. Their distinguishing feature is its contiguity (Greene 87).

Eunice gives another example of woman being marginalized to silence in the poem "He Speaks". She attacks at man's supremacist ego for his monopoly over woman of doing anything and taking any action against woman for having extra-marital affairs, as he punishes the wife by firing her out from his life:

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 realise I do this

With other women .("He Speaks")

Eunice resembles to be carrying the same sort of experience that Simon de Beauvoir presents in her classic book, *The Second Sex* for man's power display over woman to put her to silence:



She should have sexual pleasure only in a generic form and not an individualized one; this results in two essential consequences that touch upon her erotic destiny. First, she has no right to sexual activity outside marriage; for both spouses, sexual congress becoming an institution, desire and pleasure are superseded by the interest of society; but man, as worker and citizen transcending toward the universal, can savor contingent pleasures prior to marriage and outside of married life: in any case, he finds satisfaction in other ways; but in a world where woman is essentially defined as female, she must be justified wholly as a female (TSS 514).

Eunice de Souza reads out the angst and suffering hidden behind the silence of women and in her poetry, she tells many a suppressed tales of the tortured women. So, Jasbir Jain writes: “women’s writing is the literature of silence. Its meaning lies enclosed and camouflaged. It is also the literature of silence for it seeks to express that which has been submerged and suppressed. Writing in itself, has always been an act of courage” (Jain 8).

In the name of culture woman is robbed off the rights to lead a normal life, when her husband is dead. The widow is to undergo very hard fastings and rituals and to maintain a stringent life style with either white or at best light coloured costume; she is prohibited from non-vegetarian food. She is again not allowed to attend the auspicious occasions as she herself is considered in-auspicious. Eunice exemplifies:

At family gatherings  
 my mother smiled  
 in her best faded chiffon  
 and travelled third  
 with her in-laws travelling first  
 in the same train (“One Man’s Poetry”, *Fix*)

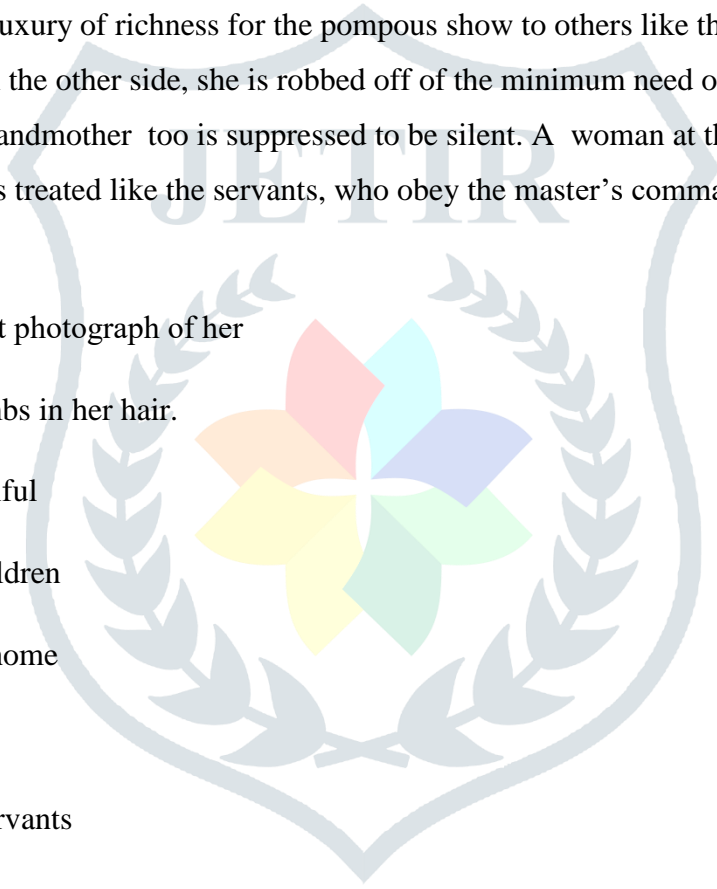
Eunice gives another example of a seventeen year old widow, named Padma, who is pushed to the state of silence allowing her to ‘crap only at night’ and by not to come out during the day time, when ‘the pure’ people are out. Eunice ironically uses the word, ‘pure’ to condemn the thought process of the society who thinks the widow to be impure and make her oppressed with silent bearing to all the dirty codes made for her:

Friend, the histories I know aren’t fit to print.  
 Remember Padma, widowed at seventeen,  
 Forbidden to see the sun for a year,  
 allowed out to crap only at night

when the pure were out of the way? (“Transcend Self, You Say”)

Eunice’s reading out the psyche of woman through her silence and presenting them in versification cannot be achieved as exactly as Eunice by any male writer even if he would be a master in words play to portray it. It is because she is a woman, she reads out the silent mind of a woman easily and presents it in her poetry exactly. Simon de Beauvoir’s analysis of the women’s capability in understanding women is truly what we find in Eunice as a poet: “Yet we know the feminine world more intimately than men do because our roots are in it; we grasp more immediately what the fact of being female means for a human being, and we care more about knowing it” (TSS 36).

Woman at every age is pressed to silence by man. She is not given the opportunity to speak even after reaching at the grand mother’s age. Eunice ironically presents the contrasting situation, where woman is given the privilege of the luxury of richness for the pompous show to others like the gold combs in the grandmother’s hair, but on the other side, she is robbed off of the minimum need of a human being, i.e, the right to speech. The grandmother too is suppressed to be silent. A woman at the grandmother age is not allowed to speak and is treated like the servants, who obey the master’s commands having no power to speak to him:



We’ve lost that photograph of her  
 With gold combs in her hair.  
 She was beautiful  
 bore seven children  
 and often ran home  
 to her mother.  
 She and the servants  
 spoke the same language  
 of silence (“Grandmother”).

Eunice’s presentation of the suppression of women to silence in the society is ironical. Ironically she expresses the wretched position of the women they live getting no opportunity to speak out their choice and for such suffocation, the grandmother ‘often ran home to her mother’. Bruce King observes very keenly the poetry of Eunice and writes: “Although de Souza’s poems arise out of alienation and the feeling that the life is a mess, they are also highly conscious of the situation and problems faced by women. This consciousness is expressed through understated irony rather than articulated comment” (King 158).



The silencing of women creates mental trauma to such a great extent that it makes them fierce fully revolutionary. The revengeful mind, which cannot do anything in the conscious mind because of the suppressed state of women in the patriarchal society, in dream, the daughter visualises hacking his mother:

“Forgive me mother// in dreams/ I hack you” (“Forgive me Mother”).

Eunice in her feminist stance attempts to free the women from the suppression of patriarchal domination and to uplift the women’s status fetching the freedom of life to lead by her own choice. Beating the silence of women in the society is just a cue to create awareness in one and all about the wretched and pathetic life a woman leads without being allowed to voice and choice. Her attempt to create awareness for women is anticipated to bring success.

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