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Gender Discrimination in the Poetry of Eunice de Souza

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Abstract:

Though since the second wave of feminism, struggle has been on the go to eliminate gender discrimination, it is still prevailing over India, where women are treated as the object of men and are assigned with inferior and marginalized position. Eunice de Souza brings forth her poetry to create awareness in the readers exposing the pitiable situations, women are put to under a society where the patriarchal culture reigns, discriminating between men and women and suspends the independence and autonomy of women. Eunice brings with it, the harmful effect of mental trauma the women undergo being victimised under gender discrimination and with the impositions of rigid restrictions over them.

Key Terms- gender, discrimination, inferior, marginalized, trauma, awareness.

Gender equality has still been an imaginary fruition in India. Female child is still unwelcome in a family, and female foetus is still aborted, though not officially in India. People's mind is not yet free from the biased mentality to think of the female child as a burden to the parents and the family. The second wave of feminism emphasized upon gender equality as a major demand to attribute equality between man and woman. Since then, feminist study has been striving to achieve gender equality, but has not yet been successful to achieve the full desired goal. The patriarchal society still positions man as the 'absolute' and woman as 'the other' (SS 25) and marginalizes women to a non-existential position in every sphere of life, creating lots of mental and physical trauma in them. Eunice de Souza (1940-2010), the agent of women's voice has taken up her pen to fight against this gender discrimination through her poetry to create awareness in both men and women to drop out this age old conventional concept and to consider women as the equally important half part of human society, trying to retrieve back with them their birth right of autonomy.

Preference of male child is dominantly spread all over India, may it be Eunice's Goan society or any other smaller or greater society. Eunice adopts her Goan society in a microcosm form standing for all the total Indian societies in macrocosm to reflect her own

childhood experience of the Goan society, where the level of gender works so strongly that the female child is robbed off of all the pleasures of life being tied to the societal restrictions imposed upon her and for the disapproval of a female child. For such reasons, Eunice feels herself to be one belonging to the 'lame ducks' group ever since she came to know that she was an unwanted female child of her parents. In such environment of "sexual prudery", "de Souza's childhood among the Goan community of Poona appears to have been a hell" (King 156). When Eunice came to know that her parents 'wanted a boy', in place of her, a daughter, she tried her best in her child brain to trick in to hide her female sexuality, to satisfy the parents, attempted to 'hid the bloodstains' on her clothes and letting her 'breasts sag' to get a masculine appearance:

I belong with the lame ducks
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. ("de Souza Prabhu")

Helene Cixous, the French feminist exhorts women to write the body, so that the body must be heard. But the female child in India is robbed off of her privilege of womanhood from her life just as Eunice had to ignore her womanhood to satisfy her parents' obsession for a male child. Such circumstances of discrimination of gender creates trauma in the female child so strongly affecting her that she barely gets the opportunity to feel and enjoy her youth.

Eunice de Souza complains that it is the role of gender in a society that privileges man to a superior position and woman to an inferior creating the feelings of marginalization in the women. Eunice's concept on gender resembles exactly with that of Simon de Beauvoir who says in *The Second Sex*: "one is not born woman, but becomes a woman"(Intro 14). To her, gender is social construct. Women are always consigned with inferior status, the central being occupied by men, as Beauvoir ironically says: "He is the Subject, he is the absolute-she is the other (SS 25).

Eunice too believes that in the name of gender from the very childhood, women are exploited being cut off with their freedom and are directed to grow according to the limited set code of manners made by the patriarchal society, and are commanded not to cross the boundary from the threshold, made by them. The girl child is taught with a separate manner under which her freedom to live freely, to behave and to dress up, to speak and to laugh is restricted. Eunice gives an example of her own childhood experience in the Goan society, where she is ‘screamed’ at by the nun and ‘thundered’ at by the preacher to stay away from the barricade made for her:

Mamas never mentioned menses.

A nun screamed: You vulgar girl

don’t say brassieres say bracelets.

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”)

Eunice becomes surprised to see that the women’s biology and the biological jargons too are prohibited to be uttered in the public. Reminiscing her childhood memory which once had humiliated her deeply for such utterance becomes rebellious and lets the world be acknowledged with the biased and unscientific concept of the society on women’s biology through her poem. A girl is commanded not to utter ‘menses’ and is directed not to say ‘brassiers’ but to replace it with a duplicate coded jargon “bracelet’ because brassiers belongs to the women’s under garments and anything belonging to a woman is still considered a taboo just as to utter ‘menses’ in public is a great sin. The sixteen year old girl is not allowed to keep the arms bare putting on sleeve-less dress, and so the nun ‘pinned paper sleeves’ onto their dresses to hide the bare arms of the female child. The sweetness of the sixteen years of a girl child gets trampled under the society’s coded manners of gender built for her debarring her to enjoy the sweetness of life. Eunice adds an ironical title to the poem “Sweet” to the age

'sixteen', to show that in reality, the sweetness of the teen age of 'sixteen' for a girl child is all the reverse, annihilated by the society's restrictions for her. She is thundered at by the preacher not to 'go with a man alone' and to share only 'passionless kisses' even with the fiancée. Beauvoir dismisses the social construct term 'femininity', through which the society compels the women to keep and stand by its norm forcibly over reigning her freedom to live freely and she writes:

Everyone agrees there are females in the human species; today, as in the past, they make up about half of humanity; and yet we are told that "femininity is in jeopardy"; we are urged, "Be women, stay women, become women." So not every female human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity (SS 23).

In the Indian society, the household domestic cores like cooking, serving cleaning, washing, embroidery, stitching, etc. are claimed to be complied by the woman/women of the family and they are taught from their childhood to acquire these so called feminine skills. Eunice has a satiric composition, to expose such enforcement of the society over women to acquire such feminine skills in the poem, "Eunice" in which the girl child is imposed to learn stitching against her inclination towards it and when she cannot comply it up to the mark of the embroidery teacher, the teacher taunts her so rudely that it hurts her child heart deeply, the traumatic mind of the little girl is caught for show in the following stanza:

Eunice, Embroidery Sister said

This petticoat you've cut

These seams

Are worthy of an elephant

My dear

Silly braless bitch ("Eunice")

The imposition of feminine skill over the small girl again reminds Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, where she exemplifies a generous mother's task to teach the daughter to acquire the feminine skill so that the society would accept her easily and her warnings is worthy to be quoted here:

And even a generous mother who sincerely wants the best for her child will, as a rule, think it wiser to make a “true woman” of her, as that is the way she will be best accepted by society.....her ears are filled with the treasures of feminine wisdom, feminine virtues are presented to her, she is taught cooking, sewing, and housework as well as how to dress, how to take care of her personal appearance, charm, and modesty; she is dressed in uncomfortable and fancy clothes that she has to take care of, her hair is done in complicated styles, posture is imposed on her: stand up straight, don’t walk like a duck; to be graceful, she has to repress spontaneous movements, she is told not to look like a tomboy, strenuous exercise is banned, she is forbidden to fight; in short, she is committed to becoming, like her elders, a servant and an idol.(343)

Eunice shows the repercussion of such feminine teachings of the mothers and impositions of the society turning over a tomboyish girl into a woman, as the girl, who once upon a time was a tomboyish, intrepid girl, confesses to have changed completely, in her words, what she says is:

Should I tell you, I wonder,

I was a burly little girl

Who knocked her sissy cousins down? (“Visit”)

Eunice becomes surprised to think that even a mother, who herself being a female can discriminate between her sons and daughters, prioritising the sons than the daughters, which is shown through her poem “Transcend Self”, where a mother hides her son in a ‘closet’ to save him with his life from being killed by the enemy Nazis, letting ‘his sisters’ meet the enemy Nazis to be killed:

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*)

Such discrimination of the mother shocks her so severely, that she gets affected with it mentally and it haunts in her dream, where she takes revenge upon her mother by hacking her. According to Freud and Lacan what the conscious mind cannot do is done in the subconscious in the form of dream or outburst or in a slip of tongue. Eunice’s rebellious mind hacks her mother in her dream.

Forgive me mother

.....

in dream

I hack you” (“Forgive me Mother”).

The revengeful attitude of a woman in Eunice’s poem, reminds Sylvia Plath’s poem, where exactly the same revenge attitude is shown by Plath towards her father:

Daddy I have had to kill you.

You died before I had time—

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one grey toe

Big as frisco seal (“Daddy”)

Eunice cites out at the society’s differentiation of gender even in the marriage system in India where two rules are made separately, one, with a disadvantageous position for the bride and another advantageous one for the groom during the negotiation of a sacred institution like marriage, which is considered to be union of two bodies and soul. When a bride is to be negotiated for a groom, the bride is thoroughly put under scrutiny for all perfections in her with her ‘family history’ to be examined for ‘TB and madness’, her father’s status is to be studied if he is ‘declared solvent’ or not, her full physique would be examined along with her ‘eyes’, ‘teeth’, ‘colour’ and ‘height’ to see if she would be suitable for the groom Francisco X. Noronha Prabhu as shown in the poem “Marriages are Made”. On the other hand, Eunice has given a contrasting theme, where through she shows that a woman as a bride’s willingness or unwillingness does not count at all when her matrimonial negotiation

is going to be materialized as in the poem, “Mrs Hermione Gonsalvez”, where it presents a very ‘fair and beautiful’ woman named Mrs Hermione Gonsalvez, who is married off by her parents to a ‘devil’ like ‘dark man’ against her will about whom Mrs Gonsalvez says:

Just look at my parents,
How they married me to a dark man
On my own I wouldn’t even have
Looked at him (“Mrs Hermione Gonsalvez”)

Rashmi Bajaj too becomes disappointed seeing such discrimination between man and woman in the society and voices her concern against such biased gender concept of the society and thinks that it must be dropped out to see a beautiful and egalitarian society and writes:

“India, with her skewed gender-ratio and increasing heinous crime and violence against women, stands much in need of such revolutionary and consciousness-raising literature which is instrumental in creating a gender_equal and egalitarian society” (Bajaj 1).

Eunice condemns the society that does not abandon even an elderly woman like a grandmother from victimising her to be a prey of gender, suppressing her voice as shown in the poem “Grandmother”, who too is assigned to a servant class and having no agency of her voice being spoken she runs ‘home to her mother’ at intervals. Eunice’s tone is sarcastic like Kamala Das’s for repressing a woman to the servant class identity, who is voiceless against all sort of injustices meted out with her:

She was often beautiful
bore seven children
and often ran home
to her mother.
She and the servants
spoke the same language

of silence (“Grandmother”).

The situation of woman, which was ‘vassal’ like in 1949 as Beauvoir has stated in 1949 in *The Second Sex* is still not improved much in giving woman her due position. Eunice points out that an aged woman like the grandmother too becomes the victim of gender and is still treated as low as a servant in the family. The position assigned to her by the family is no less than what Beauvoir by then had stated:

Now, woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, 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(29-30).

Eunice does not forget to show how deeply the repercussions of the over-riding restrictions of gender stamp works in the woman’s mind in her later life. The day a girl child gains her conscience, she is warned and alerted with all sorts of warnings and restrictions around her with lots of do’s and don’t do’s, which simultaneously leads her to nervousness and agoraphobia to face the world and the life. Eunice cites such a traumatic mind of a woman who is scared to encounter the real world and says:

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

In another poem, Eunice grasps a girl’s suppressed mind behind the gender trapped society’s full restrictions under which she is denied even to laugh and when after being grown up, she longs to laugh openly but what she observes is that in place of an open laugh there comes out ‘a nervous whinny’.

As I grow up
I longed only
To laugh easily.
All that emerged
Was a nervous whinny (“One Man’s Potry”)

In another poem, Eunice shows a girl to have never felt her youth due to the suppression of the society over her, who has the obsession for her lost youth under the trap of gender discrimination: in the society: “I was never young./Now I’m old alone”(“Forgive me Mother”). Eunice presents another victim of such suppression of the women in the Indian society is with a spinster Miss Louise who was not ‘permitted’ to speak out the ‘innards’ of her mind of her dream for marriage, because girls are restricted not to speak out their heart and mind’s content to others and as a result of this she is left as a spinster, and “is derided in her community as an eccentric spinster and humiliated for her unfulfilled dreams” (Mallewaramma 44). Miss Louise blames the society for her unfulfilled ‘rotten dream’ thus:

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”)

Eunice aims at ending such suppression of the women and extends her “compassion and sympathy for how they have been victimized by their conformity, passivity, illusions and acceptance of the behaviour expected of women” (King 157).

Eunice has a satirical composition to attack upon the society's condescending attitude towards the ability of writing poetry of the women writers of India and to their concept that 'only foreign men' can express on sexuality and writes it in her poem, "My Students":

My students think it funny
That Daruwallas and de Souzas
Should write poetry.
Poetry is a faery lands forlorn.
Women writers Miss Austen
Only foreign men air their crotches ("My Students").

Eunice de Souza projects her ambition of ending gender discrimination in the society through her poetry in various ways with the purpose of restructuring a beautiful new egalitarian society where the women would not be debarred from the privilege of living a free and independent life. Till that day, when women are not treated equally with men in the society, women will not be abandoned from the imposition by men and by the society and women would not be free from suppression and oppression and there would be no egalitarian beautiful society that Eunice dreams of.

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