

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

**Vol. 14 Issue-IV August 2023**

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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**ISSN 2278-9529**

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **A Critical Analysis of Eunice de Souza's *Women in Dutch Painting***

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**Article History:** Submitted-27/07/2023, Revised-20/08/2023, Accepted-21/08/2023, Published-31/08/2023.

### **Abstract:**

This research aims to extract the very essence of this short poem through different aspects. This study attempts to bring about the unexplored features of the poem. The three main subjects discussed in this article are Feminism, the Golden Age of Dutch Art and the correspondence between Art and Literature. The very common aspect of Feminism tries to figure out the uncommon ways of the feminist perspective used in the poetry. This research describes the way the women are portrayed in paintings. The Dutch Golden Age mainly deals with the tradition of Dutch art, the masterpieces and their masters. It is basically an introduction to the Dutch society. Furthermore, the link between Art and Literature is discussed. This link is elaborately discussed with examples.

**Keywords:** Art, Dutch Golden Age, Feminism, Literature, Vermeer.

### **Introduction:**

*Women in Dutch Painting* is a poetry by a renowned author named Eunice de Souza (August 1, 1940 – July 29, 2017). This poem is included in a book of the same name which was published in 1988. The other noteworthy literary pieces produced by her are *Fix* (1979), *Ways of Belonging* (1990), *Selected and New Poems* (1994), *Nine Indian Women Poets* (1997), *A Necklace of Skulls* (2009), *These My Words* (2012) and *Learn From The Almond Leaf* (2016). She was a poet, literary critic, novelist, editor, professor, actor and director.

*Women in Dutch Painting* is one of her numerous poems which deals with the subject of women, specifically regarding their condition in the society. It is a very short poem consisting of only eleven lines with no rhyme scheme. It is written in free verse. The speech used by the poetess is natural.

### **The poem as seen through the lens of Feminism:**

“Contemplating the images of women in the Dutch paintings, we inevitably arrive at the question of domesticity.” (Kwiatkowska 39)

From the Marxist point of view, Feminism is both, the base and superstructure of this poem.

Feminism is the basis of this poem. The poet of this poem is a poetess. The speaker of the poem in all probability is a female. The poem starts with this line- “The afternoon sun is on their faces.” (de Souza). Women working throughout the day for their families, instead of getting respect, are rewarded with negative comments. The tranquility witnessed on their faces even after working for hours without rest is often misunderstood as stupidity but that is sacrifice, the untold and unacknowledged sacrifice. Their calmness is their sacrificial nature. These women are skilful. They are really full of meaning. They are not naive, in sooth, they are taken for granted.

The aunt in the poem is showcased as a submissive wife as she never answers her husband back, this in turn tells us about her husband's oppressive persona. Not answering her husband back also reveals the psychological status of the women. Women possess a quality like that of Anna, i.e. they never lose hope. The speaker says that Anna writes poems. The speaker further adds that she (Anna) is full of optimism to witness the growth of avocado. The speaker also says that “Her voice is oatmeal and honey.” (de Souza). By using the words ‘oatmeal’ and ‘honey’, the speaker does not only admire the sweetness of her voice but also symbolises the healing power of her voice, as oats and honey together are considered as a superfood.

It cannot be said that it is a complete poem because the speaker who is a woman is reluctant to narrate the truth elaborately. After scrutinising the poem, it is concluded that the speaker does not speak directly, every word wants to say something, other than its literal meaning. The poem if read once is considered a eulogy for the women but when it is read over and over again it is realised that it is not a poetry of approbation rather indignation.

The poetess is a remarkable wordsmith. There is an impressive usage of a literary device called pun through the word 'pregnant' in the third line of the poem. Its literal meaning is expecting a baby, but the speaker also means that the woman is of a great significance.

The poem includes the names of three food items, namely, avocado, oatmeal and honey which proves that the speaker is a kitchen person, which again proves that the speaker is a lady because generally a woman stays in the kitchen for long hours, and it is reflected in the way the metaphors 'oatmeal' and 'honey' are used for describing Anna's voice.

The poem exhibits the stereotypical characterization of women, the characteristics are persevering, tolerant, acquiescent and most importantly hard-working. The bitter truth is, the peace on their faces that the readers can witness through their minds's eyes is nothing but an entente with their daily life conditions i.e. after suffering for a long time, their suffering does not affect them.

The speaker talks about only one male character i.e. her uncle. The feminine imagery used in the poem are 'kitchen' and 'pregnant'. The significance of such imagery is to let the readers know the kind of life lived by women, their nature and their position at home and in the society as well. These two images are chosen in a way that shows piercing analysis by the poetess. The poetess has markedly used these two images with the male point of view as men want or it can be said that they need, have or require women to take care of their house, here the term used for it is 'kitchen' and to fulfil their lust and reproduce their young ones, here the term used for it is 'pregnant'. In the second and third line of the poem, the speaker continuously clears the misinterpretation of the people about the nature of women. She distinctly clears up that women are not dumb creatures, their value in this world is of utter significance, it is just that they do not pretend it.

The visual depiction of the womenfolk doing their everyday domestic activities is praised i.e. the imitation of the 'real' life of the 'real' women is celebrated but the 'real' women are 'really' ignored. Women were to be seen and not heard. "Distinct gender roles were observed, especially in middle class families. While male members act as active participants of the economy and society, female members were expected to stay at home and administer household affairs. Hence, women are oftentimes presented in Dutch genre paintings in their social roles as housewives, mothers, maids, ladies or widows." (Franits) The paintings by Pieter de Hooch represent women only as the mothers with their children, such as "*Woman and Child*

*in a Courtyard, A Mother's Duty*" and many more. The Dutch paintings rarely possess the father-child relationship.

"Dutch genre scenes often present attractive young women, resplendent in shimmering satin, for the delectation of the viewer." (Sooke)

"Vermeer possibly acknowledged the tradition of "the maid as a sexual being". Kitchen maids were often portrayed in Dutch paintings and Literature as "Discreet objects of desire" and sexually threatening to the home." (Payne) In actuality, they were the prey to their lords.

One conclusion that can be drawn through this poem is that a woman's passivity is her biggest enemy. Her silence kills her. She needs to speak for herself, no one else would do it for her. Poetry is the expression of de Souza.

### **Dutch Golden Age:**

The year 1588 marked the establishment of the Dutch Republic and the formal commencement of its Golden Age. The Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, witnessed a tremendous age of creative accomplishment and so it is regarded as the Golden Age of Art.

Meritorious artists emerged during this age. The well-known artists of the age were Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Pieter de Hooch, Johannes Vermeer and the like. "The speaker of this poem talks about Vermeer's paintings." (Sharma) *The Milkmaid* (1658) made by him is one of his masterpieces. The artists represented their society exactly as it was.

"Vermeer included a depth of symbolism in his work" (Troolin) which could be clearly seen in this work of de Souza. "The introduction of quiet everyday scenes of life unfolding in private households, was among the most striking innovations of the Dutch Golden Age. Vermeer infused his scenes of daily life with layer upon layer of meaning. We come out with more questions than answers- and that's exciting. There is an intriguing mystery about *The Milkmaid* that keeps us coming back. In 1672, France invaded the Netherlands and Vermeer fell victim to the disastrous economic climate that followed. The art market collapsed overnight, and he would die just three years later, leaving behind a wife, 11 children, and enormous debts. His large family had to sell everything- just to survive. We cannot really say Vermeer was "forgotten" as he was never really known. Perhaps it is the quiet unassuming

nature of Vermeer's work, that means it took hundreds of years for him to even get noticed. Perhaps the world came to realise, that the quiet moments are often profound." (Payne)

### **Relationship between Literature and Art:**

Literature and Art are like the two sides of the same coin. They deal with the same situation but in different ways. Literature is a literary art and art is a visual literature. Both of them inspire each other. The writers and the painters both represent the society. Both of them are categorized under Aesthetics. Since time immemorial Literature and Art have been going hand in hand. According to the Marxist theory, Art and Literature, both form the parts of the superstructure of the society. Considering the connection between Art and Literature through a structuralist approach then it is like image follows words, or vice-versa. Both of them act as a medium of communication between the society and the self.

Art evokes emotions, Literature verbalises them. Literature also evokes emotions, Art paints it. Literature, if cannot be understood in a particular language, can be understood through Art. Art showcases the thing about which Literature speaks. Art and Literature help each other.

Art reflects the society in the form of figures. Literature reflects the society by naming those figures and inculcating emotions in them. Art helps us to understand the outer appearance of the people. Literature helps us to understand the inner state of the same people.

*Women in Dutch Painting* is basically an ekphrastic poem. The reality depicted by Johannes Vermeer in his paintings has inspired de Souza to create a literary piece.

There are literary texts which are completely based on artworks and artists. The literary texts as well as the paintings act as a mirror to the society. The writings possess play of words whereas the paintings possess play of colours.

The writers write in the praise of the Art. The writers and the painters are thoughtful and mindful. For instance, it is Dutch painters' consciously made paintings which resulted in this pensive poetry by de Souza. Both of their works spur questions in the minds of the readers and the viewers, forcing them to think.

Both of them also share genres, such as symbolism, absurdism and more. Painting and writing can be done as one's profession and for pleasure as well. Painting and writing are two ways of expressing emotions.

Without seeing the women in Dutch painting for real, everything could be understood. Such powerful is the expression of de Souza and so inspiring and provocative are the paintings. Literature and Art possess the ability of capturing the imagination.

Paintings help the viewers to "time travel back and catch a glimpse of what life was like" ("Jan Vermeer") when the paintings were created. Similarly, Literature acts as the testimony of the age when it was written. "Despite the fact that it has been theorized that *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665, Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands) was actually wearing a costume-jewellery earring of polished tin, this is Vermeer's most recognised and celebrated painting. The 'pearl' of her earring is, in fact, simply two brushstrokes, the lower one, reflecting her collar, a little darker than the other, and her mouth is slightly open, as if about to laugh or say something amusing. It was this look that inspired novelist Tracy Chevalier to write her book *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*, fictionalizing the relationship between Vermeer and his servant and model." ("Jan Vermeer") This is how art influences literature.

"De Souza, throughout her writings shows concerns for the plight of numerous Indian women across different social contexts: a maid, a daily wage worker or an isolated 'housewife'." (Agarwal) Similarly Pieter de Hooch's paintings such as *Maid with a Bucket and Broom in a Courtyard* and *A Woman and her Maid in a Courtyard* (1660) also deal with the women of different strata of the society.

In an interview by DNA India, she is asked about the poet that inspires her to which she replies that "Robert Browning for his *My Last Duchess* (1842) and all the things he left unsaid." (D'Souza) Again, the connection between Literature and Art is witnessed. This poem is based on the art and the artist. The poem begins with the description of the painting on the wall and ends with the description of a sculpture. The speaker of the poem praises the painting of his duchess as if it is living. Considering the latter part of de Souza's statement, it is mentioned earlier in this article that *Women in Dutch Painting* is an incomplete poem.

William Blake is a paragon of the relationship between Art and Literature as he is a great poet as well as a celebrated figure in the world of art.

The universality of the Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century inspired an Indian Catholic to write a poem in the twentieth century, the theme of both the works remaining unchanged.

The writings and the paintings create psychological complexity in the minds of the readers and viewers respectively. The more it is created the more they dwell on.

The paintings of Vermeer are small in size and the poetries of de Souza are also small in size but both of their works have a colossal impact. The silence in both of their works is not normal rather a deafening silence. The so-called peace in their works is the peace before the war.

*Women in Dutch Painting*, though a short poem but speaks more than a thousand words, just like a painting. “A thousand words leave not the same deep impression as does a single deed.” (Baldwin) It is a saying about the Art by a writer named Henrik Ibsen.

“poets and painters have taught the mysterious loveliness of such effects... They did not exist till Art had invented them.” (Wilde)

“Painters express their admiration of Literature through artworks and this is how Literature meets Painting. Since antiquity, literature has inspired painters to pick up the brush and retell a story with lines and colours. Greek and Roman mythology, the Bible, and other holy books are the most widespread sources of references for painters. European churches and cathedrals are a living statement of how much biblical stories have influenced painting and Art in general (and still do). However, mythology and holy books were not the only sources of literary inspiration for paintings. Poems have also been a genre that sparked great works in the history of figurative arts. Dante’s *Inferno*, from *Divine Comedy*, an epic poem that tells the journey of Dante through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, during which he meets his so beloved Beatrice, is a book that inspired many artists. From the original poem’s illustrations to later paintings in different styles and techniques, *Divine Comedy* is a noteworthy example of a literary masterpiece that inspired many great artistic works.” (Bensouda)

The examples of literary works that are completely based on the artworks and its artists are *The Oval Portrait*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Da Vinci Code* and the like.

“Life is an Art” and this is portrayed in Literature. Art and Literature complement each other. Art and Literature complete each other.

### **Conclusion:**

Hence, this short poem by de Souza holds a significant position in the Indian English Poetry. Its simplicity paves its way to excellence. It is indeed a feminist poem. The feminist characteristics discussed above act as its evidences. The Dutch Golden Age was an era of utter prosperity. It was golden in every aspect as the Dutch society flourished economically, culturally and scientifically. The connection between Art and Literature is not artificial and so unbreakable. Their bond keeps humanity alive. Thus, this poem is of great value. As its themes, irrespective of its time and geography, is read, understood and felt by the readers.

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