



The Self and the Mother in the Poetry of Eunice De Souza

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Abstract:

The paradigms of gender, family, and ageing began shifting in the late twentieth century due to social, theoretical, and technological changes in a globalised world. In India, where ‘family’ and ‘motherhood’ are idealised, literary explorations of parental ties started in the post-independence period. The mother-child relationship thus became central to feminist-psychoanalytic and gerontological inquiry. This paper applies feminist psychoanalysis and gerontology, drawing on Nancy Friday, Nancy Chodorow, and K.L. Fingerman, to examine the mother-daughter dyad in Eunice De Souza’s *A Necklace of Skulls* (2009). Through close reading, it analyses psychological bonding and unresolved conflicts shaping the daughter’s subjectivity, alongside shifts caused by ageing, social expectations, and caregiving roles. The paper argues that the daughter connects to the mother not only through developmental stages like the oedipal phase, but throughout her life, where the mother expects the daughter to assume the role of caregiver.

Keywords: ageing, Indian poetry, caregiving, motherhood, feminist psychoanalysis.

Introduction

Eunice De Souza's poetry offers a nuanced portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship embedded within the Indian patriarchal society and Catholic belief system. Other primary family members are absent in her poetic confessions which makes the mother figure a central and overpowering presence in her writing. Eunice De Souza's poetry is popular for its confessional style and feminist themes; it is introspective and captures the female self within the family and society. However, the vital role of the mother in her poetic creation is not yet explored within the context of selfhood, motherhood, and caregiving even though these concerns are explicitly visible in her work. This paper is going to adopt an interdisciplinary approach for a comprehensive examination of the mother-daughter relationship, considering both its profound psychological roots and its evolution within the social and temporal contexts of ageing and familial responsibility. It will borrow the theoretical contributions of relevant feminist psychoanalysts and gerontologists.

Nancy Chodorow extends the feminist psychoanalytic tradition towards the aspect of motherhood in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Chodorow brings forth the issue of mothering and its reproduction as a result of the interaction of the mother-daughter dyad, in addition to the biological, social and psychological development of the child. There is a linear transmission of this idea of womanhood passed through generations of mothers and daughters. Nancy Friday conceptualises the emotions of guilt, fear, anxiety, and envy in women in her personal account of this experience of the self through an understanding of the mother-daughter relationship. The feminine psychology is conflicted largely due to their primary relationship with the mother that goes unnoticed, given the belief that mother's love is "not open to error...or ambivalence" (Friday 2). Gerontologists have introduced a new way of analyzing the mother

daughter dynamic as a center of family and kinship ties. Women are conveniently endowed with most of caregiving and nurturing roles in society, so they accept the ‘maternal instinct’ as natural. Karen L. Fingerman has extensively dealt with the social, cultural, and psychological ways in which women relates to their mothers and daughters during different phases of life.

The central purpose of this research is to analyse Eunice De Souza's intricate portrayal of the ambivalent yet strong connection between mothers and daughters in *A Necklace of Skulls*. It demonstrates the crucial role this maternal bond plays in shaping the daughter's identity and poetic persona, extending beyond early developmental stages to encompass the complexities of adulthood and old age, where societal expectations often place the daughter in the role of caregiver. Through close readings of relevant poems, the analysis will explore the psychological intricacies of attachment, separation, and the internalisation of maternal influence (informed by feminist psychoanalysis), as well as the changing dynamics influenced by ageing, societal norms, and the assumption of caregiving responsibilities in later life (informed by gerontology).

The major poems considered for analysis are— “Forgive Me, Mother”, “She and I”, “The Road”, “General Ward”, “De Souza Prabhu”, “For a Child, Not Clever”, “One Man’s Poetry”, and a few others quoted when required.

This study argues that De Souza's poetry reveals the enduring and often complex psychological connection between mother and daughter, shaped by early experiences and the ongoing negotiation of individual identities. It also posits that the poems articulate the inherent ambivalence within this relationship in the form of deep affection and underlying tensions which significantly influences the daughter's evolving sense of self. The analysis demonstrates how De Souza's work critically engages with the societal expectations placed upon daughters as

caregivers for their ageing mothers, exploring the emotional and psychological burdens associated with this role and potentially revealing instances of resistance or negotiation of these expectations within the poems.

Literature Review

The landscape of Indian poetry in English by women has undergone a significant evolution. Initially, the field lacked a distinct thematic or stylistic identity, often reflecting the disparate interests of various writing circles. A tendency among early female poets, like Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt, was to follow the sentimental and romantic modes favoured by their British contemporaries, as B.K. Das notes, there was “no convention to follow” so many Indian-English poets followed their immediate predecessors and contemporaries, that led to tentative new beginnings instead of building upon a long-standing convention (105). This early phase of the 1950s often saw poetry adhering to somewhat conventional, externally derived models without a personal voice.

The subsequent decades witnessed a profound transformation towards an introspective and realistic engagement with the lived experiences of women. This new feminist consciousness, partly inspired by Western movements, was deeply rooted in the Indian social realities. It encouraged the poets to delve into previously overlooked themes: patriarchal oppression, feelings of alienation, the complexities of self-revelation, explorations of female sexuality, and the intricate dynamics of familial relationships. The 1970s marked a pivotal moment with the emergence of powerful voices like Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, and Eunice De' Souza among others. Their collective presence began to shape what Vinay Dharwadker describes as a discernible “look of community of women poets” (229) trying to articulate a female subjectivity.

Central to this new wave was the foregrounding of the female voice, often articulated through a potent and assertive "I". Kamala Das pioneered this intensely personal mode, and poets like Eunice De' Souza followed, making female subjectivity a primary locus of poetic exploration. Pashupati Jha emphasises the significance of this assertive self, contrasting it sharply with the reticence or denial of self often found in earlier women poets. He characterises De' Souza's work as possessing a striking rawness, highlighting a crucial transition within Indian women's poetry from attitudes of "subordination and submission" towards postures of "assertion and independence." (226).

This newfound emphasis on the personal, the candid "I," and the frequent blurring of lines between the poet's life and the speaker's voice led commentators to categorise much of De Souza's work as 'confessional'. Bruce King explicitly draws parallels between De Souza and Sylvia Plath, noting their shared thematic territory, which includes critical examinations of the church, marriage, and motherhood (156). Expanding on this connection, Anju Bala, in her comparative analysis, observes that confessional poetry serves as a potent "medium to carry out both love and hate feelings" (162). Bala suggests this genre is particularly adept at capturing the profound ambivalence inherent within intimate bonds, especially parental ones. Veronica Brady further enriches the understanding of De' Souza's 'confessionalism' by embedding it within her specific Roman Catholic background. Brady argues that while De' Souza's poems are undeniably personal and intimate, they also resonate with broader, familiar anxieties and challenges faced by modern individuals navigating life within potentially oppressive social and religious communities. As a result, the personal, in this context, becomes universally relatable.

Building upon these analyses, scholars began to explore the deeper psycho-social dimensions of women's experiences as depicted in the poetry. C.T. Nair, for instance, examines

the psychosocial subjugation women face, highlighting how the female self often becomes a site of intense conflict, shaped and constrained by intersecting patriarchal, religious, and familial structures of oppression. Kanwar Dinesh Singh significantly advanced this line of inquiry, moving beyond purely feminist or confessional readings towards a psychoanalytic framework. In his comparative study, *Contemporary Indian English Poetry: Comparing Male and Female Voices*, Singh underscores the crucial role of women poets in unveiling the intricate complexities of the female psyche, particularly their often "ambivalent attitude towards man-woman relationships" ("Introduction" 8). Notably, Singh's scholarship was among the first to explicitly highlight the intense, often "subliminal" nature of the mother-child bond, contrasting it with the relatively peripheral position frequently accorded to the father figure in these poetic explorations ("Cords of Family" 56). In "Modern Indian Women Poets: The Feminist Phase", Singh remarks that sometimes the mother figure can be implicated in the daughter-poet's identity crisis, suggesting that a mother's perceived indifference might contribute to the daughter's struggle with or suppression of her own emerging femininity.

While Singh focused on the psychological weight of the maternal bond, other scholars have touched upon related aspects of De Souza's work. Renate Papke noted De Souza's generally tender and sympathetic treatment of children, which is contradictory to her simultaneous resistance to any sentimental glorification of childhood and motherhood. As this apparent contradiction invites further consideration, Joana Passos offers a potential explanation in her essay "Women's World's in Women's words: Poetry and Memory in Vimla Devi and Eunice De Souza". Passos observes that within De' Souza's poetic world, the family can emerge as a "selfish presence", imposing expectations and demanding the daughter conform to traditional roles, specifically including the often-burdensome role of caregiver to her mother. Passos's analysis is

insightful in identifying this dynamic, but it stops at recognising the existence of this demand, leaving the complex emotional and psychological ramifications largely unexplored.

It is precisely this underexplored terrain – the intricate, ambivalent, and deeply formative mother-daughter relationship, also concerning the dynamic of caregiving – that this research intends to investigate further within the poetry of Eunice De' Souza. The study aims to demonstrate the vital role this maternal bond plays in shaping the identity of the female poet and her poetic persona. Although numerous works of literature have been dealing with this theme, there is a lack of critical intervention of Indian scholars in analyzing the mother-daughter relationship. So the study will employ a feminist psychoanalytic framework drawing primarily on the foundational work of Nancy Chodorow and Nancy Friday, whose theories emphasise the centrality and unique characteristics of the mother-daughter dyad.

K.L. Fingerman's study, *Aging Mothers and Their Adult Daughters: A Study in Mixed Emotions* (2001) will also serve as a key theoretical anchor in the paper. Fingerman's research on the lived experiences of women in these roles later in life provides a nuanced lens applicable to De' Souza's depictions. A significant facet of this later-life dynamic, frequently highlighted in De' Souza's poems, is the emergence of the daughter's role as caregiver. This study will analyse the complexity introduced by this responsibility within the specific context of De Souza's cultural milieu of Indian society and her Goan Catholic heritage. The analysis will potentially draw upon the Judeo-Christian background of the poet that informs concepts of familial duty and 'caregiving'. By integrating these theoretical frameworks and contextual layers, this paper seeks to offer a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the profound and often fraught mother-daughter relationship articulated in Eunice De' Souza's powerful poetry.

The Evolution of the Self

“infancy and grand passions
are exhausting modes of seeing”

—Eunice De Souza, “And She Lived Happily”

The poetry of Eunice de Souza depicts the evolution of a daughter’s perspective as she transitions through different stages of life. She begins with a traumatic memory of her father passing away when she was three and her resentment towards a mother who burdened her with expectations. Chodorow identifies women’s mothering as an act of “feminine role training” (31) that should prepare the child to embrace her identity as a woman, but the daughter feel insufficient from the beginning. In the poem “For a Child, Not Clever”, the mother projects her anxieties on her young daughter who claims “you have pierced me with your pain” (Souza 15) but she still accepts her fate as the one her mother seeks. The mother is closer to the daughter as she will be the true heir of her ‘femaleness’ and ‘womanhood’, yet this identification does not guarantee the glorified love of the mother. From a young age, when the sense of self is still developing, daughters are constantly reminded of their inferior position through the (sometimes unconscious) projection of the mother.

In “De Souza Prabhu”, the line “my parents wanted a boy” (Souza 16) further alienates the daughter from her mother as she realises that being like her mother does not work to her advantage. Evidently, the mother’s self-fulfilling wish of “trying to perfect this little female picture of herself” causes the daughter’s identity crisis (Friday 70). The female self enters in a constant state of self-depreciation for the mother’s unconditional love. So, from the earliest

memories of this mother-daughter relationship, the girl child takes on the arduous task of pleasing the mother, who in reality is never truly pleased as she is shackled in a patriarchal and orthodox society. As a response to this failure, the daughter starts to suppress her 'femininity' by hiding the bloodstains on her clothes (Souza 18-19) instead of asserting her identity. With the daughter's growth, the understanding between the mother and the daughter reaches a new recognition accompanied by more complex emotions.

Recognising the Mother as a Multi-faceted Individual

I am afraid
for her, for myself,
but can say nothing

— Eunice De Souza, "She and I"

The younger self only identifies with the mother as an extension of itself, as "the primary love-object", a source of nurturing as well as of separation anxiety. When the self accepts its own individuality, it struggles to maintain it against the overwhelming love of the mother as she also starts to appear as a complex individual. Eunice De Souza depicts this dynamic of an adult daughter looking towards her mother from a different perspective, seeing her as an individual with their own life, emotions, and relationships.

In the poem "She and I", the daughter is attempting to showcase both the mother and herself as individuals, although they share the grief but not the ways of mourning. Not only the daughter is detaching herself from the idealized mother, but the mother is also seeing the daughter in a new light as she can confide in her daughter to tell "his jokes, his stories" (Souza 6-7). As Fingerman observes in her book, "a mother's stories about the past are a consistent part of

the mother/daughter relationship” (61); however, they only begin after the daughter has reached a certain age. As the daughter reaches maturity, the mother begins to see her as someone she can confide in. The daughter might think she is free from the need of the mother, but the connection has only strengthened into a state of interdependence. For the daughter, the realization of individuality does not translate to the resolution of separation anxiety instead it adds another fear of losing this selfhood and merging into her mother. Nevertheless, the daughter cannot help becoming her “mother’s protector...to protect *herself*” (Friday 29). The justification of this act lies in the lines “I am afraid/ for her, for myself” (Souza 11-12). Gradually, the daughter is becoming aware of her mother’s vulnerabilities and also her own incapacity to protect her.

In “One Man’s Poetry”, she depicts the guilt her mother has felt after the passing of her father as she “never forgave herself/ for being asleep/ the night he died.” (Souza 14-16). It is interesting to see how her father’s death is also associated with her mother’s pain; this supports the claim that the “relation to the mother informs a person’s internal and external relational stance” (Chodorow 79). The daughter generally relates to their family members, their lovers, or even their father from her mother’s point of view. The consequences of such a relational dynamic are further studied below in the following sections.

Convergence of identities

I was never young.

Now I am old and alone.

— Eunice De Souza, “Forgive Me, Mother”

The elementary justification for the numerous debates associated with the similarities of women across generations lies in the gender approach. On the other hand, the psychological

closeness of these two individual entities arises from a social cause, as Fingerman calls it the “role convergence” (83). De Souza transforms through her poetry from a resentful child to a companion, who tries to understand the emotional complexity of the mother as a person to care for. Just like a middle aged woman, she becomes aware of her mother’s ageing (Fingerman 10) followed by her filial obligation as per the Judeo-Christian tradition, social expectations, and morality in the Indian context.

In her poem “General Ward”, the daughter is scrutinized by strangers saying “Imagine she hasn’t visited her mother/ for three days” (Souza 1-2) as she is unable to uphold even the “Simple Christian sentiments” (Souza 4). Scholar Sarah-Vaughan Brakman observes in her study of adult daughter caregivers how “women’s roles have changed, societal expectations have not changed” as we see in De Souza’s poetry. If a daughter fails to care for her mother, she is a subject of constant “guilt trip, the guilt whip” (Souza 11), whereas a son is not treated the same, and it is considered as a “moral failing for the daughter” (Brakman 27). Although the mother–daughter dynamic shifts with age, mixed emotions remain as she becomes aware of her own mortality and begins projecting her fears onto her mother.

The convergence of identity with the mother arises from the daughter’s desire to take care of her. Friday argues that the term ‘maternal instinct’ is just ‘taking care of’ (32) which explain why the responsibility and expectation of caregiving falls on women more ‘naturally’. Hence, De Souza descends into guilt directed towards her mother due to her incapacity in fulfilling her filial obligation as expected by her religious, social, and biological positioning. Evidently, in her poem “Forgive Me, Mother”, the poet is not afraid to recount her life as similar to her mother’s:

Forgive Me, Mother

That I left you
 A life-long widow
 Old, alone (Souza lines 1-4)

Here, grief consumes the daughter because her mother is unhappy and she blames herself for her father's death. The daughter is ready to merge her own life with her mother in an attempt to make her life feel better. Still like a child, she seeks to please and validate the mother, however, it is not the infant's love but "as we get older introjections gathers momentum" because becoming like her "overcomes our separation anxieties" (Friday 389). Introjection is a coping mechanism for the daughter, unlike role-modeling, that goes on for their whole life even if they never see the mother. De Souza's lines "I was never young/ Now I'm old, alone" (9-10) depict the daughter's conscious choice to repeat her mother's life. The presence of the mother never leaves the daughter, even when she herself is old. The demanding and rebellious tone of daughter shifts towards an effort of understanding and even her dreams become a way of connecting to the mother (Souza 11-12).

Ambivalence towards the role of a Caregiver

The Neglected Mother smiles at me
 to pull me into the circle of sympathy.

— Eunice De Souza, "General Ward"

Eunice De Souza's relationship with her mother is filled with ambivalence and fundamentally conflicted due to its symbiotic characteristics. In formative years, the child's "primary affectional object" is the mother who "interacts in some intense and strong way with it"

(Chodorow 72). The intense emotions and dependency give rise to separation anxiety from the mother, turning the same person into a source of negative as well as positive impact. As we have discussed earlier, the daughter desires to protect her mother and validate her life, but she is unable to dedicate herself completely to this role. The ‘filial obligation’ of caregiving that falls on the daughter is often neglected or overtly rejected by her. De Souza, in her poem “The Road”, keeps her stance in favour of the daughter in the lines “they said, your mother is lonely/ Nobody said, even the young must live” (13-14).

Similarly, in “Remember Medusa?”, the poetic persona asserts the absence of love and incapability of nurturing, which is considered as natural for a woman— “Remember Medusa,/ who could not love/ even herself?” (Souza 6-8) It is evident that De Souza is conscious of her responsibilities as a daughter and a woman but she chooses to refrain from being the ‘wise woman’. Throughout her poetry, she presents herself as someone who is not able to live up to the standards of being a woman and a daughter as both are recognized by their nurturing values or the glorified ‘maternal instinct’. The ‘maternal’ is ever present in the life of a woman and its most significant manifestation, our own mother, becomes the source of conflict, ambivalence, and anxiety within the identity of both the women. So the female self comes across as a collection of experiences that are mostly linked to the mother, and the perspective gained through them shapes the internal as well as the external world of the woman.

Conclusion

Eunice de Souza’s poetry offers a poignant exploration of the evolving mother-daughter relationship, tracing a trajectory from early resentment and identity crisis to a complex understanding marked by lifelong interdependence and negotiation with the filial obligation. A

sense of inadequacy and the weight of expectations are responsible for the daughter's initial perception of her mother, a dynamic rooted in societal pressures and the mother's own internalised struggles. As the daughter matures, she begins to recognise her mother as a multi-faceted individual, grappling with her own grief and vulnerabilities, fostering a newfound yet complicated sense of empathy.

The convergence of identities emerges as the daughter confronts her mother's ageing and the societal expectations of female caregiving. It is not a seamless merging but rather a process riddled with guilt and an awareness of her own mortality, leading to an introjective identification with the mother as a coping mechanism. However, De Souza's work resists a simplistic portrayal of an ever-loving mother; it highlights the daughter's ambivalence towards the caregiver role and the whole relationship. Her poetry consciously refuses to conform to idealized notions of feminine nurturing, asserting the daughter's individual needs even when this leads to guilt. Ultimately, De Souza's poetic narrative reveals the enduringly complex and often conflicted nature of the mother-daughter bond, navigating the intricate terrain of separation, connection, and the weight of societal expectations across a woman's life.

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