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Unique Form in Eunice de Souza's Poetry

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Abstract

The conception of identity in de Souza's poems has a trajectory which moves from the concrete to the abstract. She is able to create a space and a poetic idiom which can connect different aspects of identity in an abstract philosophical sense as well as within the concrete frameworks of gender, religion, and nation. An individual's identity has mainly two dimensions – the cultural and the ontological; and, it represent two directions of quest that one has to make in order to define oneself. The cultural world that one inhabits has a separate existence of its own. Language is one of the tools available for an individual to locate oneself within that world. For Eunice de Souza, creativity is a constant process of re-defining the world and re-locating herself within it. The lack of 'consistency of character' becomes multi-dimensional in her later poems. While in her earlier poems, the plurality of identity is a strategy she adopts to negotiate with the external world, in her later poems it becomes the basic reality of her inner world. The focus of these poems is on the interiority of human existence. When de Souza speaks about an 'inner void' in the poem, "Monsoon Journey", her tone resonates with mysticism. The expression of the interior dimension of 'self', demands a new idiom because it exists in a world of its own which can at times be completely detached from the outside world. Eunice de Souza negotiates the space by constantly being in dialogue with three prominent identity markers- gender, religion and nation. By de-constructing the conceptions regarding these, de Souza unloads the cultural baggage she inherits. Through her poems, she identifies the vacousness of these structures and replaces them with the enigma of the most private spaces of her identity as a woman. In this sense, her poetry becomes a mask, a powerful subterfuge with the help of which she creates a disturbingly unique poetic persona through which she attempts to come to grips with trouble and turmoil in the outer world. As Adil Jussawalla – her fellow poet and contemporary – aptly observes, (de Souza's poetry) bears the stamp of today's terrible pain, endurance attempted now. On each page it blazons freshly. She makes no attempt to make us like or pity the persona and yet we find ourselves respecting it deeply

Key Words: New Indian Poetry, Imagist Form, Poet Persona, Religion

New Indian poetry in English has increasingly displayed an urge to move away from the consciousness and uncertainty resulting from the use of the English language. In New Indian poetry, one can detect a confident 'Indianization' of the English language in terms of the manner in which expressions, idioms and syntax are

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deployed. Such a usage comes closer to the evocation of native modes of thought, rather than the display of a 'foreign' sensibility due to the use of a 'foreign' language. Instead, most of the poetry written in the late twentieth century engaged with the aspect of technique and expression in poetry. In Modern Indian Poetry in English (2001), Bruce King points out that the American influence on Indian English poetry in the mid '60s led to the creation of a poetic voice that was less formal and more direct. Such a stance relied more on the immediate experience that the senses impart, rather than on didacticism. As such, it was geared towards expressing experiences differently.

It is the impact of such developments on the form deployed by Eunice de Souza in her poetry that shall form the subject of this Eunice de Souza's (born 1940) paper. poetry appears in five significant collections of her poems: 'Fix' (1979), 'Women in (1988), 'Ways Dutch Painting' of Belonging: Selected Poems' (1990), 'Selected and New Poems' (1994) and 'A Necklace of Skulls' (2009). De Souza's one ideal in terms of form is the long 'Larkinsque' poem. But this paper shall focus on her other ideal form which is more experimental and striking – the 'imagist' poem. King observes that part of the consequence of the American influence was the utilization of the confessional mode in Indian English poetry. This helped the poet in articulating his/her fragmented vision which related ironically to the reality of the world around. While such a self-revelatory mode had also existed in older poets like

Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das, its use in the late twentieth century affected the form of poetry more directly. As King observes, "While it might seem that anything could be said in whatever way it came to the writer provided that its rhythms, cadence, language and imagery felt like poetry, such recent confessional poets as de Souza ... are highly conscious of craft, revising their poems for understatement, economy and visual shape." (Modern Indian Poetry in English, 8).

This understatement and economy are inspired by the movement of Imagism which found its way into the poetry of American poets like Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle in the early twentieth century. In 'Hilda Doolittle, Ezra Pound and Imagism', David Avers discusses that imagist poetry implies not just the creation of a visual image in the poem, but also a style that is "economical", "oblique" and "neutral in tone", tending towards the "epigrammatic". Avers quotes Ezra Pound on those aspects of such poetry that the latter admired: "Objective - no slither; direct - no excessive use of adjectives; no metaphors that won't permit examination."(2). Thus, imagist poetry involves less use of words, lending poetry a concentration that makes it resonant with meanings. This makes poetry less descriptive and more receptive to the multiplicity of meanings. The process of reflecting upon the poem is to be located outside the poem, not inside it. Instead, the poem depicts the interaction of ideas which do not state meaning, but leave it to be deduced.

Eunice de Souza's poetry within such developments and in doing so, it shall look at how the use of such a form assists De Souza in conveying her thoughts.

De Souza's deployment of the imagist form is not merely inspired by American thoughts. Her style combines with that of other poets from India and forms an original style in itself, without being the passive imprint of American notions. It seeks a motivation from the American movement but also moulds and inflects it to suit its own purposes. In the process, it also adds to the original movement and adapts it to the Indian context. King describes how de Souza's use of this form relates to other poets and forms a school of poetry in itself:

De Souza eliminates most of the usual attractive characteristics of verse and this results in a distinctly new style, a minimalism. This poetic in which tone, sound and the bare thing said in the fewest of possible words is extreme, but related to a similar economy and conscious selflimitation in Arvind Mehrotra's later poetry. Such a poetics of a minimalist imagism was at times shared by A.K. Ramanujan, and might be thought of as a school or movement of poetry on its own ... it is tempting for any artist to ask what are the essential bare bones of my art, but that three major Indian poets, de Souza, Mehrotra and Ramanujan, share such an aesthetic makes them a movement. (Modern Indian Poetry in English, 309).

Having arrived at a basic understanding of the backdrop to de Souza's use of the imagist form in her poetry, one can now move on to an analysis of her work and to see what this form helps her achieve.

"Fix" re-creates the past of the poet's Catholic Goans life through her memories. The past is brought into the present in such a way that it appears to be a part of the 'now' in the poems. This combines with de Souza's consciousness of the prejudices and prudery related to the Catholic way of life, injustices meted out to women and the hypocrisy of the Church to convey the poet's ironic attitude towards these. The use of the imagist form helps her achieve the satiric perspective better. By using less description, the poet is able to directly present situations which are explanatory in themselves. and they become so representative of the critique that the poem expresses. This fixes the attention of the reader more on the situation itself, than on the poet's opinion of it. In turn, such a technique allows the reader to engage with the situation with greater involvement. In 'Catholic Mother', the hypocrisy of Francis X, D' Souza is exposed by the ironic juxtaposition of phrases like "Grace of God" and "Pillar of the Church" against the sufferings of the Father's wife due to consecutive impregnation for seven years. The injustice he imposes thus on his wife are pitted against his hollow diatribe against "Hindu buggers" who have "got no ethics". But thus juxtaposing phrases and direct speech, de Souza avoids lengthy description and brings out the irony of the Father's words simultaneously. The last two lines of the poem which are actually one short fiveword sentence, say the most:

the pillar's wife says nothing.

The enormity of the misery of the Father's wife as well as the insensitivity and hypocrisy of the Father are marvelously conveyed by these few words. The poet uses the simple present tense which further helps her in her project of the minimal use of words, because then she is able to present people and events as immediate. Therefore, even without detailed description, the poet is able to body forth a world which is detailed in its immediate allusion to people and places. When situations and people are just there in front of the reader for analysis, they no need to be described in words. Their very presence in their evocation provides details. For instance, when the poet writes "Francis X, D' Souza/ ... Here he is top left/ the one smiling" and "Lovely Catholic Family/ says Mother Superior", these characters and their environment become alive for the reader and the reading experience reverberates with their presence. As King observes, even though the work of poets like de Souza might not have liberated Indian English poetry from "an inhibiting formalism", it definitely shows that their "imaginations are more engaged in detail, more focused on places; people are named, distinctions are noted, and the society of their poems is more textured, denser, richer, and present. The poet's speech and that of the characters is more colloquial, direct, contemporary." (ibid. 131).

A significant achievement enabled by the use of the imagist form is de Souza's depiction of her alienation from the predominantly Hindu society of India which compares unfavorably with her Goan Catholic background. This does not imply that the poet endorses the religious bigotry of Catholicism. It only suggests the contradictory pulls that make up our (various) identities. Foregrounding such alienation, 'Conversation Piece' runs thus:

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.

Here, the central idea of the poem appears as an image – that of the aunt holding up the shivalingam for scrutiny and mis-identifying it grossly. The sacrilege and blasphemy that this would imply for the Hindu salesman are ironically pitted against the aunt's matter-offact tone. The aunt's Portuguese upbringing fits in oddly with knowledge of the Hindu religion that is often reductively understood to be representative of a singular Indian ethos. This poem again uses less words and more of implication to convey its ideas. It does this by making itself a literal reproduction of a few lines of conversation between two people. This aspect of bringing in modern speech as it were, into poetry, is again characteristic of the form of imagist poetry. It salvages poetry from degenerating into the purely verbose. The poet does not look for a heightened aesthetic reflection in the incident discussed. She therefore sheds

the excessively elevated status accorded to poetry by bringing it to the level of common speech. This does not imply an irreverential attitude towards poetry but rather, signifies a resuscitation of poetic language by combining the conversational tone with the metaphoric.

By thus deploying imagism, the poet's language moves closer to novelistic language. Although it is not descriptive like the narrative of a novel is, it acquires novelistic qualities because of its prosaic, conversational qualities that focus on character and situations. 'Omen' exemplifies such prose-like characteristics of de Souza's poetry:

Today

that utterly respectable big brown clock in the college staff room decided to move its hands backwards.

No one is surprised.

This poem reads like a statement which is divested of the subjectivity of the poet. Avers notes that for Pound and such other American poets, imagism implied "the art of creating an object-like structure in words". ('Hilda Dolittle, Ezra Pound and Imagism', 8). 'Omen' too creates this 'object-like' structure but here the seemingly objective presentation of facts is replete with contrasting associations and disassociations. At one level, the poem can be understood to be a challenge to the notion of a linear and teleological movement of life. The first line comprises of a single word "Today", implying the positioning of the poem in the present. Again, the poet's brevity in the use of a single word speaks volumes through ideas of association that we constantly use to understand time (through years, months, days etc.). But the subsequent lines depict time going backwards (into the past) instead of forward (into the future). The title of the poem is ironically contrasted with the conclusion. 'Omen' does not correspond in gravity to the dismissiveness of "No one is surprised". Statement is once again replaced by comparison between words. This probably implies that traditional notions of the association of a linear and forward movement with progress and development are not revered here. They are, instead subverted. Neither does the poem directly evoke pathos or nostalgia for the past. The economical use of words assists de Souza in achieving such a distance from what is said in the poem.

The adoption of such a distance through economy helps the poet in shedding excess of emotion and dramatization. Her poems reflect a control over both the subject-matter as well as the manner of its presentation. So her satire is prevented from dwindling into the merely sardonic. Instead of scathingly critiquing follies, Souza goodde humouredly presents people's views in a gist, which reveals the poet's satiric stance in a self-explanatory manner. Therefore most of her poems are situational and do not read like well-crafted homilies. The poem 'My Students' can be cited as an instance:

My students think it funny that Daruwallas and de Souza's

should write poetry. Poetry is faery lands forlorn. Women writers Miss Austen.

Only foreign men air their crotches.

This poem satirizes people who are of the opinion that Indians (Daruwallas and de Souza's) cannot write good poetry. They feel that only foreign men can write good poetry and a frank expression of their sexuality rests only with foreign men. Thus, de Souza says a lot in this little poem. By using the preface of "My students think it funny", she suggests that she is distanced from (and even opposed to) the students' opinions. The last three lines are apparently unconnected. But these unstructured and ostensibly objective lines are actually an ironic presentation of such xenophiliac ideas. This is the note that the poem ends on, suggesting that such ideas probably do not even need any reflection. "Aiming at an apparent naturalness and to avoid glib conclusions and rounding-off of poems with observations, [de Souza] uses abrupt endings. She avoids making poems literary artifacts and uses normal diction." (King, Modern Indian Poetry in English, 157).

Women in Dutch Painting covers yet more ground in terms of the use of the imagist form. A variety of themes characterize the poems in this book – a sense of unease in women with the feminine roles thrust upon them, social concern, as well as selfexposition. The imagist form helps the poet adopt a self-ironic tone and make 'gravitas' seem blatant and blunt. 'Another Way to Die' is fraught with existential search but this quest is made to appear like an undercurrent only. Its seriousness is toned down by the antithetical element of cryptic lines that strip it down to a bare ordinariness. The following lines from the poem bear this out:

Being eaten by maggots is fantasy

In a few hours or a few days the bits reassemble a breast flies back

For a while again you are almost human

The direct and cryptic beginning of the poem represents the sudden bursting in of the corporeal, the flesh, upon the mind. The central image governing the poem is the dismemberment of the human body. The human body is deprived of its assumed grandeur and is shown as being made up of "reassembled" parts. Further, this existential dilemma (of inhabiting a fragile habitat) is not even made to appear macabre; rather, blunt lines like "a breast flies back" make it sound grotesque. A grandiose style is replaced with the mundane. This is visually depicted through the structure of the poem. Each line is composed of not more than five words and the poem ends on a single word. Through this, the poet is able to draw attention to each word in the poem, and uses only as many words as are required to demonstrate her vision. Such a technique figuratively represents the idea that poetry

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too is made up of assembled words which are made to fit together. The form aids the mock-heroic tone of the poem. Stress is implied by the manner in which words are placed. The minimal use of words ensures that every word makes its implication selfevident. "For a while again/ you are almost/ human" draws attention, at each of the three levels in which this sentence is divided, to the contingency of human existence. This helps the poet acknowledge and reveal her deep-seated anxieties in a confrontational manner, because the imagist form helps her in bluntly exposing what she feels. To quote King:

"There are elements, whether formal, narrative distance or tonal. of selfprotectiveness in the male poets. By contrast, the women poets— Kamala Das, [Eunice] de Souza and [Melanie] Silgardo increasingly strip away such self-protection and create a world of what appear direct self-revelations ... The poems of 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 selfassertions and triumph." (ibid. 134).

The poet's deployment of imagism serves to further her end of self-reflexivity in yet more ways. For, in some of her poems, she conspicuously alludes to the superfluity of words and her desire to move beyond this superfluity. 'October 30, 1987' is a poem that looks like a diary entry and its length and structure echo de Souza's ideal of minimalism: For you I wrote 'I don't need words any more' Now garrulous with memories.

Here de Souza is in conversation with both the 'you' (friend? lover?) in the poem as well as with herself. She openly declares that she has no more need of words to express herself. Although the last two lines, on one level, imply that she does not need words because words instigate past memories, the use of the word 'garrulous' also suggests other implications. Since it means 'frivolous talk' or loquacity, it also offers the idea that too many words make poetry redundant at times. Some aspects of life are best conveyed with the metaphoric and minimal use of words.

The poet develops a correspondence between the trajectory of her life and that of her poetry in such poems. At the same time, she warns that her personal life is not mirrored in these poems. This probably implies that the self-consciousness induced by imagism helps her differentiate between herself and the 'poet persona' in the poems. When she refers to the incidents of her life in these poems, it is her poetic self observing her life detachedly in these poems. So with the use of imagism and its economy, she is able to easily make such suggestions through direct juxtapositions, as she does in 'Don't Look for my Life in These Poems':

Poems can have order, sanity, aesthetic distance from debris.

All I've learnt from pain I always knew, but could not do.

The theme of the poem and its discussion seems to have begun with the title itself. The poet does not want to waste words in making the title merely a prefatory reflection of what is discussed in the poem. The first line appears to be a continuation of the title - "Don't look for my life in these poems" because "poems can have order, sanity", which 'order' and 'sanity' are not always there in life. This point can be further extended to imply that the poet denounces such order and sanity in her poems too. Due to their economy and unconventional structure, they act like brief codes. Although poetic language in general is always metaphoric and in need of de-codification, de Souza's imagism does this through brevity. Great lessons of life are summed up in one sentence: "All I've learnt from pain/ I always knew/ but could not do." Again, this declaration is packed with resonances - the poet knows also of poems that have conventional forms, but cannot incorporate them in her poetry due to the acquiescence that they sometimes come to imply.

Out of the new poems that appeared in Ways of Belonging, two are particularly striking in their use of the imagist form. 'God Rock' is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922). Here the poet appeals against the loss of bearings: "There's a continent moving/ under my feet, god rock." This is implied through the metaphor of geological upheavals. The poem ends, again, on a note of indecision. The gist of the poem is summed up in the closing lines: "Give us a sign, god rock. / A city burns." Eliot's nostalgia over spiritual desiccation and the alienation from eternal values of life is echoed in a parody in this poem. When a 'sign' is sought from God for salvation, a burning city is received in answer. But this is not to be mistaken for the fire of purgation. The poem that immediately follows this one in the collection is 'God Rock's Passion'. It is quite deliberately meant to be a 'sign' or an answer to the previous one. For, in answer to the appeal for a 'sign', this is what happens in 'God Rock's Passion':

God rock plunged into the belly of the earth, molten. Heaved off, goat pellet seed. Primeval slob.

The absence of God is characteristic of de Souza's poetry. God rock has no sign of redemption to offer to the world and therefore god rock plunges into the earth and is found molten. The concluding words can be both taken to be a (blasphemous?) comment upon god rock's action being coarse and excessively demonstrative, as well as a remark upon the fact that one's desire to seek divine intervention in life shall be met with nothing. It is upon us to formulate our rationale or ethic for life, instead of seeking a sign for spiritual redemption. The guiding spirit of the poem is again an image - god rock's plunge. The stance of the poet is conveyed by economy and understatement, as the last two words of the poem carry its thrust. These two words

are used to signify the poet's distrust of miracles and grand narratives. Instead of the poet's direct statement, it is the irony in these two words that speaks the most.

In Selected and New Poems, one poem suffices to develop upon the poet's experiments in form. 'It's Time to Find a Place' is even more self-reflexive than 'October 30, 1987' because here the poet directly refers to her act of writing poetry and arrives at an obvious reference to her imagist vision. The complete poem runs thus:

It's time to find a place to be silent with each other. I have prattled endlessly in staff-rooms, corridors, restaurants. When you're not around I carry on conversations in my head. Even this poem has forty-eight words too many.

The poem refers both to a relationship with a person whom de Souza addresses in the poem, as well as to her art of writing poetry. It is the crafty usage of minimal words that stand for both these aspects of her life, which allows her to make apt and optimum use of the imagist form in this poem. Therefore what she does here is to evoke contexts around a word in the way she uses it, so as to make multiple meanings and multiple interpretations possible. For instance, 'prattle' refers both to 'talk' as well as to the poem itself. Avers observes that American poets deploying imagism were seeking "to create a modern mode of writing which would ... satisfy a new

aesthetic criterion based not on emotional indulgence but on the precision of the practice of writing itself." ('Hilda Dolittle, Ezra Pound and Imagism', 5). Likewise, de Souza adopts the economy of imagism to shed excessive ornamentation and comment upon the practice of writing poetry. This does not suggest her distrust of language or an attempt to rely purely on formal arrangement of words as it did for Pound. Rather, de Souza's poems embody the idea that the innovative use of form can sometimes induce unexpected perspectives. Imagism is used by her to imply other unsaid things about life as well as poetry. She is thus able to engage in self-criticism without sounding overtly sentimental.

De Souza's poems trace her successive alienation from both her orthodox religious upbringing as well as an equally puritanical Hindu India. In this respect, the imagist assists her in portraying form her fragmented vision. It does not, however, reflect her isolation because as one has observed. allows her it scope for confessional writing. The brevity of lines in imagism helps her discard consistency of the self to reveal her unguarded self. It grants her the freedom to express herself more directly and to reject the overt refinement expected of women's poetry. King analyzes the implications of such a direct use of language:

In the poetry of ... such younger poets as de Souza ... language reveals feelings in all quirkiness and unpredictability, their whereas with previous women poets language stands in the way of emotion,

Volume II Issue VI: September 2014 (104) poeticizing and generalizing rather than reflecting it. [Kamala] Das, de Souza and Silgardo offer a range of highly volatile emotions with poems unexpectedly changing directions and gaining effect from their inner contrasts, conflicts, ironies and extremes. (Modern Indian Poetry in English, 155).

As one has seen throughout the course of this paper, the use of the imagist form has enabled the inclusion of all the above elements in de Souza's poetry. Its minimum worded statements lend it an element of briskness and free it from unidimensionality. The use of this form helps de Souza alter not just the style of writing poetry but also the manner of its interpretation. This infuses her poetry with self-ironic wit, dismantling romantic notions of the poet in an ivorytower, to be hailed as creator and fountainhead of knowledge. De Souza's experimental use of form thus adds new dimensions to Indian English poetry and also offers new grounds along which poetry writing can be further taken.

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