

Voice of Emancipation of the Women from Patriarchal Fetters in the Poems of Kamala Das and Eunice De Souza: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of women's emancipation from patriarchal constraints in the poetry of Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza, two prominent voices in Indian English literature. Through a comparative analysis of selected poems, the study investigates how both poets challenge gender norms, question societal expectations, and assert female agency. Kamala Das's confessional style unflinchingly exposes the complexities of female desire, identity, and the suffocating nature of traditional marital roles. Her poetry serves as a raw and powerful assertion of selfhood, rejecting the silencing imposed by patriarchal norms. On the other hand, Eunice de Souza employs wit, irony, and minimalism to critique cultural and religious dogmas that reinforce female subjugation. Her succinct verses often unveil the absurdity of gendered expectations, exposing the restrictive social conditioning faced by women. The study highlights key themes such as body politics, domestic oppression, female autonomy, and societal hypocrisy. By juxtaposing the emotional vulnerability of Das's poetry with the sardonic resistance of de Souza's works, this paper underscores the multiplicity of feminist voices in Indian literature. Drawing upon feminist literary theory, the analysis reveals how both poets disrupt conventional narratives of femininity and reclaim their narratives. Furthermore, the paper situates their poetic resistance within the larger discourse of postcolonial feminism, emphasizing the significance of literature as a tool for gendered self-expression.

Ultimately, this comparative study demonstrates that while Kamala Das's poetry embodies a deeply personal and emotive form of rebellion, Eunice de Souza's verses offer sharp social critique through biting satire. Both voices, however, converge in their relentless pursuit of emancipation from patriarchal fetters. Their poetic contributions continue to inspire contemporary feminist discourse and remain pivotal in understanding the literary resistance of women in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Women's Emancipation, Confessional Poetry, Gendered Resistance

INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and resistance of women against patriarchal oppression. As two of India's most prominent feminist voices in literature, their works reflect the internal and external struggles of women confined by societal expectations. Through their poetic expressions, Das and de Souza challenge the traditionally prescribed roles of women as submissive and self-sacrificing, reclaiming agency over their identities and desires (Banerjee 45). Kamala Das, known for her confessional style, uses autobiographical elements to expose the realities of female existence within patriarchal constructs. In poems like "An Introduction" and "The Old Playhouse", she critiques the institution of marriage and the suffocating expectations imposed on women. Her poetry is a poignant assertion of female desire and selfhood, rejecting the silencing of women's voices (Das 26). Das's candid exploration of female sexuality and emotional vulnerability disrupts the dominant discourse that seeks to control women's bodies and choices (Devi 34). In contrast, Eunice de Souza employs sharp wit and irony to interrogate the social and religious norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Her poetry, often minimalist in form, delivers incisive critiques of patriarchal hypocrisy. In "Bequest" and "Catholic Mother", de Souza highlights how religious dogma reinforces the subjugation of women, particularly within conservative Catholic communities (Sinha 91). Unlike Das's

deeply personal revelations, de Souza's detached tone serves as a biting commentary on the absurdity of gendered expectations (Chaudhary 67).

This paper undertakes a comparative study of the works of Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza to explore their shared commitment to women's emancipation. By analysing their critiques of marriage, sexuality, and cultural norms, this study examines how both poets use their literary voices to resist patriarchal fetters and advocate for female agency. Through their distinct yet equally powerful poetic approaches, Das and de Souza redefine the discourse on women's liberation in Indian literature.

KAMALA DAS: THE BOLD CONFESSIONAL VOICE

Kamala Das (1934–2009) is widely celebrated as a pioneer of confessional poetry in Indian English literature. Through her bold and unapologetic verse, she offers a deeply personal critique of the patriarchal structures that confine women. Das's poetry serves as a powerful assertion of female identity, exploring themes of love, desire, loneliness, and resistance. Her works challenge the dominant societal norms that seek to silence women's voices, making her one of the most influential feminist poets in India (Devi 36).

Confessional Mode and Female Agency

Kamala Das's poetry is intensely autobiographical, employing the confessional mode to dismantle societal taboos around female sexuality and emotional vulnerability. In her poem "An Introduction", Das boldly asserts her right to self-expression:

"I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one." (Das 25)

Through these lines, Das affirms her agency and identity, defying the cultural expectations that dictate how women should behave and express themselves. Her use of the first-person narrative is a deliberate act of self-assertion, signalling her refusal to conform to patriarchal norms. According to Devi, Das's poetry is "a courageous endeavour to reclaim the female voice from the margins of patriarchal discourse" (38).

Love, Desire, and the Female Body

A defining aspect of Das's poetry is her candid exploration of female desire. Unlike traditional representations of women as passive objects of male pleasure, Das reclaims the female body as a site of both pleasure and resistance. In "The Looking Glass", she writes:

"Gift him all, / Give him what makes you woman." (Das 46)

These lines emphasize the woman's role as an active participant in her own sexuality, rejecting the notion of female chastity as a measure of virtue. Sharma argues that Das's celebration of desire serves as a radical feminist statement that "reclaims female sexuality from the grip of patriarchal morality" (57).

Marriage and Domestic Oppression

While Kamala Das's poetry often explores themes of romantic longing, it also exposes the disillusionment of marriage. In "The Old Playhouse", she critiques the loss of individual identity within the confines of a patriarchal marriage:

"You called me wife, I was taught to break / saccharine into your tea and / to offer at the right moment the vitamins." (Das 38)

Here, Das portrays the wife as a mere caretaker, whose existence is reduced to domestic servitude. The mechanical routine of serving tea and vitamins symbolizes the erasure of a woman's autonomy. As Mukherjee notes, "Das's poetry unearths the psychological toll of traditional marriage, revealing the emotional isolation and suppression endured by women" (42).

Loneliness and Emotional Vulnerability

A recurring motif in Das's work is the theme of loneliness. Even in her search for love and validation, her poetic persona often experiences a profound sense of emptiness. In poems like "My Grandmother's House", Das reflects on the emotional neglect she faced in her marriage:

"I who have lost / My way and beg now at strangers' doors to / Receive love, at least in small change?" (Das 54)

This haunting imagery conveys the emotional deprivation that many women endure in patriarchal settings. Das's

vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but an assertion of her emotional truth. According to Nair, her poetry “challenges the glorification of female sacrifice by presenting the raw, unvarnished realities of womanhood” (60).

Rejection of Societal Norms

Kamala Das’s rejection of societal norms extends beyond her poetic themes to her very act of writing. In a society where women were expected to conform to prescribed roles, Das’s literary career was a form of defiance. Her autobiography, *My Story*, further amplifies her resistance by narrating her personal experiences of love, desire, and rebellion. Through both her poetry and prose, Das asserts that women have the right to define their own identities, free from societal judgment (Das 12). Kamala Das’s poetry stands as a radical challenge to the patriarchal norms that seek to regulate women’s bodies, emotions, and voices. Her fearless exploration of love, desire, and domestic oppression confronts the silences imposed upon women, offering a voice of resistance and emancipation. By embracing the confessional mode, Das reclaims her narrative, demanding recognition of women’s lived experiences. As Sharma aptly states, “Through her poetry, Das not only chronicles her personal journey of self-assertion but also paves the way for the collective emancipation of women” (59). Her legacy continues to inspire feminist discourse, making her a timeless symbol of literary resistance.

EUNICE DE SOUZA: SARCASM AND SUBVERSION

Eunice de Souza (1940–2017) was a prominent Indian English poet known for her sharp wit, minimalist style, and incisive critique of patriarchal norms. Unlike the confessional and emotionally charged poetry of Kamala Das, de Souza employed satire, sarcasm, and understatement to subvert societal expectations. Her poetry frequently addressed issues of gender oppression, religious hypocrisy, and cultural conditioning, exposing the absurdity of the norms that govern women’s lives (Chaudhary 68). Through her succinct yet powerful verses, de Souza carved out a distinctive feminist voice that continues to resonate within contemporary Indian literature.

Challenging Gender Norms with Sarcasm

Eunice de Souza’s poetry is characterized by its caustic tone and biting sarcasm, which she uses to dismantle patriarchal ideologies. In her poem “Bequest”, she critiques the societal expectation for women to suppress their emotions and desires:

“Learn, child, to sit still. Learn to hide your needs.” (de Souza 42)

This line exemplifies the societal conditioning that teaches women to remain submissive and invisible. The deliberate simplicity of her language emphasizes the harsh reality of patriarchal control. As Banerjee observes, “De Souza’s poetry employs sarcasm as a feminist weapon to reveal the damaging effects of gendered socialization” (77).

Critique of Religious Patriarchy

A significant aspect of de Souza’s work is her critique of religious patriarchy, particularly within the context of Catholicism. As a Goan Catholic, de Souza often wrote about the oppressive influence of religious dogma on women’s lives. In “Catholic Mother”, she highlights the contradiction between religious ideals and the lived experiences of women:

“My mother only said: / Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children.” (de Souza 33)

Here, de Souza exposes the glorification of female sacrifice in religious narratives. The sarcastic tone undercuts the notion of suffering as a virtue, questioning the morality of a belief system that normalizes female pain. Sinha argues that de Souza’s critique “challenges the intersection of religion and patriarchy, revealing the complicity of faith in the subjugation of women” (94).

Minimalism as a Tool of Resistance

Unlike Kamala Das’s emotionally elaborate poetry, de Souza’s use of minimalist language enhances the potency of her feminist critique. Her short, unembellished verses leave a lasting impact, forcing readers to confront the underlying truths of gender inequality. In “For Rita’s Daughter, When She Reads”, de Souza writes:

“Women have no wilderness in them, / They are provident instead.” (de Souza 58)

This line critiques the confinement of women within domestic roles, denying them the freedom to explore their own desires and ambitions. The absence of elaborate metaphors or embellishments heightens the poem’s stark critique. As Mukherjee notes, “De Souza’s minimalist style mirrors the silencing of women’s voices, while her sharp words serve as an act of defiance” (45).

Subverting Cultural Expectations

De Souza also addresses the burden of cultural expectations placed on women, particularly within the family. In her poem "Sweet Sixteen", she mocks the societal obsession with female purity and marital eligibility:

"My cousin Elena is no more sixteen, / but she's still unmarried, / Mother says, / 'No man wants a girl / with a mole on her chin.'" (de Souza 25)

Through this satire, de Souza critiques the objectification of women and the trivial standards by which they are judged. Her poetry underscores the absurdity of societal norms that reduce women's worth to their physical appearance and marital status (Chaudhary 70).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The poetry of Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza offers a striking examination of women's experiences under patriarchal constraints. While both poets share a commitment to feminist resistance, their approaches differ in tone, style, and thematic focus. Through a comparative analysis, it becomes evident that Das and de Souza employ their distinct literary voices to challenge gender norms, critique societal hypocrisy, and assert female agency.

Similarities: Feminist Resistance and Critique of Patriarchy

A prominent similarity between Das and de Souza is their unwavering resistance to patriarchal oppression. Both poets dismantle the myth of the ideal woman by exposing the emotional and psychological burdens women endure. Kamala Das's poem "The Old Playhouse" critiques the erasure of women's identities within marriage, portraying the wife as a mere object of service:

"You called me wife, I was taught to break / saccharine into your tea." (Das 38)

Similarly, de Souza in "Bequest" satirizes how women are conditioned to suppress their desires and conform to societal norms:

"Learn, child, to sit still. Learn to hide your needs." (de Souza 42)

Both poets emphasize the internalized oppression that women experience, revealing how societal expectations dictate their behaviour and self-perception (Chaudhary 70).

Differences in Tone and Style

While Das's poetry is characterized by its confessional, emotive tone, de Souza employs satire and irony to deliver her critique. Das's raw, vulnerable verses draw from personal experience, making her poetry an intimate reflection of female desire and disillusionment. In contrast, de Souza's minimalist, and detached style strips away sentimentality, using humour to expose societal absurdities (Mukherjee 47).

For instance, in "An Introduction", Das asserts her defiance through deeply personal statements:

"I am every woman who seeks love." (Das 26)

On the other hand, de Souza's poem "Sweet Sixteen" mocks the trivial standards used to judge women's worth:

"No man wants a girl / with a mole on her chin." (de Souza 25)

This sharp sarcasm allows de Souza to challenge patriarchal norms without the emotional vulnerability that defines Das's work (Sinha 95).

Themes of Sexuality and Religion

Another significant difference lies in their thematic focus. Kamala Das often explores the complexities of female sexuality and emotional longing, confronting societal taboos with unfiltered honesty (Devi 36). In contrast, Eunice de Souza critiques the intersection of religion and patriarchy, exposing how cultural and religious beliefs perpetuate the oppression of women. In "Catholic Mother", de Souza highlights the glorification of female suffering:

"Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children." (de Souza 33)

While Das reclaims sexual agency through her poetry, de Souza questions the moral expectations imposed upon women by religious orthodoxy (Chaudhary 72).

CONCLUSION

The poetry of Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza offers profound insights into the lived experiences of women under patriarchal oppression. While Das's emotionally raw and confessional verses explore themes of female desire, identity, and emotional vulnerability, de Souza employs satire and sarcasm to critique societal hypocrisy and religious patriarchy. Despite their contrasting styles, both poets share a commitment to feminist resistance, using their literary voices to challenge gendered norms and reclaim agency. Das's candid self-expression confronts the silencing of women, while de Souza's biting humour exposes the absurdity of patriarchal expectations. Their poetry remains a powerful testament to the resilience of women who refuse to be confined by societal constraints. By amplifying marginalized voices, Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza continue to inspire conversations on gender equality and female empowerment in both literary and social spheres.

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