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Research Article:

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and Pursuit for the Ways of Belonging

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Saikat Guha

The Ways of Belonging—this was the title of Eunice de Souza’s third volume of poems. The title recapitulates the search de Souza undertakes as a persona whose identity can not be enacted without addressing the problems her Portuguese pedigree imposes on her. While a considerable part of her writing is a nostalgic exercise in youthful memory another important segment brings out the dilemma-ridden self of the poet divided between the two cultures—Goan Catholic and traditional “Hindu” Indian—which she felt as a grown-up person. Yet, in spite of resolving the tension in generalization of experiences de Souza vividly delineates the bits and starts of life which focus more on the unseen aspects of society which characterized the Indian English poets in the late 1970s and 1980s, and which was previously overlooked by former poets (King 129-146). De Souza was raised as a Goan Catholic in Poona and moved to Bombay and then in American for higher studies. She settled in Bombay and worked as a Lecturer in St Xavier’s College. Much of her poetry generates unease that hover around the issues of belonging, which she records in the self-ironic poem, “de Souza Prabhu”:

No matter that
my name is Greek
my surname Portuguese
my language alien.

There are ways
of belonging.

I belong with the lame ducks.

(119)

De Souza's sense of alienation is fabricated largely by her ancestry. The remaining Portuguese in India exists as a small number of people pitifully striving to keep themselves noticeable. The Portuguese merchants came to India and settled to advance their colonial missions, as R. C. Majumder cites:

The geographical discoveries of the last quarter of the fifteenth century deeply affected the commercial relations of the different countries of the world and produced far-reaching consequences in their history. ...The discoveries of Vasco da Gama (1498), who received friendly treatment from the Hindu ruler of Calicut...brought the merchants of Portugal, who has coveted the advantages of eastern trade, into direct maritime touch with India and opened the way for their commercial relations with her.

(623)

Then, the coming of Pedro Alvarez Cabral in 1500 and Alfonso de Albuquerque in 1503 to India resulted in a strong Portuguese settlement in the South India who started dominating the realm of trade and also, administrative business of the native rulers. Fascinated by South India's natural treasure, especially the spices which had immense demand in the West, they established colonial authority in the West coasts. Apart from Goa which Albuquerque himself captured in 1510, his successors established their dominion over a number of sea-coasts, like Diu, Daman, Salsette, Bassein, Chaul and Bombay. However, after almost a century of domination, the Portuguese started losing their control over the trade by the eighteenth century, at the advent of other European powers, like the Dutch and the English. The advent of the British power shook the base of the Portuguese dominion in India as the Portuguese settlers fell short in power than the British. Although the Portuguese rulers got hold of Goa and its surroundings till 1961, at the post-

independence era their position diminished to the status of racial and religious (Goan Catholic) minority.

It would not be accurate to consider a Portuguese descent as bearing the legacy of colonialism because their influence on the mainstream Indian politics was wiped out by about two centuries of the British rule in the country. The Portuguese bloodline survives as minority in India still facing revulsion for their colonial-heredity. The succeeding generations have witnessed this derisive treatment of their race. However, it would also be improper to regard the Portuguese descents as postcolonial Indian. In short, it is not easy to posit the location of Portuguese subjectivity in Indian nation-making. The arid scenery that de Souza portrays in "Landscape" seems more hostile to her because of its metaphorical semblance to the troubled periphery from where her marginalized community experiences it. They sense horror in the land where the sacred rivers and trees turn their faces away from them. They push under the carpet, the limited space, which forms a landscape for them to live in. They "lock the windows/bar the doors" but there is no relief as "the sun burns through the walls" (De Souza, "Landscape" 45). Yet, the Goan Portuguese community has learnt to live here:

The pungent air will suit my soul:
It will find its place among
the plastic carrier bags and rags that float upstream
or is it downstream.
One can never tell.

(44)

The expression "float upstream" or "downstream" is that uncertainty which characterizes the poet's problematic "belonging" to this land without any fixed point of reference. "Unity in diversity" is a clichéd term used to attest Indian culture whose cultural heterogeneity has been a matter of pride. India, it is true, has provided shelter to many outsiders, but the incessant terrorist activities and regional

turmoil demonstrate the uneasy relation of different sects with the mainstream Indian culture and politics. Nevertheless, unlike the Muslims in Kashmir or the ethnic groups in the Northeast, the Portuguese community does not create any gory situation. Another poem “It’s Time to Find a Place” is apparently a love poem but incorporates implied quotations of identity issues. It is an exemplification in the possibilities of forging connection with the heart of India. The poet is exhausted in her quest for the ways of belonging when she says, “I have prattled endlessly/in staff-rooms, corridors, restaurants” (47). But she is not frustrated—when she does not succeed she finds refuge in her own locus of self:

It’s time to find a place
to be silent with each other
When you’re not around
I carry on conversations in my head.

(47)

De Souza’s poems hover on the Goan Catholic community whose pursuance she can not discard, or rather, she is not willing to discard, in her poetry. The Portuguese names and the events that take place in the same community illustrate the poet’s adherence to her communal ethos whose minority status she is aware of though there is little attempt in de Souza in endorsing group solidarity. The poet’s concern of minority identity has a conflicting relation to her poetry for while she shows her awareness of the cultural typicality of her community, the community salience often receives adverse criticism from her. De Souza’s criticism of the Goan Catholic customs and rituals, which I’ll discuss after a while, nevertheless gets impetus from minority politics that engages identity issues. Her awareness of the minority status of her community which experiences the identity politics in the inland hegemonic structure of India makes a case for the Goan Catholics. The “realists about identity”, like Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty and Paula M. L. Moya, hold the belief that identities are “not our

mysterious inner essences but rather social embodied facts about ourselves in our world; moreover, they are not mere descriptions of who we are but, rather, causal explanations of our social locations in a world that is shaped by such locations, by the way they are distributed and hierarchically organized” (Alcoff and Mohanty 6). The social positions are important vantage-point from where to perceive the politics associated with identity. In case of de Souza, the quest for minority voice, like that of the Goan Catholics, should engage itself with the political contexts of India as well as take into account the minority position from where to view, criticize, and also, celebrate itself. De Souza’s poems dealing with her community, its social customs, orthodox codes and religious hypocrisies have another façade encapsulating innuendoes of homage. In her poems, identity does not appear as something “given” or perceived objectively but in its participatory acts with the mainstream Indian politics and culture which such lines as “I belong with the lame ducks” or “The pungent air will suit my soul” exemplify.

However, race or minority status is not the only impediment on the way of enacting her identity. The condition of de Souza is worsened by her gender. A woman is an “other” on every front because of her gender (Beauvoir, “Introduction”). A female child is seldom welcomed in an Indian family, irrespective of racial pedigree, as De Souza writes:

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.
Words the weapon
to crucify.

(De Souza, “de Souza Prabhu” 119)

De Souza, like a postfeminist writer, does not make precarious or sympathetic commentary on the suffering and exploitation of women which, to postfeminists like Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfeld, has celebrated the vulnerability of women and valorized the figure of the female victim instead of addressing the issue of social and political inequality (Gamble 36-45). Instead, de Souza only shows the present woman-condition in her poetry. She does not sympathize with the characters she portrays even when she is identified with the personae. The terse indifference with which she detaches herself with the situations that detriment her cultural and personal assortment is evident in her jagged lines. "Advice to Women" is one such poem which is written in a sharp language:

That stare of perpetual surprise
in those great green eyes
will teach you
to die alone.

(121)

De Souza's poetry, especially her earlier poems in *Fix*, bears the poet's characteristic mark of "dryness" (Mehrotra 115) which tells how she has been successful in using language in poetry as "the weapon/to crucify." In the words of Jussawalla: "Those readers who prefer a softer or more lyrical line around its edge may find it (*Fix*) extremely unpleasant" (qtd. in Mehrotra 115). The short, uneven lines that employ petulant words in calm nuance and often end abruptly produce an effect of unmistakable dis-ease. Her precise, economical and unpleasant language suits her thematic concerns, as King cites:

Her poems are stripped down to their bare bones....Aiming at an apparent naturalness and to avoid glib conclusions and rounding-off of poems with observations, she uses abrupt endings. She avoids making poems literary artifacts and uses normal diction.

(157)

Although King calls de Souza's diction "normal," it is not without deliberate effort that she selects her words to propel a kind of linguistic apprehension only to generate psychic agitation in the reader. Her poems have a conversational quality but its "normalcy" is not very common in everyday usage. Here, language becomes a symbolic medium of explicating her discomfited existence. "She and I" is a poem which builds on the meeting of the poet with a lady both of whom used to love the same men in their youth. The man survived in their memories long after his death:

We've mourned him separately
in silence
she and I.

(120)

Now, at seventy-eight, the lady tells the poet of her affairs with the man, "his jokes,/his stories." The poet is unnerved by the lady's recalling of the places of their sexual adventure—"some forgotten place/where blue flowers fell." But the poet remains mum because of her fear which a mixed sense of guilt and deception generates in her mind. This poem brings out the affliction of the poet—while the other lady can frankly confess her ventures in love the poet can not—and thus disparages the former to her own self. In another reading of the poem, "she" is suggestive of a Hindu woman whose privileged social standing earns her a sort of confidence in building amorous relation which she can frankly confess, and this is contrasted with the poet's minority status which denies accommodating the same space to her. Thus the community politics exceeds its sociopolitical limit and intervenes in the personal affairs, particularly of those who are labeled as "minority" group.

De Souza is aware of the identity crisis her community has been a subject to but she does not glorify or try to earn sympathy for her community. Rather, she brings out the religious intolerance of the Goan Catholic which, according to Majumder, was one of the reasons of the decline of the Portuguese rule in the South

India (624). De Souza addresses the “de Souza Prabhu”, the religious-patriarchal categorizer, in scathing satire as “Catholic Brahmin” who still haunts her memory: “I can hear his fat chuckle still” (De Souza, “de Souza Prabhu” 119). Francis X D’Souza, “father of the year,” proclaims that the Indian Hindus are wicked whose fate of suffering is willed by God:

God always provides
India will Suffer for
her Wicked Ways
(these Hindu buggers got no ethics).

(De Souza, “Catholic Mother” 39)

But what is ironic is that he himself impregnated his wife seven times in seven years, and obviously, devised her suffering from rearing children. The priest of the local church used to call him “Pillar of the Church” but the “pillar’s wife/says nothing” (ibid). The hypocrisy of the Church spreads its wicked influence on the Catholic community that acts under its manipulation. Foucault observes the subjectivizing form of Christianity which he calls “pastoral power” and which “postulates in principle that certain individuals can, by their religious quality, serve others not as princes, magistrates, prophets, fortune-tellers, benefactors, educationalists, and so on but as pastors” (214). The complicity between the Church and the aristocracy is brought out in scathing satire in de Souza’s poem “Varca, 1942”. As the Archbishop of Varca declared that “Great landlords and peasants/must worship together” he was shot but the bullet did not touch him. The angry Archbishop cursed the aristocrats and barred the Church door for them saying that “Devils will not be cast out/of the newborn/the dying will not be blessed/with holy oils” (58). But the quarrel lasted only for a few years and the Archbishop and the landlords joined hand in hand to the exploitation of the poor folk:

After many months
the Archbishop relented

the landlords repented
and everyone worshipped together

and the landlords were landlords
and the peasants peasants
ever after.

(58)

“Feeding the Poor at Christmas” is another poem which illustrates the fraudulent nature of the upper-class Goan Catholic community done in the name of charity. They treat the poor beggars in a humiliatingly mean way by making the beggars wait for an hour before the treat, and finally providing them with meager meal:

Don't try turning up for more.

No. Even if you don't drink
you can't take your share
for your husband.

...

No. Not a towel *and* a shirt,
even if they're old.

(116)

The conjunction “and” in the above quotation is in italics which means a beggar can not take both a towel and a shirt, but any one. For the food and cloth, the beggars are instructed to “Say thank you/ and a rosary for us every evening” (ibid). The insinuation at pretentious welfare ends here and give way to plain statement—a Robert can be a “good man” but “beggar's can't be, exactly”—which lays bare the filthy heart of the Catholic upper-class.

The orthodoxy of Catholic culture in accepting the sexual maturity of adolescents is highlighted in “Sweet Sixteen,” where Phoebe asked the poet whether

she can get “preggers and all that, *when/you’re dancing?*” (117). The conundrum is resolved in an innocent haste as the poet at her sixteen “assured” her that she could have got pregnant in the ball. The sexuality taboo that de Souza portrays in this poem is a small instance of how Christianity intervenes in the disciples’ subjectivity by devising religious “codes” which they are supposed to conform to. The poet at sweet sixteen finds her world filled with the “scream” and “thunder” of religious ethics:

A nun screamed: You vulgar girl

don’t say brassiers

say bracelets.

...

The preacher thundered:

Never go with a man alone

Never alone

and even if you’re engaged

only passionless kisses.

(116)

Apart from the dominant patriarchal ideologies, de Souza’s poem illustrates the restrictions imposed on women by women—“Mamas never mentioned menses” and a nun “pinned paper sleeves/onto her sleeveless dresses” (ibid)—the ironic blunder that creates impediment on the way of liberation from patriarchal and religious oppression. But de Souza can not be called a radical feminist. Although “highly conscious of the situations and problems faced by women,” her poetry does not subscribe to any overt political ideals; “it is feminine in its kind of awareness, female vision, and affinities to the mode of other women poets—rather than in a proclaimed commitment” (King 158). In the title poem of the volume *Women in Dutch Painting*, de Souza portrays the average women who seldom become subject of poetry. The poem, inspired by some Dutch painting, describes some middle-class women whose

life is as stale and plain as painting. Yet, the women are “calm, not stupid/pregnant, not bovine” (119). What makes them strange to the poet is their lack of desire, or perhaps, courage, to undermine traditional roles as women, and assert their distinct identity in men-dominated sociocultural nexus. They either accept their fate passively or ponder over impossible fantasies:

I know women like that
and not just in paintings—
an aunt who did not answer her husband back
not because she was plain
and Anna who writes poems
and hopes her avocado stones
will sprout in the kitchen.

(119-120)

In “Miss Louise” de Souza draws a gloomy portrait of an aged spinster who becomes a victim of public scorn. Miss Louise used to dream a luxurious dream of “descending/curving staircases/ivory fan aflutter” (39) in her prime. She had the desire of mothering children in “in sailor suits/and organza dresses” which failed most pathetically “till the dream rotted her innards/but no one knew” (ibid). Within patriarchy, a spinster has the hardest life as if the fulfilment of womanhood is dependent on marriage and bearing children only. Miss Louise stands now at the brink of her youth when Fr. Hans makes a sardonic comment: “I feel an arrow/through my heart” while others say: “Yes Louise, we know, professors/loved you in your youth,/judges in your prime” (40).

De Souza is equally sharp-tongued and self-critical when she writes about herself. Mehrotra finds a tinge of “Larkinesque” self-irony in de Souza that hue a number of her poems (115). De Souza’s “Autobiographical,” as the name suggests, is an autobiographical poem which represents her angst-ridden psyche, although it is never over-indulgent in its thematic concern. Like Kamala Das’s “An Introduction”

(10-11) which invites criticism of the poet on the ground of language—her use of a “foreign” language—de Souza’s poem is a caustic remark of how her awkward “belonging” invited suspicion. The uneasy relation of the poet with “Hindu” India is apparent in these lines:

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

(De Souza, “Autobiographical” 41)

The poet seems to get herself rid of the problem of identity-crisis and seeks revenge upon the conspirators of her tragic plight in “Bequest”. As she gazes at the statue of Christ she is filled with a strange passion. There is no desire to surmount Christ’s noble mission to redeem humanity of its vices; rather, she would rip her heart out to offer it as a “gift” to her enemies. The “charity” in question would be done to the poet herself but on her ripped heart. The nihilistic tendency of the poet takes its most despicable form in these lines:

It’s time to perform an act of charity
to myself,
bequeathed the heart, like a
spare kidney—
preferably to an enemy.

(44)

The veneration for poststructuralist theories which, according to Alcott, repudiates all forms of realism and encourages wholesale epistemic scepticism is prone to weaken political determination. She observes that “all claims of identity have become suspect, no matter how they are formulated or what their political implications are purported to be... and the links among identity, politics, and knowledge have become so nebulous that it looks as if none exist at all” (314). The

razor-sharp lines of de Souza promulgate her self-formulated political implications her poetry puts on. The “realistic” representation of Portuguese or Goan Catholic life and culture is vividly multifarious in her poetry which has nuanced preponderance in the opus of de Souza. Such characters as Miss Lousie are full of blood and passion, and show distinct individual traits. De Souza herself appears to us in kaleidoscopic verisimilitude, but her *otherness* is almost always discernible. Notwithstanding her sense of alienation and cultural marginality, de Souza has immersed herself in the “mainstream” cultural domain of India which, though predominantly Hindu, is formed by numerous cultural and religious overlapping. De Souza, like other poets of her community such as Melanie Silgado and Santan Rodrigues, has undeniably her share in the development of Indian poetry in English who are part of the evolution of Indo-Anglian poetry in its growing concern for “Indianness” apart from community ethos, as Bruce King observes:

With each decade an increasing immediacy and heightened awareness of actual Indian experience is noticeable. While this might be a matter of kinds of technique and expression, it reflects a narrowing of the distance of the poet’s perception of her or himself as poet from the actualities of the community life. I do not mean that the poet is less conscious of being isolated or alienated, but rather that poetry reveals more of the environment, of other lives, and of the specifics of daily life, including relations with others.

(5)

If Alcoff is of the opinion that reclaiming of identity is to assert that “we have a location in social space, a hermeneutic horizon that is both grounded in a location and an opening or site from which we attempt to know the world” (335) de Souza’s poetry proximates that space from where to enact her identity and opening vistas of new experiences characterized by discovery of the subtext of sociocultural politics. It is de Souza’s participation in the common events of everyday that raises the complex

issues of minority identity and problems of belonging to “Hindu” India. It is in this sense de Souza stands inbetween the spaces of belonging and non-belonging.

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