IIT ROORKEE

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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 24: Eunice de Souza

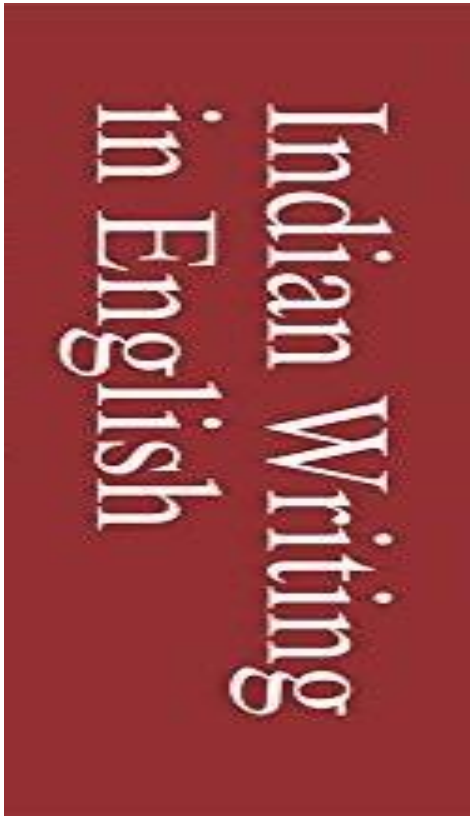
BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Background

- Pre-independence women poets were highly sentimental and romantic because of their affinity with British Romantic poets.
- Post-independence women poets wrote more about social and domestic life and the special focus was portrayal of women in Indian context.
- Their voice represented the collective consciousness of Indian women.
- Their quest for identity and questioning of socio-political marginalization of women became main concerns.
- Eunice de Souza is the representative voice among them.



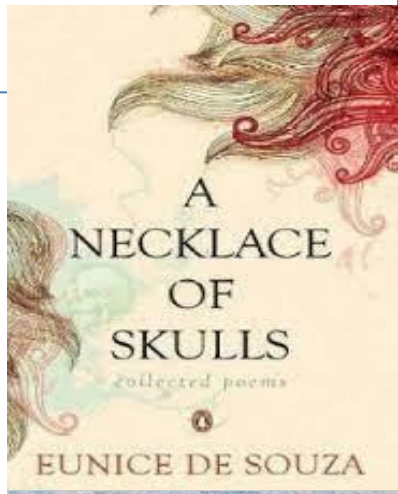
Eunice de Souza (1940-2017)

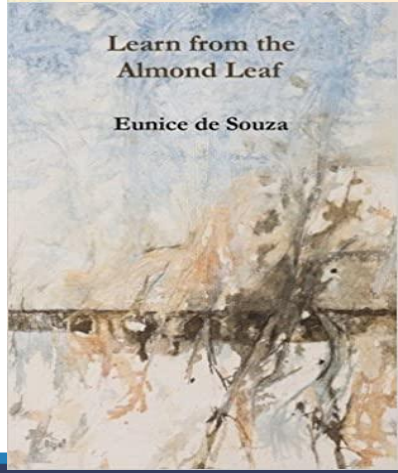
- ✓ Born in 1940 in Bombay, educated in Bombay and U.S.A.
- ✓ Returned to India in 1963 from U.S.A.
- ✓ Poet, critic, columnist, editor and researcher.
- ✓ Deeply influenced by the Civil Rights Movement of USA.
- ✓ The only woman poet included in *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra.
- ✓ Her student, Melaine Silgardo, is also a famous poet.
- ✓ She passed away on 29 July 2017.

Her Poetry Collections

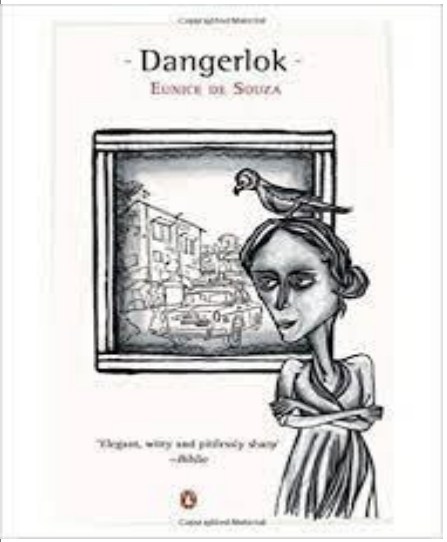


- First book- ***Fix*** (1979)
- The cover of this collection was designed by Arun Kolatkar.
- This work was denounced by St. Peter's in Bandra.
- Her friend Adil Jussawalla said if she continued to write in same way then she would soon be denounced at St. Peter's in Rome.
- *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988)
- *Ways of Belonging* (1990)
- *Selected and New Poems* (1999)
- *A Necklace of Skulls* (2009)
- *Learn from Almond Leaf* (2016)





Her Other Works



- Two Novels-:

  Dangerlok (2001)

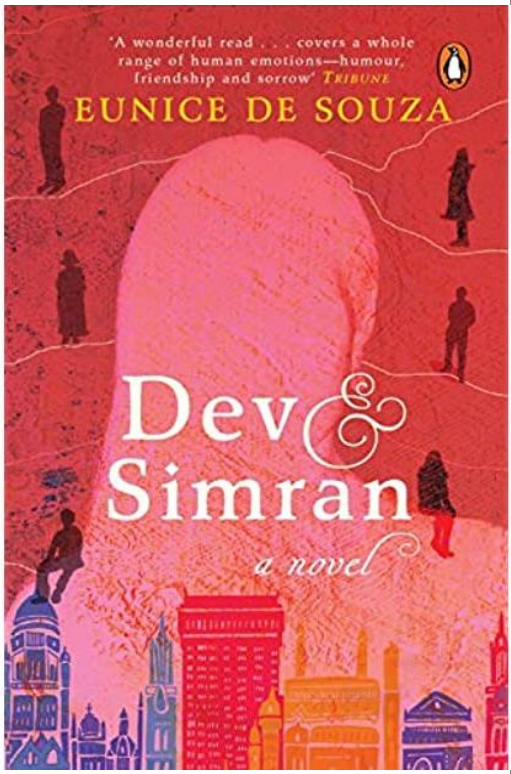
  Dev and Simran (2003)

- Two well-recognized anthologies-:

➢ ***Nine Indian Women Poets***

➢ ***The Penguin Book of Indian Poetry***, collaborated with Melaine Silgardo

- Written four books of folk-tales for children
- Also wrote for *Bombay Chronicles*



General Themes of Her Poetry

- Self-revelation and Confession
- Family, Marriage and Relationship
- Love and Sexuality
- Detachment
- Self-doubt and Self-criticism
- Feminine Sensibility
- Attack on dogmatic religion, patriarchal framework
- Domestic life of Indian Women
- Existential Search

“Autobiographical”

Right, now here it comes.
I killed my father when I was three.
I have muddled through several affairs
and always come out badly.
I’ve learned almost nothing from experience.
I head for the abyss with
monotonous regularity.

My enemies say I’m a critic because
really I’m writhing with envy
and anyway need to get married.

My friends say I’m not
Entirely without talent.

Contd…..

Yes, I've tried suicide.
I tidied my clothes but
left no notes. I was surprised
to wake up in the morning.

One day my soul
stood outside me
watching me twitch
and grin and gibber
the skin tight
over my bones.

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

Then I discovered
a cliché :that's what I wanted
to do to the world.

“Sweet Sixteen”

Well, you can't say
they didn't try.
Mamas never mentioned menses.
A nun screamed: You vulgar girl
don't say brassieres
say bracelets.
She pinned paper sleeves
onto her sleeveless dresses.
The preacher thundered:
Never go with a man alone
Never alone
and even if you're engaged
only passionless kisses.

Contd….

At sixteen, Phoebe asked me:

Can it happen when you're in a dance hall

I mean, you know what,

getting *preggers* and all that, when

You're dancing?

I, sixteen, assured her

you could.

Characteristic Features of Her Poetry

- Economy of Expression
- Abrupt Endings
- Ironic Juxtapositions
- Directness of Speech
- Lyrical
- Atmosphere of Subdued Tension
- Indian Setting
- Use of Christian Myth
- Move from ‘’bondage to freedom, indecision to self- assertion, weakness to strength”
- Hidden Sexuality
- Her personal experience represents the feelings of all women.

“The Road”

As we came out of the church
into the sunlight
a row of small girls
in first communion dresses
I felt the occasion demanded
lofty thoughts.

I remember
only my grandmother
smiling at me.

They said now she wears lipstick
now she is a Bombay girl
they said, your mother is lonely.

Nobody said, even the young must live.

In school
I clutched sister Flora’s skirt
and cried for my mother
who taught across the road.
Sister Flora is dead.
The school is still standing.
I am still learning
to cross the road.

(from Women in Dutch Painting)

Her Later Poetry

A Necklace of Skulls & ***Learn from Almond Leaf***

More of Nature imagery:

"The hills heal as no hand does.
The heart is stilled by the blue flash
of a lone jay's wing.
Impossible to forget, you think,
the shadows of the sun here ever purple,
the receding plains where the wind still blows."

- an appreciation of life
- less confrontational
- flow of time
- life and death-

"The golden orioles have gone
The warbles are silent.
The last red leaf on the almond tree
refuses to fall."



Themes Explained

❑ Attack on Social Dogmatisms

"Her family history examined
for T.B. and madness
Her father declared solvent,
her eyes examined for squints
her teeth for cavities,
her stools for the possible
non- Brahmin worms."

(from Selected Poems,4)

❑ Love and Relationship

" Keep cats
if you want to learn to cope with
the otherness of lovers....
That stare of perpetual surprise
in those great green eyes
will teach you
to die alone."
(Advice to Women)

On Domestic Life and Sexuality

- Portrayal of Indian women and their domestic life have become the main focus of her early poetry. She disapproves the Marathi poet and saint Tukaram for the neglect of her wife-

"You made life hard for your wife
and I'm not sure I approve of that.
Nor did you heed her last request:
Come back soon."
(Return)

"It pays to be a poet.
You don't have to pay prostitutes."

.....

"I hope you realize I do this with other women."
(Poem for a Poet)

What Critics say about Eunice de Souza

- “Eunice de Souza's poems have the brevity, unexpectedness, and urgency of telegrams. In the first half of *Fix,* all the telegrams come from the community to which she belongs. It is here that one meets, perhaps for the first time in Indian poetry, individual whose English keeps the flavour of natural idiom without sounding, picturesque or 'babu'.” (Arvind Krishna Mehrotra)
- “Through economy, clarity, avoidance of ornamentation and metaphor, and appearance of detachment and the dampening down of emotions, de Souza packs a lot of hidden feeling into a small package.” (Bruce King)
- “Eunice de Souza never had the slightest patience with the claims of a normality imposed by consensus or authority. No one to be trapped in a ghetto, whether ethnic, economic or political, she learned to embrace the rapture of all that was strange and liberating.” (Ranjit Hoskote)

Summing up

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.

(“It’s Time to Find a Place”, *Selected and New Poems*)

References

- King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982.
- Rao, Raja. “Interpretive Testimony: Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza”. *A History of Indian Poetry in English,* ed. Rosinka Chaudhary. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Hoskote, Ranjit. “On Eunice de Souza”. *Indian Literature*. Vol. 1. November/December, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademy, 2017.

Thank You