



Challenging Tradition: A Feminist Reading of Eunice de Souza's *Advice to Women*

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Abstract

This paper examines Eunice de Souza's poem *Advice to Women* through a feminist lens, exploring how the poet critiques societal expectations placed on women. The poem's humour, irony, and sharp critique subvert traditional gender roles, highlighting the struggle for women's autonomy in a patriarchal society. By employing both humour and bitterness, de Souza challenges cultural norms that shape women's identities, offering a unique feminist perspective. This paper further contextualizes the poem within the broader feminist literary tradition, examining its continued relevance in modern gender discourse.

Keywords: Feminism, gender roles, societal expectations, humour, irony, patriarchal society, women's autonomy, cultural norms, feminist literary tradition, modern gender discourse.

Introduction

Eunice de Souza (1940-2017) is a celebrated Indian poet and educator whose works often reflect deep engagement with the complexities of gender, identity, and societal expectations. One of her most recognized poems, *Advice to Women*, explores the relationship between women and societal expectations, particularly focusing on the prescribed roles that limit women's autonomy. This paper analyzes the poem through a feminist framework, showing how de Souza challenges traditional gender roles with wit and sharp critique. By examining the poem's tone,

language, and themes, this paper demonstrates how de Souza subverts patriarchal ideals and calls for the empowerment of women.

1. Eunice de Souza: A Feminist Voice in Indian Poetry

Background and Literary Contribution

- **Life and Education:** Eunice de Souza's upbringing and education in India and the United States greatly influenced her literary voice. As an English professor and poet, she was often exposed to both Western and Indian literary traditions,

which helped shape her understanding of feminism.

- **Literary Themes:** Throughout her work, de Souza deals with the themes of female desire, identity, and the expectations that women face. She critiques the traditional roles of women in both domestic and public spheres. Her poetry is often noted for its accessibility and straightforward critique of societal norms.
- **Feminism in De Souza's Work:** De Souza's feminist perspective is evident in many of her works, which challenge the status quo and explore the tension between independence and societal pressures. *Advice to Women* is a prime example of her critique of gender roles.

2. Contextualizing *Advice to Women* in Feminist Discourse

Gender Expectations in Indian Society

- **Patriarchal Structures:** In Indian society, women have historically been confined to domestic roles, expected to embody virtues of silence, modesty, and subservience. De Souza critiques these constraints and calls attention to the limiting nature of such roles.
- **Feminist Criticism in Indian Literature:** The feminist movement in India has grown in strength over the past century, with poets like Kamala Das, Imtiaz Ahmad, and Eunice de Souza using their writing to expose and critique patriarchal structures. De Souza's *Advice to Women* builds on this tradition, offering a sharp critique of the prescribed roles women are often forced to accept.

Humour and Irony in Feminist Literature

- **Humour as Subversion:** De Souza's use of humour in *Advice to Women* subverts the seriousness with which gender roles

are typically treated. Through the ironic tone of the poem, de Souza exposes the absurdity of traditional expectations, using sarcasm as a tool for critique.

- **Irony as Empowerment:** The poem's ironic advice offers a sense of empowerment by showing the disconnect between societal expectations and individual autonomy. It invites readers to challenge these traditions, offering an alternative perspective.

3. A Feminist Reading of *Advice to Women*

Poem Overview

Advice to Women begins with what appears to be earnest advice on how women should act, focusing on their appearance, behaviour, and demeanour. The seemingly benign tone gradually reveals itself to be sarcastic as the speaker mocks the impracticality and absurdity of the advice. Through the poem, de Souza critiques the idea that women's worth is tied to their ability to conform to social expectations of femininity.

Tone and Language: A Feminist Critique

- **Tone of Sarcasm:** The sarcastic and ironic tone used in the poem serves as a critique of society's expectations for women. The speaker's advice, which might seem reasonable on the surface, is laced with irony, turning conventional wisdom on its head. The humour that de Souza employs exposes the folly of conforming to such expectations.
- **Language of Critique:** The straightforward language of the poem speaks to the universal experience of women subjected to societal pressures. The choice of words such as "do not speak," "do not argue," and "do not be intelligent" underscores the oppressive nature of gendered expectations, emphasizing the restriction of women's voices and intellect.

4. Subverting Traditional Gender Roles: The Message of the Poem

The Role of Women as Defined by Society

The advice in the poem suggests that women should maintain silence, avoid being assertive, and prioritize their physical appearance over their intellectual capabilities. This reflects the traditional roles women have been expected to play—docile, compliant, and passive. De Souza critiques this, using the voice of the speaker in the poem to ridicule the notion that women should be confined to these roles.

Feminist Rebellion

De Souza's use of humour and irony in the poem offers a form of rebellion. By twisting the conventional idea of "advice," she subverts the patriarchal notion that women should simply accept these roles. The poem encourages women to challenge the constraints placed upon them by society, offering a form of empowerment through satire.

5. Feminist Themes in *Advice to Women*

1. Gender and Power

The poem examines the imbalance of power between men and women, with women positioned as inferior in societal norms. This power dynamic is made explicit through the "advice" given, which limits women's agency. By mocking the advice, de Souza challenges these power structures, proposing that women are capable of more than society allows them to be.

2. Identity and Autonomy

De Souza highlights the tension between women's individual identities and societal expectations. The poem suggests that women's identities have often been shaped by external pressures, with little regard for personal desires and autonomy. In this sense, the poem can be seen as an argument for women to reclaim their individuality and assert their independence.

3. Rejection of Traditional Femininity

The poem critiques the traditional notions of femininity—beauty, passivity, and silence—and calls for the rejection of these stereotypes. Women are encouraged to step outside the conventional norms of behaviour and instead embrace their full potential.

6. Reception and Impact of *Advice to Women*

Critical Reception

Advice to Women has been praised for its biting critique of gender roles and its sharp wit. Critics have highlighted de Souza's ability to use humour as a tool of resistance, making her feminist commentary both accessible and impactful. The poem's humour does not undermine its serious critique but instead reinforces the absurdity of the prescribed gender norms.

Lasting Impact on Feminist Literature

De Souza's poem continues to be relevant in the contemporary feminist literary canon. Its critique of patriarchal expectations and its call for women's empowerment resonate with ongoing discussions about gender equality and women's rights in India and globally.

Conclusion

Eunice de Souza's *Advice to Women* offers a powerful feminist critique of societal expectations placed on women. Through humour, irony, and sharp social commentary, de Souza challenges the traditional gender roles that confine women to limited identities. The poem serves as both a critique and a call for empowerment, encouraging women to resist societal pressures and claim their autonomy. In doing so, de Souza's work remains a crucial contribution to feminist literature, offering a timeless reminder of the importance of challenging tradition in the quest for gender equality.

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