



THE 'FEMINIST EPIPHANY' IN THE POETRY OF CHARMAYNE D'SOUZA

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ABSTRACT

Charmayne D'Souza (b.1955) is one among the most aggressive and flamboyant post – 1970 modern poets. She is a Goan Roman Catholic and represents minorities and their distinct culture. Her outsider-insider sensibility and minority status define certain areas of conflict. There is an implication of insecurity complex and the sense of alienation in her. Her only book of poetry *A Spelling Guide to Women* was published in 1990. It is about the pain that can follow insurgence, living by one's self, failing at making a romantic marriage, routine jobs, metropolitan seclusion, growing old, modern condition and the agony of freedom. This is the poetry of failure which in itself is remarkable. Charmayne D'Souza is an avid feminist and she is strongly sentient of the mediocre position given to women in patriarchal society.

Key words: Feminist poet- outsider-insider- voice against secondary status of women-equal status

'There's something about poetry that evokes rather strong reactions if it's loved or hated, worshipped or ignored, celebrated or detested. And when women write it, there's shock, joy, discomfiture, empathy, acknowledgement, rejection and understanding, in varying degrees (Srividya Sivakumar).¹ The poetry of Indian Women writing in English has several influences such as counting the often-reviled western bearing -but also the media and the demands of a developing society and nation. The themes could be Indian or international, the language concise or contrived, the poems swarming with metaphor or completely devoid of anything but the essentials. Their writing is often about their bodies and their desires, and in the process have often outraged spectators. Feminism also makes a difference to how love, lust, marriage and courtship are viewed. For poets like Suniti Namjoshi, Meena Alexander, Sujatha Bhatt, Eunice De Souza, Melanie Silgado, Charmayne D'Souza and others, poetry is often self-discovery, catharsis and a journey to find their feet and voice.

Charmayne D'Souza (b.1955) is one among the most aggressive and flamboyant post – 1970

modern poets. She won three prizes for poetry in the USA-the Aberdeen (South Dakota) Arts Council Prize in 1985 and 1986 and the Midwest Poetry Review Prize. In Mumbai she won the Bahut Tantrik Kamala Das Competition. She is a Goan Roman Catholic and represents minorities and their distinct culture. Her outsider-insider sensibility and minority status define certain areas of conflict. There is an implication of insecurity complex and the sense of alienation in her. Her only book of poetry *A Spelling Guide to Women* was published in 1990. It is about the pain that can follow insurgence, living by one's self, failing at making a romantic marriage, routine jobs, metropolitan seclusion, growing old, modern condition and the agony of freedom. This is the poetry of failure which in itself is remarkable. Nissim Ezekiel states 'The major poems in the present collection describe suffering and even despair, radical failures, painful conflicts, devastating situations in which the poet know that she shares her fate with women all over the world'²

Charmayne D'Souza is a passionate feminist and she is vigilant of the second-rate position given to women in patriarchal society. The title poem "A

Spelling Guide to Woman” stands as a severe critique of male-chauvinism. The women are at the clemency of men. They have to ingest the bitter pills of anguish, anxiety and laxity. The obvious prototype of her consideration is sturdily booming right through the title poem. She writes:

Woo men,
womb men,
woe men,
whim men,
warm men,
who, men?
no, woman.(p.1)

Evidently, the poem is the mirror to her feminist creed. The poem echoes the aspects of the Holy Bible – (Genesis) in which the origin of a woman is described. This section writes like this: ‘And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man’. Then the man said:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called
Woman,
for out of Man this one was
taken. (Ibid)

Charmayne D’Souza catalogs the dismal conditions of women in our country. In the poem “The Rational Animal” her focus is on the reality of women’s consent of the substandard rank given. The poet says:

After some time,
do you think a woman
is still ready to sit upright
behind a desk,
or in a drawing room,
talking sensibly to a man?
Never. (P.2)

D’Souza arraigns not only the men but also women who are ready to be docile before men. She fears that they also turn into sacrificial animals:

After all, men are such animals,
little thinking that by acting
the sacrificial goat,
she too comes among the genus
of quadrupeds. (Ibid)

Charmayne D’Souza also makes other ample edicts about the state of women.

The “Cattle-front” is an exceptional instance:

What is a woman’s idea
of the battle-front?
To wait quietly in line?
To pass muster?
To be part of the stockpile
Of weapons
a man chooses carefully
to hurl at his adversaries,
upon the world? (p.6)

She dryly comments that the woman is used as a resource by man while dealing with adversaries. This is the way of the world. Our society upholds the integrity of the men, but cares least for the women and their prestige. Nissim Ezekiel is of the opinion that “The battle-front / cattle-front is a reality which poetry too must deal with, so that all men in all societies eventually become ashamed of it” (1991).³ D’Souza shows the distinction between blissful and gloomy nuptials in the following lines:

Happy marriages
make good wars,
with decisive victories,
decisive defeats.
Unhappy marriages
only make for witty epigrams
and guerilla attacks. (Ibid P. 7)

Charmayne D’Souza opines that marriage is not a strong tie between the two partners who are usually supposed to make sacrifice for the sake of the other. The poem uses war imagery while describing married life – both happy and unhappy:

What do you think
A woman lives for?
Armoured like some Panzer tank,
For the conflagration?
Where are her marriage oaths made?
At Mars’ bedside?
.....
make the wedding veil
her shroud,
the military flags flying high
in honourable disarray
on the window’s cheeks. (Ibid)

The poet has used military terminology to describe the lot of a married woman. In our society, women play the role of the subordinate. They lack self-confidence and exchange out their prestige to men

for trivial reasons. In the poem "Next !" the poet writes: Most men make/ the same noises,// to indicate/ their impassioned choices./ And we,/ who like to think ourselves /the rarer sex,/agree,/ lightly barter our lives /away,/afraid to die alone/one day (p. 9). In our society, women are not expected to disclose their desires. They are not permitted to mingle with men. The male community raises strong objections if a woman shows signs of freedom. It is usual to stain the character of a righteous lady if she raises her voice against the authority of male community. She is defamed from all angles. This mindset is still part of our culture. This idea is presented in the poem "What If Behemoths Were To Stampede."

Charmayne D'Souza considers that Women have always been treated as consumer durables in almost all the cultures. Their stature is a subject to the inference of male community. The adjectives like 'cheap', 'whore', 'prostitute', 'low-born' are attached to their names. She enumerates: "I'm a cheap woman,/ I don't smoke./ I don't drink./ I don't make love./As a result,/I don't make babies / I think I'm a bargain!/ That/is the only thought/I have." She continues:

I am, therefore,
What is known as
A RESERVED FORCE.
It's hard to feel
I'm a woman.
I do none of the things
a woman does.
But then,
Neither do I think
I do the things
a man does.
("A Cheap Woman" p.17)

The poet knows that she is 'peculiar' because she performs none of the socially accepted roles given to a man or to a woman. She, however, cherishes her fetish which is a treat to her. In *Modern Indian Poetry in English* Bruce King's remarks the position of Charmayne D'Souza in Indian English literature that "By now there are a number of subjects that are known as likely to be found in poems by women. Security is attractive, but is also a trap, falseness to oneself, a purdah. Charmayne D'Souza often writes of the attractions of insecurity, the fun

of anxieties. She can be witty about risks and satirical towards those who do not take risks'.⁴

The poem "A Maiden's Prayer" comically contrasts real desires with the theoretical serenity of a night alone 'without a man'. Hugging a pillow the maiden desires what she lacks: 'Security/from the vagaries of love / can only offer me / its own cares/'. In "Strange Bedfellows" the poet talks about the relationship that can exist between desire, sexuality, violence and death. The next poem "When God First Made a Whore" is typically feminist in her blasphemous depiction of a patriarchal God. There is the horrid humour in the poem:

One day,
God will ask for this sweaty body
of mine,
but, like all the rest,
He will have to stand in line.
So said the whore,
as they asked for more.

(*Nine Indian Women Poets*, p.85)

Charmayne D'Souza's poems often they take astonishing directions and the attitude is esoteric. "I Would Like to Have a Movie Cowboy for a Husband" is a witty title, but the portrayal of 'Our lovemaking our orgasms' with its 'crisp certainty / of death' is distressing. The entertaining satire in the image of cowboy life of 'fried bread, beans and hash' takes a twist with the 'guarantee' of the relationship that it will only last a few years:

that our marriage could be
deliciously wiped out,
like an Indian tribe,
forever.

(*Nine Indian Women Poets*, p.86)

Regarding the Hindu marital rituals and relationships, Charmayne D'Souza uses irony with alarming effect:

I have marked this woman out
for me.
We will be tied together
by the scarlet sari
of her blood.
Seven times around
the fire of my shots.
.....
Her mangalsutra
will be a bullet
to her breast,

My garland
a hempen rope
around my neck
and a swift sharp
erection
into death .

("A Spelling Guide To Woman", p. 4)

D'Souza uses images of 'blood', 'bullet', 'fire of my shots', 'hempen rope' and 'death' to express marital relations.

Thus *A Spelling Guide to Women* is a collection of surprising intensity and imagination. Charmayne D'Souza has a lyricism and fanciful imagination seldom seen in English-language poetry. Her poetry includes social satire on the dissatisfaction existing in relations between the sexes in India. Her verse contrasts the naturalness of violence, aggression and sexual desires with repression, hypocrisy and deceit. Her entire enterprise is to expose the injustice meted out to woman. The casualness of her speaking voice, the abruptness of her responses creates visual effects.

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