

lements of Literature and Creative Communication

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Lecture - 24

Eunice De Souza

Hello, welcome back to this continued discussion on Kamala Das. No wonder, having heard some of her lines, having heard about her, no wonder if you feel that you are in the presence of some live fire. There is indeed a kind of burning if you hold her poetry; you get burnt in that, of course, burnt in a positive sense.



Earlier, too, we had used this metaphor. Please recall that poetry has the capacity to burn us and fashion us afresh. So, in that sense, we can call every reader of poetry; every reader of literature is a *dvija*. Of course, Indian philosophical traditions or in caste system *dvija* has a different connotation.

dvija is a twice-born. When somebody wears the sacred thread, it is said they become they are born again. Well, that is a metaphoric meaning. Well, poetry too has the capacity to make us burn, to burn our older self and create as afresh; therefore, even poetry makes us *dvija* the twice-born.


So, every reader of poetry is twice-born in that sense. We were discussing in the last class how Kamala Das's poetry can be called confessional poetry and how of course, keeping looking at the spirit of confession she almost practiced it to perfection. Therefore, you cannot find a better confessional poet or more honest and confessional poet than Kamala Das.

We were discussing all that; let us continue our discussion of her poetry.



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Kamala Das being much ahead of her time, found herself trapped within the narrow mental and physical boundaries in a fairly patriarchal Indian society.



She was a seeker of freedom, and poetry was to her the only way to vent her heart out and dream in order to free herself from all the shackles of society.



It was true that during the time in which she wrote or that period, in which she lived, she always felt trapped in that because she was always ahead of her time. Or unfortunately, the society in which she lived failed to keep up with her pace, which is why she always felt a bit trapped in a kind of a society that she felt did not do justice to her, that is how she felt and of course,,, she has every reason to feel that way.

In the highest sense of the term, she was a true seeker, she was a seeker of freedom, and poetry, for her, was a means to achieve that freedom. That is why words gave her a new set of wings.

What she could not achieve in life, she achieved through her imagination, through her writing. So, therefore, you can say that it was poetry that helped that really helped her to come out of the shackles of society and liberated her. She felt truly liberated in the imaginative spaces of poetry and literature.

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She used poetry as a medium to convey her deepest secrets, wildest thoughts, and to confess her desires. Poetry was a liberating force for her and she literally poured out her heart and soul, emerging as an enigma and a confessional poet to whom Indian poetry is indebted.

Due to her brilliant poetic sensibility and attachment to the confessional mode, she is often compared to and held at par with the greats such as Sylvia Plath.

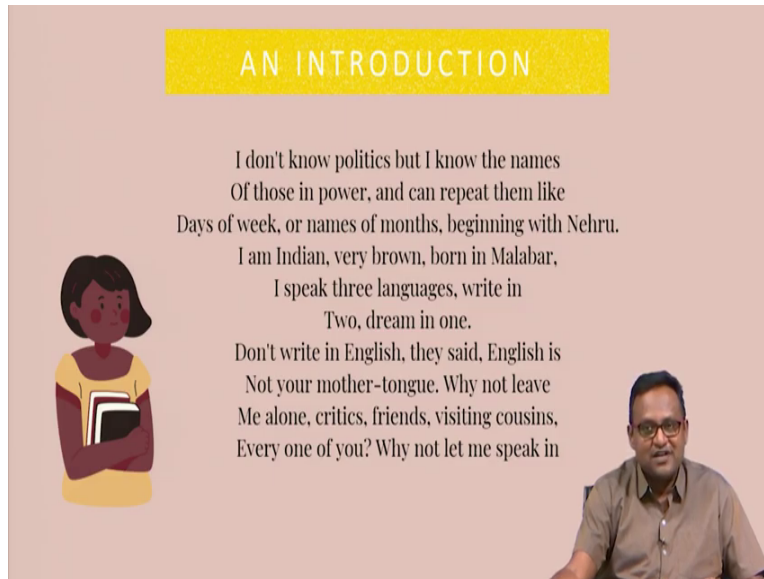


We discussed this that as a major confession; of course, it is not that she branded herself as a confession poet, but we consider her as a confession poet because she chose poetry as a medium to convey her deepest secrets or wildest thoughts and even suppressed desires.

That is the reason why we said that poetry for her was more of a liberating force and she chose to pour her heart out. Her words gave her good companionship which is the reason why she emerged as the greatest poet because of her extraordinary poetic sensibility and attachment to the confessional mode.

She is generally compared with poets such as Sylvia Plath, and of course, her poetic genius says no less than that of Sylvia Plath or probably a little more than what Sylvia Plath did. She is much greater than Sylvia Plath.

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Having heard about her life, having heard her views and poetry, and having heard some snippets of her poems here and there. Now, let us come face to face with one of her most well-known poems. Again you can see the autobiographical elements in this poem and the confessional mode of poetry that she practiced in that poem.

So, this poem epitomizes both her preoccupations. The autobiographical preoccupation that how poetry becomes a mode through which you write your story and how poetry offers you a space to share your deepest desires, darkest thoughts, and things like that.

Of course, it is a slightly longish poem. So, we have again taken a few excerpts. We have left out a few stanzas retained some, and if she interests you, you should seek out her poetry and read the rest of her poetry as well, including this poem.

“I do not know politics, but I know the names

Of those in power and can repeat them like

Days of weeks, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.”

Right in the very first few lines, she makes her disdain for politics explicit. It is not that she is not well versed with politics; she can, like a child, learn to memorize; she knows the leaders in power, those leaders she can repeat them that does not mean she is attached to them. Like a child is made to memorize nothing beyond. So, right there, her disdain for politics is quite evident.

“I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,

I speak three languages, write in
two, dream in one.”

Of course, when we read poems like this, the entire activity is to help us read a poem to discuss poetry from across the globe; please do not mistake this course as a kind of a course that gives you a historical overview.

One of the ideas behind all these classes is to give you an overview of poetry, but when we go deeper into at least a few poems, the intention is to make you familiar with how poetry works, how poetry through words weaves different magic into the fabric of language, poetry unfolds using the fabric of magic.

But it is not just the fabric of language, but it is not just the fabric of language that is there in poetry. A great poet, a great writer weaves many other things including slicing a part of their own life, slicing a part of their own flesh, their own soul, they weave it into the fabric of language and thereby make language immortal as well.

“I speak three languages, write in
two, dream in one.

Do not write in English, they said, English is
not your mother tongue.”

They stand for it stands for critics or those who try to critique her choices, the choice of her language, what she wrote. They went on prescribing what she should write in, which language she should write in.

So, this is a kind of a response to all that. So, you can go on identifying different literary elements here and you can also go on learning or go on reading with me these poems and in the process pick up how to read poetry in general because most of us feel difficulty, we find poetry very difficult to understand not because it uses extraordinary language or words that you and I do not know, but because we do not know how to read it. So, if we learn to read it properly, then probably you find poetry the easiest; you will find poetry very easy to go by. And more than that, please remember the poetry; of course, only one dimension of poetry is meaning. There is another dimension right in the very first class we identified. We identified poetry has two dimensions; one is the dimension of sound, and the other is the dimension of sense.

So, you must also focus on your eagerness to search for meaning in poetry or meaning in your eagerness to search for meaning in poems that you read. You should not lose sight of, the sound or how poetry constructs an image. So, if you are, if you are used to drawing using pencil sketches or watercolors or even oil colors; remember poetry is just that it is like painting the canvas with words that are all, painting the canvas with words.

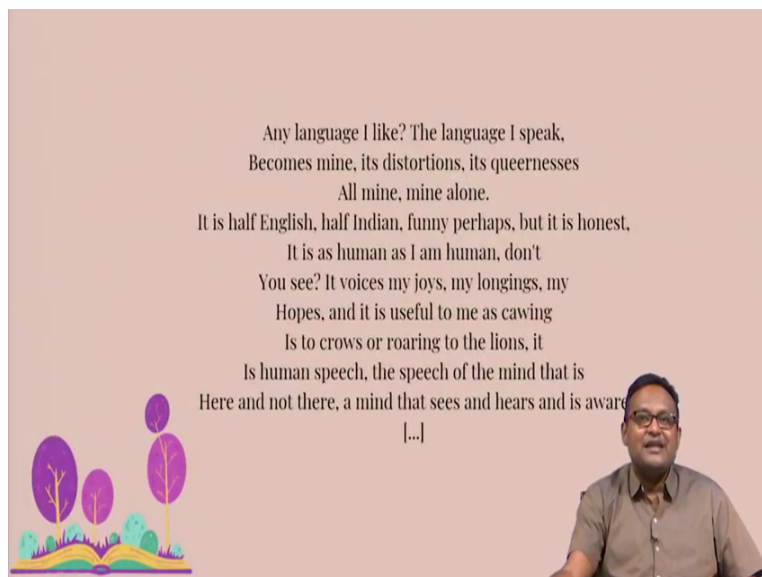
Therefore, when you create, when you create a drawing what do you look for when you create a drawing or when you create a painting? What do you look for in that? In fact, it pleases your eyes it fills your entire being, and gives you an extraordinary sense of fulfillment, a rare sense of satisfaction that is all right. You do not look for meaning in painting.

Though it is quite possible to look for meaning, it is not all so; it is poetry. So, that is why there is a poet who says a poem does not mean it just be. It exists, that is all; it is not there to mean something; it just exists.

So, please focus on this aspect of poetry as well. Please focus on this aspect once when you realize that using words in a poem just creates some kind of a picture; then, of course, you understand because that is when you derive a sense of fulfillment yeah.

So, while responding to this kind of criticism, she says why not leave me alone critics, friends, visiting cousins.

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Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queeresses
All mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and is aware
[...]

Every one of you? Why not let me speak in any language I like? Why do you keep interfering in everything? Because basically, poetry is where a soul speaks with itself or where a self speaks with its own soul. Therefore, it is the most intimate moment.

So, during your most intimate moments, you do not want anybody coming and giving you instructions; you do not like that because it is your moment; it is your private moment. So, therefore, she says why do not you leave me, let me be, let me write in whatever language I like, why do you keep advising.

The language I speak becomes mine; its distortions, its queerness all mine, mine alone. How else do you own anything? When you use a language, it becomes your right. And as long as it is yours, as long as it expresses what you wish to express, why do you care in which language you write. As long as the language that you use is capable of giving voice to your innermost feelings, your innermost emotions, that is sufficient.

You should not care what I mean, what is the figure of speech involved, what is the language in which you are writing. As long as you find the language you write is capable of conveying what you wish to convey, then there ends the matter. All debates are closed. Well, if somebody criticizes that her English is not really English, it is half English, it is Indian English, well, of course. So, I mean, how does it matter?

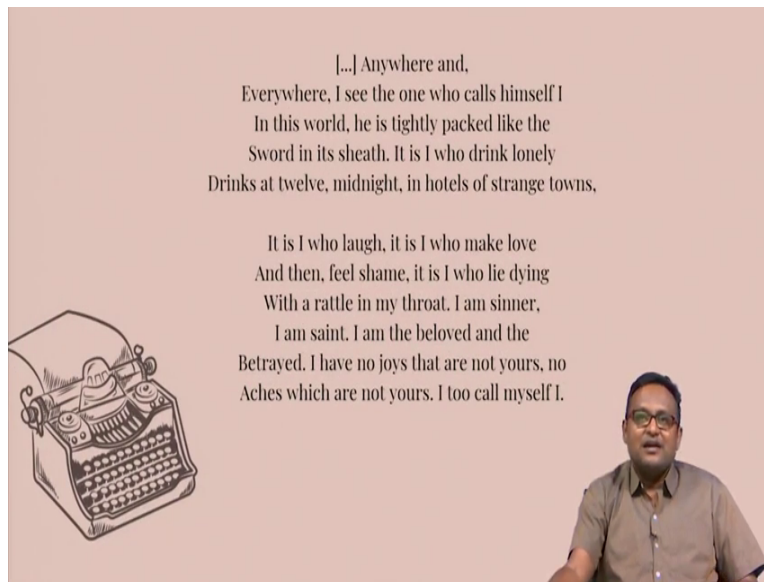
“It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest. It is as human as I am human, do not you see that?” Like you do not find a perfect human being, you do not find a perfect language for poetry. We have to do with whatever we have got right; therefore, if it is half English, so be it. How does it matter because it is capable of conveying what I wish to convey.

It voices my joys, my longings, my hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions. Look how natural see speaking in English for me is as it comes as natural to me as cawing is to crow and roaring to the lions. You may not like the voice of a crow, but just because you do not like a crow does not change the way it caws right.

That is its voice whether you like it or not is immaterial to that. So, is it with me, I do not care whether you approve of my writing in English, my writing in Malayalam, or my writing in any other language as long as it is mine; therefore, I write in it. If you like it, you read it, if you do not like it you do not need to read it, as simple as that.

It is human speech, the speech of the mind that is here and not here, a mind that sees and hears and is aware.

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[...] Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I
In this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,

It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

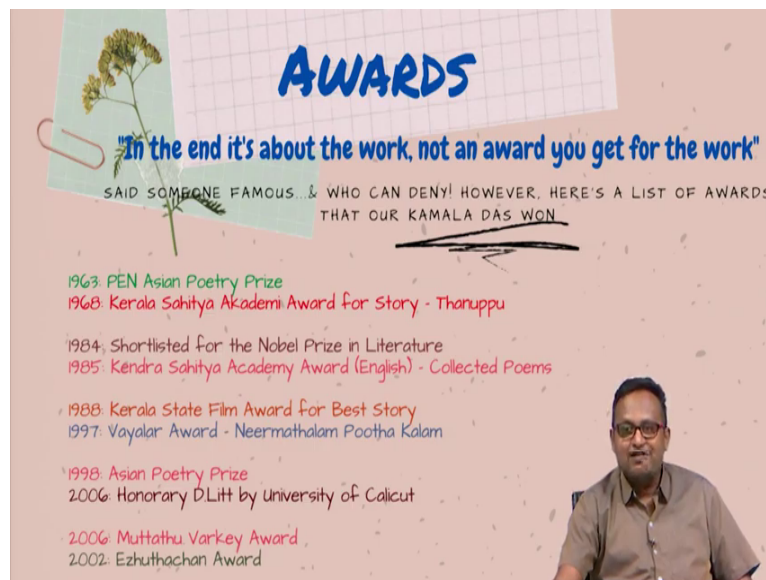
“Anywhere and,
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It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
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aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.”

-- this is where poetry achieves its universality, cutting down on the differences the external differences. It makes us realize how we are all connected at the core and how each of us is connected. Of course, if you can recall what Donne said in the 17th century, “No Man Is an Island.” When he says man, of course, human beings; no being is an island, everyone’s death diminishes me he says. Because why should anyone’s death diminishes because we are all connected at the end of the day there is a reason why all human beings are here.

And there is a mysterious thread that binds us, the day we realize or the day we see that mysterious thread that connects all of us, then our approach towards life is different becomes different, then the way we treat people around us becomes different, and we become evolved I mean evolved creatures.

Such philosophical depth is conveyed using the simplest of language in such an extraordinary confessional mode. This is Kamala Das for us, and that is why she has become important to us.

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Well, of course, many awards went in search of her, but we should realize that it is not the awards that determine the quality of the poet. Nevertheless, of course, just to make us familiar make ourselves familiar with the kind of awards she won these are some of the significant awards.

She won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Asian Poetry Prize PEN it is a very prestigious award. She was shortlisted for Nobel Prize in literature in 1984 and 85 the very next year she won the Kendra Central Sahitya Academy Award and many other awards. She was even honored with Asian Poetry Prize and she was bestowed with an Honorary D Litt degree and all that.

And the Kerala Government honored her with Ezhuthachan Award, the highest literary award that one can get for her contribution to Malayalam literature, these are some of her important works.

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And considering her contribution to poetry and the Indian literary scene, this is how various newspapers, journals, and literary ventures chose to commemorate paid their tribute when she passed away. So, this is Kamala Das for us.

So, if this class piques your interest in her poetry or if this has even made you curious about her poetry then, of course, the purpose of the class is half done because we wish to create our intention is not to give you an exhaustive account of any of these writers when we discuss them. On the other hand to pique your interest in them because this is a very short course.

In this short course, we may not even be able to do justice to a single writer. Forget the gamut of writers we have discussed. We may not even be able to do justice to a single writer. The purpose of the class let me reiterate, is to pique your interest in all these writers. So, if there is any writer you find some kind of connection with you can go back and connect yourself with their writing.

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Eunice de Souza (1940 – 2017)

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Having discussed Kamala Das, let us move on to another fellow poet or, in a sense a precursor to Kamala Das's poetry. In fact, many have identified Eunice de Souza as a kind of forerunner to the kind of confessional poetry that Kamala Das practiced, another well-known fellow writer and somebody who changed the literary landscape not just of Goa but of the entire literary scene of India.

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Eunice de Souza was born in the year 1940 in a Goan Catholic family

She was an English language poet, novelist, literary critic, and a great teacher.

She also acted in and directed theatrical performances.

She authored 4 children's novel

With a modern, witty, and unapologetic sensibility, de Souza dominated the literary scene in India.

Inspired by "medieval saint poets in India and Emily Dickinson," de Souza gifted us a handful of literary works to reminiscence over. Let us take a quick glance at her collection of works...

So, very briefly, of course, she was an English poet, novelist, professor of literature, literary critic, and editor of some important volumes, and she is also authored a couple of children's works as well. So, this is Eunice de Souza, another major poet. Of course, there is no point calling these writers Indian English women poets and all that they are Indian English poets.

Of course, we can even call them to do away with Indian English and all that, just poets, but of course, we use Indian English as a special signifier for something which we discussed at the beginning of this week.

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Yeah, very quickly, this is her contribution to literature. She has a couple of poetry collections to her credit beginning with the *Fix* which is her first poetry collection that came out in 1979, followed by *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988), *Ways of Belonging*, *A Necklace of Skulls* is a remarkable poetry collection that won her several accolades. And *Learn from the Almond Leaf*; is her last collection.

More than her collections, she is also well known for her edited volumes. Because they change the landscape of Indian English poetry in a significant way; therefore, her contribution is also in this way. *Early Indian English Poetry*, *Indian Poetry in English*, *An Anthology*, *Sathianadhan Family Album*, *These My Words*, *Penguin Book of Indian Poetry*, *Folktales from India*, *Purdan Anthology*, *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology*.

They drew the attention of the readers towards fellow poets and created interest in their writing as well. And she also has a couple of novels to her credit this is her writing.

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Quotations

"She was an eminent figure who dominated the poetry skyline,"
Jerry Pinto.

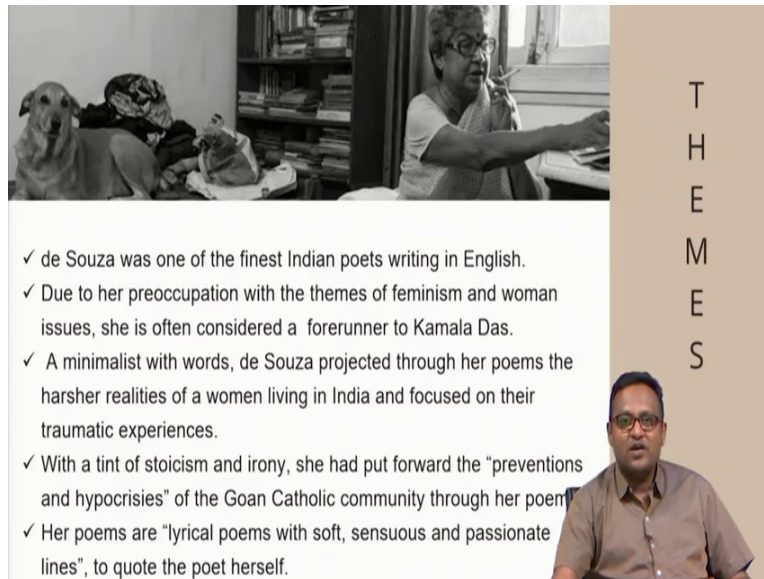
"She had a distinctive voice, wry and sardonic, and there was a kind of cruel wisdom in her poetry. Her work became more minimalist over time, and the poems in her last collection have a crystalline clarity." Ranjit Hoskote

"She also looked after the well-being of a number of stray dogs near her house and that earned her a fair amount of hostility from her neighbours. But she soldiered on. She inspired a great deal of loyalty and as she grew increasingly incapacitated over time, her loyal helpers were around to take care of her." Adil Jussawala

So, very naturally because of her contribution, she was praised by her colleagues Jerry Pinto, and Ranjit Hoskote who is himself an extraordinary poet, a successor of her poetry you can say. In fact, Ranjit Hoskote's poetry is deeply influenced by the poetry of Eunice de Souza.

So, therefore, he pays a rich tribute to her. And Adil Jussawala, a fellow poet technically speaking, too belonged to the Bombay circle initially she spent much of her time in the company of Adil Jussawala, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and others. And there are many critics who find a lineage of Nissim Ezekiel's skills poetry in Eunice de Souza's poetry. Of course, they were contemporaries, they were she was influenced by his writing and all that.

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- ✓ de Souza was one of the finest Indian poets writing in English.
- ✓ Due to her preoccupation with the themes of feminism and woman issues, she is often considered a forerunner to Kamala Das.
- ✓ A minimalist with words, de Souza projected through her poems the harsher realities of a women living in India and focused on their traumatic experiences.
- ✓ With a tint of stoicism and irony, she had put forward the "preventions and hypocrisies" of the Goan Catholic community through her poem.
- ✓ Her poems are "lyrical poems with soft, sensuous and passionate lines", to quote the poet herself.

And again, if you can briefly evoke the essence of her poetry, she is considered a minimalist with words you can recall minimalism using the economy of expression becomes again important here using the minimum number of words or not decorative, not embellishing it with here and there, but achieving the extraordinary effect that you wish to achieve using simplest of the words. So, her poetry achieves that kind of foot. So, with a tint of stoicism and irony, she put forth through her writing hypocrisies, especially of the Goan Catholic community, the community to which she belonged. Therefore, her poetry had the capacity for satire, through irony she helped expose the hypocrisy of Indian society in general.

And see one of the reasons why poets do this or writers do it is not to lampoon; of course, it is true that one of the objectives of a satire a literary satire is to expose the follies and foibles of society, but behind that is an extraordinary hope that when exposed it is like a wound. So, unless you expose it to medicine, a wound does not heal on its own.

So, a literary exposure of a society's hypocrisy has the capacity to heal the society of its own wounds. So, her poetry does that job. So, when somebody asked her to comment on her own poetry or to briefly describe her own poems this is what she chose to call. She said my poems are lyrical poems with soft, sensuous, and passionate lines. That is how she chose to describe her own poetry.

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de Souza as an Autobiographical Poet

Eunice de Souza popularly said in her poem,

"Don't Look For My Life In These Poems
Poems have order, sanity
aesthetic distance from debris."

- ✓ However, her poetic works are replete with autobiographical experiences.
- ✓ For example, She wrote a poem on her trauma after the demise of her father when she was just a child.
- ✓ Also regarding her first collection of poems titled *Fix*, de Souza commented that it contains, "a slow burning fuse about my community" (the Goan Catholics of Mumbai)



Well in the context of Kamala Das we discussed how we can consider her as a pre-eminent confessional poet, which is true for Eunice de Souza as well. In fact, more than confessional poetry, she inaugurates a kind of what you can call autobiographical poetry. Though of course, she went on saying how do not look for my life in this poem. She went on to say that; that is also the title of her poem. It is a short poem where she says poems have order, sanity, and aesthetic distance from debris.

Whereas life does not have all that life, you cannot say there is order in life, there is sanity in life; it is on the edge. Our life is on edge. So, therefore, she went on saying that nevertheless, it is true that her poetic works are filled with autobiographical details her experiences, her again her frustrations, her hopes, and anxieties find a better match in words. Therefore, she can be rightly called an autobiographical poet.

So, commenting again on her own first collection of poems, which we have identified as *Fix* and she says that it is a slow-burning fuse about my own community. She went on writing this precisely what writers do bringing in because they have firsthand knowledge about the society; they use that society as a creative cornucopia, and they are born out of that society and, of course, when they are not happy with certain aspects of the society they critique it, and they warn that society so that the society can overcome and be a kind of a hospitable place for everybody to live in a harmonious and a peaceful way.

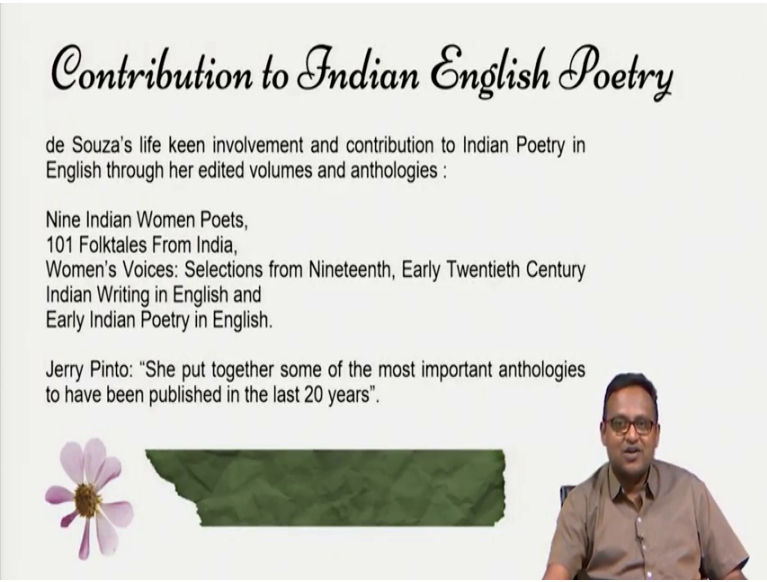
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Contribution to Indian English Poetry

de Souza's life keen involvement and contribution to Indian Poetry in English through her edited volumes and anthologies :

Nine Indian Women Poets,
101 Folktales From India,
Women's Voices: Selections from Nineteenth, Early Twentieth Century
Indian Writing in English and
Early Indian Poetry in English.

Jerry Pinto: "She put together some of the most important anthologies to have been published in the last 20 years".



As we have already discussed, her contribution is not just to Indian English poetry. Through her poetry collections, she has significant edited volumes through that she helped her fellow poets find their rightful name and fame in Indian English poetry as well.

That is why one of her fellow poets, Jerry Pinto says that “She put together some of the most important anthologies to have been published in the last 20 years”. So, if you want to have if you want to get a picture of some major Indian English poets and Indian English women poets, especially if you look at some of her anthologies, you will find a better representation of that particular literary scene. So therefore, her contribution is there as well.

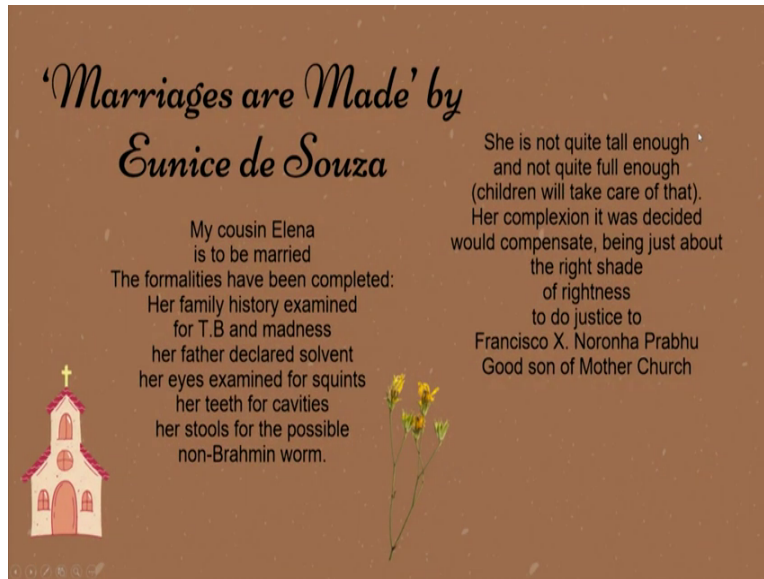
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A Necklace of Skulls is her extraordinary collection again not it is not a very voluminous piece. About 70 odd poems divided into 7 odd sub-sections through them she explores human life using extraordinary skill and language.

Again skull, of course, is symptomatic, and it acts as synecdoche. We have discussed synecdoche, and they feature her poetic works, especially even some of her older poems that did not that were not published earlier are included in *A Necklace of Skulls* and a very important collection by the poet.

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Before we end discussing Eunice de Souza, here is a poem, of course, as we said, please think of minimalism look what she achieves using the economy of expression look what she achieves here. Marriages are made; of course, there is a popular statement right “Marriages are made in Heaven” she deliberately does not use the word the next part of that phrase in heaven marriages are made.

Now, look at how marriages are made, of course, it is a powerful critique of patriarchal society because if you look for any matrimonial, I mean ads, you will see the hypocrisy of patriarchy. How they describe as if brides are available in the market they describe fair handsome good looking somebody docile.

So, her look at how she critiques this kind of mindset in “Marriages are Made”—

“My cousin Elena
is to be married
the formalities have been completed
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 worm.

She is not quite tall

enough and not quite full enough

(children will take care of that).”

So, therefore, nothing to worry about; I mean, this is how when a boy’s family is about to search for a girl probably is not the mindset in which we work which we live even now. Her complexion it was decided would compensate, being just about the right shade of rightness to do justice to Francisco Noronha Prabhu, Good son of Mother Church.

Now, look at how what is remarkable is the choice of simple words, not even complex structures, but powerful enough to expose the hypocrisy of a patriarchal society in its search for it.

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That is why this is another one I mean her well-known poem “Advice To Women” especially here the poetic persona offers advice to women in case if they wish not to feel cheated in relationships what they can do, keep cats if you want to learn to cope with the otherness of lovers. Here cats become metaphors too. If you want to learn to cope with betrayals in life you need to keep cats, why? Because otherness is not always neglected--cats return to their litter trays when they need to.

Similarly, men get back whenever they need women they get back, but of course, not very overtly it is not said overtly sensible readers would be able to make the implied meaning here.

Do not cuss out the window at their enemies. The stare of perpetual surprise in those great green eyes will teach you to die alone. So, borrowing on the cats impersonal, it is said right that cats do not get attached to people. They get attached to houses; that is a known saying.

So, I mean borrowing on that, she says if you want to get used to being aloof in relationships, how women though are a part of a relationship, how they have to how they silently bear the brunt of being alone, how they are not considered, their feelings are not considered and all that; “Advice To Women.”

I am sure you have enjoyed listening to these classes; let us quickly recall what we did. In the earlier class, we began with the poetry of Kamala Das and we continued that in this class as well. We discussed Kamala Das’s poetry as confessional poetry, and then we moved on to Eunice de Souza and how we can see in her poetry expression of her own self, and we also read some of her interesting poems.

Again if these classes have helped you to develop your interest in poetry in general and the poetry of these two remarkable poets then of course, it is a remarkable feat. We will see you in the next class with some more fellow Indian English poets.

Thank you, take care.