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Fatima Sahrish

## INTRODUCTION

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Women should be exactly like Sylvia Plath as described by Hughes: "Plath was determined to confront 'central, unacceptable things' " ( Sage 501). Numerous female writers have expressed female consciousness in a powerful manner. Elaine Showalter who coined the term 'gynocritics', 'the study of women *as writers*' in *A Literature of Their Own* aptly examines the expressions of self-awareness. If women want to inculcate sound principles then women must be educated. In Mary Wollstonecraft words.

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# "My Pen is My Palisade": A Study of Charmayne D'Souza

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"I want to be doing something with the pen since no other means of action in politics are in a woman's power." –Harriet Martineau

(Ray and Kundu Vol. IV 280)

## I. INTRODUCTION

During the late seventies of the twentieth century, the emphasis was given to 'gynotexts' and 'gynocriticism' instead of 'androtexts'. A deliberate attempt was made towards (re)presentation of biological differences, (re)valuation of women's experience, (re)thinking the canons of texts, (re)reading and the (re)presentations of the conscious and the unconscious. The genres and the structures which are included in it are women's writing, the psychoanalysis of female creativity, the progression of the female career and the growth of laws of a female tradition. In other words, it marks the emphasis on women's full access to language.

Women should be exactly like Sylvia Plath as described by Hughes: "Plath was determined to confront 'central, unacceptable things' " ( Sage 501). Numerous female writers have expressed female consciousness in a powerful manner. Elaine Showalter who coined the term 'gynocritics', 'the study of women *as writers*' in *A Literature of Their Own* aptly examines the expressions of self-awareness. If women want to inculcate sound principles then women must be educated. In Mary Wollstonecraft words:

"educate women like men," says Rousseau, "and the more they resemble our sex the less power they will have over us." This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have

power over men; but over themselves'... ' it is not empire, - but equality, that [women]

should contend for'... education for women as for men must be 'the first step to form a being advancing gradually towards perfection' "(Qtd. in Kauffman 45-46).

Contemporary Indian Women poets have been found to be writing on the recurrent themes of love, sex, man-woman nexus, betrayal, loss and pathos of females living in a phallogocentric society with some exceptions like Lila Ray, Margaret Chatterjee, Mary Ann Das Gupta, Rohini Gupta and Meena Alexander who have explored other themes too. They are fighting through writing to be free from the bondage of patriarchal domination and echo Elizabeth Barrett Browning's lines:

I heard an Angel speak last night,  
And he said "Write!" ...

Some women weep and curse, I say  
(And no one marvels), night and day  
And thou shall take their part to-night  
Weep and write.

A curse from the depths of womanhood  
Is very salt, and bitter, and good  
(Ray and Kundu Vol. IV 280)

Hammered with a sense of pride in patience, women have been taught to accept secondary place in the society. The secondary standing of women is not a natural feminine characteristic. It is, rather, a social tradition under the purposeful control of men, which is called Sexual Politics. It is an irony that a woman has to experience two states. On the one hand, she has been revered as a deity whereas on the other hand she is a prisoner

inside the four walls of her home. She blindly follows her male counterpart thus becoming a mirror image of his personality. All she does is to adorn herself as an embellishment of either her father's or husband's home throughout her life. Life of a woman is like a liquid where she moulds herself to adapt to all situations whatsoever. Formed under the shadow of traditions and conventions which are destructive, human beings forget that the difference between two objects does not indicate their inferiority or superiority.

Psychologically, from the point of view of the physical growth and because of the arrangement of the social order, there has always been a difference between a woman and a man and it will always be. But this psychological or physical difference neither advertises anyone's inferiority nor establishes anyone's superiority. In this connection, commenting on the prevalent social order, Mahadevi Verma states:

Women, who are reared under the artificial cloak of tradition, endure countless injustices not because they lack the power to resist but because they are afraid that they will be straying from their duty...But such a sacrifice is as meaningless as the submission of a helpless sacrificial animal. (Sohoni 7)

Charmayne D'Souza's one and only volume of poetry, *A Spelling Guide to Woman* (1991), shows textures of western feminism where she expresses distress, despondence as well as failure in solidarity with all the women of this world. The poet shows the radical self of a reformist kind with the strong belief of an iconoclast. Poetry is a two-way process for D'Souza. She uses poetry for not only verbalizing 'personal as political' but also in making the public as personal.

Women like those who live on the edge, whom mental stability may be at risk for several reasons involve the personal-political axes. In poetry, the focus is on the emotions and the internal landscape –the landscape of the mind. Female poets inscribe their emotional disturbances into their writing. There was enormous personal

investment in Sylvia Plath's poetry due to her depression. Women writers always experience conflict between what society expects them being women and the fact of their being writers.

Though the depiction of women in her poetry is simple, her poetry represents the anger of all women and their fight against silence imposed upon their speech. In this context "the feminist literary critics have also dwelt upon the impediments encountered by creative women. They have also focused on their silence. Their silence is probably the silence of the ages. The critics infer "that the silences result from circumstances of being born into wrong sexual category where the contingent forces are adverse as education is denied and economic dependence prevails" ( Jain and Agarwal 238-39 ).

When we talk of marriage, silence is the first thing taught to every woman. Silence represents oppression, while liberation is marked by speaking out. D'Souza highlights how success and emancipation of women in a male-dominated society causes their subversion in the family taking away their happiness. The poet shows the dilemma of how education may elevate women's status in the community but it does not alter their status in the family. The poet shares the dilemma of modern women rooted in tradition succumbing silently to the male ego knowing the importance of the 'sheltering tree of a husband'. "As men learnt to exercise control over women, they extended their authority over other vulnerable groups: thus slavery emerged" ( Geetha 51).

For a long time women have been denied full access of language and have been forced into using euphemisms or being altogether silent. Women form a 'muted group' and this term was coined by Mary Crawford and Roger Chafin. They put forth an idea that the standards to use language are governed by the dominant group or patriarchy which is echoed in Jane Austen's statement: "Men have had every advantage of women in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much a

higher degree; the pen has been in their hands" (Ray and Kundu Vol. I 213). Women have limitations to articulate their experiences due to the use of language which is derived from the insight of the dominant group. D'Souza as a writer, is the producer of textual meaning herself and her poems reveal "psychodynamics of female creativity, linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career" (Qtd. In Benstock 158).

Since gynocritics is self-contained and experimental according to Showalter, hence D'Souza seems to experiment with her subjects and language. "Heroism" is a term, Moers gave to define literary feminism wherein female protagonists of the texts create a heroic structure for the voice of female. D'Souza says what she wants to say :

In her poems as in her everyday life, Charmayne is essentially a reasonable person. Her self-mockery and her criticism of other people never goes to extremes... There is, after all, or should be, a direct relationship between poetry and life...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. (*Introduction, A Spelling Guide to Woman* n.p)

According to Maggie Humm it is gender as a social construct by which women are oppressed more than men which takes shape through patriarchy and it is women's knowledge which is a base for a non-sexist society. Pen is mightier than the sword and all female writers have proved its worth." Michel Foucault was an eminent structuralist in the mid sixties. He showed how power and knowledge works together. In this context, Lydia Alix Fillingham in her book writes that, "he started with the truism 'KNOWLEDGE IS POWER' "( Jain and Agarwal 233). It is through pen that D'Souza puts forth her anger and asks women not to be victimized by men :

Woo men

Womb men  
Woe men  
Whim men  
Warm men  
Who men ?  
No, women.

(*"A Spelling Guide to Woman", A Spelling Guide to Woman* n.p.)

Women form a muted group because they vocalize through permitted forms allowed by patriarchy. D'Souza becomes the mouthpiece for women, makes them try to break silence and speak, marking a definite change. Her poems offer resistance to patriarchy. She proved what Foucault believed "that resistance is an integral part of the power equation because if there is no resistance. There can be no power relation...resistance comes first and remains superior to the forces of power" ( Jain and Agarwal 235). If a woman raises her voice, she is told to remain silent in the name of the family or status. Patriarchy never allows liberation to women rather they are enchained in the name of dignity. D'Souza is in constant craving for her own identity and raises this issue :

I have been too long in search of someone who will turn around and say:

"You, I presume, are me, how do you do? Stay."

("Me", *A Spelling Guide to Woman* n.p)

Creativity in D'Souza's poetry becomes feminist manifesto. The word 'woman' is foregrounded when she cavils the word 'woman'. It shows hierarchization in this man's world. The patriarchal hegemonic world is exhibited where 'man' is prioritized. In this connection, Nissim Ezekiel has stated in the Introduction of the collection that "The major poems in the present collection describe suffering and even despair, radical failures, painful conflicts, devastating situations in which the poet knows that she shares her fate with women all over the world." (n.p). On the one hand, her woman is a reactionary character arguing with her male counterparts or simply becoming his shadow. There is irony, wit,

sarcasm and a frankness of expression in her poetry.

D'Souza's writing is a means of feminist intervention and activism in the structures of patriarchy. She presents her anger by stating: 'A woman's life is a reaction / to the crack of a whip.' ("Woman", *A Spelling Guide to Woman* n.p.). She portrays women in "Cattle-Front" as cattle who lay victims in the hands of patriarchy, always prepared to be bartered:

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 Spelling Guide to Woman* n.p.)

The common characteristic of recent Indian English women poets is that their pen is rooted in the body and its feelings. D'Souza explores the man-woman relationship in her poems having the basic theme of relationship between power and sexuality that is the core of feminist thinking and directly relates to Millet's argument: "patriarchal violence has a rationale, which bears some resemblance to the formulae of nations-at-war. In the battle of the sexes, as in battles between nations, violence is justified on the grounds that the enemy is either an inferior species or really not human at all" (Bhagwat 190). The social world of contemporary poetry by the women and subaltern poets has changed to an extent that cannot be assessed. Conservative critics started raising their brows when they saw that these poets have revealed their real heart and the bitter experiences from their personal and social world.

Women writers made writing their weapon and use it in their own way. It is an art for a poet in "releasing of a tension" by indulging in self-analysis and social criticism in a sarcastic and ironical tone. D'Souza's aggressive vent turns creative in her writing. Her poetry has an exquisite imagery that often seems like a social satire and throws light on the discontentment

between the sexes and also exposes the injustice inflicted on women. D'Souza sees a utopian future with an optimistic vision that the deplorable conditions of women will change. One should find a voice if she wants to be heard and lighten the dark corners if she wants to be seen.

the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge. Clasp them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance – *the difference of view, the difference of standard...*

(Qtd. In Jacobus 11)

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