

The Evolution of Feminist Voices in Contemporary Indian Poetry in English

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of feminist voices in contemporary Indian poetry in English, focusing on the works of Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, and Meena Kandasamy. Drawing from feminist literary theory and postcolonial feminism, the study examines how these poets articulate female subjectivity, resist patriarchal oppression, and redefine the contours of womanhood in the Indian socio-cultural context. Kamala Das's confessional mode foregrounds the female body as a site of both desire and resistance; Eunice de Souza's sharp satirical voice critiques religious orthodoxy and gender hypocrisy; and Meena Kandasamy's politically charged verse fuses feminist and Dalit consciousness. The paper situates these poets within a continuum of feminist discourse, showing how their works respond to and reshape the literary and socio-political landscape. Through close textual analysis, it argues that contemporary Indian women poets have transformed English verse into a potent instrument of gendered resistance and self-assertion.

Keywords: Indian feminist poetry, Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Meena Kandasamy, postcolonial feminism, confessional poetry, Dalit feminism

Introduction

The trajectory of feminist expression in Indian English poetry reflects not only the development of literary aesthetics but also the socio-political struggles of Indian women in the post-independence period. Feminism in India, though influenced by Western feminist waves, evolved uniquely, shaped by caste, religion, and postcolonial legacies. Poets like Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, and Meena Kandasamy represent three distinct yet interlinked phases in this evolution — from the confessional exploration of personal identity to satirical critiques of societal norms, and finally to intersectional feminist activism.

Elaine Showalter's tripartite model of feminist literary criticism — the feminine, the feminist, and the female — provides a useful lens for this study (Showalter 13). Kamala Das's poetry negotiates the 'feminist' phase, wherein the writer asserts autonomy against male domination; Eunice de Souza works within the 'female' phase, foregrounding women's linguistic

and thematic agency; Meena Kandasamy's work expands the framework into a postcolonial intersectional phase, where feminism is inseparable from anti-caste and anti-capitalist struggles.

Kamala Das: Confessional Voice and Body Politics

Kamala Das's poetry, particularly in collections such as *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), marked a radical departure from the genteel, male-dominated Indian English verse of her time. Her poem "An Introduction" remains a manifesto for self-definition:

"I am sinner, I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours" (*The Old Playhouse* 8–10).

Here, the personal merges with the collective female experience. Das's rejection of prescribed gender roles is both sexual and linguistic; she chooses to write in English, defying nationalist purists, and claims the right to speak about female sexuality without euphemism.

In "The Looking Glass," Das subverts the male gaze by inviting it, yet on her own terms:

"Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one" (*The Old Playhouse* 1–2).

Her frankness about female desire challenges the moral conservatism of mid-20th-century Indian society. Das's work embodies what Judith Butler terms the "performative" nature of gender — resisting essentialist constructions by re-enacting femininity with agency.

Eunice de Souza: Satire, Religion, and the Female Experience

Eunice de Souza's poetry, in collections such as *Fix* (1979) and *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988), adopts a sardonic, often minimalist style to expose the hypocrisies of religious and patriarchal authority. In "Bequest," she writes:

"I give you my debts,
My inheritances of sin and guilt,
My chains of worry" (*Fix* 1–3).

The tone is biting, undercutting sentimental notions of female virtue. As a Catholic Goan woman, de Souza's work often interrogates the gendered strictures of the Church. "Forgive me, Mother" from *Women in Dutch Painting* critiques the cloistering of female autonomy under the guise of morality:

"Forgive me, Mother,
For I have sinned
Against your idea of me" (1–3).

Her voice represents a shift from Das's sensual confessionalism to a more ironic, public critique. She reclaims religious discourse to question its patriarchal underpinnings, aligning with

postcolonial feminist thought that sees religion as both a site of oppression and potential empowerment.

Meena Kandasamy: Resistance, Dalit Feminism, and Political Engagement

Meena Kandasamy's collections *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) bring a distinctly intersectional perspective to Indian feminist poetry. As a Tamil Dalit poet, translator, and activist, Kandasamy's feminism is inseparable from anti-caste politics. In "Touch," she writes:

"I speak in tongues they have silenced,
My body a banned book,
My skin a crime" (*Touch* 4–6).

Here, the politics of the body is amplified by caste identity, which intersects with gender to produce compounded marginalisation. Her poem "Ms. Militancy" reimagines Hindu mythological figures as agents of rebellion:

"I will never be Sita,
Waiting for the test of fire" (*Ms. Militancy* 1–2).

By rewriting myth, Kandasamy dismantles Brahminical patriarchy, echoing Spivak's insistence on enabling subaltern speech. Her verse is not merely literary but overtly political, situating poetry within larger movements for social justice.

Comparative Analysis

Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, and Meena Kandasamy illustrate a chronological and thematic progression in Indian feminist poetry. Das foregrounds personal freedom and sexual agency; de Souza satirises societal hypocrisy and religious authority; Kandasamy fuses feminist and anti-caste activism. All three challenge linguistic and thematic boundaries, transforming English poetry into a site of resistance.

Where Das's confessionalism risks individualisation of feminist struggle, de Souza's satire and Kandasamy's militancy embed personal experience in broader socio-political frameworks. Together, they demonstrate that the evolution of feminist voices in Indian English poetry is neither linear nor monolithic, but a tapestry woven from diverse identities, strategies, and histories.

Conclusion

The works of Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, and Meena Kandasamy underscore the multiplicity of feminist expression in Indian English poetry. Their voices, while distinct, converge in rejecting patriarchal norms, reclaiming female subjectivity, and expanding the scope of feminist discourse to include caste, religion, and sexuality. As Indian feminism continues to evolve, these poets provide both a foundation and a challenge — urging future writers to speak from their own intersections of identity, with courage and craft.

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