

Silence, Confinement, and Patriarchal Power in Select Indian English Poems

Prof. Swaroopa Joshi

Assistant Professor, Department of English, H.P.T. Arts and R.Y.K. Science College, Nashik, Maharashtra, India.

joshiswaroop2810@gmail.com

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Abstract: This paper reads Eunice de Souza's "Catholic Mother" alongside Kamala Das's "The Sunshine Cat" to examine two different experiences of women living within patriarchal structures. The poems do not present oppression in the same manner. De Souza works through irony, religious authority, the family photograph, and the striking absence of the wife's voice. Das moves inward, presenting a woman whose desire for affection is met repeatedly by neglect and whose domestic surroundings finally become restrictive. A close reading of diction, structure, imagery, symbolism, titles, and poetic voice shows how both poets question the assumption that family life necessarily provides security or recognition to women. Reader-response ideas associated with Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt are used as a secondary framework, particularly where the poems leave significant gaps for the reader to interpret. The argument of the paper is that silence and confinement function not only as themes but also as literary methods through which unequal power relations become visible.

Keywords: Indian English poetry; patriarchy; women's silence; confinement

Introduction

Indian English poetry has frequently turned everyday experiences into occasions for questioning social expectations. This is evident in the poetry of Eunice de Souza and Kamala Das, whose works examine subjects such as marriage, femininity, religion, sexuality, domestic life, and social respectability. Their language can appear direct and familiar, yet the situations they create are rarely simple. Ordinary conversations, domestic scenes, and apparently respectable relationships become ways of exposing unequal relations between men and women.

Eunice de Souza's "Catholic Mother," published in *Fix* in 1979, centres on a father who is publicly admired for his family life while the wife remains silent. Kamala Das's "The Sunshine Cat," from *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), presents a more private and emotionally painful situation. Its female figure searches for affection but encounters repeated indifference and eventually finds herself confined within the domestic space. The two poems are therefore worth placing together not because their plots are identical, but because both question the position given to women inside relationships that are outwardly treated as normal or respectable. The comparison proposed here is based on what may be called two forms of female absence. In de Souza's poem, the woman is physically part of the family but has almost no public or verbal presence. In Das's poem, the woman's feelings are much more visible, yet her ability to act freely becomes progressively smaller. De Souza makes the contradiction between public praise and private silence satirical; Das develops a more sombre movement from emotional disappointment to physical restriction.

The primary method adopted in this paper is close textual reading. Attention is given to form, diction, tone, repetition, imagery, symbolism, structure, titles, and the use of poetic voice. Reader-response theory provides an additional interpretive perspective because neither poem explains every aspect of the woman's experience. The reader must therefore consider both what the poems reveal and what they deliberately leave unsaid. The discussion remains centred on the poems themselves rather than treating the biographies of the poets as the main source of meaning.

Objectives and Methodology

The discussion pursues three related objectives. First, it considers the ways in which women are positioned within family and social structures in the two poems. Second, it identifies the literary devices that make these positions visible to the reader. Third, it compares the different emotional and critical effects created by de Souza's satire and Das's symbolic treatment of isolation. The study is qualitative and text-based. The two poems serve as the primary material, and the argument develops through close reading rather than statistical or survey-based evidence. Iser's concept of gaps in a literary text is useful for considering the significance of the wife's silence in "Catholic Mother." Rosenblatt's transactional approach also helps explain how readers bring their own experiences and assumptions to the interpretation of a poem. Both poems leave aspects of their women's inner lives unstated, making the reader's participation important without making every possible interpretation equally convincing.

The paper also takes care not to reduce the poems to biographical documents. Historical and biographical information can provide context, but the poems first need to be considered as constructed literary works. This distinction is particularly relevant to Das, whose poetry is frequently described as confessional. That description draws attention to the personal quality of her writing, but it should not replace an examination of the poem's narrative arrangement, imagery, repetition, and symbolism.

Reading “Catholic Mother”: Satire, Religion, and the Politics of Silence

In only eighteen lines, Eunice de Souza’s “Catholic Mother” creates a sharply recognisable social situation. Father X. D’Souza is introduced as “Father of the year” and is placed within a family photograph (de Souza lines 1-4). At first, the language appears complimentary. Gradually, however, the praise begins to sound excessive. The father receives public recognition for the size and appearance of his family, while the woman whose life is inseparable from that family is given no comparable voice. The imbalance is central to the poem’s criticism. The poem’s loose, conversational construction contributes to this effect. It does not rely on a fixed stanza pattern, regular rhyme, or a sustained metrical design. Instead, the lines resemble observations made about people in a photograph or about a family known to the speaker. Because the poem does not announce its criticism in an overtly argumentative manner, the satire develops through the reader’s gradual awareness of the difference between the language of admiration and the position occupied by the wife.

The family photograph is especially revealing. A photograph usually preserves a moment of togetherness and happiness, but it can record only appearance. Here, the father’s smile and public identity are visible, whereas the mother’s thoughts and speech are unavailable. The photograph thus becomes more than a background detail. It represents the respectable public image of the family while simultaneously drawing attention to the personal experience that such an image cannot record. Irony drives the poem. The father is presented as an exemplary family man, and the approving descriptions surrounding him appear to confirm that status. Yet the accumulation of praise makes the situation increasingly questionable. De Souza does not stop to announce that the family structure is unjust. Instead, she places the statements before the reader and allows their contradictions to expose the underlying problem. The poem’s criticism consequently emerges from the gap between what is celebrated and what remains unheard.

Religious language deepens this contradiction. The father attributes his large family to divine grace, while the parish priest calls him a “Pillar of the Church” (de Souza lines 12-13), and Mother Superior also approves of the family. Religious figures therefore contribute to the public validation of the father’s role. The poem’s target is not faith itself; rather, it is the way institutional approval can reinforce a domestic arrangement in which the woman’s perspective disappears. The father’s comments about India and Hindus add to the poem’s ironic tension. He speaks from a position of certainty about the morality of others, while his own authority within the family is treated as unquestionable. De Souza does not need to explain this inconsistency. By allowing the character’s statements to stand beside the circumstances presented in the poem, she lets his confidence become part of the satire.

The title “Catholic Mother” also deserves careful attention. It appears to promise that the mother will be the central figure, but the poem gives most of its speech and public recognition to the father and to religious authorities. The woman is therefore made noticeable through her absence. The word “Mother” identifies her primarily through a familial role, while “Catholic” places that role within a particular religious setting. The title consequently invites the reader to consider how a socially approved identity may conceal the individual woman behind it. The final lines sharpen the entire argument. After the priest and Mother Superior have praised the father and his family, attention shifts to “the pillar’s wife,” who “says nothing” (de Souza lines 14-18). The silence is deliberately unresolved. It could indicate obedience, tiredness, suppression, disagreement, or a refusal to add her voice to the celebration. Because the poem does

not supply a definite explanation, the reader is left to confront the significance of the missing speech. The silence therefore becomes an active element of the poem rather than a mere absence of dialogue. De Souza's economy of language strengthens the effect. She does not need elaborate descriptions to communicate the social tension. Conversational diction, repetition, approving phrases, and the unequal distribution of speech are sufficient to create the irony. The poem's brevity is thus part of its method: a small domestic scene exposes a much wider problem of authority and representation.

Emotional Neglect, Confinement, and Diminishing Selfhood

Kamala Das's "The Sunshine Cat" presents patriarchal pressure from a more intimate angle. Published in *Summer* in Calcutta in 1965, the poem is often placed within the confessional tradition associated with Das. Yet its effect comes not simply from the subject matter. The experience is shaped through third-person narration, repeated patterns of desire and disappointment, spatial imagery, symbolism, and the gradual movement towards confinement. The woman's emotional condition is therefore constructed rather than merely reported. The opening reference to "they" is significant because it gathers several men into the woman's experience (Das line 1). The group includes the man she loved, her husband, and other men associated with her search for affection. This choice prevents the reader from treating her suffering as the result of one isolated relationship. Instead, the poem suggests a recurring pattern in which the relationships available to her fail to provide the emotional security she seeks.

Love in the poem is repeatedly placed beside its absence. The woman wants affection and companionship, but what she encounters does not provide the emotional reciprocity she desires. Her movement between relationships consequently produces further loneliness rather than fulfilment. The poem's distinction between genuine affection and physical desire is important because the woman experiences the absence of emotional connection as a deep form of isolation. Marriage intensifies this problem. A relationship that is conventionally associated with companionship and security becomes associated instead with surveillance and control. The husband is described as a "ruthless watcher" (Das line 4), a phrase that suggests observation without emotional closeness. The domestic relationship is therefore oppressive at the psychological level before the poem makes the restriction of physical space explicit. The poem's spatial imagery becomes progressively more restrictive.

The woman is eventually shut inside a room containing books. Books conventionally suggest education, imagination, and access to wider worlds, yet here they cannot remove the woman's physical isolation. The room consequently carries a double meaning: it contains objects that can open the mind while functioning as a space that closes the body in. The image of the sunshine cat forms the poem's central symbol. A strip of sunlight near the door is imagined as a yellow cat and becomes a companion to the isolated woman (Das lines 15-18). The image is tender, but its tenderness makes the loneliness more painful. Something as insubstantial as sunlight has taken the place of human company. Because the light comes from beyond the locked room, it also suggests a world that remains close enough to see but beyond the woman's reach. The change from sunshine to winter alters the emotional force of the image. As the light becomes weaker, the imagined cat also loses its presence. The fading light parallels the weakening of the woman's emotional and physical state. Rather than simply telling the reader that she is losing hope, Das lets the changing image communicate that decline through the poem's visual pattern.

Repetition contributes to the sense of a cycle from which the woman cannot easily escape. Her wish to forget returns, while the movement from relationships to

tears and then to confinement produces a steady narrowing of possibilities. There is no sudden reversal at the end. The poem instead creates the impression that each stage leaves the woman with fewer choices than before. The final description is particularly disturbing. The woman is called “cold and half dead” and is said to be of “no use” to men (Das lines 22-23). These expressions expose a deeply objectifying view of female worth. The woman’s value is measured according to what men can receive from her, and when she no longer fulfils that expectation, she is treated as though she has ceased to matter. Emotional neglect and objectification therefore come together in the closing movement of the poem. The title “The Sunshine Cat” initially sounds warm and almost playful. Both parts of the phrase suggest comfort: sunshine implies brightness and warmth, while a cat can suggest companionship. The poem gradually undermines that expectation. The “cat” is only an imagined companion created from a small patch of light, and even that light is temporary. The title therefore contains, in miniature, the contrast between the comfort the woman needs and the fragile substitute she is forced to accept. The poem is written in free verse and relies on flowing syntax rather than a regular rhyme pattern. This allows the narrative to move continuously from one experience to another. The recurring vocabulary of rooms, doors, walls, and locking gives the poem a physical framework, while the emotional condition of the woman is reflected through that same spatial restriction. Form and subject consequently work together: the poem’s movement carries the reader towards an increasingly closed world.

A Comparative Reading: Two Forms of Female Absence

Read together, the poems reveal two related but distinct ways in which patriarchal power can limit women. In “Catholic Mother,” the woman is physically present and publicly associated with the family, but her speech is absent. In “The Sunshine Cat,” the woman’s emotional life is made visible, yet her freedom steadily contracts. Silence is therefore central to one poem and confinement to the other, but both conditions involve a loss of agency. Their tones are markedly different. De Souza’s satire remains restrained and dry. Much of the criticism is produced by the reader’s recognition that the public praise surrounding the father does not match the wife’s position. Das creates a more somber and emotionally charged atmosphere. Tears, walls, the room, winter, and fading sunlight accumulate until the woman’s isolation becomes almost tangible. Religion marks another important difference. In “Catholic Mother,” the priest and Mother Superior form part of an institutional structure that publicly approves the family. Nothing comparable operates in “The Sunshine Cat.” There the pressure is primarily domestic and relational. Nevertheless, both poems raise a similar question about gendered power: what happens when a woman’s needs are subordinated to a role that others have already defined for her?

The relationship between speech and silence provides perhaps the clearest connection between the poems. De Souza distributes speech among the father and religious authorities and leaves the wife silent. Das gives her protagonist an identifiable emotional experience, but emotional expression does not give her control over her circumstances. Thus, the two poets approach female absence differently: one makes the absence of voice itself conspicuous, while the other shows a voice or inner life that remains powerless against the surrounding structure. Neither poem, however, should be reduced to a simple picture of passive women. The wife’s silence in de Souza can be understood in several ways, including exhaustion, disagreement, submission, or refusal. Similarly, Das’s protagonist continues to seek affection rather than accepting emotional emptiness as inevitable. Her search does not produce liberation, but it demonstrates that she has desires extending beyond the role imposed upon her. The poems therefore leave room for a more complicated understanding of agency.

Reader-response theory helps clarify why these complexities remain important. Iser's emphasis on gaps in a text is particularly relevant to the unanswered question of what the silent wife thinks or would say. Rosenblatt's transactional theory, meanwhile, reminds us that a poem becomes meaningful through the encounter between text and reader. A reader's assumptions about marriage, motherhood, religion, gender, and respectability can influence the response. Still, interpretation must remain accountable to the textual evidence: the repeated praise in de Souza and the recurring confinement imagery in Das establish boundaries within which interpretation can operate. The titles reinforce the comparison. "Catholic Mother" attaches the woman to a socially recognised identity, only to expose how little individual presence that identity guarantees. "The Sunshine Cat" offers an image of warmth and companionship, but the poem reveals how temporary and fragile that comfort is. Both titles therefore begin with reassuring associations and gradually acquire more troubling meanings as the poems unfold.

Form, Tone, and Poetic Technique

Neither poem depends on a conventional rhyme scheme or regular metre. Both work within free verse, but their formal effects are different. De Souza's shorter lines suit the quick presentation of observations and public statements, whereas Das's longer, more continuous lines support narrative development and create a feeling of mounting emotional pressure. De Souza's technique rests mainly on irony, juxtaposition, repetition, conversational phrasing, and the contrast between those who are permitted to speak and the woman who is not. The deliberately plain language is important. Because the poem does not surround its subject with elaborate ornament, the social contradiction remains exposed and immediate. Das makes greater use of repetition, simile, symbolism, personification, imagery, and enjambment. The sunshine is imagined as a cat, and the changing quality of the light corresponds to the woman's changing condition. Spatial images—particularly the room, door, and walls—give an external shape to an inward experience of isolation. The poem's figurative language is therefore closely connected to its psychological movement. The absence of fixed rhyme in both poems should not be understood as a lack of poetic structure. Their effects are produced through rhythm, repetition, syntax, pauses, and recurring images. The poems remain close to the rhythms of ordinary speech while using those rhythms for very different purposes: de Souza creates ironic distance, whereas Das creates emotional continuity and pressure.

The Significance of the Two Poetic Voices

The poets also differ in the way they construct the female experience. De Souza's voice is controlled and observant. She rarely tells the reader exactly how to judge the situation; instead, she places public praise beside an absent female voice and lets the contradiction do the work. Das is more emotionally exposed, bringing loneliness, desire, disappointment, and identity into a sustained poetic narrative. Her association with confessional writing is therefore understandable, but the poem still depends on deliberate choices of narration and imagery. For this reason, simply calling both writers "feminist poets" does not fully explain these poems. "Catholic Mother" is a compact satire built around public recognition, religious approval, and the silence of the wife. "The Sunshine Cat" develops its criticism through a symbolic narrative in which emotional deprivation and physical confinement are linked to the fading image of sunlight. The two poems share a concern with women's restricted agency, but they arrive at that concern through different poetic strategies. The poems also demonstrate that patriarchal power does not operate in only one location. It can be reinforced by

family expectations, marriage, religious institutions, sexual relationships, and social ideas of respectability. De Souza concentrates on the public and institutional dimensions of such power, while Das pays closer attention to its intimate consequences. The comparison is therefore useful because it shows how a similar imbalance can be experienced in both public recognition and private emotional life.

Conclusion

“Catholic Mother” and “The Sunshine Cat” approach women’s experience through very different poetic means, yet both question situations in which women are denied full agency. De Souza exposes the contradiction within a respectable family image: the father is celebrated, religious figures approve, and the wife remains silent. Das follows a woman whose repeated search for affection leads not to security but to emotional exhaustion and domestic confinement. The comparison also shows that silence and confinement operate as formal principles as well as subjects. De Souza creates a significant absence by withholding the mother’s speech, compelling the reader to consider what that silence means. Das builds a progressively restricted world through rooms, doors, walls, winter, and diminishing light. In each poem, what the woman lacks—whether speech, freedom, emotional reciprocity, or recognition—becomes central to the reader’s understanding of her situation. The effectiveness of both poems lies partly in their refusal to deliver a lengthy social argument. De Souza can use a family photograph, public praise, and a silent wife to expose a structure of authority. Das can use a locked room and a small strip of sunlight to make emotional and domestic isolation visible. Familiar objects and situations are thus transformed into signs of a larger social problem. The poems ask a related question through different forms: what becomes of a woman when society recognises her primarily through a role rather than through her individual self? De Souza presents the answer through silence, while Das presents it through confinement, loneliness, and the gradual loss of vitality. Their methods are distinct, but both poets encourage the reader to look beyond the respectable surface of family life and notice the voices, desires, and freedoms that may remain unrecognised within it.

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