

Gendered Identities Across Cultures: Eunice de Souza and Dorothy Parker

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Abstract: This paper undertakes a comparative study of Eunice de Souza and Dorothy Parker to examine the construction of gendered identities across distinct cultural contexts—postcolonial India and early twentieth-century America. Using a gender and cultural studies framework, the paper analyses how both writers depict women negotiating patriarchal norms embedded in family structures, romantic relationships, and social expectations. De Souza’s poetry foregrounds the cultural regulation of female sexuality and respectability within Indian middle-class and religious settings, while Parker’s work explores the emotional labour and vulnerability experienced by women in modern urban America. Despite their differing historical and cultural locations, both writers represent gendered identity as shaped by social surveillance and internalised norms rather than overt coercion. The paper argues that their texts function as cultural documents that expose gender as a socially constructed and culturally mediated category. By placing De Souza and Parker in dialogue, the study highlights transnational continuities in women’s marginalisation while also attending to culturally specific forms of resistance and self-articulation.

Keywords: Gender, Cultural Studies, Female Subjectivity, Patriarchy, Eunice de Souza, Dorothy Parker

1. Introduction

Gender operates not merely as a biological distinction but as a culturally produced and socially regulated identity. Literary texts, particularly those written by women, often reveal the subtle and overt mechanisms through which gender norms are constructed, enforced, and internalised within specific cultural contexts. In this regard, the works of Eunice de Souza and Dorothy Parker offer compelling insights into how women negotiate identity, agency, and constraint within patriarchal societies shaped by differing historical and cultural forces.

Eunice de Souza, writing from postcolonial India, interrogates the gendered expectations imposed on women by family, religion, and middle-class respectability. Her poetry exposes the cultural surveillance of female behaviour and desire, highlighting how patriarchal authority operates through moral codes and social discipline rather than explicit violence. Dorothy Parker, situated in early twentieth-century American modernity, examines the emotional and psychological pressures experienced by women within romantic relationships and marriage. Her work reflects the tensions faced by women navigating autonomy and dependency in a rapidly changing urban culture.

Despite their distinct cultural locations, both writers foreground female subjectivity shaped by constraint, self-awareness, and negotiation. This paper places De Souza and Parker in a comparative framework to examine how gendered identities are culturally constructed and regulated across societies. By reading their works through a gender and cultural studies lens, the study aims to reveal both the shared structures of patriarchal control and the culturally specific forms through which women articulate resistance and selfhood.

2. Gender and Cultural Context in Dorothy Parker

Dorothy Parker’s work, rooted in early twentieth-century American modernity, examines gendered identity within an urban, consumer-driven culture marked by shifting yet restrictive gender roles. Parker’s female speakers often grapple with emotional dependence, romantic disillusionment, and social expectations surrounding marriage and femininity. In the poem “Indian Summer” from her poetry collection “*Enough Rope*” she writes expressing how

she used to mould herself for every man she loved, the way he wanted her to be. In the lines from the poem, she writes, "In youth it was the way I had/ To do my best to please, / And change, with every passing lad/ to suit his theories." (Academy of American Poets, "Indian Summer"). In the same poem she also states how she no longer does that. She no longer tries to please every man she likes. This shows how women cannot be themselves around men. This puts an emotional and mental toll on themselves just to be loved and accepted by the other gender.

While women in Parker's context experience greater public mobility than those in De Souza's, their identities remain constrained by patriarchal expectations that prioritise male desire and emotional dominance. Parker exposes how women internalise these norms, leading to self-doubt, emotional labour, and psychological vulnerability. Eunice de Souza, in the poem "Advice to Women," advises women to "Keep cats/ if you want to learn to cope with/ the otherness of lovers." (*Poem: Advice to Women By*). She reminds women of the pain and struggle of being attached emotionally to the opposite gender and what it takes to keep men close. She advises women to keep cats rather than lovers.

3. Internalised Patriarchy Across Cultures

A significant point of convergence between De Souza and Parker lies in their representation of internalised patriarchy. In both bodies of work, gendered oppression is rarely enforced through overt violence; instead, it operates through subtle forms of regulation such as shame, silence, and emotional conditioning. Women monitor their own behaviour, desires, and speech, reflecting how power functions through cultural norms rather than direct coercion. This aligns with cultural studies perspectives that view identity as produced through discourse and social practice. In the poem "General Review of Sex Situation", she writes, "Love is women's moon and sun;.../ Women lives but in her lord;/ Count to ten, and man is bored." ("General Review of the Sex Situation by Dorothy Parker"). The poem clearly shows that women are more inclined to worship their lovers, whereas men get tired of the women they are courting. Here, patriarchy plays a huge role. Men are the "lord" or the top gender, and women are in a lower status compared to men. For men, women are objects of play and could be discarded upon a whim. Women cannot move on from their lovers. For her, the patriarchal he is her whole world.

In the poem "Catholic Mother" published in her first poetry collection called "*Fix*" Eunice de Souza writes, "By the Grace of God he says/ we've had seven children/ (in seven years)/.../ the pillar's wife/ says nothing." (De Souza, *Volcano: The Collected Poems of Eunice de Souza: With an Introduction by Vidyan Ravinthiran* 3). This poem is a standard for describing what patriarchy does to women. In the name of being a good wife and mother, a religious woman has to go through risky pregnancies, yet nobody talks about it in public, especially her husband. She has no voice to describe her situation, and no godly human would understand her situation.

4. Hypocritical cultures of America and India

In the poem "Social Note" by Dorothy Parker, she makes fun of the hypocrisy of upper-class men and their relationship with their wives or lovers. Despite calling her the "lodestar of my life," he cheats behind her with several women. Every assurance he makes is a way to cover up his infidelity. While the woman is faithful, which is expected of her by American society, men would stray from their wives to the next. This exposes the hypocritical culture of American society, where men and women are unequal, as men have the freedom to cheat while women are not (*Social Note by Dorothy Parker*).

Eunice de Souza shows in the poem "Marriages are Made" the societal hypocrisy that surrounds the two genders when it comes to Indian marriages. Women are examined thoroughly for any bodily defects like complexion, height, cavities, and even tapeworms. On the other hand, men are not reviewed for anything externally. Women are judged for their external beauty, but nobody cares about their internal qualities, which are required for a marriage to be successful. The same applies to men (De Souza, *Volcano: The Collected Poems of Eunice de Souza: With an Introduction by Vidyan Ravinthiran* 4).

In the online article titled "*MARRIAGES ARE MADE*" by Eunice de Souza, Dr. Bilal Kuthoo states, "Poem talks about Indian culture, one can easily point out the gender inequality. Seemingly, women are given equal rights but treated as the weaker, the inferior, as an object. When it comes to marriage, women are treated as objects rather than human beings. They are tested on various levels such as their complexion, their height, weight etc. A girl

should be perfect; skinny, fair and good looking. As long as her father is rich, it doesn't really matter how educated she is. Her father should be able to fill the boy's mouth with gold and shut it up forever. The poet talks about all these are the issues." ("MARRIAGES ARE MADE by Eunice De Souza").

5. Wit and Irony in Eunice de Souza and Dorothy Parker

Wit and irony function as powerful aesthetic and ideological tools in the writings of both Eunice de Souza and Dorothy Parker, enabling them to critique gender norms, social hypocrisy, and emotional disillusionment within their respective cultural contexts. Though separated by geography and milieu—postcolonial India and early twentieth-century America—both writers deploy sharp, economical language to expose the contradictions embedded in everyday life, particularly those surrounding women's roles and expectations.

Dorothy Parker's wit is famously acerbic, epigrammatic, and urban, rooted in the culture of modern American cynicism. Her irony often arises from the tension between romantic ideals and emotional reality, especially in poems such as "Résumé" and "One Perfect Rose." Parker's speakers adopt a flippant tone that masks despair, using humor as a defensive strategy against betrayal, loneliness, and patriarchal romantic scripts (Academy of American Poets, "Résumé"). The irony in Parker's work is frequently self-directed, transforming personal vulnerability into biting satire and revealing how wit becomes a survival mechanism in a male-dominated literary and social sphere. (Academy of American Poets, "One Perfect Rose")

In contrast, Eunice de Souza's wit is dry, understated, and culturally inflected, drawing its ironic force from domestic spaces, religious conventions, and middle-class Indian life. Her poems in *Learn from the Almond Leaf* and *Fix* use conversational diction and abrupt endings to subvert expectations, often allowing irony to emerge through silence, understatement, and anticlimax. De Souza's irony is less flamboyant than Parker's but equally incisive, targeting institutionalized patriarchy, Catholic morality, and the quiet suffocation of women within familial and cultural structures.

While Parker's irony is performative and outwardly sharp, De Souza's is inward, restrained, and situational. Yet both writers share a feminist sensibility that uses wit to destabilize sentimental narratives and expose the emotional costs of conformity. Their humor resists consolation; laughter becomes a mode of critique rather than escape. Through irony, both poets reclaim agency, transforming personal and cultural marginalization into acts of verbal resistance.

6. Comparative Analysis: Cultural Specificity and Transnational Insights

Despite these similarities, the cultural specificity of each writer's context remains crucial. De Souza's exploration of gender is inseparable from postcolonial realities, where tradition, religion, and nationalism intersect to shape female identity. Parker's work, on the other hand, reflects the contradictions of modern American culture, where women are encouraged toward independence yet remain emotionally and socially constrained. These differences highlight how gendered identities are not universal but culturally mediated.

By placing Eunice de Souza and Dorothy Parker in comparative dialogue, this paper demonstrates that gender functions as a dynamic cultural construct shaped by distinct yet comparable systems of power. Their works reveal how women across cultures negotiate identity within restrictive frameworks, articulating resistance not through grand rebellion but through awareness, articulation, and critique. Together, they offer valuable insights into the transnational dimensions of gendered experience and the cultural mechanisms that sustain inequality.

7. Conclusion

This comparative study of Eunice de Souza and Dorothy Parker demonstrates that, despite their distinct cultural, historical, and social contexts, both writers offer incisive critiques of gendered identities through irony, wit, and a refusal to romanticize women's lived experiences. De Souza, writing from postcolonial India, exposes the constraints imposed on women by family, religion, and social respectability, revealing how gender is shaped by cultural surveillance and internalized discipline. Parker, situated in early twentieth-century America, similarly interrogates patriarchal expectations, particularly those governing romance, marriage, and female emotional labor, using sharp satire to expose the hypocrisies of modern urban life.

Across cultures, both writers resist idealized femininity and instead foreground fractured, self-aware female subjectivities. Their use of humour functions not merely as stylistic embellishment but as a subversive strategy that destabilizes dominant gender norms. While Parker's voice often reflects the anxieties of modernity and individual alienation, De Souza's poetry is marked by a postcolonial consciousness that highlights intersections of gender with tradition, faith, and national identity. These differences underscore how gendered identities are culturally produced, yet their similarities reveal the transnational persistence of patriarchal structures.

Ultimately, this study affirms that De Souza and Parker, through their culturally specific yet thematically resonant writings, contribute to a broader feminist discourse that transcends national boundaries. Their works challenge readers to reconsider gender not as a fixed category but as a contested, evolving construct shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces. By placing these two writers in dialogue, the paper highlights the value of cross-cultural literary analysis in deepening our understanding of women's voices and the complex negotiations of identity within and against patriarchy.

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