



DECONSTRUCTING THE CRAZY CAT LADY:

A Reimagining in Eunice de Souza's Advice to Women

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Abstract: This paper aims to deconstruct and reimagine the stereotype of the crazy cat lady through Eunice de Souza's *Advice to Women*. The stereotype, often trivialized in cultural narratives, preserves harmful societal constructs that marginalize women deviating from heteronormative expectations. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction, the paper analyses how de Souza subverts this trope, presenting cats as symbols of autonomy, adaptability, and emotional resilience rather than markers of eccentricity or social failure. By destabilizing binaries such as dependence versus independence and unity versus separation, the poem challenges phallogocentric narratives, offering an expansive and empowering interpretation of female identity. This paper explores the nuanced critique embedded within de Souza's work, which repossesses solitude as independence, reframing the crazy cat lady as a figure of strength and self-sufficiency. Ultimately, it underscores the potential of feminist texts to interrogate and disrupt societal stereotypes, paving the way for more inclusive representations of womanhood.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, Eunice de Souza, identity, solitude

I. INTRODUCTION

Stereotypes persist in cultural narratives, shaping perceptions and perpetuating social norms. These cognitive shortcuts categorize individuals based on perceived group characteristics, often leading to the reinforcement of negative biases and the marginalization of those who do not conform to societal expectations. Consequently, stereotypes can stigmatize and negatively impact members of marginalized groups (Khan et al 3).

One such stereotype is the "Crazy Cat lady" trope which is often dismissed as trivial or harmless in contemporary media discourse. However, it perpetuates deeply ingrained social constructs and reflect societal anxieties about female autonomy. This stereotype typically describes women who are single, bitter, lonely, eccentric, alienated from society and as a result, overly attached to their feline companions. This gendered archetype carries profound sociological implications regarding society's perception and marginalization of women who deviate from conventional heteronormative expectations of marriage, motherhood, and domestic roles. This stereotype not only reduces the complexity of women's identities but also attaches negative connotations associated with femininity and autonomy.

Khan et al.'s observation that "individuals from dominant or majority groups in power suffer less psychologically and materially than the lower status or minority group member" (3) is specifically relevant to the crazy cat lady stereotype as it reflects how power dynamics in society shape perceptions of women who deviate from conservative roles. The trope not only stigmatizes women who choose singlehood and finds fulfilment in animal companionship but also reinforces the conception that their choices are inherently flawed and unfavorable.

Eunice de Souza's poem *Advice to Women* can be interpreted as engaging with the crazy cat lady trope as she advises women to "Keep cats" if one wants to "learn to cope with the otherness of lovers" ("Poem: Advice to Women by Eunice de Souza"). The poem portrays a critical examination of societal expectations on women in relation to solitude and identity. De Souza rather advises the women to embrace being the "other", thereby empowering them with a complex female identity rather than reduced and oversimplified caricatures.

While extensive scholarship on Eunice de Souza's poetry has examined the feminist undertones, themes of alienation, identity, and otherness, as well as her use of metaphor, a significant gap exists in exploring how her poem *Advice to Women* interacts with and potentially subverts cultural stereotypes such as the crazy cat lady.

To interpret the poem's subversion of the crazy cat lady trope, Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction provides a valuable theoretical framework. Derrida propounds that meaning is unstable, arbitrary and dependent on language and context. Through the application of this theoretical lens, the poem's interaction with the stereotype can be analyzed as a deliberate disruption of conventional binaries and hierarchical structures. This deconstruction reveals how the text accommodates plurality of meanings and interpretations, inviting diverse and contradictory readings that challenge dominant cultural assumptions about women who embrace independence and non-conformity over traditional societal expectations.

Advice to Women subverts the crazy cat lady trope by reimagining it as a symbol of feminine autonomy and resilience. It challenges the existing societal stereotypes that generalize and marginalize women who contravene from heteronormative roles. Using Jacques

Derrida's Deconstruction, this paper examines how the poem destabilizes conventional binaries and offers a nuanced commentary of women's lived experience. It creates a space for reimagining attributes and behaviors beyond reductive stereotypes.

II. THE CRAZY CAT LADY: HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE

The historical associations of cats with feminine power and divinity can be traced across various cultures and mythologies. In ancient Egypt, the goddess Bastet, depicted as a woman with a cat's head, simultaneously embodied protective and nurturing attributes. Similarly, Li Shou is the Chinese goddess of fertility. In Norse mythology, Freya is depicted riding a chariot drawn by cats, further linking the feline figure with female divine power. These mythological connections demonstrate the cat's role as a symbol of feminine autonomy, mystery, and strength throughout history.

These depictions were overturned in the Middle Ages as the Roman Catholic Church attempted to quell non-Christian deities and symbols other than the Holy Trinity. Writings like *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) by Heinrich Kramer disseminated the idea of cats as demonic, minions of Satan, fueling centuries of association between cats, witches, and single women. Events such as the Salem Witch trials, further solidified this sinister image. As the iniquitousness of the witch trials became clear in early 18th-century England, unmarried women with cats were pitied as they relied on their relatives, which resulted in their perception as liabilities (Alexandra). This popularized the stereotype of the "cat lady," which was derided and resented.

Today, the crazy cat lady is observed as a gendered cultural trope. In popular media and literature, one will find characters like Eleanor Abernathy in *The Simpsons* and Dolores Jane Umbridge in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* respectively. The former is described as a "figure of derision... a highly accomplished *mad woman*" and the latter as "a figure of gendered dysfunction whose *love* for cats is indicative of her contempt for the *real* lives of others" (Probyn-Rapsey 175, 176).

Despite significant efforts from the mid-20th century to subvert the association and to reclaim the narrative in positive terms, the notion of the crazy cat lady remains a sexist cultural trope in pop culture. It conjures an image of loneliness, eccentricity, and social failure, particularly in the context of women who choose to live independently with their feline companions.

Against this backdrop, Eunice de Souza's poem, *Advice to Women* offers a counter narrative. Known for her acerbic wit and advocacy for women in Indian English Literature, de Souza reclaims autonomy and challenges societal stereotypes with humor and incisiveness.

III. EUNICE DE SOUZA'S *ADVICE TO WOMEN*: A REIMAGINING OF THE CRAZY CAT LADY

Eunice de Souza is one among the most renowned writers in English of Indian Literature. Celebrated for her sharp wit, feminist sensibilities, and unflinching critique of societal norms, Dev underscores two primary identity markers in her work—her Catholic upbringing and her existence as a woman navigating Indian patriarchy—asserting that her poetry is deeply personal yet universally resonant 146.

Her poetry is often set against the backdrop of patriarchal Indian society. Karmakar traces this "patriarchal domination" and women's status from Sita's story in the Ramayana 275. Marriage, often portrayed as the ultimate destiny for women, becomes a recurring theme in De Souza's work. In post-independent India, where societal constructs remain rooted in patriarchy, marriage is viewed as a woman's primary identity rather than a facet of her life. Chamoli et al. aptly observes that women are "captivated behind the bars of social constructs formed by the patriarchal heads" 1820. Therefore, her poems express the dilemmas of women as wives, maids, daughters, sisters and spinsters. These characters furthermore explore the themes of alienation, identity, isolation and otherness.

In *Advice to Women*, the speaker advises women to "keep cats" if one wants "to learn to cope with/ the otherness of lovers". The lines highlight the emotional labour traditionally expected of women in relationships. It also equates men's capricious behaviour with cats and as a result, exposes the inherent inequities in gender dynamics. This suggestion transforms the cat into a layered metaphor: one that simultaneously critiques male emotional inaccessibility and celebrates the self-sufficiency that women can cultivate. By suggesting that women embrace the unpredictable, the poem repositions the cat from a symbol of loneliness to a symbol of autonomy and resilience.

The assertion that "Otherness is not always neglect" is pivotal; otherness is not synonymous with neglect and therefore deconstructs the societal ideals of romantic unity. Following this claim, she offers an alternative meaning through the imagery of cats returning to litter trays when they *need* to. This imagery reflects autonomy and self-sufficiency that women can cultivate. This recognition of individual autonomy challenges the dominant cultural expectation that relationships must dissolve boundaries in pursuit of unity.

This reframing is particularly significant when placed in the context of the crazy cat lady trope. The stereotype, which portrays single women with cats as socially undesirable or emotionally deficient, is steeped in a phallogocentric worldview that equates a woman's worth with her ability to fulfil traditional roles as a wife or mother. By associating cats with emotional independence and adaptability, *Advice to Women* subverts this trope, challenging the cultural narrative that stigmatizes single women. Instead, De Souza elevates the figure of the woman with a cat, presenting her as someone who navigates life on her own terms, free from the constraints of societal expectations.

The poem ends in a poignant tone as the poet writes: "That stare of perpetual surprise in those great green eyes will teach you to die alone"—is a profound reflection on the inevitability of solitude and death. De Souza again subverts the negative connotation by presenting death as an essential part of human existence. As somber as it sounds to die alone, it is not a rejection of human connection but an acceptance that self-sufficiency, both in life and in death, is an act of grace and resilience.

Thus, *Advice to Women* not only subverts the cultural narrative surrounding the "Crazy Cat Lady" trope but also invites a deeper interrogation of societal constructs through its layered use of language and metaphor. To fully unpack the poem's nuanced commentary, Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction offers a valuable lens.

IV. A DERRIDEAN DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS OF *ADVICE TO WOMEN*

Derrida's deconstruction is fundamentally about "examining [a text's] internal logic in search for hidden and alternative meanings" (Sikirivwa 63). In this context, Eunice de Souza's poem *Advice to Women* serves as a critical text that can be deconstructed to reveal the complexities of feminine identity beyond societal stereotypes. Her work invites readers to reconsider the traditional narratives surrounding women, particularly those who defy conventional expectations. By engaging in a "double reading," as Derrida suggests, we can first acknowledge the surface meanings of the poem while simultaneously uncovering the deeper, often contradictory messages that challenge the status quo.

Derrida's theory challenges the notion of fixed meanings and binary oppositions, advocating for an understanding of texts as sites of multiple, often contradictory, interpretations. Central to this framework is the idea that meaning is not inherent but constructed, fluid, and contingent on context.

In *Advice to Women*, De Souza's deliberate ambiguity and play with language exemplify Derridean principles, encouraging readers to question the societal norms and expectations embedded in cultural narratives. The wry tone of the poem challenges societal expectations of women and it is central to deconstructing traditional femininity. The poem, by urging women to be more self-assertive and less concerned with social approval, destabilizes the idea of an "ideal" woman, allowing for the possibility of multiple, diverse identities. This reflects Derrida's concept of *différance*—meaning that the identity of a woman is never fixed but always deferred, constantly changing and shifting depending on context.

The phrase "otherness of lovers" inherently disrupts the binary of unity versus separation in relationships. Traditional romantic ideals often posit love as a union that dissolves individual boundaries, yet De Souza reframes this "otherness" as a natural, even necessary, aspect of intimacy. By emphasizing relational boundaries, the poem resists the cultural expectation of women to absorb or accommodate the emotional needs of others, thereby deconstructing the hierarchical structure of dependence versus independence.

Additionally, the metaphor of the cat operates as a site of multiplicity. On the surface, the cat symbolizes autonomy and adaptability, yet it simultaneously challenges stereotypes of emotional deficiency associated with solitude. Derrida's concept of *différance*—where meaning is constantly deferred and differentiated—allows us to interpret the cat as both a critique of societal expectations and a celebration of individual agency. This duality reflects the instability of meaning, underscoring how De Souza reimagines loneliness not as a deficit but as a powerful assertion of self-sufficiency.

The "Crazy Cat Lady" trope operates within a binary opposition: the *normal* woman versus the *eccentric* or *abnormal* woman. Traditional representations of women often align with nurturing, family-centered, and socially acceptable roles, while those who deviate from this norm are labeled as "crazy" or "unfeminine." Derrida's Deconstruction allows us to see how these binaries are artificial and constructed.

The stereotype imposes an artificial limit on what a woman can be, based on her relationship to domesticity and the expectations of society. De Souza's poem, on the other hand, invites a more expansive view of womanhood, one that transcends traditional gender roles.

V. CONCLUSION

While the "Crazy Cat Lady" trope may seem like a harmless or humorous stereotype, it reflects deeper societal anxieties about women who do not fit into traditional gender roles. The stereotype perpetuates the notion that women who live alone, prioritize their personal lives, or reject societal pressures are inherently flawed or "crazy." This can be harmful, reinforcing negative views of women who do not conform to expected gender norms. In this sense, both the stereotype and its deconstruction are tied to broader social questions about power, control, and the regulation of women's behavior. De Souza's poem, by offering a critique of these societal expectations, provides a valuable tool for disrupting these harmful stereotypes.

Derrida's deconstruction of the trope reveals how the boundaries between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" femininity are not natural but socially constructed. De Souza's poem subverts these boundaries, presenting a view of womanhood that resists social categorization and instead promotes individual autonomy and identity. The application of Deconstruction to feminist texts, such as De Souza's poem, helps us see the ways in which literature can challenge normative assumptions about gender. De Souza's *Advice to Women* is a significant poem in this regard because it critiques the very structures that enforce conventional gender expectations. It offers an alternative view of womanhood that is not only refreshing but necessary in the context of ongoing debates about gender, identity, and the roles of women in society. The poem's seemingly simple advice to "keep cats" is a deliberate act of reappropriation. By aligning the act of keeping cats with autonomy and emotional resilience, De Souza repositions the trope within a feminist framework.

In reimagining the "Crazy Cat Lady" trope, De Souza does not simply reject it; she uses it as a lens through which to explore complex questions of autonomy, identity, and emotional resilience. The cat is no longer an unfortunate symbol of isolation but a figure of strength, independence, and emotional wisdom. Furthermore, she transforms the conventional associations of loneliness and solitude with cat ladies. The poem does more than critique—it subtly encourages women to reframe their perspective, shifting from one of acquiescence to one of agency.

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