

# Re-scripting the Self: Cultural Inheritance and Existential Alienation in the Poetry of Eunice de Souza

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## Abstract

The active construction and reconstruction of the self in Eunice de Souza are built on changing symbolic contexts and her anxieties about otherness/strangeness. It is in the wider frame of family, culture and society that the self is seen to respond to the social challenges of day-to-day life. In trying to understand and reproduce the constitution of the self, the paper seeks to explore as to how the poet uses her creativity in communicating her subjectivity and autonomy and in redefining the self in her writing. The aim is to focus on the psychological and cultural contours of selfhood and the personalized contexts of singlehood and urban living as contributing to the ways in which de Souza perceives herself in a hostile world.

**Keywords:** Alienation, culture, ethnicity, self, society

Born to Roman Catholic Goan parents in Poona (now Pune), Eunice de Souza's (1940- ) background has been the subject of several of her poems. The sarcastic and ironic tone of her poems is strong indeed, and reveals the kind of ambivalent relationship she has with her own ethno-religious background. A teacher (until her retirement in 2000), poet, novelist, anthologist and critic, de Souza has also been an actor and director in the English language theatre in Bombay (now Mumbai). Never married, she currently writes a weekly column for *Mumbai Mirror* and continues to be a very stringent critic of literature.

In the poetic works of de Souza are contained her hurts and humiliations, and an awareness of her gendered position in a social milieu which mediates into her self-construction. In her verse, a negative self-image, social unacceptability and being unwanted at birth come forth as having had a strong and obvious impact on her sense of self. As one who "... heard it said / my parents wanted a boy" (15-16) in "de Souza Prabhu" from *Fix* (1979), de Souza suffers from an even greater disadvantage in starting from a negative. Writing from the standpoint of one whose place in the universe is on the margins, her poetry maybe seen as a struggle with her environment. Such confrontation stems from being made conscious of her insignificance as a living being and the attendant pain, anguish and shame. Moreover, the undesirability of daughters, which is more a Hindu than a Christian attitude, underscores the negation of a woman's existence in a society like ours.

The poet talks about parents (especially, the mother), urban living and a woman's place in society. She also perhaps uses poetry as a tool to deal with the compulsions of daily life. The blunt, hard-hitting idiom of de Souza is a strategy to identify and

get at the truth behind all the hurt and pain. There is no desire to smoothen the rough edges and produce a well-wrought urn. Rather, the metaphors and imagery used present beauty as truth so that the truth in turn becomes beautiful. De Souza writes thus about the artistic process in "Don't Look for My Life in These Poems" (*Women in Dutch Painting*): "Poems can have order, sanity, / aesthetic distance from debris" (1-2). By subscribing to the notion of art (poetry, in this case) as putting together everything in order, and thus immortalizing it, de Souza gives meaning to her life and also celebrates it. It is also her unique way of creating art and highlighting its role in life.

A characteristic de Souza poem is a plain tale told without any unnecessary conceits and embellishments, letting well-chosen hard-hitting words speak for themselves. Skilled and terse, conversational and unsentimental, urbane and witty, her poetry has violence in words. She talks about the everyday and the obvious but holds the mirror at such oblique angles that one cannot but ignore the wrath in the reflection it casts. Sharp and critical, there is in her poetry an urge to enter the mind of women from previous generations, marvelling at their incommensurably different view of the world and their acceptance of marriage, children, and conventions. Her themes range from identity construction to gender oppression to an expression of sexuality. A sense of "pain, loss, and the absence of God are central to de Souza's poetry" (de Souza 37).<sup>1</sup>

Full of understatements and avoiding any external aid in the form of conceits, metaphors or symbols, verbal frugality is the mainstay of de Souza's poetics. Highly conscious of craft, she seems to revise her poems to arrive at a delicately finished form and visual shape. Her lyrics are firm and bereft of design, gaining from her characteristic inverted sense of irony and humour and the startling economy of utterances. In fact, she writes in the Preface to her latest collection of poems titled *A Necklace of Skulls: Collected Poems* (2009): "... all I wanted to write were lyrical poems with soft, sensuous and passionate lines!" (xiii).

De Souza's poetry reads very much like a chronicle of her life, in a world that is mostly life-denying. She wishes to reach for an understanding of the essential business of living by an immersion in the surface details of experience. Most of her poems have a strong sense of individuality and feminism. Several of them are also 'Catholic poems' which take us on a deeply cynical tour around her Goan Christian community, as also the conservatism of Poona where she was brought up after she lost her father at the age of three. De Souza's poetry is thus made from a pattern of personal memories and local allusions. In writing of personal feelings of loss and loneliness, she also remains concerned with the enlarged, detailed consciousness of local realities. She is a woman who is not necessarily an innocent victim of male arrogance, for her own inhibitions have torn her away from the innocence and the nakedness of pure connection that she dreams of as a totally fulfilling love.

While her singlehood is not a major preoccupation with de Souza, its attendant feelings do mark her writing. The poem titled "Don't Look For My Life..." (*Women in...*) speaks far louder than any commentary on her and her poetry: "All I've learnt from pain / I always knew, / but could not do" (3-5). The candid admission to

failure is made in the sense of 'not doing' much in terms of social action or remedy. Her poeticization of pain and isolation, as vital areas of human experience, maybe seen as helping the process of recognition and realization of the self, both in her life and poetry, contrary to the disclaimer in and as the title of the poem. The undercurrent of irony in her poetry undermines such insights gained through reflection on carefully observed experience. The irony arises from the recognition that experience can only teach ways of coping which is not the same as the sought-after peace and calm. What is gained in the ultimate analysis is the inevitability of pain and, in the attempts to find ways of coping with it, even reconciliation with the same.

De Souza's is a distinct personal voice expressing the dilemmas faced in a phallogocentric society. S.Z.H. Abidi and Nishat Haider quote her as she emphasizes the validity of a woman's voice in Arlene R.K. Zide's *In Their Own Voice* (1993):

I am different from other Indian women in my form of expression...But women's experience and socialization as a whole is different. So it is expected that what they write will be different. The point is not to have these differences but to be aware of them. Though all poets take risks, only women can really talk about their lives. The battle is to validate the material to begin with - the stuff of women's lives, women's experience, not to 'transcend' being a woman. (133)

The "differences" also result from the use of language which, in de Souza's case, has a close, vital link with ethnicity in terms of her religion and culture. Asserting that quite a few, if not all, poets are bicultural in sensibility, Lakshmi Kannan observes a curious paradox. She states that "when an ethnic identity meets with an opposition across its boundaries, ... it gets fully articulated. In the energy of this struggle in modern Indian poetry, the voices come through more alive for the tension" (295). Such a struggle or tension creates a latitude and mutability of language that can be surprising. Kannan exemplifies this through one of de Souza's poems "Bandra Christian Party" (*Fix*) for the naturalness with which it captures the Goanese idiolect and speech rhythms:

Hubby emerges from coal bin  
bottles under arm  
face a smirk.  
Hot stuff, he says.....  
Fred the comic slaps hubby on back  
now the party'll go men go says Fred .... (1-4, 8-11)

This cultural retrieving brings in its wake a historically deep cultural collectivity, "a collective memory which assumes a time, a space, shared emotions, legends, folk tales, songs and values that may give a sense of belonging to a poet or equally a sense of the obsolescence of certain cultural values" (Kannan 298). This is exemplified in "de Souza Prabhu" (*Fix*) in which the speaking voice introduces herself using such identity-markers as language and culture: "my name is Greek / my surname Portuguese / my language alien" (9-11). In fact, we have de Souza

exposing the religious hypocrisy and bigotry that sometimes passes for Christianity as well as ethnic stereotyping in quite a few of the poems in her hard-edged, somewhat violent collection titled *Fix*. "Feeding the Poor at Christmas", for instance, shows how it is not so much as true Christian charity and a genuinely altruistic need for compassion as vanity and self-interest that are the real motives behind this annual ritual.

Scathing snapshots of her own Goan Catholic community in suburban Bombay, de Souza's 'Catholic poems' are autobiographical - if not entirely confessional - in nature. For instance, the poet describes and dramatizes but says nothing about herself in the family-portrait in "Catholic Mother" that presents Francis X. D'Souza, the "father of the year" who has had seven children in seven years. The satiric, but not sarcastic, perspective comes from the juxtaposition of the father's views and the reality which surrounds him: the silent, suffering, always pregnant wife and the falsity of what the father, the parish priest and Mother Superior say:

Pillar of the Church  
says the parish priest  
Lovely Catholic Family  
says Mother Superior (13-16)

De Souza's private life is not brought forward as the subject matter. In fact, the autobiographical elements in de Souza's poetry appear detached from her life. Though, there are frequent references to parents: to the mother ("the pillar's wife") whose silence says it all and the larger-than-life "father of the year", the "Pillar of the Church" ("Catholic Mother"). Profoundly intimate, yet aesthetically distant, the poem is more of a denial than an acceptance of the father's role and over-arching presence. De Souza's capacity for suggestion is at its best here. While the mother seems a footnote; an irrelevant, silent entity, the father - with his racist and sexist biases - is described in detail. The mother's silence undoubtedly conveys her powerlessness and marginal position. This Catholic family's portrait and the mother's absence or effacement by keeping her out of family records is shared by diverse cultures and communities within India. In "Grandmother", the speaking voice goes on to hint at the restricting conventions of Goan society, especially for women: "She and the servants / spoke the same language / of silence" (9-11). The poem recalls an earlier one titled "One Man's Poetry" (*Fix*) in which too the speaker comments on the place of women - in this case, her mother who "...travelled third / with her in-laws travelling first / in the same train" (22-24).

For de Souza, her cultural inheritance, coupled with the place of women in her community, creates tensions between herself and her family, and alienates her. Her personal disquiet and questing are brought forth in ironic memories, dampening down of emotions, and economy. Rather than self-dramatizing and being trustful of her own voice, de Souza is often epigrammatic and distanced. Her conscious self-limitation helps create a poetics of minimalist imagism, seeking clarity by avoiding ornamentation and metaphor. In writing about herself and her past in a direct,



colloquial style, she uses her Goan childhood and relations with her parents as a basis for self-analysis.

Several members of de Souza's community saw her 'Catholic' poems as a betrayal for her attack on cultural religiosity in them. The poet's persona goes through religious faith, critically detaching herself and thereby allowing her individuality to develop through such experiences. The tone is sharply ironical as the poet - critical of institutionalized religion - pillories the bigotry, hypocrisy and duplicity as seen in the traditional Goan Catholic society in which she grew up. If traditional religion is a lost world for the contemporary Indian English poet, she finds little to enthuse herself in the present day socio-political set-up of which she is an unsparing critic.

The society portrayed in de Souza's poems is densely textured but petty in its attitudes. It is "a society of romantic illusions and lives wasted through ignorance and conformity.... Religion holds the Catholic community together rather in rigid social conformity than in love and justice" (King 132-33). The subjects of de Souza's satires are the Church, marriage, motherhood, Indian colour prejudice, sexual prudery and hypocrisy, the class divide and Goan vulgarity. However, de Souza strips away any layers of self-protection and creates a world of what appear direct self-revelations. Her assertion is of the self in its more characteristic female roles in relationship to father, mother, social restrictions, love, marriage, the underdog, the poor, and a sense of defeat. In suggesting herself through satire, the implied personality in de Souza's poetry appears off-hand, cold, controlled, self-distancing and ironic. The poems, especially those which reflect her Catholic childhood, are a means to gain control over private fears, anxieties and angers, through a mosaic of guilts, desires and revelations. In fact, we get a glimpse of the poems' almost ferocious economy and urgency, acid irony and the taut and consciously attenuated form. The use of irony - whether corrosively pungent and biting or more gently wry - does not mean an absence of feeling; on the contrary, its intensity suggests, by implication, a search for a truer compassion than the variety invoked by more florid effusions of sentiment. Sudeep Sen asserts that apart from irony, it is also "comic timing, a wry sense of wit, social comment and a pointedly oblique urban silence that characterizes what is best in her poetry" (*Time Out* April 2010).

Most of de Souza's poems are images, amusing characterizations or social portraits. "They catch people in a single, seemingly exaggerated stance or distorting dimension and make them the objects of comic scrutiny by caricaturing them. Read collectively, they suggest a state of siege in which a mass of threatening persons .... surround a person, the poet .... conspiring to obliterate the independent self, to make it like them" (Fernandes X). The anxiety underlying these poems is that of not finding the self, at not belonging to the community that surrounds the poet's persona. It derives from the realization that nothing really changes, that such people will continue propagating their bigotries and their determined ignorance among further generations.

In some of de Souza's poems, the object is no longer the other (family/ community), but the self. For instance, the lines from "For a Child, Not Clever" (*Fix*): "...I am the one you seek, / Let the rest go free" (19-20), read almost as the poet's statement of

intent, directed at herself. It implies the recognition that one's worst demons are those that lie within and so it is one's self that has finally to be confronted. There is a growing realization of having spoken much of "otherness" and so, in "Otherness/Wise" (*Selected and New Poems*) the declaration that she: "... must now, alas, / practice what I teach" (3-4). Personal confrontation thus constitutes the central core of de Souza's work. Often labelled confessional, this poetry of the personal makes up the strongest part of de Souza's verse. Confused with the private, confessional writing borders more to the personal or general and to such common denominators of humanity as loss and suffering, failure and self-disgust, isolation and disintegration, and relations with lovers and family. It is these negative or unpleasant experiences and emotions that rest at the disturbing centre of de Souza's existence, and which constitute the subject matter of her poems.

De Souza's poetry, however, is not so much about violent feelings as it is about the confrontation with these experiences and the accompanying emotions. Whereas the experiencing persona responds directly and emotionally to disturbing situations, the authorial persona's responses are more detached and intellectual. We find a co-existence of these two personae in "Forgive Me, Mother" which blends a wry humour in the first two lines of the second stanza: "It was kill or die / and you got me anyway..." (5-6) with an almost contemptuous flourish of the last two lines of the poem: "In dreams / I hack you" (11-12). That de Souza recognizes the existence of two separate personae in her poems is also evident in "One Man's Poetry":

Irony as an attitude to life  
is passé.....  
So be it.....  
Let me be passé and survive.  
Leave me the cutting edge of words  
to clear a world  
for my ego. (1-7)

Here, the one who claims irony as her attitude is seen as distinct from another more direct self ("my ego"). This division or split extends - as a poetic construct - the idea of the multiplicity of selves within the same individual. In "Autobiographical", de Souza writes:

One day my soul  
stood outside me  
watching me twitch  
and grin and gibber  
the skin tight  
over my bones (17-22)

In de Souza's "One Man's Poetry" too, there is a similar sense of the split: "The rage is almost done. / My soul's almost my own" (8-9). The outcome of the confrontation

between the twin aspects of the self is a tension (arising also out of a cultural alienation) that is central to some of her poems. Such alienation in the contemporary Indian English poet finds expression in several ways. It includes their alienation "from the traditional religious ethos .... from currently accepted socio-cultural mores, and .... existential alienation" (Naik 158). De Souza's poetry too reflects similar concerns as her persona finds herself alienated from her inherited religion and its all-pervasive authority. M.K. Naik adds:

...religious, social and cultural alienation must inevitably lead to a crisis of identity which is compounded by the larger – and, in many ways, oppressive – awareness of the modern world in general in which everything seems to conspire against the sensitive mind's search for a fullness of being. (164)

Despite their resistance to authority in a culture that theoretically sees them as powerful and strong, women still find themselves rendered helpless and powerless by its persistent silencing strategies and severe hegemonic control. Usha Bande points out that the female desire to disavow and defy the dominant power structure, therefore, "is variable, complex and multivalent because women live in dialectical relations with the patriarchal ideological structure" (2). Their resistance, in life as well as in their creative writings, works both inside and outside the dominant ideology. In writing their texts, women use the resources of the dominant culture and in the process re-inscribe it. Bande takes the point further by referring to Linda Hutcheon who asserts that "since women have to define themselves against the dominant discourse, they often speak the language of the dominant and subvert it through various literary strategies like parody or exaggeration" (4). Resistance thus becomes an important strategy "for gaining a self that has its roots in one's own history and experience" (222), writes Santosh Gupta.

Women have been speaking up in tones varying from mild self-castigating introspective to the more overt and strident denouncement of the oppressive hegemonic tactics used to subdue them. Such an anxiety about authorship also marks much of Indian women's recent writing. De Souza, for instance, emerges no longer as a passive victim of male authorial desire but as a resisting or critical figure who can author the text by subverting the male-dominated discourse and resisting her location in stereotypical roles. Moreover, as a self-questioning woman struggling to locate her autonomous self, she asserts her individuality, rejects male domination and even explores the centrality of sexual desire in heterosexual relationships. The movement is thus towards "self discovery and the exploration of the inner space; towards accepting new definitions of space and freedom, acknowledging difference and the need to express the self" (Jain 91).

An "existential search, meshed with social concern" (de Souza 38) contributes to the sense of urgency and restlessness in her poetry. De Souza's pre-occupation with the self, pitted against a hostile world, leads her to acknowledge it as "mauled", "flayed" and "sluiced" in "The Hills Heal" (*Women in ...*). Inner states are portrayed using – but, at the same time, transcending – the body. There is further recognition of a soiled self in "Songs of Survival" (*Women in ...*):

Self is a survivor –casualty  
 moan-mongering tragi-comedy  
 recalcitrant matter  
 mixed metaphor .... (2-5)

Even when inner states are laid bare, there appears to be no need to move further than the self - to focus on the body - in making the connections. For instance, in the poem titled “One Man’s Poetry”, the persona speaks of the disintegration of the self thus: “My limbs began to scatter / my face dissolve” (30-31). Likewise, the poem titled “Another Way to Die” (*Women in ...*) is about an attempt at reconstitution:

the bits reassemble  
 a breast flies back  
 a dull pain  
 where the heart should be .... (9-12)

The poems are thus pared clean of most of the traditional indicators of mood or defining emotion. They are funny, but blackly so. At the same time, they do not read as attempts at a private reprisal.

Diametrically opposite to such themes and subjects are de Souza’s poems in *Ways of Belonging: Selected Poems* (1990) which move nearer to her ideal of imagistic poetry. Her poetry is both intensely concentrated and resonant and relies on telling visual detail so as to vent her anger, sarcasm and impatience with a hostile, unforgiving world. The speaker confesses to these feelings in “Bequest” (*Ways of ...*), relating the anger to piety expected of a Catholic:

In every Catholic home there’s a picture  
 of Christ holding his bleeding heart  
 in his hand.  
 I used to think, ugh.  
 .....  
 I wish I could be  
 Wise Woman  
 smiling endlessly, vacuously  
 like a plastic flower,  
 saying Child, learn from me. (1-4, 12-16)

The streak of rebellion and subversion reveals the speaker’s opinion on hegemonic religious tenets and the cloying sterility and idealization of a “plastic” love. She, therefore, refuses to “take it as it comes” (“Bequest”). Her anger at and impatience with the social and religious mores of her community, however, do not limit her self’s growth into a much more enlarged consciousness in her recent poetry.

De Souza’s mindscape in her poems from the 1990s up to 2009 resembles the desert

landscape with its rivers “sucked dry” and “predatory winds” blowing through the hills (“Aravalli”). It is in such a frame of mind that she admits that there are “no happy rebels” (“At Veena’s Wedding”) and learns finally to “claim nothing” (“Aubade”). Her indifference towards, and isolation from, family and friends is seen once again as she declares in “Bequest” (*Ways of ...*):

It’s time to.....

.....

bequeath the heart, like a

spare kidney –

preferably to an enemy. (17-21)

Over and above the sarcasm at the hypocrisy inherent in her culture and society, the above quoted lines also speak of the persona’s loneliness and the attendant pain born out of her failure in man-woman relationships, romantic and otherwise. There are, however, her own “ways of belonging” and the speaker has no qualms about being counted with “the lame ducks” (“de Souza Prabhu”). The pieces fit, as in a jigsaw-puzzle, in another poem (“Autobiographical”) which explains the persona’s passionate protest, anger and bitterness. Having learned almost nothing from experience, she has therefore attempted suicide believing that “...the whole world/ was trying to rip me up” (23-24). For a woman, such isolation “is particular to her female condition because it is isolation in the midst of relatedness. While the external forms of living fill the days with constant activity, her inner voice speaks a different language of tentative aspiration. Her crisis is in her indeterminacies which tend to engage fundamental questions about the nature of womanhood” (Lal 18). Similarly, de Souza’s cultural alienation contributes to the development and shaping of her poetic aesthetics, and also points to her construction of the self. In her acceptance of pain lies her attempt at making peace with a harsh world. The resultant consciousness is that of a self shorn of all the trappings of family and community, associations and affiliations.

Arundhathi Subramaniam observes how de Souza herself maintains that her recent poems, are “calmer, more nuanced, less one-dimensional. They concede inadequacies in myself as well. I think my later poems combine both qualities that I admire: a lyricism with a sharpness and economy...” (*Time Out* April 2010). The use of irony in the later poems is gentler, having shed much of its venom. Moving from compassion to affection, the poet’s persona reveals a new-found tenderness in her prayer for a new-born child in “For Rita’s Daughter, Just Born” (*Women in ...*). Marked by a greater equanimity of the persona, the poems strike a note of contemplation and introspection. The persona’s ideal now is the figures of the women in a Dutch painting, who have serenity, maturity and calm writ large on their faces. The central concern is the urge to find peace, both with oneself and the world. It is the peace which informs the calm of the women in the Dutch painting in “Women in Dutch Painting” (*Women in ...*).

Sridhar Rajeswaran quotes Nilufer E. Bharucha who looks critically at de Souza’s later poems and points out the “spatiality” in the ones included in *Selected and ...*, a



quality that Bharucha feels was missing or rare in her earlier poems. In these, “the trade-mark irony and self-mockery is naturally in evidence, but what is new is the spatial location of the poems” (394). The self is realized in its merging with external realities. De Souza’s sense of the local lends immediacy to her perception of the self which is up against contrasts and conflicts as experienced in the world around her.

In the poems included in de Souza’s latest collection titled *A Necklace ...*, death looms large. There is, however, no wailing, no sentimental cries. In “My Mother Feared Death”, for instance, the speaker expresses an ambivalent, stoic attitude towards her dead mother:

Alive or dead, mothers are troubling.  
Mine came back and said, ‘I’m lonely.’

.....

I dream of her.

It’s the best I can do. (25-26, 33-34)

The speaker’s response to death in “My Grandfather’s Death” (*Fix*) reflects her bewilderment, as a child: “I often asked / ‘What have they done to my daddy?’ / and that nobody could explain” (15-17). The poet is thus aware of the presence of death in the midst of life. Looking around, she finds the bereaved family members, the “newly bald”, and makes light of the situation in “Death”: “The newly dead is an unknown quantity / urged on by the tuneless singing of the women ...” (4-5).

De Souza thus uses humour as a coping strategy and which helps her to reconcile to the fact of mortality and to mitigate death’s sting. Further, her awareness and mockery of death combine with the deeply moral tone in “Landscape” and reduce the dreaded phenomenon (the dead body) to a prospect of food for hungry animals and birds of prey to feed on. The self is seen as passing through various filters of moral perception which in turn contribute to its construction and growth. Rather than feeling cramped, limited or confined by such unpleasant experiences, the self faces and responds to the grim otherness of death, not as something that is macabre but as something that one can come to terms with.

The psychological emphasis in de Souza’s poetry is on conflict arising out of feelings of love and hate, competence and maladjustment, rejection and acceptance. Though her concerns reside in the tensions between herself and her family and the Goan Catholic community, yet ordinary life and relationships are equally worthy subject matter for her poetry. De Souza has thus mapped, expanded and redefined large areas of Indian reality in her writing. The techniques by which she communicates her perception of reality is through her selected snapshot album memories of her cultural background: its repressions, prejudices, ignorance, social injustices, the place of women in the community and how they have been victimized by their conformity, passivity, illusions and acceptance of the behaviour expected of them. The frames against which the self is aestheticized are those of parents (especially, the mother), religion (Christianity), and community (Goan Catholics in Poona).

De Souza's imagination is engaged in detail and focussed on people and places. Her speech is colloquial and contemporary, and helps reflect her own liberated world and its insecurities, fears and anxieties, often influenced by family, education and cultural inheritance. Her aestheticization of the self, in its interaction with the external world and caught between present and past, reflection and event, observation and experience, creates an immediacy, vitality and drama, as if the subject matter were being witnessed and experienced. As a result, "... the poet, rather than being conscious of the environment, appears part of the environment" (King 132). At the same time, the relationship between the poet's life and the poems she produces remains an indirect one. The individual's experience is "filtered through selecting screens that let pass only the most essential and significant themes of the writer's existence .... It would be unprofitable then to make the attempt to draw any direct connection between the poems and the life" (Fernandes VIII).

The poems thus offer a range of highly volatile emotions, gaining effect from their inner contrasts, conflicts, ironies and extremes. Most of them are concentrated and resonant. They arise out of a sense of alienation, and in which self-exposure is a defense. The poet's language is an expression of her emotional involvement; she does not merely poeticize or generalize, but also reflects quirky and unpredictable feelings and emotions. Her anger and bitterness are not directly expressed. The preference is for understated irony rather than articulated comment. The emergent self is one that has been formed in its interaction with the immediate environment, with other lives, and with the specifics of daily life. Bruce King observes, "This is not a poetry of heroics, nor does it seek pity. While it has no affiliation in politics, community, humanistic ideals, or religion, it is feminist in its kind of awareness, female vision, and affinities to the mode of other women poets - rather than in a proclaimed commitment" (158).

The characteristic features of modernist Indian writing, especially poetry, in English which also apply to de Souza's work may be seen in the "emphasis .... on perspective - urbanity, intellectuality, stylistics, irony, reflexivity - rather than themes" (Mukherjee 27). Her high standards of poetic technique and a preference for imagist poetry distinguish her style of writing. The word play, puns, inner rhymes, rhetorical devices, distanced neutrality of tone, compression and elliptical progression, help the poet to dramatize but not comment. A bulk of the poems do not represent lyrical moments but fragmented everyday narratives, hiding the emotions of anger, tenderness, pity, sadness and joy with her preference for firm understatement, wit, irony and self-deconstruction. Her colloquial poetic idiom allows her to explore, insightfully vital areas of human experience. Her poetic craft points to technical excellence, sharp critical awareness of the creative use of language, and control over potentially volatile material. Though her material is people, places and situations, we find de Souza increasingly turning inward to the self. The existential concern and search for ways of coping causes her to be tender and reflective, and to look within.

De Souza's poems resemble snapshots. The words describe the scene in detail; persons and places are named; the conversation is quoted; the tone is deliberately

flat and unpoetic; and, the characters speak their natural Indian English idiom. The poems move through these related fragments and end with an unexpected twist. It is the juxtaposition of the fragments that results in the poet's ironic and somewhat satiric perspective. Moreover, de Souza carefully avoids using in her poetry what Santosh Gupta refers to as the "straitjacketed mould of essentialist images of "Indian women" constructed by imperialist and nationalist patriarchy" (16). Further, her writing reacts strongly to what Gupta comments on as the imposition of "gendered roles and identities" and "frozen, static images of femininity" (134).

Thus, the material of Eunice de Souza is determined by family, culture or economics and is then turned into something more inventive and personally meaningful. Her poems convey a strong sense that selfhood is not determined or pre-packaged; rather, the self, to quote Anthony Elliott, "is a work of active construction and reconstruction, built on .... anxieties about difference, about otherness and strangeness, about intimacy and proximity – in the wider frame of culture, society and politics" (166). Instead of seeing the self as simply a private response to changing symbolic contexts, we have in her writing the sense of a self that presides over, and responds to, the social challenges of day-to-day life. She understands and communicates her self through her creativity, and her writing constitutes her subjectivity and autonomy. In her, one finds "a common female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through a strategic redefinition of self ..." (Gilbert and Gubar xii).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Fix (Bombay: Newground, 1979).

<sup>2</sup>Women in Dutch Painting (Bombay: Praxis, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>De Souza introduces herself as one of the poets included in an anthology edited by her. See Eunice de Souza, ed., "Eunice de Souza," *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* (New Delhi: OUP, 2001) 37-38.

<sup>4</sup>*A Necklace of Skulls: Collected Poems* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>*Selected and New Poems* (Bombay: Dept. of English, (St. Xavier's) Publication, 1994).

<sup>6</sup>*Ways of Belonging: Selected Poems* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990).

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