




## FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN SELECTED POEMS OF EUNICE DE SOUZA

Bikram Das 

### RESEARCH ARTICLE



#### Author Details:

Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Raiganj University,  
West Bengal, India

#### Corresponding Author:

Bikram Das

#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260402092>

#### Abstract

This article seeks to explore how poetry becomes a trope of resistance to structural violence, and how women are subjugated and become a 'docile body' at the hand of patriarchal society in selected poems of Eunice de Souza. Eunice De Souza's poetic outputs are result of her confrontation with patriarchal form of her own 'Goan Catholic community'. She is vocal about her thoughts and claims her own identity by performing her own self in the logical evolution of thoughts. Her originality and experiment in word craft, brevity of expression, and strength of feeling and clarity in thought structure make her poetry unique in the field of Indian English literature. Eunice de Souza's personal experiences within a Goan-Catholic family shaped her poetry. In her poems, we can see how women are trained to perform the typical gender role prescribed by the societal determinism. This article deals with the poems of Eunice de Souza, namely, "Advice to women" from the collection, *Ways of Belonging* (1990), "Marriage Are Made" from the collection of poetry, *Fix* (1979), "Forgive, Mother" from the collection *A Necklace of Skulls* (2009), and "Sweet Sixteen" from the collection *Fix* (1979). This article seeks to show how women become a victim of 'structural violence', and how women become a 'docile body' at the hand of patriarchy within a Goan-Catholic family.

**Keywords:** *Structural Violence, Subjugated, Docile Body, Gender Role, Identity*

Eunice de Souza (1940-2017) was a well-known Indian poet, whose poetry represents the complexities of gender, female subjectivity, identity, and societal expectations. The speaker or woman in De Souza's poems has no voice of her own as they have no agency to do anything on their own. Their silence is not natural, but they are supposed to be submissive to the structural violence. In doing so, they become a victim of the structural violence fuelled by patriarchal society. We can argue through Spivak's lens that De Souza's woman becomes a gendered subaltern as her voice is erased. In the book entitled "Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism", Pramod K. Nayar opines that De Beauvoir's major insight lies in the flashpoint that there is no 'essence' of a woman, a woman is constructed as such by men and society (Nayar 88). De Beauvoir's main argument is that "biological sex and social gender are not accidental: Patriarchy makes use of sexual difference so as to maintain an inequality between men and women" (Nayar 88).

In 'Advice to women', Eunice de Souza tries to subvert the typical gender role by giving advices to a women. In the article entitled "Challenging Tradition: A Feminist Reading of Eunice de Souza's Advice to Women", Dr. Santosh Kumar has rightly observed that:

"Eunice de Souza's Advice to Women offers a powerful feminist critique of societal expectations placed on women. Through humour, irony, and sharp social commentary, de Souza challenges the traditional gender roles that confine women to limited identities." (Kumar 119)

In this poem, we also can see the concept of alienation when Eunice de Souza describes negative impact of relationships that leave a woman detached from her partner. Eunice de Souza's poem "Advice to Women" offers ironic advice to women about dealing with emotional relationships. Using a non-human being, cats as a metaphor, the speaker suggests that women should learn from their independence and self-contained nature of a cat:

"Keep cats/ if you want to learn to cope with,  
The otherness of lovers." (De Souza)

De Souza uses the behavior of cats as a symbolic metaphor to explain relationships. Like a cat, lovers can be emotionally distant and independent. This otherness of lover should not be seen as a form of neglect. The expectation from lover may sometimes not match emotional expectation of women in a relationship. That's why, she advices women to accept reality instead of romantic

illusions. De Souza urges women to accept emotional distance as love involves loneliness, and independence. So love does not always mean constant closeness, and one must learn to accept solitude. Like cats, lovers show their love and affection only on terms: "Cats return to their litter trays/ when they need to." In the poem, the use of non-human being is not just a decorative metaphor. Here the non-human being 'cat' as a symbol is an active force in shaping female subjectivity. Cat as a non-human being is not passive; rather it has the agency to teach women. De Souza encourages women to shape their life by adopting or observing non-human traits with a view to resisting patriarchal expectations. The cat's gaze in the poem reflects Derrida's idea. In "The Animal That Therefore I Am", using a personal anecdote of being naked in front of his cat, Derrida puts forward the idea that animals are not inferior being but conscious beings whose gaze challenges human superiority and forces us to rethink our identity in terms of realization of one's own animality, which contradicts the traditional idea that animal are naked without knowing it. The cat has the agency to shape the life of women by teaching them how to cope with "the otherness of lovers", how to remain emotionally self-sufficient, and finally "to die alone". The poem shows how the lesson of solitude and autonomy comes from the non-human being - the animal itself. Eunice de Souza gives advice to the woman that they should control their emotional reactions, avoid overdependence, and accept the individuality of their partners.

In the poem "Marriage Are Made", Eunice de Souza takes a satirical note on how the institution of arranged marriage in form of a patriarchal structure treats the woman as the 'Other'. The poem is written in free verse, and it has no clear rhythm and meter. Woman's identity is constructed and shaped by the societal expectations. The poem introduces an ordinary girl, Elena, who is to be married. The speaker's cousin Elena is representative of many women, whose voice is controlled by the decision of a father:

"My cousin Elena / is to be married,  
The formalities have been completed: / Her family history examined,  
For T.B and madness/ her father declared solvent." (De Souza)

Elena's marriage is arranged without knowing her choice and consent. Eunice de Souza has used particular word "formalities" to show that arranged marriage is treated like a formal process. She is judged through her superficial criteria, and the objectification of the girl reduces them to a subaltern figure:

"She is not quite tall enough/ and not quite full enough...  
Her complexion it was decided/ would compensate, being just about/  
The right shade/ of rightness  
To do justice to/ Francisco X. Noronha Prabhu,  
Good son of Mother Church. (De Souza)

The line "She is not quite tall enough/ and not quite full enough" is an example of litotes. Using litotes, the speaker says indirectly that Elena is short and slim. Elena is judged by colour-based beauty standards. As a girl, she performs her duty in the domestic sphere. Elena has been socialized and trained to believe that the feminine qualities in women are socially given value. Her identity is shaped by the 'male gaze', which originates from Laura Mulvey's coinage. It refers to the way women are viewed and judged from a masculine perspective, where women are treated as objects of visual pleasure. In the poem, Elena's complexion is viewed from a male perspective. Eunice de Souza exposes how woman are domesticated by the social expectation, and woman are treated like a commodity in arranged marriage system. The patriarchal society trains her to be obedient, and she is expected to compromise. The ending of the poem is very significant as it ends with the name 'Francisco X. Noronha Prabhu', the prospective bridegroom. The bridegroom is mockingly portrayed as 'Prabhu' to Elena. Eunice de Souza has successfully exposed the gender bias against women in male dominated society.

In the confessional poem "Forgive, Mother", Eunice de Souza unfolds that women are both victims and carriers of patriarchal values. The daughter has internalized the core values of patriarchy, and she is asking for forgiveness because she feels guilty for leaving her mother as a lonely widow:

"Forgive me, mother,/that I left you  
A life-long widow/ old, alone." (De Souza)

It shows that there is a sense of lacuna of emotional warmth between mother and daughter. The poem presents the mother as a life-long widow. When she passes on the social norms to her daughter, she becomes a passive agent of an internalized patriarchy. The systematic oppression and discrimination do not come through an invisible force, but the violence is structural in the patriarchal society: "It was kill or die/ And you got me anyway." (De Souza) She "was never young" suggests mother's oppressive influence in a girl's life. As a mother, she trains her daughter, and she passes on strict values and discipline imposed by the patriarchal society to her daughter:

"I was never young/ Now I'm old, alone  
In dreams/ I hack you. (De Souza)

The line "In dreams/ I hack you" represents the psychological break from the maternal bond. The trauma is reflected through her sense of loneliness and alienation. In the article "Poetry as Psycho-Social Analysis: An Exegesis of Eunice de Souza's Select Poems", Chitra Thrivikraman Nair has rightly pointed out the psyche of the speaker in the poem that Eunice's mind is filled with a sense of ill-will towards her mother because her typical mother always holds a biased attitude towards her (Nair 125).

In the poem "Sweet Sixteen", Eunice de Souza tries to show how patriarchy controls female sexuality by the act of moral policing. The poem exposes how the teenage girls are controlled and raised under the strict moral control, misinformation and silence in

a male dominated society. Eunice de Souza's speaker recalls her youth days, where nuns, mothers, and preachers try to control their sexuality. Here, the instruction given to her by nun and preacher acts as a disciplinary mechanism. Her mother avoids talking about menstruation:

"Well, you can't say/they didn't try.

Mamas never mentioned menses./A nun screamed: You vulgar girl  
don't say brassieres/say bracelets." (De Souza)

A nun screams for saying words like brassiere, and instructs her to use decent alternatives. This passive submission of girls shows that woman becomes a victim of, what John Galtung termed, 'structural violence'. The preachers warn them against men and physical intimacy. The speaker warns the girls by saying that she should be very careful around boys. In doing so, she is not born as a woman, but becomes a docile woman. In this way, she becomes a 'Second Sex' in Simone de Beauvoiran term. Through this poem, Eunice de Souza attempts to expose the internalized norms of patriarchy, where 'docile body' of a woman becomes a site for 'pleasure principal'. Goan Catholic woman becomes a 'docile body', and her body is disciplined through societal do(s) and don't(s).

Never go with a man alone/Never alone  
and even if you're engaged/only passionless kisses. (De Souza)

Instead of giving proper education, girls remain misinformed. At the age of sixteen, when Phoebe asks her if pregnancy can happen just by dancing, the speaker is ignorant about it:

"At sixteen, Phoebe asked me:

Can't it happen when you're in a dance hall

I mean, you know what,  
getting preppers and all that, when  
you're dancing?

I, sixteen, assured her  
you could." (De Souza)

In conclusion, it can be argued that De Souza's poems show how female subjectivity is shaped within – and often fractured by – the structural violence. Eunice de Souza's poems like "Marriages Are Made" are still relevant today, especially in arranged marriages, matrimonial apps and bio-data culture. Although we claim the empowerment of women in some extent, the question – are women really empowered? – is still relevant. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Gen-G women may be educated and independent, but they still feel pressure to marry at a certain age. When the patriarchal mindset is still in form of surveillance, trolling, and body-shaming, the lyrics of Baul song "Narir Majhe Shob Shrishti" (creation lies within women) gives dignity and spiritual importance to the female body. In the digital world, movements like #Me Too are more vocal and assertive. While De Souza's speakers are submissive and silent, Gen-G women today speak more openly about female desire, trauma, and identity. Eunice de Souza's personal experiences within a patriarchal Indian society in general and a Goan-Catholic family in particular shaped her poetry. Eunice de Souza's own choice of being unmarried was a quiet act of resistance against patriarchal norms, where women's identity is tied to an institution called marriage. As Bruce King sheds light on the nature of De Souza's poetry: "De Souza is in tune with the feminist movement in contemporary poetry, in her directness of speech, self-revelation and non-nostalgic memories of family life" (42).

**Acknowledgment:** No

**Author's Contribution:** *Bikram Das*: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** The author has given consent for the publication.

**Competing Interest:** No

## References

1. De Souza, Eunice. Ed. *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
2. Derrida, Jacques. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." Translated by David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 369-418. JSTOR
3. King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.
4. Kumar, Santosh. Challenging Tradition: A Feminist Reading of Eunice de Souza's Advice to Women. *RJELAL*. 2025; 13(1).
5. Kaur, R. (2015). Feminist readings of Eunice de Souza's poetry. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 39(2), 112-126.
6. Nair, Chitra Thrivikraman. Poetry as Psycho-Social Analysis: An Exegesis of Eunice de Souza's Select Poems. *SRJIS*. 2013;1(1).
7. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Pearson, 2010.

8. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988.

**Publisher's Note**

*The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal* remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

**©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.**

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>