



# Rekindling a Dormant Eco- Consciousness through Poetry: An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Poems of Eunice de Souza

***Andrew John De Sousa***

St. Xavier's College (Autonomous)  
Mumbai  
[andrew.desousa@xaviers.edu.in](mailto:andrew.desousa@xaviers.edu.in)

## Introduction

The Indian ethos has long presented itself to many a visitor as a mélange of cultural diversity and unparalleled heterogeneity. As an Indian, one prides oneself on their sense of belonging to a nation that is extremely diffuse, yet close-knit and bound by unspoken ties. Among the unspoken threads that tie together this landmass which every Indian is proud to call home is the environment that surrounds us – the same trees that give breath to all countrymen, and the same soil upon which their feet step.

Words are the champions of change, and poetry, being the universal language of the soul, is an effective technique by which many an unfamiliar idea may be introduced into the mainstream narrative. In an attempt to identify the deeper relationship between poetry and the natural environment, the main aim of this paper concerns the examination of manifold facets underlying the changing approach of human beings towards the natural environment, through an ecocritical analysis of selected poems of the noted Indian poet Eunice De Souza. The sub-themes under discussion include explorations into the poet's inner call for attention towards an ailing planet, and of the mechanisms employed by her vis-à-vis the medium of poetry, to lay emphasis upon the awakening of a conscience attuned to ecological sensitivity, with special reference to the Indian social and cultural context.

## The Intersectionality of Ecocriticism

Nature has, since time immemorial, been a part of human life and will continue to do so forevermore. It plays an active component in the formulation of every thought of the human mind and in the execution of every action of the human body. From assemblies of school children in to tête-à-tetes between foremost bureaucrats at global summits, one is consistently bombarded with the notions of 'green and clean institutions' and the tenets of 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle'. Be our environments beautiful and pristine, history has shown that humans and the natural environment have long been engaged in a power battle, in a tussle for hierarchical supremacy. The anthropocentric view highlights the supremacy of humans over the natural world as the only holders of moral standing. "Anthropocentrism regards humans as separate from and superior to nature and holds that human life has intrinsic value while other entities (including animals, plants, mineral resources, and so on) are resources that may justifiably be exploited for the benefit of humankind" (Boslaugh, 2016). Scribes, poets, litterateurs and raconteurs have since time immemorial chronicled the radical changes in a society hurtling towards globalization, and its multifarious effects on various aspects of human life, and the written word stands as a powerful tool, not only to document the past, but also to alter the trajectory of the present. The same holds true for the relationship which man shares with nature, which has undergone a sea change from the spiritual approach to an instrumental approach. This transformation has catalyzed academic revolutions in the field of ecology, and subsequently in allied areas, including the literary domain, which, in simple terms, is a melting pot of everything that constitutes the world. Thus, these two areas of study merit analysis with a fine-toothed cross-sectional comb, keeping in mind supplementary factors such as economies becoming increasingly global in nature and changing lifestyles and perceptions.

Ecocriticism may be broadly categorized as the field of study that has been born of ecology, literary theory and culture studies. The field initially came into being as 'literary ecology' following which it was first birthed into an 'ism' by Rueckert in his work *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in the year 1978. "Ecocriticism is often used as a catchall term for any aspect of the humanities addressing ecological issues, but it primarily functions as a literary and cultural

theory” (Gladwin, 2017). The critical arguments within ecocritical discourse have begun to emerge from the advent of questioning the status quo with respect to ecology and the environment. By encompassing diverse perspectives revolving principally around the axes of literature, philosophy, culture and media, as well as key drawings from the theory of economics, politics, ethics and natural sciences, and praxis thereof, ecocriticism has established itself as an interdisciplinary field of study. “Ecocriticism is by nature interdisciplinary, invoking knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies, all of which play a part in answering the questions it poses” (Fenn 2015, 115–116). It is for this reason that one must be wary of falling into the trap of confining ecocriticism within the purview of literary studies. Rather, one must appreciate ecocriticism as an interplay of a plethora of academic disciplines, one of which happens to be literature.

## **Green Reflections in Indian English Poetry**

No academic discipline can successfully disengage itself from the environment, which pervades all contemporary discussions within the realms of economics, politics, humanities and natural sciences. The impacts of global environmental crises including climate change, pollution, scarcity of freshwater and diminishing food security have compounded in recent decades, the outcome of which is an increasing amount of interdisciplinary output that concerns the environment. The fortunes of the eco-critic in modern literary studies have been no different. “Literature plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter and ideas interact in a perpetual dance. Literature acts on people and people act on the world” (Pandey, n.d.). There exists evidence of numerous depictions of natural life in plant and animal form in the sculptures, seals and pottery from the Indus Valley Civilization, showing the fundamental expression of nature through the arts long before the emergence of writing as a commonplace practice. Centuries before the arrival of the English language into the subcontinent, nature was granted immense prominence as a leading thematic element of ancient Indian writing. The religions that then developed and were promulgated had a key role to play in the formation of an ecocentric culture in the subcontinent. Vedic and post-Vedic literature is replete with awestruck

poems and hymns in praise of the divine and its power as expressed in the natural world. Epics such as the Ramayana, and volumes of the Panchatantra and the Jatakas which incorporate numerous allusions to nature, particularly to the animal world, are favorites among children till today. These ancient tales and poems are frequently used to introduce children to the concepts of values, social responsibility and ethical behavior, thereby developing a strong association between their moral compass and the formative construct of the natural world.

As the English language gained a stronghold in India during the colonial period, literatures and poetry of different genres but naturally began to be produced in English by the natives. Early Indian English poets such as Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das and A.K. Ramanujan, functioned primarily within the postcolonial space. Their writings were renowned for reflecting the popular animosity against the former rulers, igniting a fire against social evils and positing tall ideals for the newly birthed nation. The following extract from Naidu's soliloquy of encouragement to the fisherfolk in *The Coromandel Fishers*, cloaks an appeal to her fellow patriots to rise up in solidarity for the advancement of the nation:

"Rise, brothers, rise; the wakening skies pray to the morning light,  
The wind lies asleep in the arms of the dawn like a child that has cried all night.  
Come, let us gather our nets from the shore and set our catamarans free,  
To capture the leaping wealth of the tide, for we are the kings of the sea!"  
(Naidu, 2020).

As Naidu seeks to stir the people into action, there is a categorically 'natural' flavor that sets off the verse and continues into the poem. She evokes the freeing morning light and the leaping tides in this stanza, and the coconut glade and the sea gull's call in the next – the images of an independent nature in parallel to a nascent, independent nation. Such was the popular sentiment of the era – the protectiveness that one harbored for one's land transmitted itself into a kinship with its people, its culture and of course, its natural environment. It is, therefore, only fitting that the Indian English poets of the post-independence age portrayed a liberated environment to complement the symbolic image of a liberated country and a free people. "A new approach and outlook become the demand of the time for all the works of these poets are characterized by ecocentric values

of collective ethical responsibility, meticulous observation and the claims of the world around us" (Karmakar and Rai 2016, 4296).

Thus, when one basks in the world of Indian English poetry, there are definitely vital rejoinders apropos the natural environment, and the masked call for sustainable living ensconced within the oeuvre gradually begins to unmask itself. It must be noted that certain allegories and metaphors of this kind, being subtle and succinct, tend to be sidelined by the comparatively prominent postcolonial themes centering around culture, identity, language and society. Yet, one can be confident of the veracity of the insight that the corpus of Indian English poetry provides on ecological perspectives, just as it does on a vast range of others. If harnessed, contextualized and systematically deconstructed through an ecocritical framework, the English poetry of the subcontinent is, to the environmentally-conscious human being, a gift that keeps on giving.

### **Thematic Foci in the Works of Eunice De Souza**

The enigmatic Eunice De Souza crafted for herself an incontrovertible niche in the world of modern Indian English poetry. De Souza was born into a Goan Catholic family in Poona; her cultural background makes itself rampantly evident in her use of language and style of writing. Through a heady concoction of symbolism, pernicious wit, satire and an effervescent employment of the allegorical narrative, De Souza unveils the stifling face of the Catholic community, which is popularly regarded by the mainstream as a fun-loving and cheerful lot. A large volume of her poems centres around the ideals of feminism and the exploration of identities of girlhood and womanhood within the claustrophobic familial and parochial space. "She uses irony as a defence not only against the onslaughts of racism and sexism, but as a means of foregrounding the displacement she experiences within her own country. Her satirical approach to catholic values, sexual prudery, hypocrisy and prejudices is quite notable" (Gupta and Sharma, 2014).

De Souza draws experientially on her Goan Catholic background, adopting a vivid imagery of the church and all those within its purview. She deigns to smirk at matters of historical significance such as the age of the Inquisition in Portuguese

Goa. The poem *D'Souza Prabhu* brings to light a turbulent time in the annals of Goan history, the likes of which tend to be conveniently omitted from textbooks of history and the prevailing narrative.

“I’m really De Souza Prabhu  
even if Prabhu was no fool  
and got the best of both worlds.  
(Catholic Brahmin!  
I can hear his fat chuckle still.)”  
(De Souza, 1979).

The condescending tone that she assumes, seeing herself as a victim of a suffocating relationship with her religion, and the expository pen-portrait that she paints through her lens thereof, are the features that hallmark De Souza’s poetry as a personal outcry against the oppressive confines of her lived reality. She dares to speak out with no qualms over giving voice to her feelings – words being her weapon of choice. Her poetry parallels her own journey of self-discovery, having been robbed of her childhood and her formative identity. It conceals within the anguish of many women whose entire lives are rendered voiceless by religion and its allied social and educational institutions. De Souza provides an assortment of incidents which hit back at her roots, the stakeholders of the church as well as the hypocrisy and misogyny enshrined in the traditional Goan Catholic family. She blatantly publicizes her angst against the Church in certain works, such as in *Sweet Sixteen*, which reveals an overt displeasure at the control exercised over the feminine being and body by the functionaries of the church.

“The preacher thundered:  
Never go with a man alone  
Never alone  
and even if you’re engaged  
only passionless kisses”  
(De Souza, 1979).

In others, she ensures the communication of her message through the sarcastic subliminal which belies a seemingly unproblematic line of poetic thought.

*Catholic Mother* encapsulates the silent subjugation of the meek mother in the family of a Mr. D'Souza, who is championed as 'Father of the year' for having his wife bear him seven children in seven years. As Gupta and Sharma (2014) opine, "*Catholic Mother* stands out as an excellent critique of the representation of a traditional woman as weak, docile, and seductive whose sentiments are firmly rooted in a social ethos that permit and justify such subjugation and oppression." The following extract from the poem indicates the standing of mother as a mute subaltern, in sharp contrast to the pedestal placement conferred on the father and his pride of offspring by the religious institution.

"Pillar of the Church  
says the parish priest  
Lovely Catholic Family  
says Mother Superior  
the pillar's wife  
says nothing"  
(De Souza, 1979).

"The conception of identity in De Souza's poems has a trajectory which moves from the concrete to the abstract. She is able to create a space and a poetic idiom which can connect different aspects of identity in an abstract philosophical sense as well as within the concrete frameworks of gender, religion, and nation" (Komalesha and Hari, 2012). De Souza's reluctance to mince words and her acerbic commentary in an attempt to deromanticize the popular notion of the Goan Catholic ethos, serve as a testament not only to her jarred connection with her upbringing through the sharp, descriptive nature of her poems, but also to her silent revolt against the very same ideals. Her poetry swims against the tide by playing devil's advocate to the conventional notions of love, marriage and family, as she focuses on disillusioning her readership to see the subordination faced by woman in a society which runs on the engine of patriarchy, and feeds on the seeds of hypocrisy.

## ***Idyll***

In the minds of many a literary critic and connoisseur of poetry, Eunice De Souza stands tall as a pioneering figure in the awakening of the Indian public to a feminist consciousness, through her collections of poetry. On closer inspection of selected poems, however, one finds a distinct flavour of nature and the natural world that seeps through the social realm for which her writing is more commonly accoladed. Similar to certain works in which she airs her differences with the misogynistic and menacingly crude aspects of Indian life through her own social and community experiences, De Souza opens up multifarious poetic avenues to awaken the environmental consciousness within.

*Idyll* serves as a unique example in which De Souza opens up to an unbiased contextualization of her identity and that of her socio-religious community. “The imagination of this idyllic past is a psychological necessity for a parochial community which finds itself alienated from the nation it belongs to” (Komalesha and Hari, 2012). Further, the poet expresses a deep ambivalence towards what the future holds for her ancestral soil, Goa, which she believes to have fallen away with the glamour, thrills and perils shrouded among the veils of development and modernity.

“When Goa was Goa  
my grandfather says  
the bandits came  
over the mountain  
to our village  
only to splash  
in cool springs”  
(De Souza, 1979).

The economy of words with which De Souza succeeds in conveying an ocean of emotions is a skilful mark of each of her poems. In this case, the need to dwell upon the modern ways of life in Goa is not felt in the least, as the imagery of the pristine natural beauty of the halcyon days unleashes an automatic dichotomy between the Goa of the past and the Goa of the present. The thunderous opening salvo of ‘When Goa was Goa’ implies that Goa has lost not just its name, but itself, in the

quest of cultural appropriation and rebranding itself to pander to the needs of the other, instead of its own. It is quite possible that she frames the image of Goa in her poems to assert her cultural background, although it may well represent the changing face of a subcontinent rapidly overrun by industrialization, or even perhaps the modern world in its entirety.

One must be cognizant of the fact that this piece was initially published in the year 1979, which underscores the prescience of the poet's personality, considering the state of affairs apropos the environmental embargos and ecological fiascos that plague the Goa of today. De Souza sheds light on the simplicity of the bygone times of when her grandfather was alive, and contrasts the then with the now through the vicissitudes experienced by the environment over the last half-century. True to her mode of image-centric writing and symbolic profundity, she captures the mountain, the village and cool springs as reminiscent memorabilia of the past, icons of the natural world which her generation was the last to experience in all their divine splendour. Branding the youngsters of the time, who would enter her village to soak in the natural wonders, as 'bandits', she hints at the completely different magnitude at which antisocial elements operate today, and how the human persona has undergone a radical transformation, as we not only plunder the environment and its inherent richness, but also fritter away our values of humanity.

Towards the end of *Idyll*, De Souza whips out the iconic icy touch which distanced her body of poetry from that of the chasing pack of poets:

“Even the snakes bit  
only to break the monotony”  
(De Souza, 1979).

Ironic as it is true, she confesses on behalf of a generation that refuses to admit to its follies, that snakes were once harmless creatures that slithered in grasses and marshlands, causing harm to man once in a blue moon. She conjures up the image of the snake in the most devastatingly poignant of fashions, to suggest that the snake population is no longer limited to slithering on its belly, but some snakes walk on two legs among humankind as well.

### ***For Rita's Daughter, Just Born***

*For Rita's Daughter, Just Born* provides an illuminating insight into the maternal instinct that overrides all else on the arrival of a new-born child in a mother's arms. De Souza expresses unequivocally the protective and hopeful sentiments of the new mother towards her little daughter in this piece, as she transcribes a soliloquy that travels only between the mother's lips and the daughter's ears.

"Luminous new leaf  
May the sun rise gently  
on your unfurling  
in the courtyard always linger  
the smell of earth after rain  
the stone of these steps  
stay cool and old  
gods in the niches  
old brass on the wall  
never the shrill cry of kites"  
(De Souza, 1988).

Once again, De Souza waves her magical wand when it comes to putting her innermost thoughts, so far from the prosaic, on paper, yet enrapturing her audience with an explicit brevity of words. The title is of immense significance to the aura which the poet wishes to weave. 'Rita' is among the names used by De Souza in order to cement the Goan Catholic community as the context of her poetry, some instances of this technique in other poems written by her being 'Hermione Gonsalvez' and 'Francisco X. Noronha Prabhu'. This piece of poetry, in particular, could be considered as a departure from the usual heavy poems, laden with dissatisfaction and mired with disgust at the world around the poet. It seems that she has successfully evoked the twin ideas of the unconditional love in the heart of the mother, and a wish of hope for the future of the baby. Keeping that in mind, the indication of the daughter having 'just been born' in the title is symbolic of freshness and newness of life. In stark contrast to many of De Souza's poems that would follow, she contents herself with the status quo of the

mother in Indian society and the traditional effeminate qualities of tender love and protectiveness associated with the role.

The imagery and symbolism derived from the environment whose presence is ubiquitous in the corpus of De Souza's work is particularly noticeable in *For Rita's Daughter, Just Born*. The subordinate theme which underlies the leitmotif of the mother's deep-seated love, is a reflection of the ideal of hope and an optimistic outlook in nature. an idea that the poet has achieved through manifesting a sensory perception within the reader as they are enchanted by her timeless words. Many symbols employed by the poet, including the gentle rising of the sun and the smell of the earth washed by the first rain, are memories one associates with childhood and nostalgic reminiscences. These evocations of nature engender stillness and peace in the mind and one is led to believe that the poem in its entirety is structured to exude a sense of calm, enhanced by its authentic, natural flavour.

The poem opens with the mother extolling her daughter with an ode of love, paralleling her arrival to the unfurling of the 'luminous leaf'. De Souza goes on to highlight the instinct of protectiveness that engulfs a parent on the birth of a child. The 'smell of the earth' and the 'stone of the steps' are allegorical references to the stumbling blocks, be them physical, emotional or external, that the child may encounter as she navigates the journey of life; the mother's prayer is that none of these hinder her daughter's progress and that she may emerge stronger and undeterred, no matter the hurdles that chance to restrain her. "The mother persona wants to safeguard her daughter from every and any danger, be it natural or environmental" (Singh and Minhas 2014, 7). The mention of 'old gods in the niches' and 'old brass in the wall' is a crisp, passing reference to the devotional relationship between the new-born child and the almighty, one which the mother strongly yearns for. This is indeed reflective of a traditional perspective on the place and space that religion should occupy in the life of children. De Souza closes the poem by alluding to the kite and its shrill cries – a final warning of love from mother to daughter, to drown out the cacophony of the many detractors and harsh brickbats she will encounter as she grows up.

Through *For Rita's Daughter, Just Born*, De Souza unravels a new dimension of the natural world and its plenary influence of the lives of human and all other sentient beings that inhabit its environs. In the poem, the mother figure equates the role played by gods, societal standards and the people around oneself, to the role played by the environment in one's quotidian experience of life. She pairs the abundance of the natural world and the event of the birth of the child as twin foils to express emotions of freshness, stillness and an overall sense of hopefulness. De Souza enchantingly plays the symbols of nature to her advantage, drawing on the constant flux of old leaves withering away and new ones emerging, and the rising and setting of the sun, as interconnected to and demonstrative of the transitory nature of human life and all that is held within it.

## **Western Ghats**

*Western Ghats*, arguably, the most inherently ecocentric of De Souza's oeuvres, features in her final collection *Learn from the Almond Leaf*. A keen reader would be privy to the fact that the poet is reminiscent of her roots as she seeks to juxtapose her thoughts between the then and the now. De Souza has chosen to nestle this verse in the jungles of her homeland, albeit with an allusion to the ghats lacking any sense of green.

"Fling my ashes in the Western Ghats  
They've always seemed like home.  
May the leopards develop  
A taste for poetry  
The crows and kites learn  
To modulate their voices.  
May there be mist and waterfalls  
Grass and flowers  
In the wrong season"  
(De Souza, 2016).

*Western Ghats* is a piece of poetry that supremely prescient in ways more than just De Souza foretelling her imminent passing away from this world, and

brandishing instructions as to what ought to be done with her mortal remains. She makes optimal use of her final opportunity to castigate the human race for having plundered the natural world around it, having uprooted its trees, shot its regal wildlife and muddied its pristine blue water. One may extrapolate, from her lyrical selection of words, that she harbours a particular allegiance towards the flora and fauna of her homeland, the Western Ghats, as she sees in them a synecdoche for the natural world in its entirety. Once again, De Souza's cultural and geographical background seep into her realm of poetry, grounding it in her lived reality. The deep inner cry for the world to turn over a new, sustainable leaf is palpable through her words, which are indeed nuanced pleas for a greener world camouflaged underneath the loud opening call to fling her ashes into the ghats. Perhaps, she wishes to emphasize the severed ties between humans and the natural world. The expression of desire for mist, waterfalls, grass and flowers in the 'wrong season' delineates her view that change is not immediately forthcoming and multiple seasons will go by before waterfalls cascade and flowers bloom in abundance – before the season that appears 'wrong' to the thieves of nature, arrives.

De Souza previews the era of her passing as the turning point in the man-nature relationship, possibly in contrast to her years as a young woman, which witnessed the expansion of industries and in turn the destruction of vast tracts of forests and displacement of indigenous populations of man and animal. The imagery and symbolism which are rich in *Idyll* and *For Rita's Daughter, Just Born*, paint a telling picture in the case of *Western Ghats* as well. For De Souza, neither would the leopards deign to develop a taste for poetry on their own, nor would the birds of the forest encourage themselves in the pursuit of voice modulation. This line, in fact, captures the essence of her poem – that the human race ought to disentwine itself from the malpractice of pillaging natural resources, but instead spend time in nurturing nature like it would its own children – to teach the leopards poetry and song instead of killing them and to groom the crows and kites to modulate their voices instead of shooting at them. It is her call for humanity to quit serving its own selfish interests at a high cost before aligning itself to the needs of the environment.

By evoking a myriad of aspects of the natural world in a mere smattering of phrases, De Souza reveals her central desires for a return to a society akin to that of early humans who lived a life symbiotic with his natural surroundings. A sacred tryst was annihilated during her lifetime, and its devastating consequences escalated from a nascent stage into a behemoth of a monster before her very eyes, lending her the motivation to appeal for a sustainable revolution, through her words.

## Conclusion

Through detailed analyses of *Idyll*, *For Rita's Daughter*, *Just Born* and *Western Ghats*, one can attest to the fact that Eunice De Souza mastered the art of extracting maximum value from minimum words, of painting portraits of nature that were delectable and dumbfounding at the same time, and of leaving on the lips of every reader, a dash of wit, irony and introspection. In the contemporary tradition of literary analysis, De Souza's corpus is frequently examined from familiar façades such as those of the feminist lens or the religious space, thus the strong manifestation of the environment in her works tends to be overlooked. However, just as she is unforgivingly caustic in her tirades against the hypocrisy and inequality propounded by the tenets of her social and religious community, her poems leave no stone unturned to rebuke the human race for the injuries which they have inflicted upon nature in whose bountiful lap they were nurtured and raised. By the depth of her use of images and symbols from the natural world to amplify her exhortations, she brings to the fore the intersectionality of the environment with gender, religion, society, heritage, popular narratives, and human emotions. In doing so, she rekindles the dormant eco-consciousness of every wary reader with sordid cautionary warnings of the repercussions of today's actions on tomorrow's reality.

De Souza's writing and poetry was accentuated by a musical quality, but it was her repertoire of words, and the ease with which she strung them together to deliver memorable coups de grace, vociferously, succinctly, and most certainly, unabashedly, that will certainly endure even with the passage of time. Albeit overshadowed by the attention drawn to her writing by her satirical yet crisp

voice in the form of social commentaries, it is evidently clear that she did not shy away from speaking her mind about the travails to which the natural world has been subject at the hands of human beings. Ranjit Hoskote, in a moving poetic eulogy on the passing of De Souza, invokes sublimely the latent oneness present in the dichotomy of religion and the natural environment, through the Lord's prayer and the melting away of the glaciers, respectively. These were two themes upon which De Souza certainly expounded liberally, and the burping of the parrot serves to remind one of the candour with which she aired her opinions by way of the written word.

“When glaciers crack and come down in avalanches  
When parrots burp and sing the Lord's Prayer...  
We'll think of you”  
(Hoskote, 2017).

True to her razor-sharp, cutting persona and championing the cause of eco-sensitive, sustainable ways of life through her reflections in verse, Eunice De Souza has left an indelible mark on the ecological domain of the glorious world of poetry, and on the literary world as a whole.

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