

ART AS MIRROR: UNVEILING THE SELF IN EUNICE DE SOUZA'S POEMS

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Abstract: The analysis presented in this paper analyzes the poems of Eunice de Souza in tandem with Dutch paintings, exploring how visual images serve as a means for introspection. Not only does de Souza engage with these pieces of artwork, but she transmutes them, translating painting into an avenue for excavating memory, sorrow, self and spirit. This confessional quality of her work allows for a porous space between observer and observed in which to re-examine traditional constructions of woman. As examined through the poems *Women in Dutch Painting*, *Reprieve*, and *For S Who Wonders If I Get Much Joy Out of Life*, it is clear that de Souza does not take the images at their face value; instead, she interrogates notions of womanhood created through convention. Through her poems, the images gleaned from Dutch paintings cease to be inert objects and instead alter at the moment of critique. While an observer might take the painting at its word, the poet's pen translates the images from static images into sites of movement, of self-questioning. Each poem, like each word, serves as a fulcrum that can pivot the painting into something beyond the passive visual and into a territory in which identity resists. It is in the space between convention and observation where poetry offers a means of gentle disruption, of altering the implicit meaning of the painting. De Souza meticulously wields image and meter to elongate the canvases into sites where art can mean something more. Through close reading shaped by feminist ideas, this study views de Souza's poetry as more than description instead, it reshapes how we see art. Her work becomes a site where inner experience meets broader social forces. Meaning shifts actively, not statically, under her words. Rather than mirroring images, she transforms them. Personal voice rises alongside political awareness. One does not overshadow the other they fold into each other unexpectedly. Agency appears quietly, line by line. Identity forms anew through these layered acts of seeing and saying. What stands out is how the research places de Souza's practice inside postcolonial feminism, showing that images do more than mirror identity they reshape it. While looking closely, one sees art not just echoing experience but actively rebuilding subjectivity. This shift happens subtly, where seeing oneself turns into becoming someone else. Through her pieces, representation transforms less about capture, more about reinvention. Where meaning forms, there too does agency emerge quietly.

Keyword: Eunice de Souza, confessional poetry, visual culture, Ekphrasis, postcolonial feminism, gender and identity

Introduction

Unique in Indian English poetry, Eunice de Souza (1940-2017) presented crisp intelligence through understated performance and critical remarks about women. While drawing from her experiences as a Goan Catholic, she uses poems to articulate personal narratives as public inquiries about role-setting and faith-imposed notions of life and self-image, while exploring women's perceptions of themselves. What is noteworthy here is the repetition with which she appeals to painted images; particularly from Europe and the Netherlands-these works of art appear not as visual representations being described, but rather, as images reflecting back as women pause and take an assessment.

This study therefore concerns itself with the insertion of human experience-memories, traumas, sense of being-into verse through visual imagery, pushing boundaries in established cultures and arts, but to

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this date, multiple studies have focused on various aspect of her poems- (Kumar, 2025), for instance, interprets Advice to Women as a subversion of stereotypes related to female conduct. (Das, 2018) reads her verses within a feminist Christian perspective, while (Bhatt, 2018) and (Biswas, 2023) pay attention to the frank, confessional nature of her work and relate her poems to gendered oppression. Along similar lines, (Passos, Women's Worlds in Women's Words: Poetry and Memory in Vimala Devi and Eunice de Souza, 2019) regards her work as an act of feminist agency.

However, little attention has been paid to the convergence of visual art and confession in de Souza's work. Following this gap, the present study reflects on such poems as *Women in Dutch Painting*, *Reprieve*, *For S Who Wonders If I Get Much Joy Out of Life and Alibi* and on how her engagement with images refigures ekphrasis not as plain description, but as feminist act of self-definition.

This work advances the study of intermedial literary analysis by focusing on the symbiotic relationship between visual art and confessional poetics within a postcolonial feminist frame.

Research Objectives

This paper is directed by the following objectives:

1. To assess how Eunice de Souza uses visual art, specifically Dutch painting, as a space of contemplation within her poetry.
2. To evaluate how confessional poetics functions in constructing and constructing personal, gendered identity.
3. To articulate how visual images of women are de-coded and re-appropriated within her poems.
4. To determine how visual culture and feminine resistance intersect within her poems.
5. To place de Souza's poems within the larger context of postcolonial feminism.

This study uses a qualitative methodological approach in understanding how Eunice de Souza uses the visual arts as the artistic space where self-reflection is carried out, and feminist criticism of self is explored in her poetry. This is a study that is dependent on secondary information sources; it is limited to available and published poems, critical articles, journal articles and previous literary analyses. The research method is a combination of document analysis, narrative inquiry and contextual interpretation to achieve a sophisticated view on the relationship between de Souza's poetry and visual art.

This study is a literary interpretative research which is based on selected poems of Eunice de Souza, and where images from visual arts (European and Dutch paintings) act as stimulus to induce a reflection in the poem. The research is built on the premise that the literary works (especially confessional poetry and feminist poetry) are self-histories and social critics. The research does not

seek empirical data collection from participants but relies on an analysis of documents as cultural texts.

The primary data for analysis include the below-mentioned poems by Eunice de Souza:

- *Women in Dutch Painting*
- *Reprieve*
- *For S Who Wonders If I Get Much Joy Out of Life*
- *Alibi*
- *Advice to Women*
- *Bequest*

These are extract from published anthologies of de Souza's poetry. The seven significant articles that have already been discussed are secondary data which shed light on feminist element,confessional mode, critique of religion and stylistic nuances of de Souza's writings. Out of these, there are writings of Joana Passos, Santosh Kumar, Archana Kumari, Animesh Das, Moumita Biswas and so on.

A four stage analytical approach has been adopted:

- a) **Textual analysis-** The poems are read closely in terms of the language, tone, form, imagery, narrative voice and the manner in which art-referencing is integrated within the poems.
- b) **Narrative interpretation-** The poems are read as narratives through which elements of the poet's life-particularly her dealing with memory, identity, trauma and emotion-are expressed.
- c) **Contextual interpretation-** The poems are interpreted through the lens of socio-political, religious, and cultural background of the poet, that is, her Goan Catholic identity, feminism and postcolonial politics.
- d) **Documentary analysis-** Works by various scholars and critics are analysed for enduring patterns of themes, critical weaknesses, and for supports that contribute to developing the present arguments.

Choice among these texts has been guided by their quiet or vocal evocations of images, correlation with self-reflection, and repetition in scholarly dissection of de Souza's raw and gendered voice. Combined, they represent a pattern bold enough to link sight to speaking.

Theoretical Framework

In the above exercise, feminist literary criticism as well as confession, poetry and visual culture have all been employed as approaches that frame the poetry of Eunice de Souza as overlapping areas. It is precisely where the individual narrative and collective history collide that her poems become an arena for imaginative negotiation; although deeply personal, they often echo societal trends and where

personal intimacy is found, there also lies weight of tradition. This is a form shaped by the confluence of fragmentation and self-reflection.

Feminist Literary Theory

- **Base:** Provides the means to address women's writing as both testimony and as subversive practice against women's patriarchal ostracism and oppression.
- **Gender Performativity:** Applying Judith Butler's theory, it understands De Souza's speakers as performative in terms of ironic enactment and subversion of the gender categories.
- **Genealogical context:** Referencing Sandra Gilbert's notion of 'anxiety of authorship', the article connects De Souza's practice to the history of women establishing their voices and challenging public/ private and art/ life divisions.

Confessional Poetics

- **Methodological Portal:** Goes beyond just autobiography to look at the confessional mode as a way to make the personal political.
- **Cultural Critique:** De Souza's poetry reveals larger patterns of gender subordination, religious identity, and colonial legacy by focusing on trauma and vulnerability.
- **Discursive Site:** The self is perceived as constructed and performed within the context of dominant cultural narratives rather than in a simplistic biographical framework.

Visual Culture Theory

- **Intermedial Poetics:** Painting confronts poetry in De Souza's art. Painting is not invoked as precedent, but is a speaking respondent. The image enters her writing as a participant, an equal, a fellow dialogist and not merely a mimetic reflection. Images introduced into her texts serve to alter the texts in relation to them through their contrast, opposition and congruence with language. Images neither offer easy collaboration nor are merely borrowed for the purpose of stylistic ornamentation; they negotiate the text by assertion, persuasion, and contestation. Meaning exists in the gap, between frame and form.
- **Power Exchanges:** Images also offer shifting perceptions of power; images of religious symbols which previously represented instruments of female repression can alternatively demonstrate the voiceless agency within such contexts, becoming an assertion of female will to subvert through an act of imaginative reclaim. The individual painting may carry the paradoxical representation of submission intertwined with covert resistance. The visual symbol acquires a newly complex definition through its reapplication in a form that does not comply to pre-established paradigms; it subverts them by merely existing in their midst as their critique. The symbol's definition is thus acquired not by intent but by context, through the agency of others claiming their meanings. Resistance manifests itself in the familiar: through the subtle appropriation of conventional icons.

Synthesis

Thus it is obvious that what De Souza does in her poetry is to perform identity and in doing so she deliberately upsets cultural conventions. Instead of describing experiences, De Souza's poetry seems to amalgamate lived experience with imagistic material that both subverts the dominant discourse and also develops different channels of feminist discourse.

Results and Discussion

Examining closely the poems by Eunice de Souza we can also conclude that her poetic negotiation of visual images, and of Dutch and European paintings, seems to serve her as a piercing device for interior reflection and for feminist interrogation. But more than exposing internal suffering and frank narration the poems we have examined suggest movements in reinterpretation, challenge and turn-around of female imagery in order to present complex realities of self, suffering, independence. Though centred on individual works, the poems tend towards a more general contemplation of seeing-and being seen.

1. Art as Reflective Surface for Emotional Truths

Women appear in old Dutch paintings just so calm, composed, still. Though De Souza looks at them closely, her voice does not admire. Instead, it steps back, quietly skeptical. They become symbols: "the women we were meant to be", shaped by expectation, not truth. Her words carry a quiet sting beneath polite surfaces. Juxtaposing those images with her lived experience, she exposes what history left out. What gets shown is not what was felt. The gap between portrait and person tells its own story. Herself enters where silence once stood. Here, art reflects not harmony or grace instead, it reveals the quiet force behind fitting in. She steps inside the scene, though unseen, shaped by emotion more than form. Not present as body, yet felt through resistance. Looking changes nothing, she will not settle under eyes that expect surrender.

2. Confessional Voice as Resistance

A quiet strength marks De Souza's voice in works like *Reprieve* and *For S Who Wonders If I Get Much Joy Out of Life*, where control, subtle sarcasm, and sharp insight form a kind of defiance. While facing moments of deep loneliness such as in *Reprieve*, where distress briefly lifts, the speaker does not act out anguish but instead offers sparse, inward-looking lines. Rather than performance, what emerges is a careful tracing of what it means to live inside a female body. Emotional release never arrives still, the pieces insist on fractured identities, unresolved ends held up without apology. What stays behind isn't healing it's attention.

3. Subversion of the Male Artistic Gaze

Though often unseen, the weight of tradition shapes how women appear in stories. Yet within *Alibi*, resistance takes form quiet at first, then sharp. Instead of justifying solitude or sorrow, the speaker refuses to answer demands long imposed. Meaning shifts when connection to men no longer frames a woman's place. Later, in *Bequest*, irony carries the truth: "learn to fake it" lands like a whisper that

echoes. Performance becomes proof of endurance rather than failure. What passes between generations emerges not as duty, but as quiet cunning. Behind acceptance lies something else entirely adaptation masked as compliance.

4. Blending the Private and the Public

What stands out in De Souza's work is how it blurs where personal narrative ends and collective commentary begins. Take *Advice to Women*, here, irony pairs with images of cats to warn about leaning too heavily on love. While sounding light, almost offhand, the lines quietly reject norms that have long tied women to romantic reliance. Through what seems like whispered guidance, a broader critique takes shape. That mix of inner voice and outward argument shows how she turns lived moments into exchanges with dominant cultural patterns.

Summary of Findings

- In De Souza's poetry, visual elements prioritize the symbolism of contrast rather than beauty. This allows the poet to measure and challenge the construction of social roles.
- The confessional style serves to reveal emotional truths, but the style also ironizes feminist subversion by speaking without sentiment.
- The narratives in the poetry create fragments of a life lived under surveillance. Observational, social, religious, and familial serve as the creative medium.
- The exchange of art and self in her work repositions dominant standards of femininity to be an autonomous, intricate, and performative woman.

Overall, the poems show De Souza's use of visual components in European art not as a sign of respect, but as a confrontation. She interrupts cultural memory in order to assert her right to define, explain, and enrich the female identity. De Souza's poetry offers a post-colonial, feminist, and deeply personal approach to the criticism of the societal gaze and the self-imposed gaze by women as a mechanism of oppression.

Conclusion

In this paper, Eunice de Souza's poetry can be understood to incorporate visual art imagery to construct moments of contemplation and subversion within her poems. In doing so, the art forms themselves are transformed from objects of visual culture into moments where feminist identity comes into clear voice. Although informed by visual, de Souza's use of imagery does not create moments for contemplation or passive consumption, but rather becomes a forum for a more active consumption and interpretation. Her poems do not simply speak of works of art, but engage in dialogue with them and reinterpret their significance, filtering them through a gendered perspective. Ultimately meaning does not only exist in the image itself, but in the way seeing itself is rendered an act of resistance.

The research's breakdown of meaning takes several forms, one is image as mirroring and another is confession as silent defiance, rather than acquiescence. Instead of conforming to an ideal of viewing, her words reinterpret the nature of seeing by turning the viewer into being viewed. Her own conversation with personal experience blends with political as a collision rather than congruence. It is not integration of both worlds, but reclamation through layered construction of meaning, and shifting not only of what gets seen and why, but who gets to see it and under what circumstances.

This study of postcolonial feminist theory reveals how the visual image is created as an area where subjectivity is constructed, debated, and reconfigured, resulting not so much in statement as in process, and thus, a series of brushstrokes, frame works, and gestures resistant to clear-cut understanding.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis

Theme	Key Insight
Art as Reflective Surface	In <i>Women in Dutch Painting</i> , art mirrors the "affective violence of conformity" rather than beauty.
Confessional Resistance	Minimalist narratives in <i>Reprieve</i> refuse emotional closure, forcing readers to confront disjointed expressions of self.
Subverting the Gaze	<i>Bequest</i> redefines the feminine legacy as "strategic deception" ("learn to fake it") to survive social observation.
Private vs. Public	<i>Advice to Women</i> uses an intimate tone to deliver a public polemic against the socialization of women into dependency.

Implications

One feels here the very way in which cross-artistic dialogue inspires and informs the female voice. Indeed, through its reliance on the visual language of painting, de Souza frames confession not as inwardness but as a confluence of experience and history. We witness a fundamental displacement of visual regard; it is no longer solely reception, but reinvention, and in these works, historically marginalized female voices reshape these canons, not to renounce them, but to find a place within them. These are tradition undermined, refashioned, turned upon its head. They become meaningful when speech returns upon silence.

Limitations

Due to the exclusive focus on written documents, this text has no interaction with, nor response from readers. No ways exist in the text of how various groups of people understand de Souza's visual art related poetry. Although it mentions some poems connected with images and stories of his life, it does not fully approach all the poems, and it does not inquire deeply into his non-European roots like India or indigenous art traditions.

Directions for Future Research

Looking ahead, further work could take several directions. One path involves examining how figures such as Imtiaz Dharker or Gauri Deshpande integrate visual media, film, perhaps, or sculpture, into their feminist expression. Beyond India, similar patterns may appear among female poets in postcolonial African or Latin American contexts who turn imagery into sites of resistance. Another possibility emerges through audience-focused studies- applying reader-response methods to uncover how different groups perceive de Souza's themes of art and selfhood. Though distinct, these paths share an interest in voice, image, and interpretation.

What stands out is how Eunice de Souza uses verse not just to show life, yet reshape it from within. Irony carves space where identity fractures open, revealing raw edges beneath calm surfaces. Close attention to ordinary moments turns small details into quiet rebellions against fixed roles. Instead of accepting familiar views, her words invite new ways of looking guided by a female voice unafraid to redraw boundaries. Seeing becomes an act, shaped by someone ready to overwrite what was once thought complete.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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