

Postcolonialism through the Lens of Eunice de Souza: Irony, Identity, and Everyday Resistance

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Abstract

Postcolonial Indian English poetry has often been concerned with nationhood, identity, and cultural negotiation in the aftermath of colonial rule. While much scholarship has focused on overt political or historical narratives, poets like Eunice de Souza offer a subtler yet incisive postcolonial critique rooted in everyday experience. This paper examines postcolonialism through the lens of Eunice de Souza's poetry, arguing that her work articulates a distinctive form of postcolonial consciousness marked by irony, gendered critique, and cultural scepticism. By interrogating religion, middle-class morality, colonial legacies, and female subjectivity, de Souza exposes the internalized structures of domination that persist in postcolonial Indian society. Drawing upon postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, the study demonstrates how de Souza transforms the personal and domestic into sites of resistance, thereby expanding the scope of postcolonial discourse beyond nationalist paradigms.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Indian English poetry, Eunice de Souza, irony, gender, cultural identity, everyday resistance

Introduction

Postcolonial literature in India has traditionally been associated with themes of nationalism, anti-colonial struggle, and cultural recovery. Early postcolonial writers often sought to reclaim indigenous identity from colonial distortions, emphasizing collective histories and political liberation. However, the evolution of postcolonial discourse has revealed that the end of colonial rule did not signify the end of colonial power. Instead, colonial structures of thought, morality, religion, and social hierarchy continued to shape post-independence societies in subtle and pervasive ways.

Eunice de Souza occupies a distinctive position within Indian English poetry for her refusal to engage in grand nationalist narratives. Rather than foregrounding overt political resistance, her poetry exposes the lingering effects of colonialism as they manifest in everyday life—particularly within domestic spaces, religious institutions, and gender relations. Writing with irony, restraint, and sharp social observation, de Souza articulates a postcolonial consciousness that is intimate rather than epic, sceptical rather than celebratory.

This paper argues that Eunice de Souza's poetry constitutes a significant yet underexplored mode of postcolonial critique. Through her interrogation of language, religion, middle-class morality, and female identity, de Souza reveals how colonial legacies continue to structure postcolonial Indian society. By situating her work within postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, the study highlights how de Souza's ironic poetics transform everyday experience into a site of resistance.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonialism, Culture, and the Everyday

Postcolonial theory, as articulated by scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, emphasizes that colonial power operates not only through political domination but also through cultural representation, language, and ideology. Said's concept of cultural imperialism reveals how colonial authority reshapes identity and knowledge, while Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and ambivalence highlight the complex negotiations inherent in postcolonial subjectivity (Wikipedia contributors, "Postcolonialism").

In the Indian context, postcolonialism also involves confronting internal hierarchies perpetuated through religion, caste, gender, and class. Feminist postcolonial critics argue that women often bear the burden of these intersecting forms of domination, making gender a crucial site of postcolonial inquiry. Literature that focuses on everyday life thus becomes essential for understanding how colonial power persists beyond formal decolonization.

Eunice de Souza's poetry aligns with this expanded understanding of postcolonialism. Her work shifts attention from external colonial oppression to internalized cultural norms, revealing how postcolonial identities are shaped by inherited moral codes, religious authority, and social conformity. Irony emerges as her primary critical tool, enabling her to expose contradictions within postcolonial society without overt political rhetoric.

Language and the Postcolonial Voice

Language occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse, particularly in Indian English writing, where English functions both as a colonial legacy and a medium of self-expression. Unlike writers who attempt to indigenize English through linguistic experimentation, de Souza adopts a plain, restrained diction that mirrors everyday speech. This stylistic choice underscores the ordinariness of postcolonial experience while simultaneously revealing its underlying tensions.

De Souza's use of English is marked by irony rather than anxiety. She does not seek to justify or glorify the language but employs it as a tool for cultural critique. Her poems expose the gap between colonial-inherited ideals—such as civility, morality, and respectability—and the lived realities of postcolonial society. In doing so, she challenges the notion that postcolonial identity must be articulated through linguistic flamboyance or nationalist assertion.

Religion as Postcolonial Power Structure

One of the most significant dimensions of de Souza's postcolonial critique is her treatment of religion, particularly Catholicism. Religion in her poetry functions as an ideological apparatus that reinforces discipline, guilt, and obedience—values deeply intertwined with colonial morality. Rather than offering spiritual solace, religious institutions appear as mechanisms of social control, especially over women.

De Souza's ironic portrayal of religious rituals exposes their role in sustaining hierarchical power structures. By highlighting the contradictions between professed spiritual ideals and actual social practices, she reveals how religion perpetuates colonial modes of authority within postcolonial society. This critique aligns with postcolonial theory's emphasis on examining cultural institutions that outlive colonial rule.

Gender and Postcolonial Subjectivity

Gender is central to de Souza's postcolonial vision. Her poetry consistently foregrounds female experience as a site where cultural, religious, and social pressures converge. In postcolonial societies, women often become symbols of tradition and moral purity, tasked with preserving cultural values inherited from both colonial and indigenous sources.

De Souza's poems resist this burden by exposing the constraints imposed on women through marriage, family, and social expectation. Her female speakers are often sceptical observers rather than passive victims, using irony to navigate and critique their circumstances. This stance complicates postcolonial narratives that prioritize national or cultural identity over individual agency.

By focusing on women's everyday experiences, de Souza demonstrates how postcolonial oppression operates at the micro-level of domestic life. Her feminist perspective thus enriches postcolonial discourse by revealing the intimate dimensions of cultural domination. In the poem "Sweet Sixteen" from her poetry collection *Ways of Belonging*, de Souza writes, "...She pinned paper sleeves/ onto our sleeveless dresses. /The preacher thundered:/ Never go with a man alone/ Never alone/ and even if you're engaged/ only passionless kisses..." (De Souza, "Sweet Sixteen': A Poem by Eunice De Souza"). This shows how Indian society is conservative and teaches girls to be emotionless when around men, even with the man they are engaged to be married to.

Irony as a Mode of Postcolonial Resistance

Irony serves as the defining feature of de Souza's poetic style and her primary mode of resistance. Unlike overt protest poetry, her work employs understatement and humour to destabilize accepted norms. This ironic stance reflects a postcolonial sensibility that recognizes the futility of grand narratives while remaining deeply critical of social injustice.

Through irony, de Souza exposes the absurdities of middle-class morality, the hollowness of religious authority, and the contradictions of postcolonial respectability. Her refusal to adopt a sentimental or confessional tone further distinguishes her from other women poets, suggesting that emotional restraint can be a powerful form of critique.

Irony allows de Souza to maintain critical distance, enabling her to question cultural assumptions without offering simplistic solutions. This ambiguity mirrors the complexity of postcolonial identity itself—fragmented, contradictory, and perpetually in negotiation.

Eunice de Souza's poem "*Marriages Are Made*" employs irony as a powerful critical tool to interrogate the romanticised and sanctified notion of marriage in Indian society. Through subtle verbal and situational irony, the poet exposes marriage as a patriarchal and transactional institution rather than a sacred union grounded in emotional compatibility. De Souza writes in the poem, "My cousin Elena/ is to be married/ The formalities/ have been completed:/ her

family history examined/ for T.B and Madness...” (*Eunice deSouza Poem Marriages Are Made*). The woman who is married is wed for social convention. It is an arranged marriage, and there is no question of love for which she got married. This shows the irony that completes the title that marriages are made not in heaven but by human beings. This shows that in postcolonial India, little has changed when it comes to marriages. The West could not change the idea of arranged marriages made by Indian families, even though many Indians have converted to Christianity.

The Everyday as a Postcolonial Site

One of de Souza’s most significant contributions to postcolonial literature is her focus on the everyday. Rather than depicting dramatic historical events or political struggles, her poetry examines ordinary moments, domestic interactions, and social rituals. These seemingly mundane details reveal the pervasive nature of postcolonial power, embedded in habits, language, and social expectations.

By transforming the ordinary into a site of critique, de Souza challenges the hierarchy of literary themes that privilege national over personal experience. Her work suggests that true postcolonial resistance lies not only in political liberation but also in questioning the cultural norms that shape everyday life. In the poem “Conversational Piece,” Eunice de Souza writes, “my Portuguese-bred colleague/ picked up a clay shivalingam/ one day and said:/ Is this an ashtray?/ No, said the salesman,/ This is our god.” (“Conversation Piece”). This shows the cultural diversity of Postcolonial India, where a Portuguese Indian born in India is unable to identify the idol of a major religion in India, which is Hinduism and treat it like an ordinary object. Cultural differences in India’s major religions like Hinduism and Christianity is most prevalent.

Conclusion

This study has examined postcolonialism through the poetic lens of Eunice de Souza, foregrounding irony, identity, and everyday resistance as central modes through which her work interrogates the lived realities of postcolonial Indian society. Rather than engaging with grand nationalist narratives or overt political rhetoric, de Souza locates the postcolonial condition within the intimate, domestic, and often banal spaces of everyday life. Her poetry

reveals how colonial legacies persist subtly in social institutions, linguistic practices, gender roles, and cultural expectations, making the postcolonial experience one of continuous negotiation rather than historical closure.

Irony emerges as de Souza's most potent stylistic and ideological tool. Through sharp wit, understated sarcasm, and deadpan humour, she dismantles inherited hierarchies of power—patriarchal, colonial, religious, and linguistic—without resorting to didacticism. Her ironic voice exposes the contradictions embedded in postcolonial identities: the promise of freedom coexisting with cultural inertia, modernity clashing with tradition, and individual desire constrained by social conformity. In this sense, de Souza's irony performs a distinctly postcolonial function—it unsettles authority, destabilizes fixed meanings, and resists the solemnity often associated with canonical nationalist discourse.

The question of identity in de Souza's poetry is deeply inflected by postcolonial anxieties of belonging and marginality. As an Indian Catholic woman writing in English, she occupies a liminal space that allows her to interrogate dominant narratives from the margins. Her poems articulate fragmented identities shaped by religion, gender, class, and language, reflecting the hybridity theorized by postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha. Yet, de Souza's treatment of hybridity remains grounded in lived experience rather than abstract theory. Identity, in her work, is neither celebratory nor resolved; it is marked by discomfort, irony, and a persistent sense of unbelonging that mirrors the complexities of postcolonial subjectivity.

Everyday resistance forms the ethical core of de Souza's poetic vision. Her resistance does not manifest through overt rebellion but through acts of linguistic subversion, emotional honesty, and ironic exposure of social norms. By focusing on domestic spaces, familial relationships, and interpersonal dynamics, de Souza demonstrates how power operates at the micro level and how resistance, therefore, must also emerge from within these quotidian sites. Her poetry challenges the patriarchal regulation of women's bodies and voices, critiques religious dogma, and questions the moral hypocrisies of the middle class, revealing resistance as an ongoing, often invisible process embedded in daily life.

Furthermore, de Souza's use of English—the former colonizer's language—becomes itself an act of postcolonial negotiation. She strips the language of its ornamental excess, employing a sparse, conversational style that reflects Indian speech rhythms and cultural contexts. This deliberate linguistic economy resists both colonial literary grandeur and postcolonial exoticism, asserting a voice that is at once local and cosmopolitan. In doing so, de

Souza reclaims English as a medium for articulating dissent, irony, and selfhood within a postcolonial framework.

In situating Eunice de Souza within postcolonial discourse, this paper argues for a redefinition of resistance that moves beyond revolutionary rhetoric to include subtle, ironic, and personal forms of dissent. Her poetry expands the scope of postcolonial studies by emphasizing the significance of the everyday, the domestic, and the marginal voice. De Souza's work reminds us that postcolonial resistance is not only enacted in public spaces or historical moments but also in private negotiations of identity, language, and desire.

Ultimately, Eunice de Souza's poetry offers a nuanced understanding of postcolonial India—one that acknowledges fragmentation, irony, and ambivalence as enduring realities rather than transitional phases. Through her incisive poetic gaze, she transforms the ordinary into a site of critique and the personal into a form of political engagement. Her contribution to Indian English poetry thus lies not merely in thematic innovation but in her ability to render everyday life as a powerful terrain of postcolonial resistance, making her work both culturally specific and universally resonant.

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