

# Urban Ecocritical Perspectives in Eunice De Souza's Poetry: Socioeconomic Disparities, Ecological Degradation, and Human-Nature Interactions

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**Abstract:** *This research paper examines Eunice De Souza's portrayal of urban landscapes and the intricate interplay between socioeconomic inequality, environmental degradation, and human experience in her poems. Focussing on "Juhu Beach," "Landscape," "Bandra Christian Party," "Fledgling," and "Five London Pieces," this paper employs an urban ecocritical framework to examine how Eunice De Souza's poetry illuminates the complex intersections of social, environmental, and cultural disparities embedded within the urban landscapes of Mumbai and London. Through a nuanced analysis of De Souza's works, this study reveals the intricate layers of urban experience, highlighting the tensions between human and non-human entities, and the implications of these dynamics on urban ecology. In "Juhu Beach" and "Landscape," De Souza highlights the stark contrasts between the affluent and the marginalised, exposing spatial and ecological injustices tied to rapid urbanisation. "Bandra Christian Party" delves into the intersection of suburban culture, patriarchy, and environmental exploitation, while "Fledgling" emphasises the coexistence of human and non-human entities, aligning with posthumanist perspectives. "Five London Pieces" reflects on cultural displacement and environmental longing in an urban setting. By showcasing the resilience of nature and critiquing unchecked urbanisation, De Souza's poetry advocates for a more socially equitable and environmentally conscious urban future.*

**Keywords:** ecological consciousness, human-nature interactions, socioeconomic disparity, spatial injustice, urbanisation

## 1. Introduction

Urban ecocriticism examines the intersection of urbanisation, environmental degradation, and human experience, offering a framework to explore the socio-environmental dynamics of city life. "Crucial to urban ecocriticism is the understanding of the modern human mind as something that is constituted by urban forms and dwelling" (Rangarajan 78). Eunice De Souza's poetry, deeply rooted in the urban landscape of Mumbai, provides rich material for this type of analysis. Her poems not only reflect on human life in urban spaces but also offer a critique of the social and ecological costs of rapid urbanisation. In this paper, I explore five poems—"Juhu Beach," "Landscape," "Bandra Christian Party," "Fledgling," and "Five London Pieces"—using an urban ecocritical approach to demonstrate how De Souza addresses themes of socioeconomic disparity, ecological degradation, and the human-nature connection.

### 1) Socioeconomic Disparities in "Juhu Beach"

De Souza's poem "Juhu Beach" is a poignant reflection on the environmental and social inequalities prevalent in Mumbai's urban landscape. The poem juxtaposes the affluent elite with marginalised communities living in squatter settlements. The line, "So we visit my actor-friend in his home on the beach. / It's a squatter settlement, each home 5' by 3'" (De Souza 90), highlights the stark contrast between the luxurious lifestyle of the wealthy and the cramped living conditions of the poor. This disparity is further emphasised by the poem's reference to environmental neglect, such as coastal erosion and pollution, as De Souza subtly critiques unchecked urbanisation.

In "Juhu Beach," the social inequality is intertwined with ecological degradation. The speaker's casual act of stubbing out a cigarette on a sandbag serves as a metaphor for the disregard of environmental vulnerabilities in the face of urban development. The character of Ramu, a former circus performer, represents the marginalised individuals who suffer the consequences of both socioeconomic and environmental neglect, thus underscoring the need for more equitable urban policies.

### 2) Exploring Spatial Injustice in "Landscape"

In "Landscape," Eunice De Souza critiques the spatial injustices pervasive in urban environments, resonating with Edward Soja's notion of "spatial consciousness" (Soja qtd. in Rangarajan 81). The poem exposes the "locational discrimination" shaped by social forces, particularly class and economic disparities.

The first stanza underscores the desecration of natural spaces, as the speaker's ashes will mingle with plastic waste and rags in the creek. This image highlights the spatial injustice of environmental degradation, where the sacred is reduced to the profane. The line "We're short on sacred rivers here" (De Souza 93) emphasises the scarcity of untouched natural spaces.

The second stanza, "We push so much under the carpet—" (De Souza 93), illustrates Soja's concept of "multiscalar geographies" (Soja qtd. in Rangarajan 81). The carpet, a domestic space, becomes a landscape of hidden truths, with worms embedded in each tuft, symbolising the unseen consequences of spatial injustices.

The third stanza contrasts the abundance of garbage with the scarcity of resources for the vulnerable, exemplifying spatial

injustice. The image of crows and egrets highlights the struggle for survival in a degraded environment.

The final stanza, "Stretch marks of the city" (De Souza 94), reveals the city's spatial injustices: uneven development, poverty, and exploitation. The "dhow[s]" and "Arab horses" (94) represent the global economy's reach, while the "old monkey coughs in a tree" (94) symbolises the marginalised.

### 3) Social Hierarchies in "Bandra Christian Party"

In "Bandra Christian Party," De Souza explores the intersection of suburban culture, patriarchal norms, and environmental attitudes within Mumbai's Christian community. The poem critiques the toxic masculinity and excesses of the suburban elite through the character of Fred, who "dominates the party" with objectifying and sexist humour (De Souza 9). This portrayal highlights the entrenched social hierarchies within suburban spaces, reflecting broader social and environmental injustices.

Urban ecocriticism emphasises the interconnectedness of social and environmental systems, and in this context, the suburban party becomes a microcosm of environmental attitudes. The excess and consumption displayed at the party mirror the exploitation of natural resources in the urban environment. De Souza's critique of the objectification of women parallels the exploitation of the environment, underscoring the overlapping systems of domination in both social and ecological contexts.

### 4) Human-Nature Interactions in "Fledgling"

"Fledgling" focusses on the human-nature interactions in urban Mumbai, highlighting the coexistence between humans and other species. The speaker's gratitude for the sparrows nesting in their home, "I am grateful / the sparrows have made / my house their home" (De Souza 38), challenges the anthropocentric view of urban spaces, instead advocating for species coexistence.

This theme of human interaction with urban nature ties well with Chantelle Bayes' exploration of the "more-than-human city" in her book *Reimagining Urban Nature: Literary Imaginaries for Posthuman Cities* (2023). This connection to the sparrows, especially the fledglings that "cling/ wide-eyed to the pelmet," (De Souza 38). reflects a personal entanglement with non-human entities within an urban domestic space. In her section on "Private Entanglements: Houses and Gardens," Bayes' explores how non-human elements like gardens and animals integrate into human-designed spaces. Bayes highlights the idea of the "more-than-human gardener," suggesting that humans and non-humans share and shape spaces together (Bayes, 143). De Souza's sparrows are not simply visitors to the house—they are cohabitants, shaping the domestic environment as much as the human occupants do.

The sparrow's return and the fledgling's interaction with the household echo Bayes' idea of re-imagining urban spaces as posthuman, where human and non-human lives are interconnected and interdependent. Bayes writes, "The city, too, is a form of nature" (Bayes, 12), which reflects the poem's presentation of the house as a part of nature, not separate from it. The urban environment becomes a space

where nature persists, not in opposition to human life, but as a constant and essential companion.

Additionally, the line in the poem, "The mother scolds and chatters / forgetting / shadows which circle the sun," suggests the sparrows' existence is not entirely dictated by human concerns or awareness. This mirrors Bayes' posthuman perspective, where non-human entities have their own agency and narratives within urban environments. As Bayes suggests, in the posthuman city, human narratives are not the only ones that matter; instead, the agency of non-human actors, like sparrows, contributes to the life of the city and home (Bayes, 26).

The poem offers a perspective that aligns with Bayes' vision of a posthuman city, where human and non-human lives are deeply intertwined. It encourages a reimagining of urban spaces as places of coexistence, where humans must acknowledge the presence and agency of the non-human world within their domestic and urban environments.

### 5) Cultural and Environmental Longing in "Five London Pieces"

Five London Pieces, offers a nuanced portrayal of urban life in London. The poem weaves together themes of cultural displacement, postcolonial identity, and the ecological complexities of city life, juxtaposing the alienation of urban existence with fleeting moments of environmental and historical reflection.

The poem's first section, "Wintering in London," captures the speaker's estrangement within London's urban environment, symbolised through her disconnected relationship with the sari "I can't feel the edge of my sari/ and stumble/ a stump in shoes." (De Souza 75) This physical and cultural dislocation reflects the fragmented experience of navigating a foreign urban landscape. The speaker's longing for the "downs / which stay green in winter" (75) contrasts the vitality of nature with the coldness of the city, highlighting the ecological and emotional distance between the speaker and her environment. This yearning for natural landscapes suggests that the city's seasonal rhythms amplify her sense of isolation and alienation.

In "Encounter at a London Party," De Souza subtly critiques the colonial undercurrents that shape social interactions in the urban metropolis. The speaker's offer of a "pickled onion on a stick" in place of conversation underscores the superficial engagement of city life, where meaningful connections are overshadowed by cultural misunderstanding. The line, "the Empire lives / only in the pure vowel sounds I offer you / above the din" (75), emphasises the persistent influence of colonialism within the urban setting, deepening the speaker's sense of cultural displacement in the city.

The section "Meeting Poets" explores how the urban environment impacts creative expression, presenting poets as "cool speckled shells" (76), isolated and distant, much like the fragmented city. Social and creative interactions, tainted by superficiality, leave the speaker alienated even in intellectual circles. The metaphorical "dankness" of poets suggests that the city dampens creativity and connection, reinforcing the alienating effects of urban life.

In contrast, "Wittersham" shifts to a more pastoral setting outside the city, where the natural world reasserts itself despite human alteration. The peaceful marshland, with its "fat sheep grazing" and the presence of historical relics such as planes from past wars, symbolises the resilience of nature and the inescapability of human history, even in rural or semi-urban settings. This section presents a complex interplay between human attempts to control nature and the enduring traces of both nature and history in the landscape.

De Souza's Five London Pieces thus portrays the urban environment as a space where historical, cultural, and ecological forces collide, leaving the speaker disoriented and disconnected from both her cultural roots and the natural world. The city emerges as a fragmented, dissonant space, whereas moments of connection with nature, even those scarred by human history, offer solace and continuity. De Souza's poem explores how cityscapes shape individual identity and how nature persists amid urban and historical disruptions.

## 2. Conclusion

Through an urban ecocritical lens, Eunice De Souza's poetry reveals the intricate connections between socioeconomic disparities, environmental degradation, and human experiences in urban spaces. Her poems critique the ecological and social consequences of urbanisation, while also celebrating the resilience of urban ecosystems. By examining the intersections of social and environmental systems, De Souza calls for a more nuanced understanding of urban life—one that considers both human and non-human actors as integral to the city's ecology.

In "Juhu Beach" and "Landscape," she juxtaposes the affluent and the marginalised to expose spatial and environmental injustices. Her works, including "Fledgling" and "Five London Pieces," further highlight the coexistence of human and non-human entities in urban environments, offering a vision where nature is not separate from but integral to city life. By illustrating the intersections of urbanisation, social inequality, and environmental degradation, De Souza encourages readers to reconsider the role of nature within cities, advocating for a more equitable and ecologically conscious urban future. Her poetry thus stands as a vital contribution to urban ecocriticism, blending cultural critique with an urgent call for social and environmental justice in urban spaces.

## References

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