

Tradition, Continuity & Change

Goan Society in Transition(s)

Edited by
Nina Caldeira

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Contents

1. By way of Introduction <i>Nina Caldeira</i>	01
2. Goa, Traditionally Modern. <i>Oscar Noronha</i>	05
3. Tradition, Continuity And Change: A Case Study of The Dancing Umbrellas/Sotrios of Cuncolim. <i>Susheela Mendes</i>	12
4. This and That: The Two Faces of Adoption in Goa. <i>Dr. Isabel Vaz</i>	22
5. Narrating Tradition, Continuity and Change in a Catholic Wedding Ceremony. <i>Lourdes da Costa</i>	37
6. Tradition And Modernity In the Historical Monuments: A Case Study of Chapels and its Revenue. <i>Xavier Martins</i>	51
7. Routes and Roots: The Goan Diaspora's Frozen Frames. <i>Deepa. Prajith</i>	56
8. A Silent Struggle towards Change: Contribution of Goan Colonial Women towards social and economic freedom in Estado da India: Reviewing the Colonial Periodical Press. <i>Brenda Coutinho</i>	76
9. Festivals of Goa: Blending Tradition with Modernity to Foster Continuity. <i>Glenis Mendonca</i>	82
10. Of mud, stone, tile and more: The re-making of the Casa Portuguesa in Goa. <i>Irene Silveira</i>	90
11. The Goan Common Man looks Idhar-Udhar: Analysis of Uddhar Sawkar's editorial cartoons. <i>Natasha Gomes</i>	102

12. Questioning Progressivism: The Activist Strain in Konkani Writing in Translation. <i>Nafisa Oliveira</i>	129
13. Analysing the Reflections of Tradition and Modernityin the Goan society in Mario Miranda’s Cartoons. <i>Svetlana Fernandes</i>	140
Index	149

Questioning Progressivism: The Activist Strain in Konkani Writing in Translation

Nafisa Oliveira¹²

Introduction

An individual's encounters with literature are informed by the world in which these encounters take place. Irrespective of the text chosen, individuals constantly and actively read with a critical eye toward the present, trying to make sense of that present by excavating the cultural archives of the past. Such readings are precipitated in part by the fact that works of literature are steeped in and respond to their own social, political, economic context (among others). As the authors of the past found themselves working through the issues, concerns and anxieties that dominated their particular historical moment, the readers in the present make use of their texts for the same purpose of sense-making. Literature, thus, is a social act.

In the same vein, the American novelist, Alice Walker once strongly stated, "Activism is my rent for living on the Planet." like her, many others from the literary field are interested in eliciting a welcome change. This kind of literature which has an activist element often goes by the term protest literature or social-problem novel. As stated above, literature is greatly concerned with the status quo of society and the issues prevalent as also possible solutions. Writers generally attempt to bring forth the predicaments of the common people and the Goan writers are no different. This brings us to the endeavour of the paper to examine the activist strain in Konkani writing in translation that questions progressivism. The didactic nature of such writing is what is relevant in the present paper. Many of them have a purpose that goes beyond mere entertainment. Their writings endeavour to create informed citizens and at times

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even move the reader to take desirable steps. There are three major areas wherein authors question progressivism: through analysing its effect on the environment, and through observing the changing social dynamics (both at the level of families, as well as, villages) and through the changes taking place in the jobs sphere.

Progress usually carries along with it a positive connotation. However, development more often than not comes at a cost. There is a need to review whether the end product is worth the compromises made. The paper has employed three texts predominantly to examine the aforementioned areas, viz. *The Upheaval* by Pundalik Naik, *The Kiln* by Mahabaleshwar Sail and the short story collection *These are my children* by Damodar Mauzo.

The rapidly decaying environment

Several years ago (05/07/2014) the daily *O Herald O* had published a piece titled 'Goa's climate is going to change for the worse'. In it, Freddy Dias stated, climate change is an issue that has not been given much importance, even while there is widespread destruction of environment due to various eco-degrading activities like mining, tourism, mega-housing projects with high-rise buildings, et al. In fact, purchase and sale of land here has become the single most powerful 'industry' that is responsible for degradation of the State's environment today, as in its wake, hills are massacred, agricultural fields plundered, no development and green zones are converted into concrete jungles overnight.

Goa, this year (i.e. 2018) has been affected with the monkey fever virus which according to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has been indirectly caused by the clearing of forest area for cultivation since this causes changes in tick fauna - an important risk factor for outbreaks. From the looks of it, it appears that the condition of the environment has only worsened in the past few years. As climate change is becoming a cause for grave concern nationally and even internationally, Goa hasn't witnessed much activism in this area. Nevertheless, several authors speak about the effects of human activity on the environment as well as the need for tree cover.

In *The Upheaval*, Nanu is ‘swallowed’ and decapitated by the mound of ore that he himself had unloaded. This final scene clearly seems to be a waking call: it is meant to drive home the point that people should act now lest it be too late. While it was not unexpected that a catastrophe of this magnitude would eventually befall, it is the time that marks its significance. Nanu had woken up that morning with a feeling that it was a new dawn in his life; ironically, it ended up being the last dawn in his life. The success of Protest literature is concluded from this point: when a reader is left with the inkling that something needs to be done for fear that it will be too late.

Similar to *The Upheaval*, one of the characters in *The Kiln*, Jaywant is also buried under a mound of earth when he went to collect clay from a hillock. To quote, “The potters had scooped out so much mud from the hillock’s side that a hollow cave had been formed.” (Sail p14) This could be indicative of how abuse or exploitation of the land could have adverse effects. In the Malayalam novel *Chemmeen*, the author speaks of the wisdom in not going to sea twice as greed could have a downfall. A parallel can be drawn between that and these two novels, exploitation of nature in any form can have devastating consequences. If one believes that nature gives magnanimously, then it is also one’s privilege to accept graciously and not greedily.

The mango tree in the *The Kiln* is also symbolic in nature. It appears to be the one thing that binds the entire community together. For a long time the inhabitants would refrain from cutting it and neither would they allow any other to cut it down. They would vehemently protest if anyone would try to cut it down pointing out to the fruits and shade that the tree provided. However, towards the end of the novel, it is seen that desperation has driven the families to cut it down and sell the wood for a paltry sum of money.

In Mauzo’s ‘These are my children’ we have a very touching story of a mother’s unconditional love for her children. Rosalina had her children plant three coconut trees which were named after them: Angela, Anthony and Abel. They had all moved away and Rosalina showers all her love and affection on the trees since they remind them of her children. This was a means to vent her maternal

feelings. While the story is largely about maternal affection, there is also the callous nature of the working of the land Acquisition Office. When Rosalina innocently asks about the notice sent to her, she is dismissed by the reply, “That’s their system. land is simply acquired on both sides of the proposed line.” (Mauzo,127) When an attempt is made to reassure her by indicating that there will be compensation, she lashes back saying, “I don’t want their money! How dare they put a prize on my trees!” (130)

The trees are eventually felled to her dismay. This is a common occurrence today. The greenery in many areas is slowly being replaced by a concrete jungle. Rules are often bent to give way to mining and construction — basically any business that promises big money. Thus all these authors are concerned with the actions of man and their resulting consequences and impact on the environment. There is need to check the exploitation of nature and instead to protect and safeguard our natural heritage.

The shifting social dynamics

The Konkani writers also speak about the changes in the structure of families. This is not only a trend in Goa but also the rest of India. We are slowly seeing the disappearance of the joint family. Damodar Mauzo’s stories are largely about interpersonal relationships and as such concern family relations. As mentioned earlier, ‘These are my children’ has a deeper meaning in terms of the mother projecting her feelings on the coconut saplings. While none of her children were estranged, they were almost strangers. Rosalina at one point of time thinks what it would be like when Abel came home with his Australian wife showing her around: “Now this is the Basilica of Born Jesus! That is the famous Calangute Beach. Here is the headland of Dona Paula. And this is my mother.” (Mauzo, 132) The priorities of her children had changed and they hardly gave her any importance any longer. The cutting of the trees signifies the rupture in the bond between her children and herself.

In her article, ‘The Impact of Migration on Family life’, Nancy Foner opines: “...family patterns change when people move to another country --- how this happens is shaped by the cultural

beliefs and practices they bring with them but also by economic, legal, social, and cultural forces in their new environment.”

Several stories in Mauzo’s collection deal with the children leaving the nest and relocating or migrating. It appears that it is not only the physical distance that has affected the familial bond but also the mental idea that their parents are no longer indispensable. In ‘Minguel’s Kin’ overcome with wistfulness Minguel tells his wife, “They are not guests! Those who come every day aren’t called that, they are family. And the real family have become guests!” (Mauzo,18) Luciana and Victor had strained relations with their parents, while there was no animosity, they had indifferent attitudes. All their lives, Minguel and Feliza had made sacrifices and done everything they could for the sake of their children only to be neglected in their later stage. Instead, the couple found something else to project their emotions: a squirrel and a mynah. By the end of the story when Minguel refuses to let the coconut tree be cut because the mynah had built its nest there, it is clear that they continue to make compromises but now for the animals instead.

Mauzo brings up an important issue that occurs even today. Many aged parents are neglected and often even shifted to homes because of their children’s refusal to maintain them, either because they are busy with jobs or are in a different country. By bringing out the emotions of characters like Mangalakka and Rosalina, the reader is reminded of the sacrifices and pains taken by parents in the upbringing of their children. The least they deserve is gratitude and recognition for the same.

Annes Jung, in her book, *Unveiling India* poses the rhetorical question, “What then has happened to the old houses and the old women in Goa? The houses, that once stood for grand family trees, now lie abandoned except for old women live in them, the last of the fragile guardians. The young have struck root elsewhere.” (Jung n.p) In the same work, the manager of an old age home reflects, “We do not want to face the fact that our family ties are breaking. It is loyalty in a family that makes the glory of a home. Those homes no longer exist. Houses do, like monuments.” (n.p.)

Cultural distance in a family is another negative fallout of development. In the story ‘As Evening Fades’ we see the dissimilarities between Mangalakka and her son and daughter-in-law. To quote from the text: “...Mangalakka had taken down the idols from the devarao (...)and brought them with her. She had then reserved a corner for them in the bungalow. At that time, she had not noticed Prabha’s forehead creasing in disapproval.” (Mauzo, 62) later on the behest of Namita she is asked to move them into her own bedroom.

There is a further clash of ideologies between these two generations when Prabha hosts a party and his mother is appalled by the thought of alcohol being served. Prabha only shrugs it off saying, “These events are held every now and then at one another’s houses. We can’t avoid hosting them. When we live in society, and we’re connected to business, we have to entertain. You must try to understand. We have to move with the times, right?” (Mauzo, 64) This is an indication of the need to fit in and live up to the expectations of society at any cost. Prabha and Namita had been caught in this web, to the extent that they didn’t know when they themselves had begun to reflect their phony lives. Mangalakka refers to their smiles as ‘synthetic’ when they come to see her of.

The Kiln and *The Upheaval* speak about the change in the large social sphere i.e. that of the village. In both the novels there is a falling apart of the village. While before the villagers would have a community centric approach, they soon become individual centric. Again a parallel may be drawn here between Chemmeen and these two novels. It is evident that these novels mainly deal with societies in transitions and some of the problems that they experience as a result of this transition.

The changing job sphere

Progress and development has given rise to a variety of jobs. As the years go by, there are a variety of job offers available. However it is not always possible to find a job of your liking in your home town which has led to migration. In the article ‘Youth and Society in Goa: Continuity and Change’, the author states,

“Regarding labour force, Goa today is experiencing a labour paradox situation. On one hand unemployment is high, on the other hand there is a high labour import, especially manual labour. Labourers from other states of India flock to Goa in search for jobs. They work in the construction, fishing and hotel industry as well as domestic work. These types of works are quite often shunned by the more educated native Goans.” (214)

This is of importance and brings us to the terms ‘job’ and ‘profession’. A job is more about working to earn a living, while a profession speaks about being skilled in a particular field. While in the earlier days people were content with earning for a simple life, today’s competitive world has replaced the contentment with a simple life with ambition of earning more and climbing the social ladder. The aforementioned article goes on to state,

“The positive value attached to out migration is the economic impact on households providing them with higher income level and thus with better standard of living. At the same time the youth is aware that on the other end out migration means loss of qualified human resource for the state. The data also suggest that out migration is not the first option of most of the youth for finding jobs. There is still a high preference for Goa as a place to work if job remunerations and benefits are competitive enough.” (224)

Mauzo however seems to be of the viewpoint that migrating and working abroad is not all glam and glory. One gets a glimpse into the life of a kuwaitkar in ‘The Red Nissan’. The narrator speaks of the luxurious life that his friend Maria is living. But the affluence had only resulted in something akin to careless abundance. Her children could afford an education abroad and hardly spent any quality time with their parents. In fact, they were showered with material things and came across as spoilt children because of over indulgence by their parents. While they do appear to have a mind of their own, they do not use their freedom responsibly.

The superficial life is very apparent in the story and makes one question whether money is a blessing or a curse; as also it is clear by the end of the story that living in Kuwait was not as simple as the couple had made it out to be earlier.

While Mauzo's stories deal with the changes in the towns and cities, the other two works deal with the changes in the villages. The *Upheaval* opens with a pleasant description of the landscape, lush with greenery. The story is set among the agricultural community and inevitably the initial conversations are centred on sowing and harvesting. Pandhari, his wife Rukmini and their children Nanu and Kesar live a modest but content life removed from the shadows of industrialization. However, temptation soon comes along in the guise of Babuso, a middleman between the mining entrepreneur, Prasad Babu and the proletariat. He portrays an attractive picture of the industry and appeals to Pandhari on the basis of its monetary advantage.

The second part of the novel leaps ten years ahead and gives an account of the changes that occurred over that period of time. This Part details the evils that have befallen the village —increased alcohol consumption, violence against women and degradation of the land. And the back drop for all this is the land degradation and the obliteration of vegetation by the dust and ore. Nanu is now a truck driver. Kesar, like most of the other village women, works near the mine plots. Pandhari has a tea shop which is frequented by the truck drivers.

Development comes at a cost, though the price that each one pays is different. While some are morose because the land is not fit for cultivation, even those who are acquainted with the mining industry know that it is just a matter of time before they will be jobless. This is evident when a truck driver in the novel says, "Work is so hard to come by these days. They've got machines for everything" (Naik, 105). Social novels like this concerns themselves with the conflict of modernity and the interests of human beings necessary to its advance.

In *The Kiln*, the traditional potters community stand to lose their means of livelihood when a dam is expected to be constructed which would prohibit the lake from drying, thereby incapacitating them from collecting the clay from the bottom of the pond. One of the central themes of the novel is change.

Darwin had stated, “It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.” This holds true for the characters in the novel. The ones who are most willing to adjust and adapt and come to terms with the alterations taking place are the ones who manage to make a decent living.

For instance, Sadanand who is the only educated person in the village, moves to Pune and is then able to support his family, while the rest of the families still struggle with the dwindling potters trade. Sheela and Sakharam also move to Goa and find jobs in the packing department of a company and repairing motor cars in a garage. They understand early on that being sentimental about the potters tradition would get them nowhere. They serve as an example for the other villagers and towards the end of the novel, Sitai entrusts them with the care of her grandson, Vasant.

Change therefore at times also calls for a break of traditions that are no longer feasible. For instance in the same novel, tradition binds the hands of Sitai as quoted in the text, “A widow must not mould a lump of clay on the potter’s wheel, she must not beat a pot into shape.(Sail, p12) However, towards the end of the novel the dire straits of her living conditions drive her to break this tradition and use the kiln. While Sitai’s helplessness leads her to attempt to break of the ropes of tradition in this manner, the vulnerable condition leads characters like Ramchandra and Shanker to smuggling liquor. Thus, the changing society leads men to find even unethical means to survive at times and gives way to corruption.

Conclusion

A text’s popularity at any given moment around the world stems from the text’s ability to speak and respond to the pressing issues of the time in which it was produced. Works of literature have the potential to not only influence the public consciousness but also bring about social reform.

The works leaves one with several rhetorical questions, the most poignant among them being: can one blame the characters for the

choices that they make? It is only human to want more and desire a better lifestyle. However, to what extent should one go to achieve it all, is what the authors wish to stress upon. The answer lies in the manner each person chooses to prioritise what is important to him.

For a long time, the belief that ecology and development are antithetical has existed. Maybe it is time to visualise an alternate reality: one in which we have to take only what we need for today so that there is enough left for tomorrow. This holds true even in terms of an occupation. Being preoccupied with accumulating wealth may lead to missing out the little things that give joy. With regard to the change in the social fabric, there isn't much that one can do as it is a fairly complex affair and there are too many factors at play. It is one of the defaults of change.

It is essential to bear in mind that no alternative course is offered in the texts; the authors do not submit a solution (either implicit or explicit) to combat the all-consuming influence of the progress. Perhaps, the reason for this is: change is inevitable. It is the very essence of life. In fact, change appears to be a poignant theme in all the works as it oscillates between the vicissitudes of tradition and modernity, agriculture/pottery and industry, then and now. In the face of change, the Konkani writers have had a continual tradition of literature for a social cause.

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