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*Colonial and  
Post-Colonial Goan  
Literature in Portuguese*

PAUL MELO E CASTRO



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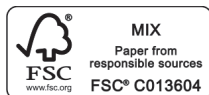
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# Women's Worlds in Women's Words: Poetry and Memory in Vimala Devi and Eunice de Souza

JOANA PASSOS<sup>1</sup>

Sandra M. Gilbert, whose work helped establish feminist criticism in the American academy in the 1970s, recently wrote 'Finding Atlantis: Thirty Years of Exploring Women's Literary Traditions in English' (2011, pp. 24–43)<sup>2</sup> in which she celebrates the recuperation of women's literary canons. Gilbert concludes that a whole tradition of women's writing is now studied and re-published as a consequence of efforts by a generation of critics who gave visibility to a genealogy of works that had been considered 'second best' in relation to an established, male-oriented canon passed on to younger generations. Thirty years later, the result is a richer body of cultural heritage and a deeper knowledge of the past.

Likewise, post-colonial studies have suggested corrective epistemologies intended to revise the partial archive inherited by modernity. Consider, for example, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which denounced the racist bias in Western historical perceptions of other civilisations, or Ranajit Guha's 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency' (1988),<sup>3</sup> which imagines historical memory reconstructed to include the misrepresented or silenced peasant rebels whose political claims were reduced in British documents to violence and rioting. Just as Said signalled the urgency of questioning standard euro/western-centric cultural references and developing awareness of eastern and southern cultures, Guha

opened the way to interpret events ‘against the grain’, looking for alternative sources of information in order to revise historical memory beyond elite accounts. Both Said and Guha argue for inclusive models of knowledge that deconstruct hegemonic, marginalising practices (inherited from the ideologies of European colonial expansion), and set forth on another ‘search for Atlantis’ (to evoke Gilbert’s metaphor), only, this time, one directed at the integration of cultural differences and rediscovering the plurality of world heritages.

The parallel ‘revolution’ brought about by feminist and post-colonial theories crosses the humanities, broadening our comparative platforms, even if in different (though potentially overlapping) ways, either in terms of gender or cultural differences.

The articulation of Sandra Gilbert’s model led me to focus on women’s contribution to Goan Literature in Portuguese. This chapter discusses poems by Vimala Devi, the main feminine voice in Goan literature in Portuguese, inheritor to a genealogy of women’s writing that starts with the nuns at Santa Monica convent in the seventeenth century and continues through poems, short stories and essays published by women in nineteenth-century newspapers. One must equally draw attention to Maria Ermelinda dos Stuarts Gomes (1889–1937)<sup>4</sup> and Propércia Correia Afonso de Figueiredo (1882–1944),<sup>5</sup> both prolific journalists and scholars. Finally, other dimensions of this Goan canon produced by women would encompass short stories for children<sup>6</sup> and the precious cultural legacy embedded in cookery books, repositories of local gastronomic traditions.<sup>7</sup>

If feminist theory led me towards women’s writing, post-colonial theory provided the concepts and perspective to approach Goan literature in Portuguese from a revisionist angle, aiming at its questioning, deconstruction and reinterpretation. That is to say that post-colonial theory provided the methodology to revise the limited approaches to Goan literature traditional of Portuguese scholars. In a way, one could apply Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) *Provincialising Europe* to research on Goan writing in Portuguese. I consider it necessary to conceptualise Goan literature in Portuguese as one more system among other parallel literary systems inside that territory, alongside Goan writing in English, Marathi and Konkani. To work with this plurality is to acknowledge Goa’s reality. Yet the polyglottism of Goan cultural life is not obvious in analysis



of Goan literature in Portuguese before the advent of post-colonial theories. Previous studies tended to universalise one view of the field, framed by the limits of publications in Portuguese, without any due reference across (linguistic) borders to parallel developments or exchanges of influences – as occurs, for example, with the *Indianist* trend in Goan literature, exemplified by poets such as Mariano Gracias, Paulino Dias and Nascimento Mendonça who were intent on citing Hindu history, Hindu deities and Hindu classical literature (even if relying on translations into English) in their *fin-de-siècle* poetry in Portuguese.

Another point worth emphasising is that the end of colonialism in Goa has meant that Portuguese became a language of the past. Marathi and English are currently used in official documents. Konkani is the official language and English is the language of contact with the international world. This switch to Konkani/English as literary languages of Goa signifies that translation from Portuguese to Konkani and/or to English may be necessary to preserve a segment of Goan literature that was, in fact, written by Goans to promote Indian culture abroad, such as 'Indianist' poetry; to enliven local cultural life, educating and entertaining their Goan public; or to intervene in anti-colonial politics, asserting local life and identity. Moreover, Goan literature in Portuguese (or English) also illustrates a dynamic of migration among Goans, as publications like *The Indo-Portuguese Review* (monthly newsletter, Calcutta 1919–27) and *A Revista da Índia* (Goa, 1913) were planned for international subscription by Goan communities abroad. Currently, a post-colonial approach to Goan literature in Portuguese is relevant to encourage a greater focus on: (1) the local self-assertion of Goan cultural identity as a system that often voiced anti-colonial resistance and socio-political criticism; (2) the great cosmopolitan awareness displayed by local literary systems, such as Goa's, of romantic, *fin-de-siècle* and modernist influences (see Mukherjee, 1971 and Gopal, 2005); and (3) its clear commitment to promoting Indian culture abroad, asserting India's contribution to world heritage. These characteristics of secular Goan literature in Portuguese represent a blend of cosmopolitan aesthetics and philosophical references that belongs to the modern heritage of the Indian subcontinent.

In this context, a comparative study of women's writing across linguistic borders, comparing an Indian and a Goan author, seems timely and relevant, an example to encourage translations from

literature written in Portuguese to Goan languages, bringing this heritage to contemporary Goans while asserting the integration of Goan heritage into other Indian cultures and communities. Furthermore, a comparative study of the Indian poet Eunice de Souza and the Goan poet Vimala Devi is justified by the fact that they both acknowledge the importance of memory, internal conflict and self-awareness as functional ‘materials’ with which to invent contemporary forms of identity, facing whatever ‘negative inheritances’<sup>8</sup> both biographical and historical memory might carry, especially since one cannot disentangle private memories from public, social processes. The poems I analyse belong to *Selected and New Poems* (1994)<sup>9</sup> by Eunice de Souza (b.1940), and to different collections by Vimala Devi (b.1935), a Goan poet who has published most of her works in Portuguese, though also in Catalan, Spanish, Esperanto and French.

Eunice de Souza has published four collections: *Fix* (1979), *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988), *Ways of Belonging* (1990) and *Selected and New Poems* (1994). As an academic, she also organised *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* (2001), *101 Folktales from India* (2004), *Purdah: An Anthology* (2004), *Women’s Voices: Selections from Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Indian Writing in English* (2004) and *Early Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology (1829–1947)* (2005).

Vimala Devi has published nine collections of poetry. Her collections are clearly divided according to periods in her life. Only her first book, *Súria* (1962), is about Goa. It includes one poem in Konkani and words of Konkani are inserted in several other poems in the collection (with a Konkani glossary included at the back). *Hologramas* (1969) and *Telepoemas* (1970), on the other hand, are experiments with surrealist aesthetics (written in Portuguese). By 1970, Vimala Devi had already lived in Goa, Portugal and the United Kingdom. She eventually settled in Barcelona where she has now lived for over thirty years. In Barcelona she published four collections of poetry, but her work became bilingual or trilingual, a meaningful gesture expressing multiple ways of belonging, just like the Konkani words inserted into the Portuguese of *Súria*. The ‘Barcelona’ collections are *Hora* (1991), *Rosa secreta* (1992, which includes poems in Portuguese, Catalan and Spanish), *El temps irresolt* (1995, mostly in Catalan), and *Éticas/Étiques* (2000, a bilingual edition Portuguese/ Catalan). This chapter will discuss poems from several of the collections.<sup>10</sup>

I shall highlight recurrent themes in both poets while suggesting possible dialogues. Here I start with Eunice de Souza and 'Notations':

They needed so few notations  
 those unknown singers:  
 a dying queen, a faithless king,  
 a golden chain, the lover lost  
 in the dark forest of passion,  
 nobly lost, ignobly lost,  
 always they sang of loss.  
 No attempt to cauterise memory  
 No gestures of refusal  
 Or acceptance. No cut to abstractions.  
 It happened: that is all they say.  
 It happened (2001, p. 98)

In 'Notations', the poetic voice is puzzled by the complacency of superficial, popular lyrics, whose repetitive nature is evoked by the echoes of 'lost' and 'loss'. In addition, the stereotypical, melodramatic content of these songs (a dying queen, a lover lost) reveals the lack of an inquisitive perspective beyond standard references, an attitude that disconcerts the poetic voice. The extent of the poet's difference in relation to the self-confident simplicity of popular singers asserts her personal drive to think analytically, to unearth deeper meanings and causes. Accordingly, the title of the poem – 'Notations' – suggests a search for greater knowledge, a vantage point to establish 'gestures of refusal or acceptance' in the interpretation of life and the world. After all, to use 'notations', as in music or mathematical systems, is to organise information systematically. To do without notations is to shun a 'cut to abstractions' and set up patterns that reveal deeper meanings. If one shuns notations, ignoring formal systems of knowledge, then one accepts current elements of popular culture thrown together by habit and repetition as sufficient material to create one's song. This blithe attitude explains the line 'No attempt to cauterise memory' as popular songs divert you from your open wounds, offering distraction and amusement. By contrast, Eunice de Souza's lucid and problematising attitude reveals an obsession with unsettled issues, a determined refusal of solace. In conclusion, I would suggest the poet's perplexity in 'Notations' reveals the gap between unproblematic, popular references and the poet's own analytic perspective, subtly inviting the reader to adopt the poet's reflexive attitude.

Having introduced Eunice de Souza's dense, yet sensitive and complex universe, I now turn to Vimala Devi, mediating my discussion of her poetry through translation from Portuguese to English:

Agora a paisagem veste-se  
 E torna a ser um espaço racional e transparente.  
 Os crepúsculos dilatam os horizontes  
 com súbitos avisos.  
 Conduzimos a noite  
 Com todas as paixões pensadas.  
 E a voz, às vezes, deixa-se arrastar  
 Pelo ritmo de espelhos e miragens.

[The landscape dons its clothes  
 And it becomes a rational, transparent space again.  
 Dusk broadens horizons with sudden warnings.  
 We lead the night  
 With all passions thought through  
 And the voice, sometimes, drifts  
 To the rhythm of mirrors and delusions.]<sup>11</sup>

(Vimala Devi, *Rosa secreta*, 1992, p. 28)

In the previous poem, 'Notations', Souza recognised the contrast between people's careless attitudes and her obsessive need to analyse the meaning of memories and representations. In Devi's poem, the reader also finds a poet trying to express her own strategy for dealing with perceptions. But Devi's notations are different: she displays a constant effort to control her imagination and emotions, replacing Souza's reproof of superficiality with a commitment to rationalise revelations ('warnings') and delusions, so that nature becomes a rational transparent space, instead of a provider of omens. Vimala Devi's poem suggests the poet's impulse to interpret and 'expand' reality (so as to contemplate inner drives and landscapes) has to be rationalised and played down, performing a secret task of self-effacement, in order to fit everyday normality. Vimala Devi's effort towards self-control is phrased as leading the night with 'all passions thought through', reducing emotions to choices and schemes. In Vimala Devi, a 'transparent' landscape, reduced to its normal, visual perception (for transparency allows the gaze) is the equivalent of Eunice's despondent recognition of the 'few notations' required by others. In both cases it is the poet who cannot

avoid taking in several layers of meaning, seeing multiple possibilities for/beyond the real. For Devi, these phantasmagorias, in continuum with reality, have to be contained and restrained, even if, 'sometimes', they are allowed to 'drift' as poetic voice, that is to say, 'to the rhythm of mirrors and delusions' expressed through poetic writing. The association between night and sunset as periods that strain the effort to balance an excess of perception and its controlled/rational articulation must be understood within the general frame of Devi's late poetry, where there is a constant negotiation between night and day, where the evening is a time when the 'contract' with everyday reality is suspended, and inner worlds are allowed to flow and inspire her poetry. Hence, the verse 'dusk broadens horizons' presents sunset as a beginning, the return to a private, imagined universe, beyond the everyday demands of factual reality.

Phantasmagoria and visions, as expressions of inner drives, can be related to Devi's experiments with surrealism in *Hologramas* (1969) and *Telepoemas* (1970). This experimental period paid special attention to language games and their suggestive power to express unconscious drives. The play with word association and psychic drives will remain an important feature in Devi's style, but the later Barcelona collections replace an exploration of language and the unconscious with the expression of clear emotions and spiritual longings, using affect to convey a concern with ethics and humanistic values in contemporary urban life.

Considering the two poems quoted above, one can conclude that both Eunice de Souza and Vimala Devi depict the interplay between perception, reason and sensitivity as the elements igniting their creative process. The way both write about this process reveals self-awareness and an unusual will to share their strategies as authors. Another affinity is that both *Súria* (Devi, 1962) and *Fix* (Souza, 1979) reflect upon Goa's colonial past, which makes them particularly interesting for an approach framed by post-colonial ideas. Nevertheless, Eunice de Souza and Vimala Devi's dialogue with historical memory is not followed up in their later poetry, even if feelings of exile remain pervasive in Devi's, as a sort of omnipresent ghost, always nostalgically loved and always reacted against, revealing an effort to reconcile with present circumstances and reality.

From a post-colonial point of view, Devi's later work rejects fossilised nostalgia, voicing a clear encouragement to other exiles

who, like herself, had to migrate due to historical changes and political transitions. That is why Devi repeatedly writes of private emotional strategies to move on with her life, surviving longing and loss. But, moving on does not necessarily imply silencing the nostalgia felt for a lost time and place, albeit under colonialism. Devi's suggestion is one must improvise new bonds with foreign realities through an act of will, a compromise that allows the occasional invocation of one's private ghosts.

Vimala Devi's later work allows us to re-position *Súria* (1962) beyond the limits of post-colonial nostalgia. Devi has been accused of voicing the 'nostalgic mode' of the ex-coloniser. But her critical awareness of the exploitation of the poor classes in Goa by the rich, privileged families, contradicts any accusation of *acritical* nostalgia. Instead she expresses the longing of the 'exile', a key figure in post-colonial transitions that caused mass migration across the globe. That is why in later collections, written in exile, Goa is never mentioned, yet longing and estrangement in relation to everyday reality remain. Thus, she focuses on the figure of the exile, and its troubled inner life, not lost worlds.

In turn, Souza's childhood memories of Goa in *Fix* (1979, also her first collection) are cynical and harsh, each verse a trenchantly lucid comment on Catholic patriarchy and the oppressive upbringing suffered by a future outspoken feminist. 'The Road' illustrates Souza's tone in relation to these childhood memories:

As we came out of the church  
 into the sunlight  
 a row of small girls  
 in first communion dresses  
 I felt the occasion demanded  
 lofty thoughts.  
 I remember  
 only my grandmother  
 smiling at me.  
 They said  
 now she wears lipstick  
 now she is a Bombay girl  
 they said, your mother is lonely.  
 Nobody said, even the young must live.  
 In school  
 I clutched Sister Flora's skirt  
 and cried for my mother

who taught across the road.  
 Sister Flora is dead.  
 The school is still standing.  
 I am still learning  
 to cross the road (2001, p. 76)

Again, as in 'Notations', there seems to be a conflict between the poet's expectations and other people's reactions. A memory of a smiling grandmother is the only recollection expressing familial bonds. The rest of the family is not mentioned at all, as if they were either forgotten or invisible. Later, during another stage of her life as a 'Bombay girl', family erupts again as a selfish, oppressive corporation demanding a caring role from the daughter towards the (probably widowed) mother. However, the poet will remain emotionally distanced from family ties by a lack of communication and mutual recognition, as one reads in the last stanza: if the character of the daughter is 'learning to cross the road', the divide between 'home', 'mother' and the poet 'self' is still there.

In both Souza and Devi's poetry history, memory and biography resound with political implications. If I have highlighted their position as critical observers and self-aware individuals, it is because from this position they can interpret the relation between their selves and wider socio-political processes. I have condensed their poetic, post-colonial reflections on Goa as a nucleus of memory with contemporary reverberations: for Devi it is the homeland from which she is in 'exile', and for Souza the site of an oppressive Catholic patriarchy in childhood. However, it is unfair to reduce their work to comparisons centred on Goa, especially since Eunice de Souza is acclaimed as an Indian writer and academic beyond the regional universe of Goan, and Vimala Devi has consolidated a multifaceted career as a Goan writer *and* a surrealist poet, art critic and literary scholar, currently establishing an Iberian dialogue in her work, between Spain and Portugal.

Souza's writing of Goan history as a negative, traumatic legacy is undeniably connected to her deconstruction of Catholic patriarchy. She is internationally established as a feminist poet committed to raising awareness of women's oppression. Maybe it is easier for her to address Goan recollections than criticise Hinduism, though it is clear that in her first collection, *Fix*, colonialism and patriarchy overlap. Nevertheless, as an example of feminist writing not strictly related to Goa, I have selected 'Advice to Women', a sarcastic,

unforgiving poem that exposes gender manipulation through romantic dreams:

Keep cats  
 If you want to learn to cope with  
 the otherness of lovers.  
 Otherness is not always neglect –  
 Cats return to their little trays  
 when they need to.  
 Don't cuss out of the windows  
 at their enemies.  
 That stare of perpetual surprise  
 In those great green eyes  
 Will teach you  
 to die alone (Souza, 2001, p. 72)

The title 'Advice to Women' demarcates the intended audience and the poet's pedagogic role. Souza's assertion of alternative role models works by deconstructing comfortable, romantic mythologies that tame women and force accommodation with family life, the expectation of company and fulfilment. The poem claims you will remain alone, and those around you will be indifferent to your emotional needs. From this point of view, what may seem a selfish, cynical quest for self-centred isolation is in fact a strategy for selfhood and individuality, a foundation in the process of reconnecting women to family and lovers in a less oppressive, dependent mode.

As far as Vimala Devi's later writing is concerned, it is not possible to discern a clear intervention in terms of gender, though there is a hint of neo-realism in *Súria* (1962), denouncing situations of gender injustice. Compared to Souza's sarcastic tone in 'Advice to Women', Devi is gentler, even when she addresses disquieting subjects such as negotiation between outside reality and internal longings, present life and past memories, self-awareness and internal fragmentation. Often, Devi's poetry evokes the strained process of facing life in exile, a condition that epitomises contemporary (post-colonial, post-modern) subjectivities. The poem quoted below exemplifies Devi's representation of this process, revealing an estranged awareness, the poise of an experienced negotiator between the conflicting demands of everyday life and inner worlds:

Ressurge a essência do Presente  
 com os nossos sonhos cavalgando



o tumulto que cria os dias  
 sem apagar a odisseia  
 dos frágeis ontens.  
 Junto à saudade  
 that que atravessam outros ecos  
 à passagem de cada nova era

[The essence of the present re-materialises  
 while our dreams ride the turmoil  
 that creates the days  
 without erasing the odyssey  
 of fragile yesterdays.  
 Together with the longing  
 other echoes traverse  
 at the passing of each new era].

(Devi, 1992, p. 24)

Both poets, in 'The Road' and in 'The Essence of the Present Re-Materialises', expose dysfunctional ways of belonging in biographies revisited through memory as isolation/difference (in de Souza) or as a condition of exile (in Devi). These themes are generated by contemporary social challenges, the general feeling of anxiety and insecurity arising as a consequence of mass migration and displacement in a global world. Vimala Devi and Eunice de Souza always invoke a past that is 'somewhere else' than the present location. This past determines, through affect and imagination, current ways of being and surviving and so explain why Souza and Devi's poetry can travel across publics, achieving international appeal. In this way, whilst tackling issues of memory, genealogy and heritage in a post-colonial world so deeply shaped by its recent past, these two poets confront its tensions and provide some healing strategies through art, reason and sensitivity.

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