

## Goan Migrant Literature

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**Abstract.** This article presents an approach to literature written by Goan emigrants, integrating it into the Goan literary canons. It presents three case studies, encompassing works by Vimala Devi, Ben Antao, and Victor Rangel-Ribeiro.

**Keywords:** Migrant literature, Goan literatures, the exile

Goan literatures resemble a stained glass window. In a stained glass window, you may consider the pieces separately, yet, when seen together, the set of distinctive colours and shapes makes a pattern, a meaningful whole. Likewise, you can approach separately the different Goan literatures in English, Marathi, Konkani and Portuguese, but if you do not explore the exchanges or even the silences between these different canons, you are missing important dimensions of the plurilingual Goan literary system. In other words, if you only consider one part of Goa's literary corpus, in one language, you miss the overall effect of a plurilingual tradition. Obvious as this statement may seem, the fact is that although Indian literature (including Goan literature) has always been a plurilingual tradition, most literary studies tend towards a monolingual approach. For example, researchers either study Goan literature in English or in Konkani. You seldom find a comparative study across language barriers. Note that I am not saying that Indian scholars do not compare texts written in different languages. I am saying that comparative approaches across languages have to increase in number and breadth, and the conclusions of these studies should have a wider international circulation.

When you consider plurilingual literary traditions, the strategic importance of literary translation becomes more obvious as a means to bring into contact different streams in a plural cultural heritage. This fact is not so obvious from a European perspective such as my own, since most European nations are monolingual. However, knowing that Goan literature includes several literary systems in different languages, I have been keen on having access to sources in Marathi or Konkani in order to have a more complete view of the local literary scene, but it has been extremely difficult to find translated sources. Hence, from

that experience, I think it is relevant to contribute to the debate on Indian literatures, and more specifically, on Goan literature, by highlighting the importance of promoting translations from regional languages to other idioms that allow local literatures to travel extensively, nationally and abroad. Even if some work has already been done, and credit should be given to translators such as Paul Melo e Castro (translating Goan literature from Portuguese into English) or Vydia Pai (translating short stories from Konkani into English), I still think it is accurate to claim that a greater investment in translations is necessary and strategically important for further research on Goan literature. Another point worth considering is that both examples of translations I mentioned above converge in their promoting a greater circulation of the English language, a fact that echoes other debates about language and power in Indian education and policy (see Sridhar and Mishra). In my view, English may be a convenient language for promoting one's work abroad, but from an Indian perspective, translation across vernacular languages is important to stimulate and valorise India's cultural diversity. Hence, India's publishing houses must invest in a selected set of languages according to regional interests and targeted public. Yet again, as Mini Chandran wrote:

Although there is an official encouragement to translate between Indian languages, the majority of translation activity is from Indian languages into English. Besides the linguistic hierarchy, what is at work here are the forces of the marketplace, whereby an English translation ensures greater visibility for the work outside its regional locale within India and even outside India. Moreover, translators who have the linguistic competence to translate effectively between two Indian languages are also on the decline. Most of the translations between two Indian languages are mediated by an English translation, with English ironically becoming the link.

As an answer to this trend, the anthology of essays, edited by Ciocca and Srivastava, and entitled, *Indian Literature and the World* (2017), sets out to confront the centrality of Indian writing in English within postcolonial studies, a field that, in Western academies, has hosted research on world literatures. I fully agree with Ciocca and Srivastava that the plurilingual nature of Indian literatures needs further acknowledgement and study, counterbalancing the hierarchy of languages identified by Chandran. However, for the researcher that is not familiar with India's vernacular languages, translation to the English language still may provide a glimpse of the original linguistic diversity of India, moreover if critical introductions to translated texts make the reader more aware of the local cultural ascendancy of the original text.

All this discussion about languages, translation and the plurilingual nature of Indian literatures comes about because of the difficulty of following parallel literary trends in different languages within the same territory. Nevertheless, nobody contests the relevance of doing so, without marginalizing worthy contributions in any language. Likewise, it is difficult to follow publishing dynamics in the same language, self-affiliated to the same culture of origin, but in another geography. Just as I consider that writing that reflects Goan society

and culture, and Goan history, or that claims affiliation to Goan collective identity(ies) should be considered Goan literature, even if written in each of the four above-mentioned languages—Konkani, Marathi, English and Portuguese—I also think distinctive parts of the same literary system should not be separated by geography. I am referring here to emigrant writing, or, “diasporic writing”, and I want to discuss the place of migrant writing in relation to national, or regional, literary canons. The initial reflection on language barriers was a means to suggest that local literary systems can be divided by several types of borders, as for example, linguistic borders, and no one denies the plurilingual nature of Indian literary heritage. Likewise, can criticism accommodate migrant writing within national canons? Or is migrant literature (literature written by emigrants living away from their homeland) invisible to local literary canons? Once again, language and power dynamics become relevant to understand the way literary systems work. Writing by Goan immigrants tends to be in English, which is the language that connects one’s point of origin with the everyday life in the host nation, frequently the United States of America or the United Kingdom. The fact that this migrant literature is written in a language with a wider circulation than local languages, may explain the visibility of migrant writing in Goan literary circles, a fact that may even be felt as unfair for those writers living and writing in Goa. The issue at stake in the juxtaposition of local and migrant Goan literatures is the way the local relates to the global, in an age of mass transit, when “here” and “there” share cybernetic simultaneity. Naturally, the mobility and interconnectedness that characterize contemporary life influence contemporary writing, and, subsequently, change the practice of literary criticism. Traditionally, the study of literature has always been heavily dependent on notions of national identity, collective self-assertion, and the cult of exemplary figures—all three ill-fitting notions for writing about the representation of fluid identities and individuals in transit, across distant geographies.

What are the terms for a critical model adjusted to interconnectedness online and identities in transit across geographies? Are “migrant literatures” to play a key role in 21<sup>st</sup>-century literary systems?

In order to clarify what I mean by “migrant writing” and “diasporic writing” I will start by evoking Edward Said and his definition of the figure of “the Exile” as the personification of the intellectual living abroad, between cultures, thinking back about the past as the key to understanding one’s (political and affective) disposition in the present. The figure of the exile is an important image for conceptualizing the integration into local literary systems of writers that are away from their homeland (by choice or by force of circumstances) but who still reflect about their past life as well as their current affective connection to their homeland. Just because a writer is far away from his or her home country does not mean that his/her literary production cannot dialogue with local cultural life or be accommodated by the local literary system to which he/she refers back, or, has been affiliated (because of other works or public statements by the writer). That would be the case, for example, of Vimala Devi or Orlando da Costa, who

have written explicitly about Goa, moved abroad, and then written extensively about memory, feelings of exile, or divided selves, even if they did not write exclusively about these subjects.

When the condition of exile is shared by a significant number of individuals who share the same history of dislocation (that is to say, they share the same point of origin and share the same host country, reproducing in the host country some communal or group dynamic), one may identify that group of people as a community living in diaspora. Some individuals one identifies with this community become writers, and, critical discourses have been referring to them as diaspora writers. Consider, for example, that there is a significant community of individuals of Indian descent living between India and the United States of America or India and the United Kingdom. According to Amit Shankar Saha, writers such as Monica Ali, Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, or even Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh could be considered instances of Indian diaspora writing, representing these mobile communities across the three countries. The list of names mentioned by Saha amounts to saying that diaspora Indian writing is, in fact, the core canon of Indian literature acknowledged internationally, a point deserving some attention. Yet, I do not want to engage in a debate over Indian local literatures versus Indian diaspora literatures. I just want to make explicit what the notion of diaspora Indian writing refers to, while claiming it is a current, established notion that diaspora Indian writing is an important part of Indian contemporary literary systems. Another interesting point for the argument I am constructing here is Saha's definition of Indian diaspora:

The Indian diaspora has been formed by a scattering of population and not, in the Jewish sense, an exodus of population at a particular point in time. This sporadic migration traces a steady pattern if a telescopic view is taken over a period of time: from the indentured labourers of the past to the IT technocrats of the present day. (191)

What I find interesting in Saha's words is the way Indian diaspora is established as a story of emigration, and not as a consequence of political and social conflicts (as was the case of the Jewish diaspora). That is to say that a concept such as diaspora Indian writing, is, in fact, a case of migrant writing, only India's emigration story is so rich, long and diversified that "diaspora" seems a more adequate term, to accommodate different social classes and lifestyles.

Goa's emigration history is equally rich and diversified, and one finds several examples of Goan writers living abroad who want to represent stories of emigration and struggle, including the moment of returning home, the final stage of many emigration stories. Below, I will discuss a novel by Rangel-Ribeiro as an example of migrant writing. At this stage, I want to suggest that migrant writing is a stricter concept than diaspora writing, since the central focus of the former is precisely an emigration story, representing emigrants' experiences.

Carine Mardorossian offers an interesting contribution to this debate by arguing that "migrant writing" is the better term to describe the fluid, mobile experiences of writers that have been living abroad. On the contrary, according

to Mardorossian, the figure of the writer as an exile relies on fixed categories of the foreigner as an eternal outsider, remembering a past life. I think this is a reductive interpretation of the figure of the exile, which is a more complex figuration, with a powerful subversive dimension (Passos, “Liminality as Critical Empowerment”). On the other hand, I agree with Mardorossian that the reception of “migrant literature” and the interest in migrants’ stories is gaining momentum in Western academies, somehow replacing former debates from the postcolonial field of studies.

In the case of Goan writing, which is the subject of this article, this discussion is relevant, as Goa has been the point of departure for generations of emigrants. I am not going to address the routes or destinies of Goan emigrants, as I am specifically interested in writers and literature. Through a discussion of the figure of the exile and of a notion of migrant literature I am developing a theoretical argument to approach three Goan migrant writers I have selected as case studies of Goan migrant writing. However, from my experience of reading Goan literature, I will say that the most represented emigration routes in Goan literature have always been, according to literary references in English, first and foremost, to the rest of India, especially Mumbai. Then, there are references to countries on the eastern coast of Africa, as Goans were hired by British families as nannies, cooks and domestic servants. If Goans had a higher level of education, they could be hired as clerks in the civil service. But Goans also emigrated as traders, and easily integrated themselves into business networks. In these cases, the main language of emigration has been English. In Goan literature in Portuguese the most represented destiny for Goan emigration was Mozambique, during the colonial period. A significant Goan community also moved to Portugal. Currently, the United States and Canada seem to have replaced former emigration routes, becoming the main host countries.

When one considers emigrant writing, traditional models of critical reception no longer work effectively because the principle for the reception of literary canons has always been their point of origin, namely, the canons of national and regional literatures. What happens with canons of migrant writing? What challenges do these cases raise for the field of literary criticism? Frequently, emigrant writers find themselves being received in the literary circles of their host country as token figures representing a certain community.<sup>1</sup> But this is only one dimension of the circulation of migrant literature. What about the reception of migrant writers in the literary debates of their own native countries? A successful writer abroad may not have the same impact in her/his community of origin. Or, she/he may be virtually invisible, having lost touch with the local culture. All of these questions help me structure lines of critical thinking to approach the three selected case studies I want to explore in this article. I will consider three authors who can be integrated into yet another stream of Goan literatures, defined by geography and travelling. That would be the case of “migrant Goan literature”, a segment of contemporary Goan literature, which intersects with other regions, integrating an element “in transit” into the otherwise regional vision of Goan

cultural life. Simultaneously, this writing, like its authors, is written outside of the immediate dialogue with local Indian literatures, and it is at least partially free from their influence, in terms of literary tradition and trends, since migrant literature is in contact with other literary universes as well, as a consequence of the author's everyday immersion in the host nation's culture.

As examples of authors who come under the category of migrant Goan literature, I will address the Goan writers, Vimala Devi, Ben Antao and Victor Rangel-Ribeiro, applying some of the ideas discussed above to their texts.

The first writer, Vimala Devi, is one of those Goan writers who initially wrote in Portuguese. After 1961, the year of the integration of Goa into India, she moved away, living in Portugal, the United Kingdom and Spain, where she finally settled, in Barcelona. When she migrated, she was physically cut off from the Goan literary scene, but Goa remained present in her poetry through themes related to memory, past life, longing and the feeling of the exile. Currently, through translation, her work is being rediscovered by writers engaged in Goan literary criticism, a fact that proves the strategic importance of literary translation, as I defended above. I chose to work with Vimala Devi in this article because the figure of the exile represents a possible trope to approach streams of migrant writing, namely those that deal with longing for the homeland, or return to one's culture of origin. These themes are very strong in Vimala Devi's poetry, and, in a world where the refugees' plight does not seem to be diminishing, it is relevant to acknowledge the expression of these feelings as an important component of literature addressing the displacement of people, sometimes under strained circumstances, across geographies. Maybe it is my politicized view of literary expression that makes me dismiss criticism that tries to establish which forms of sensitivity are politically correct. These superficial critical voices dismiss the exile as a nostalgic figure, without realizing the political issues his/her private pain exposes. Migrant stories frequently are refugee stories, and the expression of nostalgia for the homeland raises the question of the motives behind the displacement of people. As this is a relevant contemporary topic, and as literature is a sophisticated form of social and ethical intervention, I believe Vimala Devi's poetry is an adequate choice to present the figure of the exile as a possible trend in migrant literature, including the case of Goan migrant writing.

Devi was acclaimed as a surrealist poet in the 1960s in Portugal, just at the time when Orlando da Costa established himself as a novelist. Hence, in these two cases, the host country found room to embrace these migrant writers and, at least for a period of time, integrate them into their local literary scene. This integration of some Goan writers into the Portuguese literary scene, replicates the success that diaspora Indian writers have achieved in the West.

At the time, Devi published two anthologies of surrealist/concrete poetry, *Hologramas* (1969) and *Telepoemas* (1970), receiving acclaim in the Portuguese literary scene of the 1970s. She also received a prize for her co-authored history of Goan literature (*A Literatura Indo-Portuguesa*, 1971).

As for the sense of exile, so frequently expressed in Vimala Devi's poetry, I consider that it can be a powerful critical tool to give a voice to all the people displaced by political transitions that have affected their lives irrevocably. In that sense, her voice goes beyond Goan literature. In other words, Devi's writing is part of Goan migrant writing, but her work can also be integrated into a cosmopolitan, transnational literature that articulates shared experiences of exile and migration, albeit across different routes and in different circumstances. As an example of her recreation of the exile figure, I will quote two poems that clearly express the emotional importance of past memories in everyday life, as a haunting presence, that on the one hand hurts, while on the other hand encourages the exile to survive and reach for reintegration. Below, I offer the Anglophone reader my translation of two of her poems originally written in Portuguese:

There are causes that move you  
because they slip away, and  
one day, return to their source,  
the core of your memories,  
a setting still shining  
each hour, desire and dream.

(Vimala Devi, *Rosa Secreta* 25)

As the reader can see, there are no specific territorial references. The poem is "de-territorialized". And yet, anyone can sympathize with the joy of rediscovered memories, the pleasure of reviving treasured moments one would like to go back to. This poem can be read in relation to the author's distance from Goa (though other interpretations might apply), and thus, it would be possible to assign a place to this instance of migrant literature in a Goan literary system, under the category of, say, reflexions on Goa from those who live abroad. Several possibilities are open to the critic, and the place of migrant literature starts to take shape, both in relation to its point of origin, and in relation to the host society, by expressing the liminal position of the migrant, living between two worlds.

With a second example I hope to make my theoretical claim stronger while offering more evidence of the features I have attributed to Vimala Devi's poetry:

How many voices, and a single voice  
can inspire new modes of forgetfulness.  
How many echoes  
awake new disquiet in you,  
and in all modes of disquiet  
that envelop your horizon?

(Vimala Devi, *Rosa Secreta* 27)

In this second poem, Vimala Devi represents the fragile balance between forgetting, which brings tranquillity to the subject, and the constant renewal of

inner disquiet. “Echoes” can be traces, hints or association of everyday things to a life left behind, and still missed. Are these not the feelings of many emigrants, away from home? With these two poems I have suggested that Vimala Devi can be considered a “migrant writer” affiliated to Goan literature. Moreover, this is so because throughout her long career, one of the key themes in her poetry has been the suffering of the subject dislocated from his/ her homeland.

To conclude my analysis of Vimala Devi’s work, I would like to mention that she also writes prose. Vimala Devi published two collections of short stories, *Monção* (1963) and *A Cidade e os Dias* (2008). Originally written in Portuguese, they have been translated into Spanish and Catalan. Some short stories are also available in English and there is a forthcoming edition translated by Paul Melo e Castro. Her short story, “Hope” (pp. 175–181) was included in the anthology *Ferry Crossing* (1998), a fact which testifies to the inclusion of Portuguese-language authors in the set of references that constitute contemporary Goan canons.

My second case study is the writer Ben Antao, a Goan emigrant established in Canada. He is a journalist and a teacher, and I am going to address his work, *Love Triangle, a Novel in Terza Rima and 160 Sonnets*, published in 2014. The first thing that called my attention when I started going through the pages of this book was the choice of poetic forms: narrative poetry and the sonnet. The former invokes India’s classic tradition of long narrative poems (traditionally, in couplets), and the latter the 16th-century canonical poetry in Europe, written by, for example, Francesco Petrarca, William Shakespeare and Luiz de Camões. Also, the novel in terza rima is divided into “cantos”, just as Camões’s epic poem, *Os Lusíadas*. It seems Ben Antao has selected erudite models, from Eastern and Western classical traditions, to write contemporary poetry. His novel in “terza rima” is a narrative poem of wronged love and fatal retribution. It conveys a moral lesson, implying that life will show you the consequences of your own deviation from righteousness. *Love Triangle* also includes several references to Christianity, an aspect which reinforces the moral considerations suggested by this narrative poem.

*Love Triangle* does not have to be approached as a piece of migrant writing, since it includes no references to any emigration experience. The plot of this narrative poem unfolds around a love triangle, concerning a husband, his wife and his lover (and the latter’s other lover). As the plot unfolds, the masculine character in this adulterous relationship repeatedly expresses his fear of losing his wife and son in a divorce, regretting his affair. Although these feelings are to be expected in these circumstances, the fear of losing his nuclear family is even more unsettling because of the exclusive role of these two family members as anchors for his social life. In other words, the social landscape of the narrative poem does not include references to extended family, childhood friends or social circle. Consequently, apart from references to professional life, wife and son are the only social bonds of the male character. This position resembles that of the typical emigrant, as a foreigner. In this set of circumstances, social integration is not taken for granted, and one’s dependence on close family is greater. Thus, I am arguing that *Love Triangle* is not a dissonant piece in a book where poems about emigration are



abundant (see part II). Since poems in part II repeatedly mention Goa, the Konkani language, “the Goan personality” (page 151) or “to go abroad or not to go” (page 122), a migrant’s tale emerges from the recollections contained in such poems. If one reads *Love Triangle*, taking into consideration the poems about Goa and emigration (in part II), then, the sense of isolation one perceives in the social landscape of the former can be interpreted as a trace of migrant narrative.

Another relevant feature of *Love Triangle* is its tragic dimension. The son of the main character dies in a fishing accident, and divorce is inevitable, as the mother blames him. Secondly, the lover with whom he had an affair returns to her girlfriend, accusing him of deserting her when she told him she was with child. These plot developments gradually lead the protagonist to a situation of complete isolation, depression and death, a sequence of events that replicates aspects of the tragedy, as the protagonist suffers a sort of punishment for his wrong actions.

Another point regarding Ben Antao’s book is that his sonnets, which are published after the narrative poem, *Love Triangle*, are divided in two parts. Part II is the one that mentions Goa, and other memories of the poetic voice, in America and elsewhere. As for part I (from page 97 to page 118), it offers the reader a set of poems about “Art and Artists”. Some of the mentioned artists are Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Claude Monet and Van Gogh. References to these artists and their works are accompanied by the names of the museums or the cities where their works were visited. Ben Antao writes about The Louvre, Palazzo Madama, in Torino, or Musée D’Orsay. Through these poems, one follows the tourist and the art lover in the poetic voice, and this facet of the writing represents a curious parallel to all the references to Goa and the expression of the migrant’s memories of his homeland. The combination of part I and II articulates a mapping of a life in transit, where travelling is not only a matter of strategic necessity but of leisure as well, and this double dimension of Ben Antao’s poetry fits the patterns of 21<sup>st</sup>-century migrant writing, where mobility encapsulates diverse drives and projects, beyond sheer necessity.

Finally, as is frequently the case among migrant writers, in Antao’s poetry, his homeland, Goa, stands as a place of affects and memories. Many poems are dedicated to Goan friends: “For Lambert” (page 121), “for Victor Rangel-Ribeiro” (page 123), “For Augusto Pinto” (page 125); and many Goan villages are remembered, representing episodes of a biography lived in that particular state.

The last writer I will discuss in this article is Victor Rangel-Ribeiro, an established figure in the cultural life of Goa, mostly because of his talent as a musician. After living in the United States for decades, he wrote his first novel, *Tivolem* (1998), which is about a young woman who returns to her native village in Goa, after having lived for many years in Mozambique, the country to which her parents had emigrated. The death of her parents, and the fact that she was robbed of her inheritance by a man she trusted, make this sad and disappointed young woman return “home”, to her grandmother, her only remaining relative. On returning to Goa, Marie-Santana manages to find some inner peace, and she sets about rediscovering old acquaintances. Thus, through the eyes of Marie-

Santana, the reader also discovers the social world of the village, its hierarchies, alliances and rivalries; both rules of politeness, when visiting high-class, elderly members of the community, and the colloquial language of boatmen and peasants, all spiked with sad recollections of destitution, in Mozambique.

But Marie-Santana is not the only character in the plot who returns home to the village of Tivolem. Simon Fernandes, a bachelor in his thirties, also returns from Kuala Lumpur. Through Simon's eyes the reader gets a second perspective of the village and its inhabitants, confirming the manners and traditions observed by Marie-Santana. In the end, Marie-Santana and Simon Fernandes get engaged, and their love affair becomes as important for the development of the plot as the portrayal of settling down back home, after having been away for so long. In fact, I believe the love story is a necessary narrative strategy to captivate readers, but the main point of the novel is the sociological portrait of a village in Goa, challenged by the social dynamics set in motion by returned emigrants, who, even if they respect tradition, always bring to Tivolem (a fictional place) new ideas, new attitudes and new trends. Consequently, Tivolem itself is changed by the returned emigrants, also in material terms, for example, when they build new houses copying foreign building styles. Likewise, emigrants change the local economy, on account of the money and the goods they bring to Goa. In the same way, if the main characters of the novel are good, clever individuals, and both of them embody migrant stories, then, on the one hand, I think the novel encourages a progressive frame of mind, welcoming ideas and expectations returned emigrants might bring home. On the other hand, when the narrative focuses on local inhabitants who remained in Goa, they are represented as the benevolent keepers of local identity, the guardians of old traditions. Thus, tradition and innovation are graciously entwined in the represented Goan setting, described as quiet, rural and provincial, but open to accommodating some changes, and ready to welcome worthy individuals. *Tivolem* can even be read as a metaphor that stands for Goa, a benign place, providing solidarity and inner peace to both local inhabitants and newcomers alike.

### Notes

1 Actually, this is a complex issue. Either the immigrant writer is confronted with a certain appropriation of his/her work as exotic, unwillingly fulfilling certain Orientalist and exotic stereotypes (see Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*); or he/she is criticized for not representing his/her local culture adequately, distorting it; or he/she is accused of not being nationalist enough, exploiting one's culture to please Western audiences (see, for example, Chandra, "The Cult of Authenticity"). I have to thank Cielo G. Festino for the suggestion to read this article.

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