

# Re-telling Goa's History: The Margin Narrative

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**Abstract**—This paper presents the first reflexions about Margaret Mascarenhas's novel, "Skin", based on post-colonial critic perception of History and its agents. By doing so, this study will put light on a literary corpus of Indian Literatures: the Goan Literature whose cultural basis creates an unique historiographic metafiction conducted by different characters that one by one plays the narrator role.

**Keywords**—Goa, History, Literature, Metafiction.

## I. INTRODUCTION

INDIA is recognized for the complexity of its culture. Expressed by the linguistic plurality, multiple voices emerge revealing a hybrid condition beneath the canonical construction of a *Hindu-Hindi-India*. Although Hindi is the official language, there are at least 14 official languages all over the country and more than a hundred dialects; some of these languages and dialects make use of different alphabets which means that communication is a real and constant challenge on that country.

India is not only Hindu although it has been constructed this way firstly by occidentals - denounced by Edward Said [1] as a result of an Eurocentric perspective. But also Indian radical nationalism movements work hardly on the same idea since the XXs. In fact this massive cultural construction - the Hindu India - results from the experience on Colonialism itself, when the presence of the British gave birth to the idea of a Unique Indian Nation. To avoid reductionism, even the idea of Colonialism must be questioned on this situation as historical precedents point to other experiences of Colonialism documented on Indian territory: Mughal, Muslim, and Portuguese for example.

So, when studying Indian Literature one of the main questions is that there are many Indian Literatures, which specificities lay on cultural, historical, geographical, linguistic and political diversity. Homi Bhabha, argues that narratives (Literature) are the symbolic field through which Nation, as discourse, is disseminated, and add that "to study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself. If the problematic "closure" of textuality questions the 'totalization' of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the fields of meanings associated with natural life" [2].

Based on this perspective, this paper promotes the discussion of how historiographic metafiction reconstructs the history of the Nation, empowering the voices of the different

social roles placed aside the Hindu-Hindi-India. The object of this investigation is Margaret Mascarenhas's *Skin* [3], a historiographic metafiction that presents Goan history by different perspectives as stories are told by different characters. The stories converge on each other, revealing a circular narrative structure.

Some questions have to stay on mind while this study goes on: Who tells the history and how it comes to be truth? How the truth stays silently hidden on stories? Is it possible to find truth?

And finally: is that the truth what we find beneath our skin?

## II. GOAN LITERATURE

An overview on the India's literary *corpus* indicates the same linguistic challenges that can be observed on the social field. Firstly there are correspondent literary corpus to the official languages and the main dialects: Bengali Literature, Telugu Literature and Tamil Literature for instance. Some authors write on their mother tongue, but some others have a hybrid condition being a local author. It means that they write in the official language of their region, they write in the dialect - or dialects - what is very possible to exist on the same region, and they can also in the language of one of their parents. If these authors had accessed the formal educational system, English is another linguistic option. So it is common for them to write versions of their texts in different languages.

The polemic around the use of the British colonizer language is still in the post-colonial agenda. But it is not a pertinent discussion here as there is another language on the focus: the Portuguese.

Just to understand the specificity of Goan Literature, it will be necessary to shortly list some historical events that have contributed to the linguistic profile, responsible for an intriguing writing.

The language of Goa is Konkani but there is also a dialect on the same region which is dakhini, spoken by the Muslim. The region has been a sultanate just before the Portuguese arrived and captured Goa, in the year of 1510 and ruled over a small part until 1643, when a treaty with England divided Goa between the two Empires. Both had periods of much and less power over the territory. Portugal kept annexing other territories from 1788 to 1799. On 1797, the British Army occupied Goa but in 1813, their presence was not so strong. And although the obvious decline of Portuguese power on that region, the two nations were so entangled that in 1821 Goa was represented on Portugal Parliament.

In spite of the Independence of India, in 1947, Goa was incorporated to India's territory only in 1961, becoming a state of the Union in 1987.

The contact of these two cultures resulted on the Indo-

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Portuguese literature, composed by short stories, critics, poems and novels written in Portuguese. This literature is represented by names like Francisco Luis Gomes, Orlando da Costa, Vimala Devi among others. And it's significant that a language spoken by a small group left such a great literary corpus.

The literary scenery is that Goan writes – locals or diasporic –, according to Peter Nazareth's anthology [4], have written in 13 languages, headed by English, Portuguese, Marathi and Konkani; the last using three different scripts.

It is from this hybrid cultural condition that comes "*Skin*", the novel of Margaret Mascarenhas that will be focused by now.

### III. STORIES BECOME HISTORY

Margaret Mascarenhas is an American born writer, of Goan origin, who has divided her life and professional career between U.S and Goa where she lives nowadays.

The book was written in English but all over the story, Portuguese words come up, as can be seen in the first paragraph of the story: 'When Saudade reached a certain point in her life, she did away with herself. At least her "self" as people knew her then. She was *desaparecida*. Gone.' [5]

In the prologue, the direction of the plot is given to the reader: 'You see there were stories within stories, myths, dreams, legends, skeletons in closets. Mothers and fathers who weren't. Green-eyed girls and cases of mistaken identity. A melting pot of histories, race, religions. People who owned other people. Points of view. Acts of courage, cowardice, deceit. And love – the heart of the matter. Hearts that mattered, shattered, scattered. Like shards from a broken mirror.' [6]

The plot of the novel is this melting pot: the history of Goa told by different people all entangled on one of the protagonists, Pagan. The reference for the narrative is the familiar context, whose dramas melt with historical events of countries in which Pagan lived and her ancestors had once lived. The readers move from one place to another and from one time to another with no linearity: each character has a part of story to tell and only Pagan will be capable of signifying them as a hole.

It would be another historiographic metafiction novel of a diasporic Indian young woman who decides to go back to India to find herself, if there was not a new component: slavery. The character Saudade - cited above – was descendent of slaves owned by Pagan's family. And the African component of the Goan society comes up.

It is old Saudade who begins to tell the story looking at the Arabian Sea. The same sea that has brought her ancestors in Portuguese ships, on the same model of colonialism applied in Brazil, country in which the novel ends.

Then, who is telling the history of catholic elite Indo-Portuguese family is the one in a marginal role. It is Goan history told by its margin. As Linda Hutcheon [7] argues, it is the margin becoming the center of the narrative. And in this specific plot by the role of the narrator.

The main characters are women from two distinct lineage,

put aside by the colonial society. The Miranda Flores were a traditional family in Goa, economically well succeeded. Dona Gabriela Maria Clara de Miranda Flores is the matriarch close to death on the very beginning of the narrative. Pagan is her granddaughter. Esperança, Pagan's ama is the last decedent of slaves that, for generations, served the Miranda Flores.

Motivated by an existential crisis, Pagan uses the excuse of the grandmother illness to interrupt her life in U.S. after a short period in Angola working as journalist.

When Pagan arrives in Goa, she knows the official history of the family but she has always felt something was lost on her past, even before the death of her parents on an aircraft accident. Missing Esperanças' stories, she looks for her old ama and asked her for stories. That was the moment when the histories of Esperança's mother and grandmother reveal the origin of the richness of the Miranda Flores: the slave commerce.

While this version of her family history is told, Pagan also discovered the unknown history of these slave women who turned into domestic workers. The natural tensions between these two social positions in Goan society are also revealed. One of these emblematic moments happens when Saudade tells Dona Gabriela's daughter, Livia, that she wanted to stay in the convent after getting pregnant of Livia's brother, Leandro. She says "And what identity do I have at the present?" I retorted. 'I am a descendent of slaves with no surname. I am your maid. A pampered one, I grant you, but a maid nonetheless. A maid who has gotten herself into the worst kind of trouble'. And so, in the end she gave in and we sat at the piano and played duets.' [9]

It is possible to improve a gender approach for what is told about this double colonized condition experienced by woman in India. In fact, both feminist and post-colonial critic came close all over the narrative. But it would take this study away from its mainstream.

History and story changed places many times and what was history turned on story and what was story became history. This double positioning of time categories on the narrative can be also understood as a kind of *leit motif* that points to what Bhabha calls 'the ambivalent figure of the Nation' [8]. Narrate the Nation is always move from one time to another, from History to story and vice-versa. The two sides of the skin, the allegory created in the novel that suggests a place inside and a place outside through which the two categories – story and history – move and flow. In the words of one of the novel's narrator, "And so, over the years, as the doors of knowledge opened to Livia, so they have for Esperança. Geography, Literature, Maths, French, Art, and History. But it was the colonial edition of the history, not the true story. The true story had been given to Esperança by her mother, who had received it from her mother, and so on. The true story always resides with the mothers, thinks Esperança. But that doesn't mean they always tell the truth" [10].

So, historiographic metafiction must be understood as a genre that works in interface. As Hutcheon says "Like those recent theories of both history and fiction, this kind of novel asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves

historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time”.

But it must be also thought as a genre that works with two great discourses – history and story – both connected by the same logic: memory. Mascarenhas’ “Skin” could not be linear because it is an individual memory, Pagan’s that reconstructs history through the stories that she was told. And this reconstruction allows Pagan to tell another history for her and her children. A *now* de-colonized history.

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