



Acta Scientiarum. Language and Culture
ISSN: 1983-4675
ISSN: 1983-4683
actalan@uem.br
Universidade Estadual de Maringá
Brasil

Across community barriers: female characters in Vimala Devi's short stories

Festino, Cielo Griselda

Across community barriers: female characters in Vimala Devi's short stories

Acta Scientiarum. Language and Culture, vol. 41, no. 2, 2019

Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Brasil

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=307462019007>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4025/actascilangcult.v41i2.45888>



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

Across community barriers: female characters in Vimala Devi's short stories

Cielo Griselda Festino
 Universidade Paulista, Brasil
 cielo.festino@docente.unip.br

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4025/actascilangcult.v41i2.45888>
 Redalyc: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=307462019007>

Received: 17 December 2018

Accepted: 24 June 2019

ABSTRACT:

This article brings a reading of the short-story collection *Monção* [Monsoon] (2003) by the Goan writer Vimala Devi (1932-). The collection can be read as a short-story cycle, a group of stories related by locality, Goa, character, Goans, from all walks of life, and theme, in particular women's milieu, among other literary categories. In her book, written from her self-imposed exile in Portugal, Devi recreates Goa, former Portuguese colony, in the 1950s, before its annexation to India. A member of the Catholic gentry, Devi portrays the four hundred years of conflictive intimacy between Catholics and Hindus. Our main argument is that Devi's empathy for her culture becomes even more explicit in *Monção* when her voice becomes one with that of all her women characters. Though they might be at odds, due to differences of caste, class and religion, Devi makes a point of showing that they are all part of the same cultural identity constantly remade through their own acts of refusal and recognition. This discussion will be framed in terms of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's theory of autobiography (2001) as well as the studies on Goan women by the Goan critics Propécia Correia Afonso (1928-1931), Maria Aurora Couto (2005) and Fátima da Silva Gracias (2007).

KEYWORDS: Goa, Vimala Devi, Monsoon, women, catholic, hindu.

RESUMO:

Este artigo traz uma leitura da coleção de contos *Monção* (2003), da escritora goesa Vimala Devi (1932-). A coleção pode ser lida como um ciclo de contos, um grupo de histórias relacionadas por localidade, Goa, personagem, goeses, de todas as esferas da vida, e tema, em especial a questão da mulher, entre outras categorias literárias. Em *Monção*, escrito a partir de seu exílio autoimposto em Portugal, Devi recria Goa, ex-colônia portuguesa, na década de 1950, antes de sua anexação à Índia. Membro da nobreza católica, Devi retrata os quatrocentos anos de intimidade conflitiva entre católicos e hindus. O nosso argumento principal é que a empatia de Devi pela sua cultura torna-se ainda mais explícita em *Monção* quando a voz dela se torna uma com a de todas as suas personagens femininas. Embora possam estar em desacordo, devido às diferenças de casta, classe e religião, Devi faz questão de mostrar que elas são todas parte da mesma identidade cultural constantemente refeita através de seus próprios atos de recusa e reconhecimento. Para essa discussão, levaremos em conta a teoria da autobiografia de Sidonie Smith e Julia Watson (2001) e os estudos sobre a mulher goesa das críticas goesas Propécia Correia Afonso (1928-1931), Maria Aurora Couto (2005) e Fátima da Silva Gracias (2007).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Goa, Vimala Devi, Monção, mulheres, católicos, hindus.

INTRODUCTION: REMEMBERING GOA

The collection of short stories *Monção* [Monsoon] from 1963^[1] by the Goan author, Vimala Devi (1932-), is a short-story cycle, a group of stories by the same author related by theme and locality, Goa, (Wiemann, 2013). In it, Devi brings Goa, her motherland and former Portuguese colony in India (1510-1961), back to life as it was in the 1950s, when she was already self-exiled in Portugal, turning the memories of her own life experience into a suggestive literary narrative that is one of the masterpieces of Goan Literature in Portuguese.

In their study on autobiographical genres, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001, p. 25) define experience as "[...] the process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm, constituted through material, cultural, economic and interpsychic relations". Precisely, to write her book Devi chooses to adopt the Hindu pseudonym Vimala Devi, instead of her Christian given name Teresa da Piedade de Baptista Almeida. Through this play between her name and penname, Devi, who belonged to the Goan Catholic gentry, seeks to maintain her ancestral personality pointing hybridity as one

of the defining qualities of Goan identity. Likewise, in the stories that make up the collection, there is an interplay between the Indian and Portuguese facets of the characters' identification. They are always side-by-side, reflecting the outcome of four hundred years of a conflictive intimacy that, as Homi Bhabha (1994) would have it, was agonistic and antagonistic, but in which no one could be what he was without the other.

Smith & Watson (2001, p. 18) add that our experience is contextual since "[...] acts of remembering take place at particular sites and in particular circumstances". As stated, Devi wrote *Monção* on the brink of Goa's annexation to India in 1961, and published it in 1963 when her motherland was going through a troublesome period of transition concerning its new political status. Hence, the titular *Monção*, a recurrent presence in each story, can be read as an allegorical reference to the traumatic end of the Portuguese regime in India.

Through the protective veil of literature, then, Devi seems intent on depicting a world fast receding into the past, but without sparing it any criticism about what she considered the main foibles of Goan society: inequalities due to class and caste as, though converted to Catholicism, Goans took into their new religion the caste hierarchy of Hinduism. Nonetheless, as Paul (2006, p. 51) remarks, Devi never criticizes Portuguese colonialism in the collection. Rather, as the author adds, "[...] she was explicitly committed to a certain hybridized Luso-Indian culture [...]" and regrets that "[...] Portugal was expelled from Goa before the territory's economy was revamped" (Melo e Castro, 2006, p. 49).

Smith and Watson (2001, p. 18) also observe that our experience is defined by "[...] the politics of remembering: what is recollected and what is obscured is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past". Though a daughter of landowners, brought up in the comfortable atmosphere of the *Casa grande* [Great house], Devi fictionalises the lives of Goans from all Goan communities across barriers of class, caste and religion: whether they sit on the verandah of the big house, enter huts, walk dusty roads, bend low in the paddy fields, attend the *tyâtr* [popular theatre-play in Konkani] or the *nâttak* [Hindu dramatic art], attend Mass or go to the Temple, leave for the diaspora, return home, express their love for Goa, or criticise it. As Melo and Castro (2009) observe, *Monção* is the first piece of creative literature from Goa, in the Portuguese language, in which almost all social groups from Goa are portrayed. Through memory, then, Devi interweaves hers and their lives together –personal narratives and narratives not strictly her own.

Smith and Watson (2001, p. 16) point out that "[...] the process [of remembering] is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering". Devi's portrayal of her motherland is at its best in *Monção* in her complex recreation of female characters. Crossing barriers of class and community, Devi becomes one with the young lady from the *Casa grande* in '*Recordação do tio Salú*' ['Memory of uncle Salu'] and treats the old grandmother in '*Ocaso*' ['Decline'] as if she were her own; she sympathises with the beautiful *curumbim* [land-tiller] woman in '*Venus e os seus braços*' ['Venus and her arms']; she laughs with the clever spinster in '*O genro-comensal*' ['The house-husband']; she admires the enchanting Hindu girl in '*Padmini*'; she feels compassion for the bailadeira's daughter in '*Nâttak*'; she shares the young Hindu wife's anguish and frustration in '*Dhruva*'; she understands how the practice of the arranged marriage curtailed women's lives in '*Incerteza*' ['Uncertainty'] and '*Os filhos de Job*' ['Job's children']; in '*A droga*' ['The cure'], she sadly tells the story of a star-crossed love between a Catholic girl and a Hindu man. Devi might assume a rather paternalistic tone, in particular when referring to low caste, poor characters who were vulnerable to exploitation, but she is no less critical for that of her own class and is deeply aware of the injustices of her own society. What is implied in the quality of Devi's narrative of her female characters is that they all belong to the same space and cultural context, though they might come from different social and religious strata of Goan society, fact which manifests itself in their degrees of access to power and agency. Nonetheless, they are united by some of the '*usos e costumes*' [uses and customs] shared across communities from smoking home-rolled dhumtis [cigars] to the practice of the dowry for the marriage of the daughter of the house.

In her portrayal of women's predicaments in Goa, Devi's *Monção* bears juxtaposition with a series of articles by Goan critic Propécia Correia Afonso (1881-1944) entitled *A mulher indo-portuguesa*

(1928-1931) ["The indo-portuguese woman"], commissioned by the *Boletim do Instituto Vasco da Gama*, Panjim, Goa. Though written in the first half of the twentieth century, therein Correia Afonso, very much like Devi in *Monção*, depicts Goan identity, albeit through a historiography of the women of the land. She goes back to the ancient Hindu *Laws of Manu* and considers in counterpoint women from the Muslim, Hindu and Catholic communities in order to show that, for all their differences, all make up the Indo-Portuguese identity (Correia Afonso, 1928).

Like Devi, Correia Afonso writes from experience and observation. She was also born in the Casa grande and belonged to one of the most illustrious catholic families, whose women were, for Maria Aurora Couto (2005), among the first feminists of Goa. If Correia Afonso, writing at the time of the Portuguese Republic in the 1920s, which was first promissory and then disappointing to Goans, affirms Goan identity, Devi's *Monção*, with its fictional time corresponding to the 1950s interrogates its nature.

What both women also have in common is their use of the resources of education and privilege not to become perfect wives, as it was expected of women of a certain class at the time, but to reflect and write on their own culture. Their affection for Goa notwithstanding, Devi and Correia Afonso are pointedly critical of its fossilized customs that hindered the progressive development of their community. According to Stuart Hall (1990), identity should be understood as relational and performative, a process always in the making based on difference rather than essence. Devi's *Monção* displays the first definition of identity since, like all signifying practices, Goan identity is not portrayed as simply being a mimicry of the Portuguese, affirmation of Catholicism or rejection of Hindu beliefs, but as the ongoing unresolved relationship between the Indian and the Portuguese, the Catholic and the Hindu, the *bhaktar* [land-owner], and the *mundkar* [land-tiller]. In Devi's narratives, the members constituting Goan society do not necessarily align with each other, but are co-dependent for their existence.

Along the same lines, in her articles on the Indo-Portuguese woman, Correia Afonso frames Goan identity as being constructed through and not outside difference. If, on the one hand, the Casa grande and its inhabitants follow a Western style, it was nonetheless rooted in Indian soil. Even if converted to Christianity, *bhaktars* and *mundkars* would converse and pray in Konkani, the language of Goa. Likewise, though many Hindus resisted Portuguese rule, their lives were still affected by colonialism since, willingly or unwillingly, they were part of this stratified social milieu. According to Correia Afonso, a point of convergence between communities was the Goan home, 'zealously guarded by Hindu and Catholic wives' (Correia Afonso, 1928) alike. Whether through essays, in Correia-Afonso's case, or through fiction, in Devi's, both cross barriers of class, caste and community to voice the plight of Goan women of all religions.

Smith and Watson (2001) also observe that our experience is mediated by language. In the case of a plurilingual society like Goa, this is a highly complex issue. Though *Monção* is written in Goan Portuguese, Goa's official language during the Portuguese regime, and the language of the catholic gentry, the stories depict Goan culture as spoken in all its languages: Konkani, today Goa's official language and relegated to the background during the colonial period, English, the vehicular language of India and the language of work for Goans, or Marathi, the literary language of the Hindu community^[2]. Rather than flatten linguistic and cultural differences, Devi makes them overt already in the first story, '*Nattak*', through the plight of her character, Tukaram, as if to set the tone for the whole collection: "Sempre a mesma dificuldade, a língua, pensava! Em casa só falavam concaním, na aldeia ninguém sabia português e, em criança, antes da escola primária portuguesa, aprendera o marata!" (Devi, 2003, p. 22). ["Always the same problem, the problem of language!" he thought. At home they only spoke Konkani, in the village no one knew Portuguese and, as a child, before attending the Portuguese primary school, he had learnt Marathi"]. If Portuguese was even the mother tongue of many members of the Catholic gentry, it at times hindered the social ascension of those who had been raised in the other languages of Goa.

A PROTEAN NARRATIVE VOICE

In *Monção*, the narrative voice becomes more or less internalized depending on whether the narrative is concerned with expressing an emotional truth or factual events. Precisely, the short story '*Recordações do tio Salú*' ['Memory of tio Salú'] is narrated in the first person singular in retrospect, suggesting that, like Devi herself, the narrative persona is now far from Goa and tries to recuperate the images of her home country that got engraved in her memory: "Um templo de 'saudades' pode chamar-se a tudo que trago dentro de mim" (Devi, 2003, p. 109, my emphasis) ["You could say that everything I carry inside forms a temple of 'saudades'"]. In the story, the "[...] narrating I, or agent of discourse, and the narrated I, or object of history [...]" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 60) are interwoven when the narrative voice becomes one with the young woman of the Casa grande, as the exchange between her and a boatman shows, on an ordinary day, returning home from Pangim, Goa's capital. She remembers the smiling faces asking her (Teresa?) in Konkani: "*Aiz Pongê, bai?*" (Devi, 2003, p. 109, my emphasis) ["So you went to Pangim today, 'miss'?"]. She also recalls talking to the fishermen passing by the veranda of her house saying "*Distâ tyâpramânem ho varo pâvsâla, 'bai'!*" (Devi, 2003 p. 109, my emphasis) ["This wind'll bring rain, 'miss'!"].

If in her story, through her narrative persona, Devi re-enacts memories of aristocratic Old uncle Salú, last member of an ancestral house, very much like her own, in order to show that "[...] the storyline does not unduly angle in favour of a certain standpoint [...]" (Eagleton, 2013, p. 91), she puts him in counterpoint with the poorest members of the community, while she also includes her narrative persona amidst them. The narrator's insinuation that she knows the Goan subaltern intimately is first shown in her switching from Portuguese to Konkani. Then, to add veracity to her narrative, Devi adopts a first person plural narrative voice to indicate that in her childhood her narrator had belonged not only in the Casa grande but also among the Goan people, independent of class and caste, until they had all grown up to become aware of the social abyss that separated them: "[...] boa aldeia, boa gente, bons manducares, pescadores, curumbins, farazes, velhos e velhas, católicos, hindus, rapazinhas de langotim sujo com quem tanta vez joguei a cabra-cega ou os *godde* [...]" (Devi, 2003, p. 110). ["A good village, full of good people, good mundkars, fishermen, curumbins, farazes, old men and women, Catholics and Hindus, and the little boys in dirty loincloths with whom I played hopscotch or *godde* [marbles]"].

Through this Protean narrator, Devi portrays the contrapuntal relationship between Goan women at two levels: *inter-story*, where female characters echo their counterparts in other stories of the collection, and *intra-story*, where the differences between women from different walks of life emerge in a single narrative. This narrative strategy already entails that "[...] it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its 'constitutive outside' that the 'positive' meaning of any term - and thus its 'identity' - can be constructed" (Hall & Du Gay, 1996, p. 4-5, my emphasis). Hence, Devi enters both the *Casa Grande* and the hut to show how intertwined the lives of all her female characters are. Nonetheless, she adopts a more intimate or aloof narrative voice, depending on her familiarity with the life of the characters she tells about. Instead of implying that Devi has a partisan view on Goan society, this shifting quality of the narrative voice lends credibility to the narrative as it implicitly points to the degree of intimacy between the Catholic and Hindu communities. Devi and her women characters in *Monção* are thus paired in an intricate relationship that, at times, suggests certain parallelisms that seem to cross the foggy boundary between fiction and autobiography.

AMONG BHATKANS, MUNDKARS AND CURUMBIM WOMEN

The women that populate Devi's narratives are humorous, active, and witty. If she depicts *mundkar* and curumbim women from her own standpoint, as an upper caste Catholic woman, conscious of the social gulf that separates them, she has no qualms in criticising the *bhatkans*, the wives of the *bhatkars*, for the at times

small-minded attitude towards the plight of their unprivileged sisters. Simultaneously, her stories show how courageous all Goan women, rich and poor, of all faiths, could be when circumstances demanded it.

Though as colonised women they were doubly abused by colonialism and patriarchy (Chatterjee, 1989), it can be argued that, from the secluded sala [living-room] of the Casa grande to the humble, impoverished huts of mundkars and *curumbins*, women tried to make the best of their circumstances for home and community. Although not autonomous, in the sense that they could freely choose the course of their lives, their work was essential for the material wellbeing of their families. This role as family providers would eventually break the ground for their future emancipation, as they transferred their abilities from the seclusion of the private to the world of the public.

The short story '*O genro-comensal*' ['The house-husband'] is told through a narrative voice that, though in the third person, sounds like a locatable character rather than a disembodied omniscient narrator (Eagleton, 2013), as it shows an intimate knowledge of the life of the Casa grande. Through it, Devi pays humorous tribute to the recurrent figure of the spinster, in Goan society and literature, as illustrated by four sisters of good Catholic stock, Soledade, Claudina, Teodelinda and Dejanira, who knew how to fend for themselves when, after the death of their papa, there are no men left in the house. These women are characterized as being ugly: old, fat, with marks of chicken pox; some of them were the typical 'beatas' single women who spent their days praying or attending Mass. However, the stereotype is broken when it is shown how shrewd they could be to manage their vast fortune and keep face in Goan good society.

Correia Afonso (1930a) argues that, while poor women always had to work, upper class women were far from being parasites and contributed to their family's livelihood with the needle or by supervising the family estate. If Teodelinda's fading looks and substantial fortune secure her a husband who is penniless but, as the narrator observes, with a touch of irony, a "[...] brâmane de Saligão [...]" (Devi, 2003, p. 33) "[...] a Brahmin from Saligão [...]" and an heir to continue the family line, it is Soledade, "[...] baixa, gorda, com um rosto duro, enérgico [...]" (Devi, 2003, p. 31) "[...] short and stout, with a stern, forceful countenance [...]" who manages the extensive family land in Benaulim, Divar and Dongrim. Teodelinda's husband will not only play by the sisters' rules but also, as it was the custom among Goan families when there was no male heir, adopt the wife's surname. From inside the walls of their old mansion, and never outstepping their place in conservative Goa, as Teodolinda's marriage to a man from the same caste attests, these women used the limited agency they had to their own advantage not only to increase the family's fortune but also to keep it within their control.

Likewise, in 'Ocaso' ['Decline'], it is the grandmother who takes care of the family at a material and spiritual level, though the tone of the story is more sombre and the figure of the grandmother more complex. According to Smith and Watson (2001, p. 19), "[...] remembering is not an entirely privatized activity but also a collective one". The story is narrated in retrospect in the first person plural by one of the grandchildren of the house, as if voicing the family's shared views of the grandmother. The reader thus learns about the old grandmother, a very energetic woman who, very much like Soledade in '*O genro comensal*', after her son's migration to Africa, administered the estate's affairs with a firm hand and taught her children both how to run the property and how to sip their tea. Though she was a living symbol of the "[...] velhas tradições brâmanes tão respeitadas na família [...]" (Devi, 2003, p. 53) "[...] Brahminic traditions so venerated in our family [...]" the grandmother was worshipped also by the *mundkars* who considered her "[...] um ídolo providente e protector [...]" (Devi, 2003, p. 53) "[...] an oracle, a protector [...]" and so put up with their lot. Their existences could not be separated. If one part were missing, this whole world would collapse. As Couto (2005, p. 241) observes, if the *senhoras* [ladies], from the Casa grande cultivated the "[...] arts and the social graces [...]", they also considered "[...] working the land a sacred duty [...]" and "[...] combined the vitality of rural experience with the elegance of their salas and their social life". Thus, while mundkar and curumbim women worked the land, the batkan left the sala to supervise the palm plantation. Though their economic situations were unequal, wealth and comfort for one and poverty and endless strife for the other,

these upper class women were not ignorant of the source of their prosperity or the penury of the women from the lower classes who toiled side-by-side with their husbands and children.

Devi shows the decay of Goan society by comparing the grandmother to her daughter-in-law, intra-story, and to her granddaughter, inter-story, in the sequel '*Esperança*' ['Hope']. When the father passes away in Africa, the family goes on as normal. Nothing changes. However, when the grandmother dies, their dynasty enters terminal decline as the narrator observes. The first sign of the catastrophe is the *mundkars* sitting down during the wake of the old woman. Worse still, her successor, a fragile batekan, raised for a private world indoors, who, unlike her own mother-in-law was unable to harmonize the life of the sala with that of the plantation, prefers to place the family's future in the hands of her young inexperienced son rather than follow in the footsteps of the old woman. Devi thus makes use of the family saga to tell about the decline not only of life in the *Casa grande* but also of the Indo-Portuguese state as the Portuguese had in the Catholic gentry their most important allies.

The upshot of the grandmother's death is revealed in the sequel, '*Esperança*', in which, uncharacteristically, instead of working in the fields, a young *mundkar*, Pedrú, squats in the hut watching the monsoon flood the fields, while his mother and sister, representatives of those who had dared sit at the wake, have condemned themselves to a monotonous life of hard work and poverty so that Pedrú could attend the Lyceum, learn Portuguese and find a position in the colonial bureaucracy, so improving the family's fortune. Nonetheless, due to the abyss still separating the *mundkars* and *bhatkars*, Pedrú fails to get a job. In the late colonial period, the latter tried to bar the rise of the former, thus keeping the jobs in the bureaucracy for the people of their own class. As Melo and Castro (2009, p. 62) comments, "[...] whilst the decline of the bhatkar is setting in and thereby beginning to free the mundkar from feudal obeisance, it does not necessarily follow that this decline will automatically entail the rise of the mundkar". '*Esperança*' reaches its climax when Mitzi bai, the granddaughter of the decadent *Casa grande*, who lacks the strength and foresight of her grandmother, is offended by Pedrú, a Shudra, because he dares ask her to intercede to get him a position in the *Fazenda* [Portuguese administration in Goa]. As the narrator sadly comments, in '*Recordação do tio Salu*', the likes of Mitzi bai and Pedrú had been equals in childhood "[...] sem que os homens tivessem ainda cavado abismos entre nós, irmãos de folguedo e pequenas esperanças, futuros batecares e manducares" (Devi, 2003, p. 110) ["before the hands of adults [had] opened a gulf between [them], siblings in [their] larks and inconsequential hopes, the future mundkars and bhatkars"]. Eventually, a new social mobility would set in when the likes of Pedrú, unable to find a job in Goa, would join the Goan diaspora in Africa and with their remittances, not only buy the houses of the impoverished *bhatekars* but even marry their daughters, like Mitzi bai.

This inter-story counterpoint, between grandmother and granddaughter, becomes more overt when these Brahmin women from the *Casa grande* are read against the poor *curumbim* sisters. If Devi turns a harsh look on the women from the *Casa grande* in '*Esperança*', she praises the beautiful *curumbim* woman in one of the most stylized narratives of her anthology, '*Venus e os seus braços*', while, once again, criticizing the *bhatkar* whose own short-sightedness leads him to confuse religious belief with superstitions and become intransigent with his workers when a storm threatens to destroy his paddy fields. Through the emblematic figure of Mogrem's arms, both beautiful and strong, Devi portrays the dubious attitude of the Goan gentry towards the poor.

Despite their dire circumstances, Mogrem and her husband Vitol constituted a loving family in which the children also helped out by taking care of their younger siblings. It is at this point that the omniscient narrator moved by their plight changes from a disembodied third person narrative voice to a first person narrator – identified as bai, as women from the *Casa grande* were called – to show that she is not indifferent to their suffering: "A solidariedade de aquele lar *tocava-me* profundamente. E a pobreza em que boiava não 'me' passava despercebida. 'Chegava a ser indiscreta, ao perguntar à Mogrém porque traziam ao mundo tantos filhos, sabendo que não tinham meios de subsistência'" (Devi, 2003, p. 132, my emphasis) ["The solidarity of that family touched 'me' deeply. And the poverty that hovered over it didn't 'pass me by'. I went as far

as asking Mogrém indiscreet questions: why did they bring so many children into the world knowing that they hadn't the means to support them?"]. This change in the style of the narrative voice seems to indicate the actual moment when experience becomes fiction, with all the metaphorical richness of the latter and the crudity of the former.

Toil, hunger and physical exhaustion lead to Mogrém's untimely and foreseeable death. In *Monção*, it is the despair engendered by extreme circumstances that seems to unite Goans from above and below as if they could only come together when confronted with death. Standing before Mogrém's funeral pyre – very much like the mandukars had sat at Grandmother's funeral in 'Ocaso' – what the *bhatkar* Dias and Mogrém's husband miss most about this *curumbim* is the strength of her arms that had worked so hard to stave off hunger. As for *Bai*, if, as Eagleton (2013, p. 88) observes, "[...] a third-person omniscient narration is a kind of meta-language [...] that cannot be the object of commentary within the narrative" [...], by switching to a first person narrator and character, Devi presents her narrative persona in a way which can be subject to criticism. Although *Bai* is not to be conned into complicity with Mogrém's masters, though they might belong to the same caste and class, as her reflection on the *curumbins*'s dire poverty as well as the sombre tone of the narrative suggest, she still sounds almost callous to the reader when she voices that death has robbed them of Mogrém's beauty.

Though from the last rung of the social ladder, what brings Mogrém and the grandmother in 'Ocaso' together is that both women were the main support not only of the family but also of the community, as they provided food for all: Mogrém with her work and the grandmother with her able administration. Devi's likening women from different social classes works as an implicit critique of her same characters' prejudice towards each other.

AMONG HINDU WOMEN

The relationship between authors and their works can be a complex one. Devi's alternating admiration and criticism of her own community, the Catholic gentry, at which she can poke fun as in the case of 'O *genro comensal*', adopt a nostalgic tone in 'Ocaso', or a critical one in 'Esperança' acquires new layers of meaning when compared to her portrayal of Hindu women in the stories 'Dhruva', 'Padmini' and 'Nâttak'. If Devi's Catholic women are at times depicted as selfish young *bhatekans*, shrewd old women, or ineffectual *senhoras* secluded for so long that they do not know how to deal with more practical issues, Devi's Hindu women are always young girls who are innocent, kind, fragile and generous. Older women, like the figure of the mother-in-law, who victimizes powerless daughters-in-law still in puberty, are always kept in the background and their voices almost unheard. Devi thus limits her narrative to an almost idealized image of the Hindu woman either because she seems to fear hurting communalist sensibilities, or she would actually not know how to portray their lives in a more intimate manner. Devi's exploration of the ways of remembering Hindu women in *Monção* is also shown in her use of the narrative persona. If in the case of the women characters who belong to the Catholic community many times she resorts to a narrative in the first person singular or plural, to implicitly signal that she belongs among them, in the case of Hindu female characters, she restricts herself to a third person plural narrator. In addition, another detail that marks her distance with Hindu female characters is that their lives are always portrayed in a rather idiosyncratic manner, associated with collective Hindu rituals or customs, as seen from the perspective of the Catholic community. They are depicted as young brides, leading a secluded life, or being *bailadeiras*, thus indirectly hinting that though Catholics and Hindus might be neighbours, there was not necessarily a great intimacy among them. However, following Smith and Watson's nomenclature (2001, p. 65), rather than "[...] contingent others [...]", these Hindu women are presented as her "[...] significant others [...]" because "[...] their stories are deeply implicated in the narrator's and it is also in relation to them that the narrator understands her own self-formation". Either

way, very much in the line of Correia Afonso, what is commendable about Devi is her effort to bring them into her narrative in implicit counterpoint with her Catholic women characters.

Dhruva, in the eponymous story, has just moved into the house of her parents-in-law after an arranged marriage. Her name already points to her main attribute, her constancy. She deems herself lucky because she has made a good match. Her plight, however, is that she will find a rival not only in her mother-in-law, a common theme in Indian literature, but in Luisa, the Portuguese girl in the sequel short story '*Fidelidade*' ['Fidelity'], with whom her husband has an affair in Lisbon. The stories are also compared through two emblematic scenes. While in the first story Dhruva stands by a window looking East as if trying to affirm her Indian roots, once she has learnt about her husband's trip to the West, in the second story it is the turn of the young husband to stand by a window, also looking East, once he is in Lisbon and has crossed not only the sea but also a cultural abyss by making love to Luisa. Dhruva and Chandrakanta are united by the disorientation produced by his cultural and geographical dislocation which not only affects the life of those who go away but also of those who stay put, in particular women. Though the narrative focus is on Dhruva, and the reader has some access to her inner thoughts, she is portrayed in a stereotypical manner that bears many points in common with the representation of many other Hindu female characters, in particular the detailed account of the marriage ceremony: the tying of the tali with three knots, her braided hair being adorned with flowers, the new life in the in-laws house, the figures of the imperial mother in law, the *boto* [Hindu priest], the kaku or uncle.

The pattern in the plot is broken, nonetheless, when, uncharacteristically, young Dhruva seems to yearn for the orthodox life of the Hindu young wife, the familiar subjection to the mother-in-law, since she knows how to deal with this millenary custom. It is her husband departing for an unknown world that brings an estrangement that she cannot bear. Another narrative strategy that sets Devi's story apart from so many others on Hindu women is the relationship she establishes between the young Hindu wife and the husband's new Portuguese friend, Luisa. If her Portuguese counterpart, Luisa, is characterized by her independence, education, liberal sexual mores and free will, what characterizes Dhruva is her endurance and resignation that elevate her to a level her Catholic sisters rarely reach in Monção and through which Devi pays tribute to the Hindu women of the community.

Like Dhruva, Padmini also gives her name to a story, as if through this literary strategy Devi were bringing these young Hindu women out of the privacy of their houses for the contemplation of the reader. If in the story about the Catholic community, the narrator can become one with the female characters, here Padmini is always seen from the perspective of a newly arrived Portuguese man, who becomes infatuated with her. Her name refers to the lotus or water lily, a complex Indian symbol. Like Padmini, it is native to Asia, and a sacred flower in the mythology of ancient India that symbolizes beauty and purity, as well as India's national flower since 1950.

Their encounter seems to enact the fascination of the Western man with Indian culture. Though he can admire her from afar – and their eyes meet in a look that poses a thousand unanswered questions –, he never even hears her voice because her father always stands between them. Padmini never speaks in the story. For Partha Chatterjee (1989), the Hindu resistance to the arrival of Western foreigners was shown in their zealous defence of their private life, as represented by religion, home and women. Padmini, the lotus flower, symbolizes what the Hindu community would not yield. This is why she appears to the reader and narrator as a mysterious and fascinating young woman, a riddle to the Portuguese man who, despite his surname, Fidalgo – roughly meaning nobleman – is no more than a commonplace foreigner for the Brahmin Hindu. Padmini resembles India to the European interloper, so close yet so distant at the same time. As in the case of the Old Woman in '*Ocaso*', who had become an icon to the community, the Portuguese Fidalgo also likens Padmini to an idol. It is their physical proximity and the almost impassable cultural distance that provokes awe and fascination.

Though, as Fidalgo's interlocutor Lieutenant Gama points out, the Portuguese in Goa might have access to low-caste sex workers, Padmini is sacred territory. Any intimate knowledge of her was denied to the outsider, just as, although the Portuguese might have had power to destroy Hindu temples and build churches in the same place, they could never cross the threshold into the private recesses of a Hindu family.

Devi's homage to the Hindu woman becomes even more poignant in the short story that opens the collection. If, like Dhruva, Padmini is a member of the local elite, as her brother studying in Lisbon suggests, and, paradoxically, closer to the Catholic gentry than Catholics from a lower caste, in '*Nâttak*' the main character is another young girl, Durgá, perhaps even more innocent than her peers in the other two short stories. Unwittingly, she is discriminated against for being the daughter of a *bailadeira*, women considered to be prostitutes, as Correia Afonso (1929b) observes in her classic study on Indo-Portuguese women.

Though at first her marginal status seems to give her a certain leeway, Durgá is as much constrained by patriarchy as Dhruva and Padmini or Mitzi bai in '*Esperança*'. Correia Afonso (1929b) observes that the same society that created the *bailadeiras* condemned them. They were part of the Hindu cultural milieu, but considered outcasts, and became prostitutes after their parents gave them to the temple in order not to pay a dowry or because they refused to immolate themselves on the pyre of their husbands. One of their greatest paradoxes was that, once *bailadeiras*, they could become educated, even go to British India to study. In some cases, they became artists. If bourgeois Catholic wives were educated to raise their children and be helpmates, these women were educated to entertain their patrons better.

Devi pays tribute to Durgá by naming her after the goddess who represents feminine energy and power and safeguards her devotees against evil and wickedness as the plot of the story confirms. The mother's profession has condemned the girl to extreme loneliness, as indicated by the narrator singling her out in the middle of the crowd that has come to see the *nâttak* [Hindu theatre]. Her purity and innocence are shown by her inability to understand her mother's standing in society or her own plight. She longs for what other girls had, a regular home, affection. As she cannot find it in real life, she looks for it in art, in the *nâttak* [Hindu theatre], in a representation of 'Javadeva', the story of Krishna's dalliance with the shepherdess, and Radha's suffering due to his infidelity. It was played by the young actor, Tukaram, to whom Durgá's candour and beauty do not pass unnoticed.

The drama performed on stage mirrors Durgá's own. Like Radha, Durgá will suffer when her short-lived relationship with Tukaram comes to an end as he goes away once he discovers she is the daughter of the *bailadeira* who had ruined his own father's life. What is implied in the narrative is that she is his half-sister. Through her portrayal of Durgá, Devi's desire to break barriers among communities is exposed when instead of condemning the *bailadeiras*, she passes judgement on the society that marginalizes them.

What seems to unite all these women characters, Catholic and Hindu, is that they have to learn how to fend for themselves in a world without men. The first story of Monção, '*Nâttak*', features Tukaram, an actor from a Hindu community, who decides to leave Goa in order not to drown in Goa's stagnation. The final story '*Regresso*' ['Return'] features another young Hindu man, Chandrakanta, who returns to Goa after a spell in Lisbon only to realize that he no longer fits in. In between are stories of Catholic men who depart for Africa or the Americas to escape poverty at home. The womenfolk, however, stay put in Goa, taking care of family and property. There is almost no mobility for them. Nonetheless, though constrained to remain within the physical walls of the house or the invisible walls of an arranged marriage or enforced spinsterhood, a practice among the rich to avoid dividing the family property, they often take the place of the head of the household and decide the future of their families. Theirs is a kind of veiled emancipation.

USOS E COSTUMES ACROSS COMMUNITIES

Though both the Catholic and Hindu communities were endogamous, many '*usos e costumes*' [uses and customs] were shared. Hence, arranged marriages prevailed among Catholics and Hindus being the only

kind of life allotted to women of a certain class and caste. On the subject of marriage customs, Fátima da Silva Gracias (2007) explains that those who converted to Catholicism actually followed many Brahmanical customs, even when banned by the State, while also following Portuguese traditions that had been imposed or came as a result of the intermingling of cultures.

Gracias (2007) observes that in the case of both the Hindu and the Christian communities, marriages were negotiated by parents via a relative or a middleman or woman, known as *raibari* or *soirikar*, and that the young couple had no part in the arrangements. Another tradition shared by Catholics and Hindus, and found in communities worldwide, was the dowry that the bride's family was expected to provide, which sometimes meant a huge burden for some families. In *Monção* the haggling over a dowry is the main theme in 'Incerteza' in which a Catholic father negotiates a husband for his daughter. To signal the endless marriage negotiation and the father's concern to get a good deal for his daughter at all cost, the story begins in *medias res* and has an open ending. The narrative focus is restricted to the father's implicitly indicating that in these negotiations daughters had no voice. If it was considered a breach of paternal duty that a daughter should remain single, it was even more shameful to have her rejected by the family of the groom. Here the *raibari* stretches the negotiation in favour of the groom because he knows that his client is a prize fathers are desperate to have for the honour of the family, even when the same groom's family might be as poor as theirs. What is made overt through the discussion between the matchmaker and the father is how daughters were humiliated even by their own parents, offered on the marriage market as if goods for sale.

The point of no return in the marriage negotiation, which shows Goa entering a new stage in history, was the communion of assets, whereby the bride's fortune becomes the groom's, as the *raibari* in a daring move tells the desperate father in 'Incerteza'. In her article '*A mulher indo-portuguesa perante a lei*' (Correia Afonso, 1929a), 'The Indo-Portuguese woman and the law', Correia Afonso discusses the legal rights of Indo-Portuguese women, or rather their lack of rights compared to the men of their community. Conjugal society was supposedly based on liberty and equality: men had the duty of defending the family's assets while women were in charge of the home and of strengthening the moral values of the family. Nonetheless, women were always at a clear disadvantage when compared to men as regards rights to family property and inheritance. During the Portuguese First Republic, however, laws were passed that improved women's legal rights over the family property. These laws applied to all Goan women, Catholic and Hindu alike.

At a moment when Goa was militating for autonomy from the Portuguese New State, and had to show the colonizer its preparedness for self-government, the figure of the woman took on a particular importance for change in the public sphere that had to be accompanied by a change in the world of the private. Bourgeois women like the Angelica of 'Incerteza' were expected to differentiate themselves from uneducated lower-class women, like Mogrem in '*Venus e os seus braços*', or emancipated Western women, who were seen as decadent and frivolous, like Luisa in 'Fidelidade'. In a way, she was expected to be disciplined, trained in bourgeois virtues: literature and music; skilled at sewing and embroidery; clean, organised and economical. For all that, however, a woman's worth was still calculated in material terms, as her skills were actually presented as assets rather than virtues.

If dowries were a troublesome issue among upper-class families, they were a matter of life-or-death to the poor, with fathers contracting huge debts, even risking their own life to make enough to marry their daughters. In '*Os filhos de Job*', which takes place in Penha da França, Devi's own village, an old Shudra fisherman, Bostião, – perhaps the same one who had played with the daughter of the bhatekar in '*Recordações do tio Salú*'? – exerts himself beyond the limits of endurance by fishing at sea rather than keeping to the river, in order to get a good catch and thus have a dowry for his daughter. If in 'Incerteza' the voice of the daughter, Angélica, is never heard, reflecting how bourgeois Catholic women were restricted to the world of the private, in '*Os filhos de Job*', Carminha's thoughts ring out. Also, unlike their upper-class sisters, women from more humble origins had always been exposed to the world outside their homes because they had to go out to earn a living. This is the case of Carminha, who goes to market to sell her father's catch. For all their

caste and class differences, a life of spinsterhood condemned these women to loneliness, marginalization and, sometimes, dire poverty, perhaps even worse in the case of rich women who did not know how to manage their own affairs, such as the daughter-in-law in *'Ocaso'*. As in the case of *'Incerteza'*, the story has an open ending that shows Carminha, standing by the Mandovi river, "[...] hirta como uma estatua de resignação [...]" (Devi, 2003, p. 107) [[...]frozen like a statue of resignation [...]] as her father is taken away from the village to the hospital in the city.

Another point of communality among the stories is that romantic love is rarely an issue. Significantly, in *Monção*, only in *'A droga'* is there a real love affair. Nonetheless, it is ill-starred as the lovers belong to different communities: Rosu is a Catholic while Caxinata is a Hindu. The narrative focus wavers from one to the other as if to indicate that their forbidden love, condemned in both communities, has put them on an equal standing, as both of them would become outsiders if their love were consummated. These lovers can only meet in the secluded countryside, outside their communities, away from the village. Their love has no future, as the name of the story suggests. The titular 'cure' is nothing but a medicine to provoke an abortion if their love prospers.

Theirs, however, is not the only story in which love is aborted in *Monção*: in *'Nâttak'* Durgá falls in love with a young man who leaves for Bombay, to pursue his career as an actor and avoid the trap of a young bailadeira as had been the case of his father. In *'Padmini'*, the Portuguese soldier can only admire the young Hindu girl from afar. As her voice is not heard, one can never know what her feelings are. In *'Dhruva'*, the arranged marriage, in which love had begun to blossom, is doomed to fail once the husband returns to Goa a changed man after his stay in the West. In *'O genro comensal'*, the arranged marriage's only objective is to produce an heir. Love is beside the point. Even in *'Venus e os seus braços'*, hunger and despair lead the loving husband to reduce his beautiful wife to a pair of toiling arms.

Though resourceful and trying to do the best of their situation, female characters in all these stories are presented as being caught up in the web of a complex society from which they seem unable to disentangle themselves, as shown in the fact that characters' rarely have an epiphany on their own condition and, rather than having happy endings in which order is restored, each story's resolution is always unsettling as if through this strategy Devi wanted to signal the motives that had provoked Goa's downfall.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Echoing the epigraph to the stories of *Monção*, a couplet by the Sanskrit poet Kalidasa – "A sombre da árvore alonga-se ao pôr do Sol/ sem nunca se separar dela" (Devi, 2003, epígrafe) ["The tree's shadow stretches away at sundown/Without ever splitting from it"] – Devi and her female characters are like shadows of that big tree called Goa. Though they might be at odds, they remain attached. They are all part of the same cultural identity constantly remade through their own acts of refusal and recognition.

Devi's stories have much in common with Correia Afonso's desire for a Goa with crossable barriers between communities, like her project of a *'Liga feminina'* ('Feminine league'), in which Hindu and Catholic women would teach one another their alphabets, Devanagari and Romi respectively, a gesture to bring together both communities (Correia Afonso, 1930b). In a similar, and equally daring manner, in *Monção* Devi establishes an intra-story and inter-story dialogue that is simultaneously cross-cultural between women from different religions, castes and classes, breaching barriers of prejudice, fear and even desire, to show that, despite themselves, all Goans were part of the same tree. She masterfully captures what Hall calls "[...] this sense of difference which is not pure 'otherness'" (Hall, 1990, p. 397, my emphasis) in one line from *'Os filhos de Job'* that speaks volumes metonymically. Only when Carminha's father is laid low by illness and despair do all the women come together: "Angelina, Carminha, Savitri and Dona Lavínia choravam como se ali, perante a dor, fossem todas iguais e as castas não as separassem até a morte" (Devi, 2003, p. 106) ["Angelina, Carminha, Savitri and Dona Lavínia wept as if there, before such pain, they were equal, no longer divided

by caste until their dying day”]. Devi here is among her women characters, sitting by the sick man, aching with them, as if trying to raise their awareness that it is not only in death and suffering that they should come together. It is as if she wanted to call her womenfolk’s attention to their capacity to rewrite their past, in particular because *Monção* was written when Goa was about to become part of India, which would bring to an end the style of life depicted in the book. This emblematic scene thus illustrates what I see as Devi’s main forte in *Monção*, her demanding her fellow Goans, not only women but also men, to see what had made Goan society unique: their ability to live together despite ruptures and difference.

REFERENCES

- Bhabha, H. (1994) *The location of culture*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Chatterjee, P. (1989). Colonialism, nationalism and colonized women: the contest in India. *American Ethnologist*, 16(4), 622-633.
- Couto, M. A. (2005). *Goa. A daughter’s story*. New Delhi, IN: Penguin Books.
- Devi, V. (2003). *Monção*. Lisboa: Escritor.
- Eagleton, T. (2013). *How to read literature*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Correia Afonso, P. (1928). A mulher indo-portuguesa. *Boletim do Instituto Vasco da Gama*, (4), 1-18.
- Correia Afonso, P. (1929a). A mulher indo-portuguesa. *Boletim do Instituto Vasco da Gama*, (5), 29-60.
- Correia Afonso, P. (1929b). A mulher indo-portuguesa. *Boletim do Instituto Vasco da Gama*, (6), 46-79.
- Correia Afonso, P. (1930a). A mulher indo-portuguesa. *Boletim do Instituto Vasco da Gama*, (7), 20-35.
- Correia Afonso, P. (1930b). A mulher indo-portuguesa. *Boletim do Instituto Vasco da Gama*, (8), 14-21.
- Gracias, F. da S. (2007). *The many faces of sundorem. Women in Goa*. Goa, IN: Surya Publications.
- Hall, S. (1990) Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: community, culture, difference* (p. 222-237). London, UK: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, S., & Du Gay, P. (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. London, UK: Thousand Oaks; New Delhi, IN: Sage Publications.
- Melo e Castro, P. (2009). Vimala Devi’s ‘Monção’: the last snapshots of colonial Goa. *Portuguese Studies*, 25(1), 46-64.
- Smith, S. & Watson, J. (2001). *Reading autobiographies. A guide for interpreting life narratives*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wiemann, D. (2013). What will count as the world? Indian short story cycles and the question of genre. In W. Goebel, & S. Schabio (Eds.), *Locating postcolonial genres* (p.154-168). London, UK: Routledge

NOTES

- [1] All the translations of *Monção* from Portuguese into English are by Paul Melo and Castro (University of Glasgow).
- [2] In the same way that in India there has been religious strife, there have also been conflicts over languages. Goa was ruled by the Portuguese from 1510 to 1961. In 1556, with the introduction of the printed press, Portuguese became its official language until December 1961 when Goa was integrated into the Indian Union. Not only did Portuguese stop being the language taught at school, but Goa’s linguistic policy also became aligned with that of the India. While Portuguese had been Goa’s official language, it had shared the Goan territory with Konkani, the native language of Goa, Marathi, the language of the neighbouring state of Maharashtra, also spoken in Goa, and English, the language of international mobility both in India and abroad. In this new scenario, an old-new conflict arose regarding which should be Goa’s official language - whether Konkani or Marathi - until Konkani became Goa’s state language, after the Official Language Act was passed on February 4, 1987, amid a series of violent confrontations between groups that defended either Konkani or Marathi. In turn, a second issue arose when it was Konkani in the Devanagari script, rather than in the Romi script, which was chosen as the official script of the state.