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Creative Writing in Konkani

MANOHAR RAI SARDESSAI

It would be preposterous to expect of a young, growing literature a uniformity in quality and quantity, throughout the year. Though the year '78 is in certain respects a lean year for Konkani it has to its credit a few praiseworthy attempts at creative writing. Though there is much greater communication now than ever before among writers using Devanagari, Kannada and Roman scripts, the question of a common script is still a major handicap in the development of a common market and common readership.

Here is a modest attempt at evaluation of creative writing in all these three scripts. Though it is far from exhaustive it will give a fairly good idea of the literary trends set in motion a few years ago. As in other literatures, the greatest number of books produced in Konkani also belong to fiction. Ravindra Kalekar and Pundalik Narayan Naik have already shown the way. Tukaram Sheth follows it with some success. The novel *Pakhlo* by this young writer is a remarkable work in many ways. It is both a psychological and social novel. *Pakhlo* is a Konkani word for the European or white-skinned. Born of rape by a Portuguese soldier, young Vithu, fair-skinned and fair-haired is nicknamed *Pakhlo*. He is scorned, ill-treated and at times even tortured. Neither Christian nor Hindu society

accepts him as its own. He belongs to none. Almost an outcast uncared for, unwanted. A series of misfortunes befall him. A girl whom he adores refuses to marry him because he is a *Pakhlo* born of a Christian. His maternal uncle's daughter gives birth to a fair-skinned girl. Her husband suspects that she is the daughter of *Pakhlo*. The jealous husband illtreats the wife who out of sheer exasperation commits suicide. *Pakhlo* is asked by many to go to Portugal in search of his father. But *Pakhlo* thinks: "I wander, I roam about in this land like the wind. I have been here since I was born. But I don't disappear like the wind. I am fixed to this land. I am a native of this soil just like this mango-tree. My roots have gone deep into this earth. Here I have grown up in strength and blossomed. I am a European living in the bosom of this land." Many a time an intense melancholy comes over him, a feeling that he were better not born at all. When his mother dies he goes to the crematory. But it starts raining. The body does not burn. *Pakhlo* says to himself: "My mother's body won't burn. We must bury it. Fire won't touch my mother's body because I am a *Pakhlo*. I shouldn't have been born a *Pakhlo*." This pathetic tale is told on two levels. The hero is the narrator in one chapter while in the chapter following it is the writer who unravels the plot and throws light on the characters. The language of the novel is simple, natural and reflects rustic modes of speech of the village folk. Though the writer fails to give the hero a convincing language, he is highly successful in recreating the life in a Goan village. Tukaram Shet has a few happy expressions: "His mind was a desert full of cactii." "The tale developed its colour like the betel pan." In *Dorachi Bhul* (Dora's Error), Francis Saldanha of Mangalore also discusses a problem: what happens when a married young man has illicit relations with a woman who has left her husband. Saldanha, a prolific and popular writer knows how to make his story interesting: Amar falls in love with Dora, a nurse who has left her husband. Amar marries Gita. She finds out her husband's relationship with Dora. Her pertinent question is "If you love Dora, why did you marry me?"

Amar denies having intimate relations with Dora. Amar, however, fails to convince Gita. Gita's brothers take their sister away to their house. A conflict plagues Gita's mind: "If my husband has a mistress, I too should have a lover." But her better self tells her: "If your husband is bad that in no way gives you a right to be sinful. Pray to God. Ask Him to change your husband's ways." In the meantime, Dora divorces her husband and marries another man. But she finds, she cannot live without Amar. Gita's parents come and scold Dora, Dora is distressed. She goes out into the street, throws herself in front of a truck, is hit by it and dies . . . but before dying she confesses her sin and realizes her mistake. Amar and Gita are now reunited. The novel, though highly readable because of its style, fails to convince; it lacks boldness of treatment and the necessary realism.

Aiz Mhaka Foleam Tuka is a hesitating attempt at fiction writing by young A. Carvalho. What otherwise could have been an interesting story is marred by interpolation of matter extraneous to the plot and the author's unwarranted views on family planning.

Tunvem Mhaka Negar Kelem (You Denied Me) is like Irene Pinto's many novels cast in the same mould and mood. She deals solely with the sentimental problems of the woman. She feels a woman alone can fully understand a woman. She carries sometimes her theory too far and portrays men as potential exploiters of the weaker sex. *Tunvem Mhaka Negar Kelem* describes the utter disappointment and frustration of a girl who has been denied by her lover. A rich young man makes friends with a poor girl. He promises to marry her. The boy's father, however, opposes this unequal marriage. The boy yields to the pressure and marries another girl. The theme is not uncommon but the novel is highly readable; thanks to the simplicity of the language and originality of treatment. *Kavi ani Rosemari* (Rosemary and the Poet) by J. S. Alvares is an interesting tale about a girl who falls in love with a poet without knowing who he is. A number of obstacles and misunderstand-

ings keep them apart for a long time. At last, she comes to know that the one she loves is her favourite poet and they are united in wedlock. Alvares has a simple and fluent style and the dialogues are crisp. But one feels a deliberate attempt at making the story long by the introduction of incidents that could perhaps be avoided. With more concision and precision the novel would have been shorter but more artistic.

Mention may also be made of *Mollbavoilli Divtti* (The Heavenly Flame). It is a tale of love, rape and murder by the popular novelist Dolphy Cascia from Mangalore. In Mira, we have an idealized woman who steadfastly refuses to be bullied into submission by the selfish and sex-hungry villain John. A series of misfortunes befall her: An attempted rape by a rickshaw-driver, thwarted by bold Sunil, with whom she falls in love, Sunil's suspicion about her when she is seen with John, a false alarm of pregnancy which makes Mira's only brother and guardian Remy suspect Sunil, Sunil's death at the hands of Remy, John's murder, Remy's imprisonment, Mira's illness and ultimate death. Mira's words explain the title of the novel: I am a heavenly flame. If anybody tries to have me by force, I shall either be extinguished or I shall burn my tormentor to ashes. The story though interesting in parts is too full of improbable events to be convincing. The language smacks of a certain artificiality and the idealism in the novel is not tampered by the necessary realism.

Manv Jivent Asam (I am still alive) by Dolphy Cascia is a suspense and murder novel. The author describes the life of gangsters in Bombay and shows how Vally, an unemployed young man commits a murder just to get money for his sister's marriage. The crime pursues the criminal. He is arrested and sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment, his sister Sally's marriage is broken off and his mother dies. Thanks to a strange coincidence, Sally happens to meet the widow of the murdered who arranges for her marriage. Though the novel is readable, the reader has to sort out too many loose strings in this unconvincing murder tale. In *Many Tumkam Pois Korch-*

im Na (I shall not leave You), Francis Saldanha describes the conflict that takes place in a joint family between the daughter-in-law coming of a poor family and a daughter-in-law coming of a rich family. Francis Saldanha's *Manv Chukan Poddlom* (I made a Mistake) is a fairly successful detective story, the element of suspense being almost absent: A richman, Voltab is involved in the murder of a young man Ravi, who was in love with his daughter, Chandrika. Detective George finds out the culprit who at last confesses. "I did make a mistake."

Bhuyarantly Gutt (The Mystery in the Cellar) by H. J. Geveas is a highly successful detective story. The novel starts with the murder of two girls. Detective Godwin bursts open the racket and the mystery is unravelled. Novels of this type are extremely popular in Konkani in Roman and Kannada scripts.

With Damodar Mauzo, Shila Kollamkar and Mina Kakodkar, Konkani short story has come of age. Women writers have obviously a great share in this evolution. Jaimala Danait in her *Kavaso* (Ketaki Flowers) adds a new note. Her short stories mostly deal with domestic problems. Though some of her stories tend towards sentimentality, her treatment of the theme is natural and her style simple and idiomatic. In the story 'Problem' she deals with the problem arising out of a situation where both the father and mother go out for jobs, leaving the child to the mercy of the whims of the maid servant. Jaimala poignantly brings out the loneliness and helplessness of the child who becomes unduly sensitive and dangerously irritable. 'Ankvar-Mori' is a story of an unmarried mother who, passing through great hardships, educates her son, gets him married to a rich girl only to be scorned and despised by the daughter-in-law as 'Virgin-Mary'. Jaimala also deals with inter-caste marriages, and the dowry system. Fortunately, not all her stories deal with social problems. The title story 'Kavaso' shows the sentiments of a newly married girl whom her husband offers a ketaki flower. This throws her into a sad reverie. She remembers how a friend of hers had gone to the forest to get

a ketaki flower, was bitten by a snake and had died. The melancholy of the story overpowers the reader too. The story 'Note Choloili' (The False Note) is also extremely disturbing a swindler succeeds in passing on a false bank note to an illiterate woman vendor. The woman takes the note to a doctor and requests him to visit her son who is seriously ill. On seeing the false note the doctor refuses to pay her a visit. While her son lies dying, the swindler is seen enjoying himself in a restaurant. Jaimala is perhaps most successful when she is describing the life of birds and animals. The stories 'The Lizard' and 'The Crown' are cases in point. The book has a foreword by this author. It is a critical appreciation of Jaimala as a storyteller.

Konkani Kathashtake is a collection of eight short stories by eight different writers from Cochin. They deal primarily with the socio-economic problems of the Konkani society in Kerala. They are amazingly short and simple and some of them extremely touching: In the story 'Antim Bhik' (The Last Alms) by Narayan Naik, we share the deep sorrow of Manoj when it dawns upon him that the children whom he had given alms must have got drowned in the floods. In 'Tamaso ma Jyotirgamaya' (From Darkness lead Me on towards Light) by V. Venkates, we see young Sudhakar who has been refused jobs though he has a valid certificate. Sudhakar comes home and burns the certificate and in that flame sees the glowing truth. It is a severe judgment on our educational and economic system.

Francis Saldanha tries his hand at humour in his *Vachia an Hansia* (Let us read and laugh). The book contains one story: 'Ghatavoili Vhoddlimaim Kodialchea Bhoundder' (The Old Woman from the Ghats on a Tour of Kodial) and a few jokes. The story describes the amazement of an old woman on visiting a modern town. She wonders, for example, how her grandson manages to get water from a tap. In many cases, the humour seems to be a little forced. The same can be said of the jokes too.

Fugettyo (Fire-Crackers) by C. G. S. Takode are stories full of humour and wit. Takode is inimitable in his humorous dialogues as for example in the story 'Amar, Akbar, Antony.'

Mahatma Gandhi by V. Sequeira is a laudable attempt and perhaps the first one of its kind in Konkani (Kannada script) to introduce the Mahatma and his philosophy of life to the common man. The writer's earnestness of purpose makes the book highly readable.

Though a number of plays have appeared during recent years and though many new plays have been staged with success more or less, this year there seems to be very few plays that have seen the day in print.

Onit (Injustice) by Freddy J. Da Costa in the traditional way, with moralising dialogues, with good men suffering but being rewarded in the end and villains and criminals being justly punished. Da Costa has the art of the dialogue and can create interesting situations. Though there are hundreds of such plays staged every year, very few are ever published. Da Costa's attempt is really praiseworthy and needs be followed by other successful 'Tiatr' writers.

This author's *Pisollim* (Butterflies) follows in the wake of his *Zaio-Zuio* (Jasmine Buds). Like *Zaio-Zuio*, *Pisollim* are short poems. *Zaio-Zuio* had a certain unity with an undercurrent of profound sadness running through them. *Pisollim* is more varied in form and content. Along with the vein of melancholy there is a satirical vein at times bordering on cynicism. The author reflects on love, meditates on life, has a dig at the rich, laughs at the human follies and pities their weaknesses. The verses have a certain common rhythm but no common metrical pattern. In some cases, rhyme is absent but there is ever present an internal rhythm which is consonant with the meaning and the mood. There is a profusion of alliteration and play on words which makes it well nigh impossible to render the verses into another language. Here are a few samples: "Girestachi mottar moddta/ten'na ti/goribank dhukolchi poddta (When the rich man's car breaks down, it is the poor who have to

pull it). 'Duddu asunui/girestank bhogta dukh/hench mhoje goribichem/mhaka sukh' (The only solace I get from my poverty is that even the rich are unhappy though they have plenty of money). 'Khinn, khinn/moztanach/jinnen nagoilo/Bhuim, bhui/khonnttanach/Tanen zagoilo (As I counted the moments, life cheated me. As I was digging the earth, thirst overwhelmed me)

'Xarant nanvam/ konzank/ Ganvant/ nanvam/ monxank (In a city, corners have names. In a village faces have names). 'Hanv mhakash sodtam/ ten'na lok mhonntta: He vatt chukta' (When I go in search of myself, people say I have lost my way). 'Mhojem paul kiteak oddlam?/ Hea rostennich/ mhoji vatt addailea.' (You ask me why I have halted? These very roads have blocked my way). 'Mollbantlea Devak/ devllant vhorun konnem dhanplem dar?/ Bhottak vichar (Who has taken the God of the skies to the temple and closed the door? Ask the priest).

'What Prof. Armando Menezes said about *Zaio-Zuie* could as well apply to *Pisollim*: "a 'precious little volume which is reminiscent in its discontinuity and epigrammatic character of Tagore's 'Stray Birds' but is otherwise entirely original—I almost said entirely konkani."

Dhormik Gitam is a collection of Christian religious songs written by Fr. Moreno de Souza, S. J. and published twenty years after his priesthood. Some of the songs were already published in Konkani periodicals. Fr. Moreno de Souza who is the editor of the Catholic Konkani monthly *Dor Mhoineachi Rotti* (Monthly Bread) follows the religious tradition of the Eighteenth Century of Konkani hymns unadulterated by Portuguese vocables. Sanskrit words used herein are in consonance with Konkani words and do not figure as intruders, These hymns are extremely appealing in their simplicity and the directness of sentiment. It is a happy departure from the present trend of making Konkani liturgy highly sanskritized and hence incomprehensible to the average Christian faithful. Here is an example of Fr. de Souza's hymns:

‘Nomon Tuka Sagor Tara/ Patkeanchea Tum Vhodd adhara/
Sorg Rannie Deva Mata/ Aik jem magnnem put-duv korta/
Krista Mata Sagor Tara/ Soglle vatten fosounk sodhta/ Pavo
Tum maka sorg-dara/ Soitan maka tallnnent ghalta/ Patkant
poddunk nirmum naka/ Tujea balkak sanddum naka/ Ankvar-
nirmoll, Sagor-Tara/ Nirmoll-mhaka vhor Dev-ghora. (Hail
Maria Stella! Hail to Thee’ (You are of great help to sinners.
Queen of the Heaven, Mother of God, Listen to the prayer of
your sons and daughters. Mother of Christ, Maria Stella, Lead
me to the Gate of Heaven/ The Devil is tempting me/ He tries
to deceive me from all sides/ Do not let me fall into sinfulness/
Do not forsake your child. Virgin pure, Stella Maria, Take me
spotless to the Gate of Heaven).

Fr. Moreno de Souza has travelled in many countries of the world and when he heard hymns in other languages, he wondered why there should be no such songs in Konkani. Hence the inspiration to compose these hymns.

Bhaja Govindam is a successful attempt by B.V. Ballo at rendering into Konkani verse the famous work by Shankaracharya. Poet Baki Borkar had already attempted it with great success. Ballo’s rendering appears to be much simpler than Borkar’s though less rhythmic.

This year’s special Divali and Christmas issues provide a rich and varied fare of creative writing: Konkani (Devnagari script) edited by Ramesh Velluskar has an array of excellent stories, articles, and poems written by the best of Konkani writers like Chandrakant Keni, Mina Kakodkar, R.V. Pandit, Nagesh Kaimali. Bakibab Borkar’s *Fulam* shows the importance of the flower in the life and language of Goa. A.N. Mhambro displays his inimitable humour bordering on political satire in his *Bhau Bandoddkaralem Iadastik* (A Memorial to Bhau Bandodkar). Gajanan Jog reveals himself a tongue-in-the cheek humorist in his *Past: ek Samajik Goroz* (Brief-case: a Social Need).

Talented Damodar Mauzo gives a light but interesting short story in *Zannavai* (Philosophy). Pundalik Naik’s *Raktakhev* is

a heart-rending, blood-curdling tale of incest and murder. A long-lost son comes home by accident, unknowingly makes love to his own sister. Father comes to know of this love, recognizes his son and out of sheer exasperation kills him. His daughter struck with grief kills herself. The pathos of this tragedy is matched by the vigour and intensity of the language though the author at times falters and sounds a bit verbose.

Konkani (in Roman script) edited by Uday Bhembro contains a short story by John L. Goes titled 'Vichitra Sundori'. It ends in an unexpected way leaving the reader gasping at the realisation of the fact that the beautiful girl is really a pitiable hunchback. Anthony Correia Pienkar, a promising poet has a few interesting short poems among which the following: Panvol bhor zamnicho/Hanv bhattkar/Mhojea paianchim/Dha Botam /Mhoje munddkar (I am the landlord of one step of land. The ten toes of my foot are my servants). Kallzant konnachich/Birant dhorinstana/Uzvaddantlean bhonvtam/Punn ture kallokhant/-Ubo raun mbojer/Fator kiteak xenvttita (Unafraid, I walk in the light. But why do you throw stones at me, standing in the dark?).

One of the best short stories of this year is to be found in the Diwali issue of *Zaag* (in Devanagari script) edited by Ravindra Kelekar and Sumant Kelekar. It is 'Rudra' by Gajanan Zog. The story describes in a concise and suggestive language the suppression of the sexual urge of a widow and her unbearable loneliness. In this issue figures a playlet by Pundalik Naik, 'Paunni' (Auction). The theme is the frustrated, unsuccessful life of a freedom fighter and his ultimate moral triumph. Suresh Borkar gives a translation of *Caligula* by Albert Camus. Though the translation is faithful to the text it fails to recapture the precision and vigour of Camus style. *Ghovo* by Shantaram Anant Hedo is a touching and realistic portrait of a mentally deranged woman who is a social outcast. Ramesh Velluskar in his poem 'Varea, Varea' (O Wind) shows a rare talent of harmonizing music with word-pictures in an eminently rustic language which does not however, cease to be literary. Madhav Borkar uses his

bold cosmic symbols in 'Uzvaddacho Prann' (The Soul of the Light). Shankar Ramani, the veteran poet is successfully satirical in 'Hanv Bhutebab' (I am Bhutebab). It is an amusingly realistic portrait of a self-satisfied Government servant.

Parmall (in Devanagari script) edited by poet Suhas Dalal contains among others 'Zoglam' (Flashes of Lightning) by this author. Fifteen short poems dealing with various aspects and interpretations of lightning, written in a lapidary style. An article on the 'Revolt of the Ranes' written by Subas Dalal will surely provide a rich source material for an historical novel on the theme,

Maiek Bhuke'li (Thirsting for Love) by R.U. Rao is a beautifully told tale dealing with the supernatural. There is something uncanny and gripping about the story and it is narrated in a language that sounds perfectly natural. *Ghara-Purus* by Shantaram Anant Hedoo recreates in a picturesque language the political scene of Goa during the daring revolt of the Ranes against the Portuguese. Nagesh Karmali tries to recapture in free verse the spirit of the 18th June 1946 when Lohia launched Goa Freedom movement. In the Divali issue of *Zait* (Victory) (in Devanagari) edited by Bhiku Bomi Naik we have an enticing account of the travels in North-Eastern India by Ravindra Kelekar. Kelekar is at his best perhaps in travel accounts. Narendra Bodke who has made a name as a poet in Marathi gives a highly evocative poem in 'Suranga Vallesar' (A Garland of Suranga Flowers). In his essay 'Goribichem Sovong' (The Mask of Poverty) Tanaji Halarnkar shows in a forcefully convincing language how many of us wear the mask of poverty for our own selfish ends. Pundalik Naik gives a few pointedly naughty poems in *Brutam* ('Vulgar Poems').

Special issues of *Raknno*, *Kannik*, *Panchakaday* all in Kannada script have also made their contribution.

As during the past years, quality of Konkani creative writing is very unequal, the excellent published side by side with the mediocre. And it is difficult to glean the good from the bad. This short review has not been able to include all writing scat-

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tered in various periodicals. There are bound to be omissions deliberate as well as unintentional.

A better system of distribution of books, more reading rooms providing the general reader with Konkani reading material, a closer contact among writers and a more enlightened readership will go a long way in improving the quality of Konkani writing as well as its output. Periodical surveys of this type and frank critical appraisals have also their role to play.