

RESEARCH ARTICLE

LOCAL COLOUR IN SAVIA VIEGAS' *LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT QUINTA*

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ABSTRACT

Indian writing in English has flourished considerably. It reveals the multifaceted culture of India. Goan writers in English have added a distinctive tone to Modern Indian literature in English. Goan English literature is fast emerging in the last two decades. It has created a niche if not a big, albeit a small place in Indian writing in English. However, Goan writers in diaspora are known internationally. The representations of the local colour continue emerging in Goan fiction in English. It has not received serious and sustained scholarly attention. To my knowledge no study of local color in Goan fiction in English exists. The objective of this paper is to examine the local colour in Savia Viegas' novel *Let Me Tell You About Quinta*. It lays out the theoretical lines pursued in the paper. In light of characteristics of the local colour literature, the novel is analyzed. It is concluded that the novel is written within the framework of identified realism. There is a regional consciousness. The novel is rich in local colour. The sociological and anthropological elements in Savia Viegas' fiction could also be considered as part of her aesthetic. My approach is based on the accepted constitution of 'Local colour fiction' in the making of fiction and not a social document.

Key words: Fictional world, local colour, realism, regional consciousness, Viegas.

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INTRODUCTION

Regional identities have always been dominant features of the Indian cultural matrix. Goa has a unique culture. The literature of the region reveals its identity. The liberation of Goa brought a new vigour into its literature. The writer's contact with the reality of life became more alive. Goa's freedom movement and indignation at the

injustice, economic inequality and Goan immigration were common themes in fiction in Goa. Goans have been through a long denationalizing colonial experience which still affects both the social reality and the psyche. There is a regional consciousness in the fiction. The writers have depicted regional flavour. It is significant to note that Lambert Mascaren has won critical acclaims for his pre-

liberation, socio political novel—*Sorrowing Lies My Land* (1955). The diasporic novelists such as Leslie de Noronha, Peter Nazareth, Victor Rangel-Ribeiro, Lino Leitao, Margaret Mascarenhas and Ben Antao are known internationally. They wrote sincerely and passionately.

Methodology

The elements of local colour literature are taken into consideration while analyzing the novel *Let Me Tell You About Quinta*. As perceptively observed by Josephine Donovan “Local colour literature is characterized by a realistic focus upon a particular geographical locale, its native customs, its physical and cultural environment and its regional dialect” (European Local Color- literature). This form in writing was dominant in American Literature between the Civil war and the end of the 19th century. These are the distinguishing traits and characteristics of the local colour literature. The characters are marked by their adherence to the old ways by dialect and by particular personality traits central to the region. The characters have a nostalgic memory of times gone by. It depicts the thematic tension or conflict between urban ways and old fashioned rural values. The narrator is typically an educated observer. He maintains sympathetic, sometimes ironic distance from them. It reveals the ‘treasure of knowledge’ embodied in the regional tradition and religious practices.

Savia Viegas is one of the prominent novelists in Goa. There are a few interesting writers in English preceding Savia Viegas, who are novelist and short story writers yet, Viegas is an interesting and forceful occurrence. Savia Viegas, an academic and Full Bright Scholar, come from Carmona, a small village in Goa. Her oeuvre includes *Tales From the Attic* (2007), *Let me tell you about Quinta* (2011), *Eddi and Diddi* (2012) and *Abha Nama* (2012). *Let me tell you about Quinta*, like her debut novel *Tales From the Attic*, is set in Goa. Savia Viegas writes about her intimate world. In a recent interview she told me “I try to make my characters and settings as close to my own life as possible. They almost share names and surnames and environment. The village is the same” (Interview). A close relationship with the land seems to have shaped Goa’s literary consciousness even today. The place that Viegas focuses on is Carmona, a little

known place outside Goa – a small village in South Goa. It is a:

– nondescript village till tourist brochure discovered it and sold its charms to the world. ‘Lusitanian Paradise’ and ‘a piece of Portugal in Goa’ described the copy writers, drawing the European budget traveller to a cheap vacation destination, criss-crossed by hippie trails, trance parties and drug retailing outlets. (Viegas, 67)

Barring a few scenes from Mumbai, Washington and New York setting is in South Goa. The focus is on Viegas Family or lineage and its connection with the local landscape. It is a story of a fading world of the elite Viegas family. The main theme is conflict between Bhatcars (landlords) and Mundcars (labour class). Viegas explores in greater detail, the genealogy of the maternal and paternal family of Mari. It is a novel dealing with the life and times of people associated with Quinta (the house). In the beginning, Viegas describes the pride of Goan ‘bhatakar’s (landlords), the pride of big houses. The ancestral houses are empty. “The children are dead and the grand ones are away in the West.” (Viegas, 3)

The children are away to join the white man’s class. When that big house was built it was never about dollars. It was about creating a huge showcase of their power with sons in church, and gleaming paddy fields ‘ and coconut groves trimmed on the backs of sun - roasted tenants Mundakars they called them. (Viegas, 3)

Viegas presents a fascinating picture of septuagenarian Queirozito’s (Tito) 200 year old ancestral home. He has won a protracted litigation contesting the claim by relatives. He gets a new lease of life. He wants his grandson Suraj, Marri’s son to come from the United States for possible repairs. But Suraj’s Russian American wife California arrives. She has arrived to privately estimate all that belonged to her by marriage. He takes her around the villa to check out and budget the extent of repairs. Queirozito has to face another invasion of his home and determines to

fight back once again; however, he comes across dark family secrets. Tito recollects the glorious days of Quinta (ancestral house). Viegas presents the picture of the feudal system through the delineation of characters of Tito's maternal uncle and aunt.

In the beginning of the novel the picturesque description of the house - Quinta fascinates the reader. The 'HOUSE' represents the pride of the 'bhatkar' (landlord). The novel doesn't have a protagonist. Quinta may be considered a protagonist in a broader sense of the term. Quinta is an Old Portuguese house. "This is like a chapel to their past, a shrine, like Se Cathedral, grand Sala and balcao- hall and portico- memorializing their past and the rest of it like that only... like us, common people (Viegas, 4). The people had either emigrated to greener pastures like Europe or the couple could not bear any children. Hence the houses "now stood empty and forlorn, looming over the village amidst a cluster of smaller homes"(Viegas, 5). Viegas says, " There is nothing great about this village.... a few bhatkar and many butler families lived here" (Viegas, 65). Many of the young Goan people leave for greener pastures in hope of a better tomorrow. A few houses were left, which could be counted on "fingers". Some donated their property to the church while "a few are locked up, their inmates having gone away. Others have fallen to ruin like monster dinosaurs of the old time." (Viegas, 65-66) This aspect of Goan Catholic life causes great agony to Viegas. In her opinion "People and houses have social roles to play"(Viegas, Biography). Viegas has depicted realistically postcolonial life in Goa. She addresses the issues of land reform, their abuses- corruption, lawlessness and above all the fascination of youth for the west.

Soon after liberation the socio economic dynamics of Goa started rapidly changing. On one hand Tito's mother Mariquinha was trying her best to retain her power over her property and the mundkars after her husband's death. The Indian law freed the oppressed mundkars from the feudal system. The new Indian law regarding tenants, reduced the power of the bhatkars. Mundkars who once upon a time were submissive and respectful towards their landlords, now were no longer so. This

conflict between bhatkar and mundkar is depicted in the chapter entitled 'Mundkars'. For instance Jacki, the mundkar avoids paying the full rent to Tish Ximeao. He even brings raw material to concretize his house without informing the landlord which in turn angers Tish Ximeao. The mundkars, now no longer beholden to the Bhatkars, worked on ships and abroad. In those days, some youngsters preferred working on the ship. They packed "a few clothes in a tin trunk and set off for Bombay to file their papers for jobs in the shipping industry". While waiting for their call they would stay in Bombay in the Kudd. The family waited anxiously for the call and when the call did come:

the mood became jubilant, the fattened pig was slaughtered and the 'chandhor,' the copper steamer was mounted on the cooking hearth for endless rounds of sannas'. They sailed for eighteen months and usually never mingled with the other passengers. They got homesick and sea sick, but survived embarking at different ports, spending money, saving losing making that awkward journey to manhood. Years of sailing gave them bandy legs, gout and psychological baggage too. They became sad old men. They no longer belonged. (Viegas,69)

Viegas has described in a precise way how a few young men tried to better their fate and destiny. They accepted jobs as "boatswains, cleaners, deckhands, or butlers and cooks." When these young men returned to the village, they were transformed "into Beatles and Elvis Presely look alike, with the whiff of heady Charlie perfumes, puffs and shiny terylenes" The local landlords like Tish Ximeao disapproved of this, as local labourers were no longer available to work on their land. Mariquinha, Tito's mother would say "Busons and butlers are now the bhatkars like her brother" (Viegas, 75)

Tish Ximeao who outlived most of his immediate kin watched with despair and helplessness at the changing scenario. Viegas describes in an ironical manner how So what if their

husbands and sons are on the ship or in the gulf they are only cleaning toilets of Arabs, scent flows through the toilets of Arabia even if water doesn't through their rivers- if they have any. Our men are so enamoured by the scented toilets that they would rather clean toilets than till the land. (Viegas,211)

This fascination of youth for the west is brought out by Viegas vividly. The ending of the novel strikes a note of despair in the utterances of Preciosa "once they go westward they never return."

Viegas mentions political events such as Fanchu Loyola, the nationalist who fought for Goa's independence from Salazar's dictatorship, the liberation of Goa. Viegas also deals with threats to regional landscapes, to local heritage and to local ways of making a living; the tourist travel to Carmona, the engineer with new technologies visit the place, the estate agents with their commercial motive move to and fro. She describes peoples' indignation for the builders from outside Goa. Viegas says "You cannot modernize a space by bringing in more concrete structures"(Viegas, Biography web).

She has captured the daily routine of men and women and their emotional makeup. Sometimes, it is overtly sentimental. She beautifully brings out the locale flavour by introducing varied characters invariably found in every village of Goa. There are many characters from the village portrayed by the writer such as Tish Ximeao (bhatkar), Preciosa who speaks Konkani and English with a Portuguese accent. Piedade "the mestico servant girl", Dr. Xau the village doctor, Dona Aida Gracias (widow), Matheu (labourer), Bruto, fortune teller, Ramon, Bahmon, Marquinha (Tito's mother who struggles to retain her power over her property and the mundkars). Viegas adds some episodes of Milagrosa, a drunkard and a nun only to create local colour. However the main focus is on Queirozito and his wife Preciosa and his maternal uncle Tish Ximeao. They show their dissent to the forces of modernity. They feel that their lives are being erased by the encroaching powers of modernity. In depicting the character of Tish Ximeao the great-granduncle who is one of the bhatkars, Viegas

has thrown light on certain traits of upper class Catholics in Goa.

His(Tish Ximeao) good mother believed that if God gave sons like a bountiful crop of coconuts, they have to be equally divided. One had to go back to the Lord, and so become a priest. Another had to go to the people, so a doctor. Yet another had to be given to the devil, so a lawyer. Others could choose to be what they wanted. So when she did 'Ina -Mina -Mynah -Moe' with her sons, labelling each for their beatific or diabolical roles, poor Tish Ximeao was chosen to go back to the Lord. (Viegas, 80-81)

For several years Tish Ximeao "studied at deNobili". He "failed to pass his Latin exams" which made him give up "the life of a seminarian". During the Second World War he worked for some time at a "local gun foundry in Poona". He then returned to Goa and began to "cultivate the horticultural family estates spread all over Goa". He represents the old feudal system. Many a times he wished, "the old order could be restored to Goa."

Viegas has minutely portrayed minor characters, merely for the sake of local colour. An ordinary woman like a small vendor too is life like. She is a familiar character to every Goan. There is a "Gaudi woman in a bright and red sari with a bamboo basket, laden with mangoes, fresh fish"(Viegas, 39). Another character - a fortune teller is portrayed vividly.

dark with a Spanish tan and the skins on her face and arms hung in loose folds like parchment hung to dry. She wore a shocking pink blouse with a green sari with the pallu drawn over her head. A set of wise eyes peered from the recesses of her kohl-lined lids. She carried a patch-eyed parrot in the cage. (Viegas, 32)

The novel is filled with descriptions of religious practices. Viegas has not only minutely described the religious life of Catholics in Goa, but also

narrated how daily life and religion is blended. People not only prayed but also narrated their woes to god and saints asking for their intervention and pray on their behalf to the Lord. Preciosa as usual transferred her troubles to Jesus, "You take care of it, Lord" She whispered inaudibly as she did the dishes." (Viegas, 211) Viegas describes the yearly visits of Saibinn to their homes. The villagers sang the *Ladainha*, a litany, to usher in Saibinn's visit. Viegas narrates the annual visits of some Christians to Pota - a pilgrimage center in Kerala. She has focused on the Christian ethos in her novel. Adherence to religious practices by the Christian community show that religion plays a definite role in the life of the people.

She has sprinkled the novel with lot of **Konkani and Portuguese** words and phrases, enhancing the local flavour. "A sprinkling of Konkani and Portuguese words lend a feeling of quintessential Goa" (Goa Desk). For instance "posko" (adopted), "baillo" (non-Goan), "potacho" (illegitimate) "bhatkar" (landlord), "advogado" (advocate), "Kudd" (Goan bachelor dormitories in Mumbai), 'pakle' (white people), 'feni- chouris – panv' (lunch) 'Xith – coddii' (rice and curry) 'Tome, pega este', vais embora, vais embore! – (Get out, Get out), "Dadlo" (man). The writer has used words from local dialect like- 'And they Killoud, pilloud money' (bribed). In *Tales from the Attic* – Viegas has not given the translation of these words or phrases. However, in *Let Me Tell You About Quinta*-- she has translated these words or phrases in English for the benefit of readers who are not Goans. She has used these words and phrases not only to create regional flavour but to define the characters.

As an essential component of one's culture, food is also central to one's sense of identity. She describes some of the dishes prepared locally, such as wheat bakri, fried fish, fish ambotthik,, boiled redrice, peppercorn curry, chicken, cafreal, salted pork pies, vindaloo, sorpotel, xacuti, , meat ball curries, pot roasts, calamari chilli fry, rice sweetmeat called Pinagre. Viegas by describing typical use of language and food choices of the people in Carmona ,offers insights into the cultural expressions and practices of Catholics in Goa.

Basically, Goa was an agricultural land. Most of the people were closer to nature. Today things have changed. The writer describes and narrates some of the practices related to agriculture indulged in by the Goans such as "divining water and building bunds". Viegas describes Carmona with its tales of superstitions and agricultural magic. They form a vital part of the narrative. As soon as Mariquinha read about the impending law regarding land to tenant bill in the papers, she stopped subletting her fields to her fellow villagers. When the villagers realised the meaning of her scheme they pleaded their case, but to no avail. They then heaped curses upon her. "May her house reverberate in emptiness and may its walls collapse and turn to mud again... No one remembered the curse and healthy young coconut saplings grew where the field once was" (Viegas, 125). The villagers believed that one should not plant Date palms trees in front of the house. They had told Tish Ximeao not to plant these trees but no avail, he did not pay heed to them. "May the curse rot hit him!. Male trees do not beget children. Many years passed and Tish Ximeao's wife never had an occasion to whisper the good news in his ear" (Viegas,125). They also believed that:

the veins of water that webbed parts of the subterranean depths of Carmona and sourced its wells gave a distinct youthfulness to some of its inhabitants. (Viegas, 8)

People believed that at cross roads evil spirits lurked specially at night. "Coincao said, this was the junction where the wicked dead congregated at night and even in the day the vapours left by their nocturnal presence galvanized the air and tainted it with unholiness."(Viegas ,100)

Viegas depicts the arrival of hippies in Goa in a satirical way. Hippie culture which began in the 60s spread from USA to other parts of the world. In the 70s its impact could be seen on Goa. "With the Beatles love songs cassettes in their backpacks, several travellers frequented the coast. Americans and Europeans in shorts or loose flowing robes sat for hours on the beach in self absorbed stillness or roamed around listlessly in the markets" (Viegas, 114). The hippies frequented the beaches and

indulged in all sorts of things. The villagers condemned the hippies who spread amorality. Viegas reflects the voice of the Goans. As aptly observed by Ben Antao "Savia Viegas has brought to light those ugly and unfortunate happenings that have visited upon Goan village in the aftermath of freedom and democracy" (Ben Antao, Web).

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the beginning, the novel has no protagonist. Viegas has paid meticulous attention to accidents and incidents of life in Carmona. In this prose narrative of local colour her fictional world is manifestation of some human aspiration and some fundamental conflict. The characters in the novel are bound by traditions, beliefs, superstitions and curses. The novel has brought out class prejudices by depicting clashes between the landlords- upper caste Catholics and mundkars (labour class) They are devoutly religious and hold on to faith blindly. In depicting religious practices by Goan Catholics the author has brought out how Goa has observed Latin elements that came in with the Portuguese. While describing the inner setting of the old houses and nature her close attention to detail is evident. A look at the local landscapes, manners, emotions, superstitions of local community, omens, premonitions, magic reveal that the novel is absorbed in a particular locality. The delineation of all these aspects is done with the expressive eye. The novel is rich in 'local knowledge' and is embodied in regional tales, tradition and practices. There is a conscious endeavour of human togetherness. The regional flavour pervades throughout the novel.

It is rural rather than the urban perspective that governs the novel. The novel is an elaboration of those human concerns that characterize her fiction. The author's intense interest in things regional has given rise to local colour. Her art is grounded in the native soil. Hence the social milieu of the native land. It can be concluded that Viegas is a single minded practitioner of local colour fiction.

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