



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

## Reading Reginald: Magic, Love, and 'Dignidad'

Reginald Fernandes was one of Konkani's most proficient writers, having more than a hundred books to his credit, with his avid readers excitedly waiting for his next offering. Fernandes wrote *romans*, which can be translated as novels (or novelettes, if one is being pedantic). Although Fernandes, and the genre of Konkani writing to which he contributed immensely was and is very popular, the *romans* as well as Fernandes have not received the critical scholarly and literary appreciation, that they so rightfully deserves.

This column would like to look at one of the earliest works of Fernandes, *Sat Somdir* published in 1951. The theme that I would like to particularly explore revolves around the author's understanding of *mog* (love) and *dignidad* (loosely respect, status, and human dignity). The basis of many *romanses* and *tiatrs*, one can suggest, was formed through the enmeshing of these two ideas, against the backdrop of social inequality. Thus, in this work Anita, a girl who is born into a rich family and lives in a grand house, falls in love with Alfred, hailing from a poor family and whose mother had raised him by working as farm labour. Very early on in the novel we have Fernandes stating, "*To ortouta pisso, zo sor corit dignidadic ani mogac,*" (He errs badly who associates status [social standing] with love).



Needless to say, the love between Anita and Alfred is put to the test, not ostensibly because

Alfred lacks nobility, but also due to the fact that Anita's uncle wants to usurp her inheritance amounting to some four lakh rupees. Anita was an orphan, who had lost her mother when she was only three and her father when she was eleven. Yet, one need not be led into believing that the plot of *Sat Somdir* is solely revolving around pecuniary matters. Indeed, the basis of the novel is love between social un-equals and how the realization of this love leads to the restoration of human dignity and respect or *dignidad*.

Anita and Alfred decide to elope to Bombay, but Diogo - Anita's uncle - gets wind of the plan. It is here that the tribulations that the young lovers have to face, begin. Within such an ordeal, Fernandes also takes his reader on an adventurous journey, full of possibilities. When Alfred is left for dead in the dense forest of Sattari, he meets a Sadhu who gives him shelter in the *divull* (temple) that he takes care of. Here Alfred comes across a richly adorned idol in the temple, which has a magical *thic* (diamond), called *Sat Somdir*. The magical power of this particular diamond is that it can show the whereabouts of any person, as if being projected on a screen.

It is not just the diamond that provides the 'magical' relief in the novel, but other kinds of medicinal herbs (*ocot* as Fernandes would refer to it) also come into the plot at crucial moments. So what we have here is that, at crucial moments when the reader thinks that the plot is going in an expected direction, Fernandes brings in twists and turns - and indeed there are many in this novel! Magic and fantasy is important for Fernandes in another way as well. I would like to suggest that twists brought about by magic at various parts of the novel, also acts as a device of *deus ex machina*. Such a device, it can be suggested, is necessary as in a rigidly hierarchical society as that of India and Goa, how are two people madly in love with each other, ever to find the realization of their love? In other words, escape from rigid hierarchies is facilitated by magic.

In keeping with the author's thinking or conceptualization that love and *dignidad* can be accomplished, not only through breaking social boundaries but also having material riches, the novel ends with Anita and Alfred being joined in holy matrimony as well as recovering a lost treasure of gold bars. Before this, it so transpires that Alfred gets incarcerated in the dreaded prison of Aguada, and the Sadhu from the temple of the Sattari jungle through the use of some *ocot*, manages to get him out of the prison. The guards at the prison thinking that Alfred is dead bury him in the prison cemetery. Anita comes to know of this through the

ghost of a man, who was the business partner of her father in Africa. This particular ghost had cheated Anita's father of many lakhs of rupees and had purchased gold bars, which were buried near his house. It was this chicanery that was keeping the ghost bound to the earth. So in the end, Anita's greedy and scheming uncle is punished for the crimes he has committed. Alfred, Anita, and Alfred's mother live in Anita's house having the *guirestcai* or riches, which now rightfully belonged to Anita.

To go back to an earlier point, in the world that Fernandes opens to his readers, suffering and poverty borne with humility and equanimity does not lead to more suffering and poverty, but to a genuinely happy life – full of love and riches! After all what good are riches without love and affection? So, if we are to understand the concept of *dignidad* and how this *dignidad* was reflected in novels such as those of Fernandes, then we would need to understand that, within this world, riches cannot be separated from love, and that social barriers can only be broken when both are present in copious quantities.

The act of Reading Reginald cannot just be confined to reading his *romances*. Indeed, we have to decode the very thought and intellectual influences on novelists like Fernandes. What, for instance, did Fernandes read? *Dignidad* is perhaps, one of the several concepts and ways in which to understand this corpus of literature. It is time we start searching for them.

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