



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

Reading Reginald: Inside Africa

The last time I had written about the Konkani novelist Reginald Fernandes, I had suggested that to understand such writings as *romans* (and even *tiatrs*) we would have to think anew and look more closely into these writings. Accordingly, I had hinted that the way Reginald Fernandes understood and conceptualized 'dignidad' could be one of the many ways to understand the corpus of writings written in the Roman script. In response to my article, many felt (through social media) that Fernandes' books should be put back in circulation. Though such an initiative would be welcome, this was not the point I was trying to make. Rather, what I wanted to do was to initiate critical discussion on the possibilities that are available in Fernandes' writings.

To further explore this possibility, this column would like to look at Fernandes' *Khoddop Rannim* (1955) which has Valentino Vaz as its main protagonist. The novel opens with Valentino's mother on her death-bed, who tells him the importance of being humble, for humility would allow Valentino to succeed in life. Valentino's mother worked as a *randpinn* or cook, whose husband, a seaman, was dead when Valentino was a mere infant. Thus, facing impending poverty and with no family support base in Goa, Valentino packs his bags for Africa. There he finds employment with a great Goan trader of ivory called Robin Saukar. It is here that Robin Saukar's daughter Thelma and Valentino fall in love with each other. Valentino initially was uncomfortable as he was a mere servant of her father's and according to him Thelma was placed higher as far as 'dignidad' was concerned. However, it is Thelma who insists that they should not believe in such things.



The twist in the novel occurs when, to procure ivory Robin Saukar takes Valentino and another employee Martin Monteiro, in the African jungle. Because Monteiro wants to make Robin Saukar's wealth his own as well as marry Thelma, he deliberately misguides Valentino into the dense and dangerous jungle. Here, the element of magic as a device for the progression of the plot comes into play, both for good and bad. Monteiro chances upon a witch-doctor who gives him some magical fruits that would turn the hearts and minds of Robin Saukar and Thelma in his favour, when in fact the preferred person was Valentino. On the other hand while Valentino survives his ordeal, he also meets certain persons who direct him to a particular kingdom which is situated inside a huge rock, shaped like a human head. The astonishing fact of this kingdom is that its queen has lived for more than 2000 years, for she has access to "Jivitachem Udok" or the elixir of youth.

As it turns out, this queen or *Khoddop Rannim* owned a very large diamond that is lodged in the temple that belongs to her family. It was, apparently, the largest in the world. And because Valentino refuses the advances of the queen, who madly falls in love with him, he is made a prisoner. Valentino now has to escape this make-believe world, if he wants to maintain any hope of being united with his beloved Thelma.

What should also be discussed at length about this novel is the way Africa and blacks are represented in *Khoddop Rannim*. Africa was a part of the Goan diaspora and as such it was part of the Goan imagination as well. Fernandes is not the first or only person to write stories set in Africa. Indeed, many of the romi writers following the 1950s (or, perhaps even earlier)

did train their literary lens on Africa. The scenes that are set in the dense and dangerous jungle of Africa would obviously involve the depiction of peoples living in the forest. The language or the collective nouns that are used to refer to these peoples would definitely qualify to be racist by our standards. The point that I am trying to make is not that Fernandes is consciously being racist, but for readers today, to be aware and be sensitive to this issue while 'Reading Reginald' (and also other writers who set their stories in Africa).

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Though love between social un-equals is part of the story, however it is not a preoccupation of the author in this novel. Although the images of the African jungle that are displayed to us draw on colonial accounts of adventure and exploration that were definitely circulating during his time, the African jungle also becomes a site of struggle for achieving 'dignidad'. Whatever Valentino achieves or manages to make his own, he can only do it by fighting for it. Though magic may have helped Valentino's pursuits, yet his human capabilities and strengths seems to have sailed him through rough waters in this novel. But magic does play a vital part in keeping the reader engrossed in the novel.

As a setting, if Africa is given deeper reflection in novels or stories written in Konkani then it also points out to the complexities and diversity of interactions and influences that Goa had with the larger world. One could also profitably look at how the Portuguese colonial world - just before formal decolonization - featured in Konkani literary space. The fact that Africa had formed the setting of so many stories written in Konkani in the Roman script, suggests deeper connections not just of travel and migration but also of the movement of stories and colonial fantasies.

By keeping in mind certain vital components that went into the making of a Reginald *romans*, we now have some basic markers to understand the thought behind his novels, apart from enjoying them the way we do with any good novel.



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