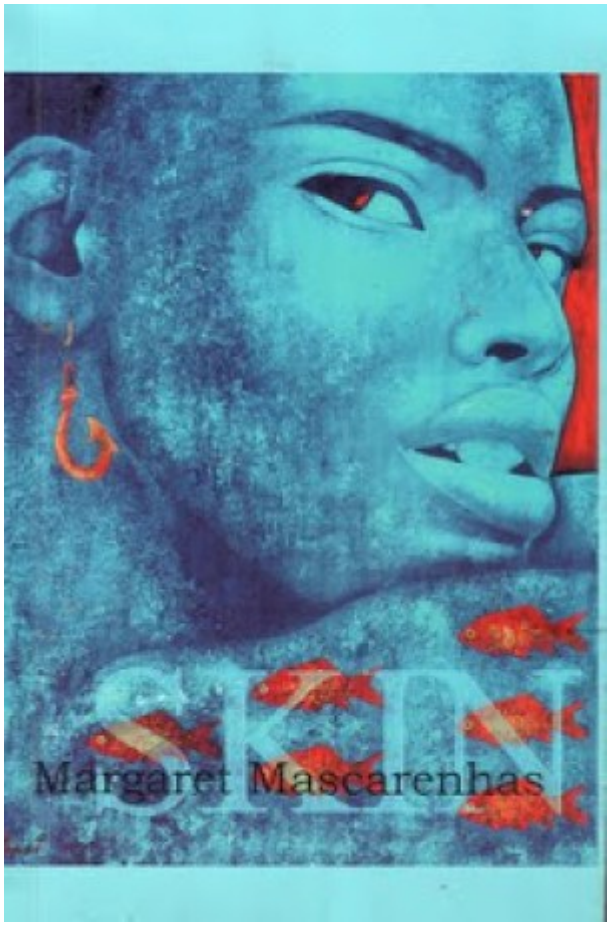
There are only a handful of novels in English that have been written by Goans or persons of Goan origin/ancestry. Margaret Mascarenhas' *Skin* is one of them. This novel was first published around 10 years ago by Penguin. For the last few years I have come across sporadic references on the internet forums regarding Margaret's novel and I always nursed a desire to read it. Last year when Goa1556 took the opportunity to republish it, I was of course thankful –the book was finally in my hands!

The protagonist of Margaret's novel is Pagan – half American and half Goan, half white and half brown (the name stuck because her parents being liberal-minded did not baptize her and hence her grandmother in Goa considered her a pagan). A gruesome and horrifying experience as a war-reporter in Angola shakes Pagan's mental health and she decides to find her roots after she nearly kills a man harassing his wife on a street in San Francisco. When Pagan reaches Goa, she finds her grandmother (an ogre of a matriarch in her younger days) on her death-bed. She fails to recognize her because Pagan's skin has been tanned due to her stint in Angola. Throughout the novel, the skin or colour of the skin plays an important role. Skin, like its many colours, assumes the role of superiority when it is fair and that of servitude and hardship when it is dark or darker. And the skin also comes to represent the tension surrounding race and caste relations.



Livia, her aunt starts narrating to Pagan her family history, “Before the Portuguese came, we were Kamats – Saraswat Brahmins who had migrated to Goa from northern India centuries earlier. One branch of the family converted to Catholicism in order to retain their land and assets… [the Saraswat Brahmins] were given high-level government and administrative posts.” Bernardo, the grandson of a wealthy merchant named Afonso Miranda, inherits all the property and by marrying a rich, young heiress, starts the lineage of the Miranda Flores’ – Pagan’s family. Bernardo thinks it fit to venture into slave-trade as, for him, trade in slaves was more profitable than trade in luxury rarities.

However, the real story is different – one which differs from aunt Livia’s sanitized version and is told through Esperança – the descendant of slaves that were brought from Angola. Esperança narrates the torture and hardships that were inflicted upon her ancestors by Pagan’s family. Here’s an excerpt, “But it was the colonial edition of history, not the true story. The true story had been given to Esperança by her mother, who had received it from her mother, and so on.”

Just like the mitochondrial DNA, which we can only receive from our mothers, the stories or histories in *Skin* are relayed by women. (As an afterthought, how about calling this *mitochondrial narration*?). Women are at the center of this novel. Their longings and losses are skilfully portrayed. The men who genuinely love the women in this book die an untimely death and the ones who don’t, meet a ghastly end.

The plot of *Skin* is multi-layered, a saga that spans many generations and centuries with the story moving from America to Africa to Goa and Daman. Written in prose that flows smoothly, this book also includes enlivening folk-tales of Angola. The use of myths and folk-lore seems out-of-place as some of the major twists in the plot are made to depend on magic and the supernatural. Margaret weaves a complex tale with characters trying to make peace with their past, their history.

Since Margaret is a product of the Goan diaspora, in some pages of the book one finds her reminiscing about the natural beauty of Goa and commenting on the culture and politics of the land – sometimes expecting the natural surroundings of Goa to be preserved like in a museum, frozen in time and changeless, and at other times hitting the nail where it ought to be struck, “Our culture, thinks Pagan. Goa has been overrun by so many cultures, no one knows who they are anymore, much less what culture they belong to. The Goan Catholics are trying to be Hindus. The Goan Hindus are trying to be Maharashtrians. Only the tribals know who they are. But for how long?”

Pagan’s search reveals to her, through the stories of her childhood – and those that are narrated by her aunt Livia and Esperança – that her blood is a mixture of Native Goan,

Castillian (Spanish) and African genes. Pagan tries to come to terms with the atrocities that her ancestors heaped on the African slaves and their descendants while at the same time trying to cope with her own personal and psychological issues. The whole novel is about the journey that Pagan undertakes – physical, spiritual and intellectual – in tracing her roots and reconciling with the past.

The artwork of the cover of the Goa1556 edition done by Ravi Kerkar and Crisologo Furtado is a visual treat. Margaret's hope that future endeavours too would use local talent is also shared by me. Some faint writing is observed on the back cover and the spine. What does it signify?

What also interested me about this book is that when it was first published 10 years ago, the idea that many of us Goans have African genes or ancestry was something that would have been scoffed at. Margaret Mascarenhas has tried to include a neglected aspect of history through her writing, thereby opening our eyes to another side of our history. One reason why Margaret's book needs greater contemplation and readership.

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