



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

Era Uma Vez, Or What Could Have Been

Until then I had thought each book spoke of the things, human or divine, that lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves.

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

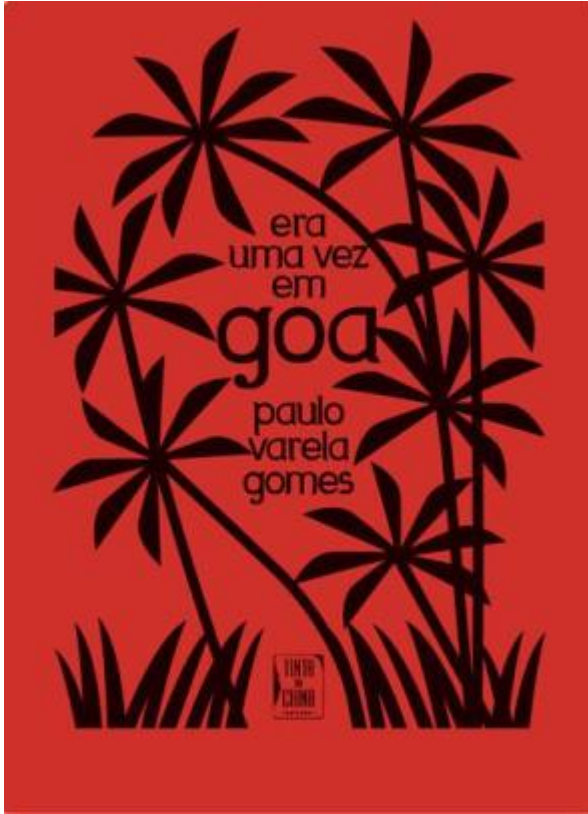
The late Paulo Varela Gomes, former delegate of the Fundação Oriente in Goa and an architectural historian, always emphasized Goa's difference, and thus uniqueness. In his crucial intervention in the debates on Goan church architecture, *Whitewash, Red Stone* (2011), he emphasizes that rather than interpreting church architecture in Goa as Portuguese-European or Indian, Goan architecture is simply Goan. A few years before his untimely demise from cancer, Gomes turned to write fiction and memoirs. In one of these works, a novel titled *Era uma vez em Goa* (2015, *Once Upon a Time in Goa*), Gomes returns to his obsession of Goa as *different, as unique*.

Reading *Era* one is struck by the impact of the English novelist, Graham Greene on Gomes' writings. One can consider Greene as the first British writer to think of Goa as different and "unique". Greene jotted his brief impressions of Goa from his short stay in 1963 in an essay he wrote for the *Sunday Times* in March 1964, "Goa the Unique". In this essay, Greene contrasts his experiences in Bombay to the one in Goa—the stark poverty and utter squalor of Bombay was completely different from the clean air, emerald fields, and the small but decent houses he found in Goa. The destitution in Bombay was in stark contrast to the poverty in Goa.

Greene traveled to Goa in the footsteps of many British predecessors. The most (in)famous of them all was Richard Burton who wrote *Goa and the Blue Mountains* (1851). Burton was followed by more charitable British travelers such as Isabel Burton (his wife) and Evelyn Waugh, a contemporary of Greene. Most of these British travelers were Catholics by faith and came to Goa to observe the lived Catholicism here. Filipa Lowndes Vicente's *Entre Dois Impérios: Viajantes Britânicos em Goa* (2016) suggests that Goa's links with Catholicism were one of the main motivations for many British travelers to visit Goa.

One can consider Gomes' novel as an engagement with Greene's travel account, for Greene's *Sunday Times* article is translated as an annexure in the novel. Gomes fictionalizes the very brief visit of the English writer; he imagines the conversations that Greene may have had, regarding culture, history, and politics, that led him to write his brief impression of Goa.

Accordingly, Gomes casts the semi-fictionalized Greene in various scenarios: his incomprehension with any of the local spoken languages at that time (Portuguese and Konkani), his encounter with the Indian security forces and the remaining Portuguese secret agents, his travels in the *caminhão*, his reception into Goan hospitality, the relief that literally washes over him when he enjoys a hot bath after a long time, his appreciation of the clean water and air, and his lengthy conversations about the architecture and culture of Goa.



Greene visited Goa immediately after India’s annexation of the territory, and it was also a time when the first hippies had started trickling in. In imagining the conversations of Greene, Gomes demonstrates the prescience of Greene’s observations for Goa’s future—albeit in hindsight. Green’s encounter in the novel with the first flower children is a portent of the destructive way Goa was opened for global tourism. His encounter with the famed Goan hospitality is another portent of the havoc that the tourism industry would wreak in the decades to come. Thus, Greene’s visit occurred at a momentous present when the past was being undone, and an uncertain future loomed. In such a moment, Greene asserted Goa’s difference from the rest of India, and thus its uniqueness.

While the real Greene confined his observations to “Franciscan Goa” and “Jesuit Goa”—the North and South of Goa, the semi-fictionalized Greene engages more strongly with the non-Catholic Goa. After all, the semi-fictionalized Greene enjoys the benefit of hindsight and progress in historical research. He talks about Betal at length, the feisty non-Brahmanical deity, as much as he enjoys talking about church architecture (as indeed Gomes the architectural historian would have loved!). He also speaks with upper-caste Hindus about religion, caste, and their connections with Portuguese culture. And in this context, the semi-

fictionalized Greene continually reflects on the question of identity—what gives Goa its character? Religion? Culture? State? History?

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It is remarkable that a short piece on travel writing has such an impact half-a-century later. Even more remarkable as Greene did not consider himself as particularly knowledgeable about matters of the subcontinent. Greene told Maria Aurora Couto, who wrote *Graham Greene: On the Frontier* (1988, rep. 2014), that “India rather frightened me by its size. I have enjoyed myself very much during two weeks in Goa, but to write about India in a novel I would have had to live there over a considerable period of time...” Yet, his one insight, ‘different and unique’, sparked in Gomes a life-long obsession, so much so that Gomes’ academic writings seek that which was different and unique about Goa.

*Era uma vez*, or once upon a time, is a phrase that invokes happenings in the past. It is also a phrase, as Gomes uses it, that hints at possibilities, or ‘what could have been’. Gomes indulges in thinking of possibilities in the guise of telling a once-upon-a-time story.

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