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Science over Superstition? The Representation of the Social World of the *Novas Conquistas* in *Bodki* by Agostinho Fernandes

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The Goa that appears in Portuguese-language literature from the territory is mainly the Velhas Conquistas, the four districts acquired subsequent to 1510 and which underwent an intense if incomplete process of Christianisation and acculturation to Portuguese culture. The Novas Conquistas, which were only acquired in the late eighteenth-century, long after the Portuguese zeal for conversion, and where Hindu life was left relatively undisturbed, appears far less frequently in Portuguese-language fiction, though writers such as José da Silva Coelho in the 1920s, Maria Elsa da Rocha and Epiácio Pais in the 1960s and, in particular, the Hindus Laxmanrao Sardessa and Ananta Rau Sar Dessai who published from the 1940s to the 1960s allow glimpses of its geography and society.

The only novelistic treatment of this space in Goan fiction in Portuguese is *Bodki* by Agostinho Fernandes, which was published in 1962. Since the novel is out of print and not widely known, it is necessary to recapitulate its plot. The protagonist Fernando is, like the author himself [use Fernando-Fernandes pun?], a graduate of Goa's medical school. Unable to find a better opportunity for employment, he finds himself forced to move from the capital, Panjim, to set up a clinic in Maxém, a village at the far extreme of southern Goa, a borderland space between the then Portuguese territory and the rest of the Indian subcontinent. The doctor doesn't just see himself coming to Maxém to treat the physical ailments of the patients, but also to educate and uplift them socially. In his words, his struggle is "a luta contra a ignorância" and that "só elevando o nível cultural do povo é possível vencer nesta luta" (p.25). The doctor, then, could be described as a modern day proselytiser in the name of reason, his attitudes taken as an example of what Walter Mignolo terms "colonial discourse from the margin of the west" (190), the expression, on the part of the intelligentsia of the colonised countries, of pride in belonging to or enrolling in the Western tradition (quoted in Schwartz, : 190) and of a binary opposing the enlightened

(represented by the doctor) with the benighted (represented by the villagers). In Maxém, Fernando finds himself isolated, lacking leisure activities or people of a similar background with whom to socialise. His work as a general practitioner brings him into contact with the local population, which is mainly comprised of Hindus with little western education and a great attachment to what the doctor sees as their superstitions and myths. Due to the first person narration of the novel, the minds, feelings and rationales of the villagers remains opaque, which reinforces the ultimate ambiguity of *Bodki*.

Bodki, like the majority of the most well known pieces of Goan fiction in Portuguese, was published in Lisbon, and so . The novel's attitude is analogous to that outlined by Huggan as the postcolonial exotic. Here, however, though the exotic is internal between the New and Old Conquests, is reproduced for a Portuguese audience implicitly similar to the protagonist. Indeed, there is no formal demarcation of cultural difference between the Goan protagonist and the implicit European readership of the novel. There is, in the descriptions given by the narrator, an ethnographic, paternalist, exoticising eye that Machado has seen as both a weakness of Portuguese-language writing by Goan Catholic authors (2011 50) but which can also be thought of as an enduring point of interest today. In *Bodki*, consequently, the reader discovers Maxém through the eyes of the narrator. When he first visits the market, for instance, the human landscape is described in the same tones as the merchandise: the vendors are outfitted in "lenços de cores berrantes, saris vermelhos, amarelos, verdes, *chollliôs* de riscas vivas, grossas colares de contas ao pescoço, pesados *nothi* nas narinas e nas orelhas, *chandaio*s prateados e doirados nos pulsos e tornozelos, era tudo uma policromia indescritível..." (p.57). As the last line shows, what is at stake here is attempting to constrain in language a scene that appears to exceed the narrator's control and understanding. The focus is on the spectacle, not the conditions that undergird it.

Bodki, then, revisits certain tropes of colonial literature. The doctor, the bearer of rationality, moves into Maxém with a sense of mission to improve and enlighten the natives. What is particular here is the narrator is a subject of native ethnicity. There is almost no mention of colonialism or colonial rule in the novel, just as there are no European subjects, though in the espousal on the part of the

doctor of what he articulates as an exclusively western epistemology we can detect what Perez describes as the “continuidade entre colonizadores e colonizados” (2014: 56) and to an extent Fernandes’s point that a clear binary relationship between colonizers and colonized was disturbed in Goa by the intergration of the native elite into colonial governmentality (2014: 169). The relation between rationality and superstition is recast as an affair exclusively internal to Goa, as “um embate entre as convicções modernas da elite educada do meio cristão e as crenças populares das camadas mais baixas de Goa” (Machado, 2011: 50), between the Catholic doctor from the centre and the largely Hindu population of the periphery. The doctor, then, is the practitioner of what Perez terms “o orientalismo dos orientais” (2014: 39). Rather than a contact zone which, in Pratt’s celebrated formulation implies a certain mutuality of influence (1996: 6), Maxém is shown to be a colonial frontier where the doctor attempts to impose his mindset on a recalcitrant other, to convert the heathen Novas Conquistas not so much to lusotropicalism, though his attitudes give continuity to a tradition wherein the Goan Catholic elites identified the lower castes as other in accordance with racialized discourses of civilizational backwardness, as to a contemporary form of rationality.

Despite the seemingly entrenched attitudes of local people, Fernando’s clinic is soon successful and, to an extent, his patients come to trust the doctor and his scientific knowledge. The irony, and *Bodki* is full of undermining ironies, is that Fernando often has recourse to unnecessarily showy techniques with the sole objective of impressing patients, such as the use of forceps to deliver a normal birth. Bhabha has described the paradoxical belief in fixity and reformism as a key ambivalence in colonial constructions of identity (2007: 94). The fixed idea of superior self and inferior other means that the narrator is always blind to the interleaving or relativizing parallels that become apparent to the reader over the course of the novel.

The . Passos has described *Bodki* as revolving around a rivalry between Western medicine and Indian medicine (2012: 200), but it is important to recognise that what the narrator is vying with isn’t any version of ayurvedic knowledge but the local superstitions. These beliefs are embodied in two figures: the *gaddi* and the *bodki*. The *gaddi* is a sorcerer in touch with the gods to whom

the villagers turn in moments of affliction. He serves as the antagonist to the doctor, the contrary of the values that the narrator holds dear though, as the episode with the forceps and the gaddi's deathbed conversation reveal, the distinction between the two men is not as clear cut as the narrator believes. The *bodki* is a local woman [explain]

One day, Fernando meets a young man named Dinvás, a local boy studying at University in Pune who has returned for the holidays. The pair quickly become firm friends. Fernando learns that the young man is in love with Kamala, the daughter of the Bodki, and a figure who will rouse fear and desire in equal measure throughout the novel, but that his father is firmly opposed to the union, as the *gaddi* has forecast that marriage between them would only bring disaster. Dinvás, who has rejected the superstitions of the village, remains undeterred. Kamala, however, has promised her mother that she will not enter into a relationship with any man and so ensure that the dynasty of *bodkis* ends with her. Her decision, however, provokes a different disaster: in his despair, Dinvás hangs himself.

Here the doctor falls ill with a severe case of malaria and leaves Maxém to recover. When he returns he encounters a Sikh named Govinda Singh, who is a painter with a predilection for nudes. Singh has fallen in love with Kamala and convinces her to sit for him. Like Dinvás, Singh refuses to believe in the superstitions of the people of Maxém, giving no credence either to the nefariousness of the *bodki* nor the predictions of the *gaddi*. The character of Singh is the point at which the exoticising tendency of the novel is most evident. Before the integration of Goa into the Indian Union, Sikhs were practically unknown in the territory. But what is even more unlikely is Singh earning his living from his painting. The idea of anyone selling Western-style paintings in a small market in the Novas Conquistas in the 1950s is highly unlikely. Given the society depicted in the novel, who would there be to buy his art work? Singh, it appears, is there both to satisfy a shallow taste for exoticism (with his turban and manifest difference) and also to provide – alongside the doctor and Dinvás – another figure who could go against the social orthodoxy of Maxém. There are improbabilities in the depiction of Kamala also. The idea of her bathing naked outside while Singh spies on her is a recirculation of a crude orientalist fantasy.

Even the idea of Kamala bursting into tears and being comforted in public in the arms of a Catholic doctor is rather a poor adaptation of a trope common in light literature poorly adapted to local categories than a piece of social observation.

Rumours begin to circulate that the spirit of Dinvás has returned to haunt Maxém and is disturbing the lives of the inhabitants. The village is then struck by an outbreak of smallpox. The disease, which is initially considered a blessing by the people of the village who refuse to collaborate with the doctor, turns malignant and kills many people, including the *gaddi*. The villagers consider the *bodki* responsible for his death. Unable to contain their fury, they set fire to her hut and she perishes in the blaze.

In the aftermath to these events, Kamala discovers that she has fallen pregnant by Singh. Soon after this revelation, Singh is bitten by a hooded cobra and dies. The *bodki's* daughter is racked by a dilemma: she now carries a child who, if female, will continue her accursed line. Almost out of her senses, she asks Fernando to perform an abortion, a request that he refuses, alleging that medical ethics do not allow him to take life. Kamala has no alternative but to commit suicide, throwing herself upon Singh's funeral pyre, as though committing the sati of Hindu widows.

In the end the doctor, who had always spoken out against superstition, falls foul of the villagers' beliefs, as the inhabitants of Maxém think that, as Kamala had visited the doctor before her death, she had passed her malefic powers onto him, making him her successor, a perverted version of both the *bodki* and the *gaddi*. Unable to continue his practice, Fernando closes his clinic and prepares to return to the capital. On the day that he is due to leave Maxém, he receives a letter from his father informing him that his sister's fiancé has burnt to death in a car accident. In a radical destabilisation of the novel's professed epistemology, we realise that the doctor's sister, who like Kamala is pregnant, is now a *bodki*.

Maxém is a small village in the taluka of Canácona, near Goa's southern border with the neighbouring state of Karnataka, about as far as one can travel from Panjim and remain within Goan borders. Maxém's distance, both geographic and social, make it a fitting site for the exotic. The vast majority of the population is Hindu, as in the rest of the Novas Conquistas, though there is a

small population of Catholics. In *Bodki*, this community is described however as “supersticiosa como os restantes” [superstitious as the others] (p.22). Contrary to the doctor, then, what Christians as exist in the village are still firmly connected to local belief systems, suggesting a conflict not so much of religion as of outlook. As Machado argues, what runs through *Bodki* is ‘o constante embate entre as convicções modernas da elite educada do meio cristão e as crenças populares das camadas mais baixas de Goa’ (2011: 50). This view is corroborated when the narrator describes Maxém as ‘uma terra de irracionais’ (p.68), where everyone, Hindu and Christian alike, share a ‘fanatismo pelas superstições, o seu medo, pálido mas sempre presente por algo desconhecido’ [fanatism for superstitions, a pallid fear of the unknown that was always present] (p.64). The doctor, with his freshly obtained medical degree is, on the other hand, a bearer of science and reason. Yet, though the locals are all characterised as superstitious (and here it is noticeable that Dinvás’s father initially follows their beliefs), there is a particular dismissal of Hinduism (which follows the pattern of the centuries-old subalternization of other religions to the Catholic faith in Portuguese-controlled territory)

It is through the doctor’s eyes that the social world of Maxém is focalised. His experience of space equates to what Pavlov-West terms ego-centric deixis, the mode of spatial apprehension and construction that he sees as typical of colonial writing (2010: 12), in which surroundings are subordinated to the perceiving eye of the colonizing subject. Pavlov-West argues that deixis, or the use of context-dependent language, is autopoeic, in the sense that reference to surroundings creates a sense of self. It is through the doctor’s description of Maxém that his self-understanding is shaped. When the narrator describes the *devalaia* or temple, his gaze is that of an unsympathetic sceptic: ‘Era vê-los na devalaia a prostrarem-se no chão, adorando um boi de rocha negra todo coberto de flores, ou então uma cobra de metal amarelo, ou ainda, imagens, meio humanas, meio exóticas, com muitos braços e muitas cabeças’ (p.69). Through the eyes of the doctor we discover the other sacred places in the village: ‘Um rochedo alto de forma bizarre, uma árvore de gralha secular [...] uma grande casa de formiga branca” (p.69) where the villagers would leave offerings on

certain days of the week. The world is the object of placatory or propitiatory worship, not understanding.

Various gods from the Hindu pantheon are described as presiding over the destinies of the villagers: Krishna (p.159), the goddess of Porbot (p.149) and, most importantly, Agni the goddess of fire who is referred to throughout the novel. It is mainly in moments of affliction. It is thus not spirituality that the doctor objects to but the rejection of scientific ideas of cause and effect. The doctor, though nominally a Catholic, is portrayed as entirely secular. The villagers, on the other hand, implore divine intervention whenever they find themselves in situations of affliction. The Catholics in the village are described as behaving in the same way as the Hindus, praying indiscriminately to Saint Francis Xavier, the patron saint of Goa, or Our Lady of X, imploring favours in exchange for wax candles, coconut oil, masses and other items. While this is an obvious continuation of pre-Christianisation practices, it is also a pattern of behaviour current in contemporary Catholicism. The criticism, to reinforce the point, is the forsaking of rationality and personal responsibility.

Indeed, the life of the villagers is seen by the doctor as being lived under the sign of fatality. They believe that their destiny is decided by higher powers and that their only recourse is to entreat the gods and obey traditional superstitions. The transmission of such beliefs is shown in the scene where the mother explains to Kamala the origin of the *bodkis*. The principle that underlies the story, and of which the lives of Kamala and her mother provide a continuum, is that children pay for the sins of their progenitors. The mother here describes her daughter as the “fruto dos meus pecados” [fruit of my sins] (p.85) and laments: “[m]ais valeria que eu morresse antes de nascer, antes que os meus olhos pecadores vissem a luz do dia” (p.85). While this conviction is co-natural with the doctrine of Karma in India, it is also found, for instance, in the Old Testament.

On this view, the lives of Kamala and her mother are unavoidable. The mother relates to Kamala the history of the lineage of *bodkis*. The first *bodki* is the queen Taramati. Despite being greatly loved by her husband, she falls for a young subject named Vassan and becomes enslaved to his will and desires to the

point of killing her husband. The tradition is thus strongly linked to the perceived dangerousness of female desire. On the day the king is due to be cremated, Taramati is supposed to throw herself onto his pyre, in accordance with the tradition of sati, a potent site of dissent between colonial discourse and nativist feeling in colonial India. The queen, to the shock of her subjects, is discovered in the arms of Vassan. Scandalized by her behaviour, the people drag the queen pitilessly to the fire and make to hurl her onto his burning body. It is too late, however, as the king's skull has already burst, the traditional sign that the spirit has left the body. Taramati's sacrifice would no longer have any value in the eyes of the gods. Fearing punishment by the gods, the people are outraged. They forget she is queen and spit in her face, rip her clothes and, in the end, tear out her hair. Moved to pity, one of the ayah's gives Taramati a white cloth to cover her body. Thus the first bodki came into existence.

For Kamala and her mother there is no escape from their condition. Her mother's mother and grandmother were also bodkis. It is "uma espécie de fatalidade que atingiu a nossa família" (p.92). The social superstition is not something that can be opted out of. The only escape for their family is its extinction: 'a dinastia de bodkis tem que desaparecer na nossa família, o que quer dizer que depois de ti, não haverá mais ninguém. The only solution for Kamala is to abjure men, renounce the idea of marriage and suffer her fate in silence, imploring divine help in order to bear the curses inheritance of her mother. Here the characters' attitudes reach the diametric opposite of the ideals espoused by the protagonist.

The conflict between the rationalism of the doctor and the superstitions of the locals is played out in the doctor's efforts to perform his profession. When the doctor suspects that one of his patients, an old man, is suffering from a serious illness and tell him that he should be taken to hospital, the man refuses to go, retorting "Eu não vou para o hospital. Sei que aí matam, de propósito, gente, para poderem estudar nos seus cadavers" (p.174) [echo of Vimala Devi's "Os Filhos de Job" which also features an enlightened doctor trying to save ignorant villagers - footnote]. This is one of the few instances where direct dialogue on the part of the subaltern is represented and here it is only to confirm the narrator's pigeonholing of them.

The doctor's worldview is never seriously challenged or undermined by a voice from amongst his patients. For the most part, *Bodki's* representation of such figures recalls JanMohammed's idea that colonial literature commodified the native, negating his or her subjectivity and individuality in order to fashion a generic being (1985: 64). In *Bodki*, there is very little counterdiscourse that emerges through dialogism. The ideas of the villagers do not appear to condition the way in which the doctor defends his rational views. Only the gaddi is permitted to speak at length, on his deathbed. [Insert Gaddi speak]

Indeed, in the end, it is the events of the plot that challenge the Manichean ideology of the doctor, though there is no recognition on his part. There are four characters in the novel who challenge local traditions: Kamala, Dinvás, Singh and the doctor. Dinvás and Singh are framed as cosmopolitans, though in the traditional idea of education, elitism and privilege, rather than as the contemporary retooling of the concept as indicating an openness to the other (C.f. Wilson/Spencer – look up). The boy has left the village to study in Pune. When he decides to marry Kamala, he not only rejects local superstition but goes against the authority of his father. Singh, the Sikh painter who had fled scandal to hide out in Maxém, certainly the most unlikely character in *Bodki*, picks up where Dinvás had left off, starting a sexual relationship with Kamala. The doctor freely associates with Kamala and encourages both men to disobey traditional prohibitions.

Despite elements of implausible exoticism, *Bodki* does have its documentary value. This value inheres not just in its status as the only twentieth-century Lusophone Goan novel set in the Novas Conquistas, and so a rare representation of what Gandhi calls the 'non-players' in colonial society (it is in book after p.171 – look up), the lowest of the subalterns of the fringes of Portuguese Goa. Yet, as Alcoff argues, to represent is never an immediate revelation of a social reality. It is to construct a certain subject position (p.9). Part of *Bodki's* value is its record of a certain colonial-era worldview. Fernando's seemingly selfless actions as a man of medicine can be read as an ongoing process of attempting to enforce hegemony, understood in the Gramscian sense of the coerced recognition of validity of control and superior status.

However it is the ambiguities of the novel, which shortcircuit the narrator's overt ideological affiliation, which provide the most thought-provoking element of this work. Perhaps *Bodki* does not have the sociological force of a neo-realist novel such as Orlando da Costa's *O Signo da Ira*, but its depiction of the ordinary people of Goa, who live in a world that is not characteristically their own, and which the forces of modern civilization cannot reduce or explain away because its heart eludes the control of rational forces, remains forceful today.

Bodki contains not one whit of what the postcolonial, understood as a critical investigation of colonialism or opposition to colonial practices. Indeed, there is almost no mention of colonialism at all, apart from implicitly as part of the backdrop of history that formed the narrator and the class from which he emerges. Dirlik makes the point that eurocentrism is 'hardly a EuroAmerican phenomenon', arguing that 'Much of what we associate with Eurocentrism is now internal to societies worldwide, so that to speak of 'Europe and its Others' itself appears an oxymoronic distraction' (p.9/10). Indeed, we might say that the narrator Fernando occupies the subject position normally occupied by the colonizer in colonial fiction, thus both adopting to an extent and displacing any Portuguese view on Goa. Alongside what I have described as the an exotic tendency in the novel, which I read as an attempt to render it alluring to readers unfamiliar with Goa, exists a paradoxical attitude of self-sufficiency, which places the narrator as a member of the Goan Catholic elite in a controlling centre. Contrary to any notion of transculturation or hybridity, there is never any question in the narrator's mind about the primacy of his ideology. The novel's shocking and deeply ambivalent close can be read under the sign of the uncanny, which for Bhabha indicates an instance when our relation to the present is questioned and the superficial self-sufficiency of Western modernity is interrogated. If the surface discourse of the novel reiterates the orientalist belief in the essential superiority of the logical, rational 'West' over the irrational, misguided and superstition East (see Fernandes, 155), the ending undercuts any purchase on any such certainty. In *Bodki* this occurs when, with the death of the narracolonialtor's future brother-in-law and the condemnation of his pregnant sister symbolically to become the next *bodki*, superstition seems to win

out over rationality as truth. This conclusion, in a novel published shortly before Indian military action in Goa, can be seen as a proleptic metaphorisation of the bankruptcy of a certain colonial elite, unable to impose a rationality mandated by the colonial rulers, ultimately defeated by circumstance (whether supernatural in causation or merely chance) and left with nothing but the ruins of a career and a family in what was soon thereafter to become post-colonial territory.