

Costa, Suneeta Peres da. *Saudade*. Atarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2018. 114 pp. Paperback. ISBN 9781925336634

Reviewed by Paul Melo e Castro
University of Glasgow

If in the sixteenth century the world converged on Goa, ever since Goans have returned the favour with compound interest, spreading out from their tiny homeland to the four corners of the earth. Depending upon one's standpoint, and investment, the current memoration of the Goan diaspora has mainly focused either on the Indian Ocean—from the western seaboard of India, especially Bombay, across to the British colonies of East Africa, and up to the Persian Gulf—or on the Anglophone countries of Europe, the Americas and Australasia where Goans who had previously circulated in the colonial world were driven to move after the dismantlement of the British and Portuguese empires. Suneeta Peres da Costa's novella *Saudade* instead depicts Goan migrants in a rather unfamiliar setting, one swept by the salt breeze from the Atlantic and Macmillan's 'winds of change': the south-west African Portuguese territory of Angola in the final years of colonial rule (1961–75). In doing so, she expands both Goan literature—understood broadly, though only a broad take thereon could represent understanding—and fiction representing Angola, a space which is seen here from new angles, from the peripheral inside in the diegesis and from the linguistic and cultural outside in the composition.

Historically, the Goan presence in Angola was tiny, but significant. People with a connection to Goa in Angola included the tragic Angolan nationalist of Goan origin Sita Valles, brutally murdered by political opponents in Luanda in 1977, a young woman whose childhood to an extent parallels that of *Saudade*'s narrator but who took a path of radical engagement in local politics; the Goan freedom fighter PP Shirodkar, who, after being arrested and deported to Angola by the Portuguese authorities, came to love the land of his captivity to the extent that he would later proclaim that, if the Hindu tenet of metempsychosis be true, it was there that he would like to be reborn; and the doctor and novelist Agostinho Fernandes, whose second unpublished novel after *Bodkei* (1962), about the exploited labourers of Goa's paddy fields, was supposedly lost amid the upheavals of independence, after which, alongside the major part of the settler population, Fernandes 'returned' to Portugal.

Some of this breadth of experience is shown in the life of Maria-Cristina, the protagonist and narrator of *Saudade*, who also feels love for the myriad details of her everyday yet estrangement from self and social surroundings; confronts the ambiguities and injustices of colonialism from a position of relative privilege; and grapples with a Lusophone identity shot through with elements that make little sense west of the Arabian Sea. Goan Catholics occupied an especially ambiguous location in the Portuguese empire: 'colonised citizens' at home, they could become 'colonising citizens' in Africa and elsewhere, with access to a social mobility comparable to metropolitan settlers, yet still unable ever to attain a position in which their non-European origin was immaterial (even though, as in *Saudade*, the autochthones saw little difference between the various hues of colonial interlopers). Maria-Cristina's father, a labour lawyer mediating between European pastoralists and native workers, exemplifies this ambiguous situation. As in Epitácio Pais's recently rediscovered 1970s novel, *Preia-Mar*, perhaps the earliest Goan work to feature expellees from Uganda, a significant theme here is Goan *Africander* racial prejudice towards native Africans. Yet, *Saudade* goes further, re-creating also the particular intercontinental cosmopolitanism of daily life in marginal spaces like Angola, which brought together people from all over the colonial world before this diversity began to spread back to Europe in the post-WWII period.

Form and content match perfectly in *Saudade*. Overspilling the limited moment, process or event proper to the short story, yet holding back from the dispersal and intersection of plotlines and character trajectories one might expect from the novel, this sensitive, lyric novella gives us a stretch in the life of its protagonist, as she grows from infancy to young womanhood during a turbulent political epoch that impacts on self and family. The novella's themes are staples in postcolonial *Bildungsromane*—the gradual discoveries of the mutually complicating adult realities of colonialism, identity, human relationships and sexuality—but handled in a way that is always fresh and arresting. In some senses, as a speaker of Portuguese, I'm an odd reader for this work—or else, given the complex articulations across space and time characteristic of a Goan experience it reflects and embodies, merely a bog-standard reader, I don't know—but an abiding interest for me was the representation of a specifically Goan life in Portuguese Africa, one evoked, mentioned or brought to mind in many places, but never with the sustained focus or intricate nuance shown here. I imagine that *Saudade* isn't an easy read for a non-Portuguese-speaking Anglophone reader, to whom few concessions are made in the way of explanation or gloss. References to Portuguese and Angolan history and culture abound throughout the novella as if it were a Lusophone text. Or perhaps even more than in a Portuguese-language work: the mention of Goan and Indian elements and an unlikely reference to seeing Godard's *La Chinoise* aside, *Saudade* is almost hyperlusophone in its cultural references, leaving it to the uninitiated reader to vault the various metonymic gaps with the aid of context, imagination (or, today, Google).

Yet, the insider position fictionalised at times sits oddly with the marks of exteriority across the text. In writing *Saudade*, a paratextual note tells us, the author fictionalised the memory of a memory. The story of Maria-Cristina is loosely based on the experience of Peres da Costa's grandmother in pre-1975 Angola, expressed in a language that is admirably the author's own—and perhaps that of the adult narrator looking back, given the novella's close—but is not that of the child protagonist nor that of her context. To cavil over details in a work that, albeit brief, might offer so much to so many different readers feels like cranky gatekeeping, but, throughout, there are misspellings of Portuguese and small errors of fact. It feels vitally important that an author should not merely write 'what she knows', but also what she wants to imagine, recoup and share. But slips like 'Sine' for 'Sines' (Vasco da Gama's birthplace), 'Farreira' for 'Ferreira' (a common name across 'Lusotopia'), not to mention some mismatched chronology, could easily have been avoided had the text been read by someone for whom the language and context is a reality, not a (post?) memory. Are some of the details plausible for 1960s and 1970s Angola? I can't say, not having been there. But, certainly the fictional world is sharply drawn and always thought provoking, whatever its verisimilitude. And the effect of the occasional solecisms is odd, but fascinating. If, as I said, the story makes no concession to an Anglophone audience who must orient themselves in a field of reference encompassing, inter alia, the hijacking of the Santa Maria and the particular cultural and linguistic identity of Goan Catholics, to a Lusophone reader *Saudade* at times seems to create a fantasy Lusophone world, an exotic yet integral one which partisans of *Lusofonia* might wish existed in place of the unevenly connected, often mutually oblivious archipelago of speakers that seems more to be the reality (not least in Goa, whose annexation by India goes unmentioned in the story). The protagonist's Goan parents go to the cinema in colonial Angola to see Marcel Camus's *Orfeu Negro*, the child narrator herself, who seems preternaturally conversant with the culture around her, recognises a *morna* by Eugénio Tavares in a Capeverdean postboy's whistled tune, and so on. Perhaps part of this can be linked to the split between the young girl living through adolescence of both body and identity and the wearied recollections of an adult in an unspecified but apparently Goan future—where does this voice come from, so innocent in the past yet so encumbered in the present?

This fiction of being inside a Portuguese-speaking world spun by a Goan (or related) writer standing on the outside isn't unprecedented—the recovery of a Portuguese imperial past as creative capital in the present is also found in Antonio Gomes's *Sting of Peppercorns* (2010), among others. *Saudade*, with its Janus-like imagology, facing backwards and forwards, inwards and out, is the most fascinating I've come across so far. As one might expect, the novella's title has a lot to say about its themes and content. 'Saudade', perhaps the most familiar Portuguese word to Anglophones, and one that metonymises Lusophone culture to the informed but unwary, is a loaded term. Though often described as untranslatable, this is far from true. The limit of what we might affirm is that no single English word covers all of its uses or can bear the cultural weight it has acquired over the

centuries and the latitudes of its use. If anything, it is a contradictory emotion, one that is bittersweet, of having but not holding, holding yet not having. As such, it is the perfect title for a work that makes a fascinating contribution to any body of writing with which one might like to associate it: Australian, Indian, Goan, Angolan . . . A strongly recommended read.

Work Cited

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Suneeta Peres da Costa was born in Sydney, Australia, to parents of Goan origin. Her debut novel, *Homework*, was published internationally by Bloomsbury in 1999. She has published and produced across the genres of fiction, non-fiction, playwriting and poetry and made contributions to Australian literature as an editor, critic and teacher for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney Review of Books, and the University of Technology, Sydney, among other organisations. Her literary honours include a Fulbright Scholarship, Australia Council for the Arts BR Whiting Residency, Rome, and, recently, an Asialink Arts Creative Exchange to India.

Paul Melo e Castro is a lecturer in Portuguese and Comparative Literature at the University of Glasgow. He has research interests in literature, film and visual culture, is currently engaged in research projects on the post-1961 Goan short story and on postcolonial photography, and is an occasional literary translator.