

**THE UNBEARABLE DARKNESS OF BEING CONVERSION, CONFLICT  
AND DISLOCATION IN ALAN MACHADO (PRABHU)'S  
SHADES WITHIN SHADOWS**

**Deepna Rao**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Jai Hind College, Mumbai

**Abstract**

*An emergent trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century writings of Goa has been a re-assessment of the state's colonial history in its prose works. Ethnic conflict, conversion and slavery are a few of the dark themes explored in some of these narratives. One such novel is Alan Machado (Prabhu)'s Shades within Shadows, which follows the lives of two ordinary families in the period between 1750 and 1800, who reside near present day Mangalore. The novel explores two dark phases linked to religious conversion and ethnic conflict, dispossession and dislocation: the Goan Inquisition, where Hindus faced persecution and were forced to embrace Catholicism, and secondly, the siege of the Mangalore Fort by Tipu Sultan and the consequent forced conversions and recruitments to a slave-army. Machado (Prabhu)'s novel does not castigate Islam or Christianity, but presents the plight of those innocents who are victimized by ideological powers enforcing conversion. Through the events presented, it serves to provide a commentary against hegemonic conversion, displaying how power groups and vested interests ubiquitously abuse religion. This paper will provide a thematic and formal analysis of this novel with a New Historicist framework.*

**Key words:** Postcolonial, Slavery, Goa, Konkan, Karnataka, Identity, Ethnic conflict,

*Conversion, Dislocation, Dispossession, Hegemony, Ideology*

**THE UNBEARABLE DARKNESS OF BEING CONVERSION, CONFLICT  
AND DISLOCATION IN ALAN MACHADO (PRABHU)'S  
*SHADES WITHIN SHADOWS***

- Deepna Rao

**T**raditional historicism views history as the end result of a collection of 'facts', evidence and data, all leading to certain plausible conclusions. New Historicism, however, views history as a 'text'. This text is a narrative, an interpretation by the historian. Hence, the veracity of the text might be disputed, and the ideology and cultural context of the author may also be studied and analysed. The approach also delves into the complex matrix of power relations and the circulation of power among different groups within a text. While New Historicism is a theoretical approach that may be applied to a number of different types and genres of texts, period novels provide a compatible area for application. An emergent trend evinced in Goan writing in English since the turn of the century is the rising interest in writing historical fiction. A number of Goan prose works since the beginning of the twenty-first century have provided a personal and alternate view of Goan history, for instance Margaret Mascarenhas' *Skin*, Antonio Gomes' *Sting of the Peppercorns*, Edila Gaitonde's short story collection *The Tulsi and other Short Stories* and Alan Machado (Prabhu)'s *Shades within Shadows*. The last of these provides a disturbing display of the plight of ordinary people during two extremely dark events: the Goan Inquisition and the siege of the Mangalore Fort by Tipu Sultan. Against the backdrop of these historical events, the novel explores the themes of ethnic conflict, religious conversion, and the consequent dispossession and dislocation of people.

Alan Machado (Prabhu), the author, is a descendant of the *Ganvkars* of Aldona, who emigrated to the Mermajal around 1680. As his compound surname with parentheses would indicate, he has retained allegiance to his community of origin despite the conversion of his ancestors. His novel provides an unmitigated perspective of the process of religious conversion by two separate communities: Christians and Muslims, and thereby delivers a commentary against hegemonic religious conversion. Machado (Prabhu) does not castigate any religious community. There are no slurs at any point in the novel against either religion. However, the novel, by way of presentation, would certainly appear to show that religion is ubiquitously abused by power groups to exercise hegemonic control. From a New Historicist point of view, one might also consider this a means of tracing the origins of ethnic conflict and tensions, and how these shape human reality.

At the heart of the novel are displayed two families: the family of Jaki that lives in Mermajal, a village near Mangalore, and the family of Pilip that lives in urban Mangalore under a Portuguese influence. The novel thrives on the use of contrast, presenting life in

both the rural and urban setting. Yet, simultaneously, the innocence of the two families is depicted. They are untouched by the political events, which, unknown to them, will leave none in the region untouched. One might analyse this as an attempt by the writer to emphasize the guilelessness of those victimized, and how these events affected those in both urban and rural areas. The two spatial narratives run parallel to the official history that is presented through epigraphs before each new chapter begins. These three parallel narratives function to heighten the tension in the novel, as well as provide a contrast between the personal lives, untouched by political strife and ideology – and the political world of the region, and secondly, they display how it is the power groups that play a decisive role in reshaping the lives of the inhabitants – leading to their dislocation and consequent conversion.

The first chapter, while ostensibly about Jaki's birth, provides important passing references to the Goan Inquisition and the Anti-Hindu Laws passed during that period. Anant K. Priolkar, in his historical account *The Goa Inquisition: The Terrible Tribunal for the East* describes the controversial period and traces its origin to the antecedent Spanish Inquisition. This Inquisition sought to punish those who retained Jewish practices and rituals post-Christian conversion. It was an attempt to ensure fidelity of the converted 'New Christians'. However, as the grounds for conversion were often motivated by monetary harassment or temptation, the converted Jews did not practice Christianity with the devotion sought by the clergy. The first *Auto de Fé* or burning at the stake has been recorded on 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 1481. Three hundred Jews were burned at the stake, and eighty were sentenced to life imprisonment in the first year itself. By the end of the decade 8,800 were burned at the stake, and 96,504 were penalized. In 1492, the Jews were finally banished as a community from Spain, and many died of starvation or were sold into slavery. Some were well-received in Portugal and moved to Indian soil in Goa. Priolkar shrewdly observes that six hundred 'rich' families 'secured permanent domicile in Portugal on payment of 600,000 cruzados (9).' It might well be inferred that the Spanish Inquisition and the Portuguese aid were both motivated by monetary avarice more than religious motives.

The political pressures from Europe, particularly Spain, however mounted, to effect the Portuguese Inquisition. The Papal 'bull' was issued on 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1531, and exactly a decade later, the Portuguese Inquisition came into force. This Inquisition lasted till its abolition in 1820. The Goa Inquisition, however, came into force in 1560. The period between 1560 and 1820 may well be considered one of the darkest periods in Goan history, as well as Indian history. By presenting the circumstances of characters as a result of this period, Machado (Prabhu) not only provides an alternate subaltern history, he traces the roots of communal conflict and ethnic identity issues in the states of Goa and Karnataka.

In terms of technique, Machado (Prabhu) utilizes the device of epigraphs that provide a parallel official history that contrasts with the personal histories of the two families depicted. These epigraphs are drawn from letters written to officials in power, official decrees, as well as personal diaries of historical figures. The official accounts give the reader and critic a glimpse of the ideological underpinnings of the dark events that form the historical backdrop of the novel. The novel begins with an extract from the correspondence of the Viceroy of Goa to the King of Portugal, written on 18<sup>th</sup> June, 1750, which mentions that in numerous villages, 'on account of the debts and burdens arising from the last war (1)', a large number of Christians 'abandoned their fatherland to go and settle in the lands of the infidels, imperilling their souls (1).' The general reference to the war is an indication of the existing conflicts between the then Portuguese (Christian) regime and the two separate ethnic powers: the Hindu Marathas and the Muslim Nizami regime in the South. While there is no specification of whom the war was with, there is a clear-cut religious intolerance evinced as the Viceroy refers to the other venues where the Goans have emigrated as 'lands of the infidels (1).' They are not even mentioned or listed by name. The inhabitants who form the major population of these lands, as they are non-Christians, are simply labelled as 'infidels' even if they very obviously do have a religious faith. A war does not happen due to one political regime alone and the Portuguese regime here is seen to ignore the plight of the common folk who have emigrated on account of 'debts and burdens (1)' and that these were engendered by an ethno-political conflict.

Indeed, the period of the Goa Inquisition, which was accompanied by concurrent wars with the neighbouring regimes, marked a period of religious intolerance towards Hindus and their resultant conversions. Some conversions were also a result of zealous proselytization. The novel presents us with a number of minor characters who are a part of the village fabric and how their names changed following their conversions: Ganesh becomes Gaspar; Anant, Antonio; Krishna, Christopher; Laxman, Lucas and Pandurang, Pedru. One also learns the varied reasons that prompt the conversions:

'Anant chose the cross to a spell in jail and the prospect of life in the galleys for defying the law. Krishna attended a wedding conducted in the old rite in the neighbouring village. The law had been broken, and the law-breakers paid the penalty. Manjunath ate food prepared in Bernadino's house and this put him beyond the pale. With nowhere to go, he took the embracing arms of the padre. Ganesh had no such compulsion. He was genuinely inspired by the new faith. (8)'

The soft targets for the exertion of hegemony through the institution of religion are convicts like Anant, innocent villagers like Krishna who see no harm in attending Hindu weddings beyond Portuguese reign but are evidently not spared by the intolerant; those

who lose their high caste such as Manjunath and those like Ganesh who are truly desirous of conversion. Thus there are numerous motivating factors, but apart from the last one, all the other motivating factors paint a scenario that indicates the rigidity of Christianity as well as – in the third case – Hinduism. The caste system and its strictures of purity and impurity, led to the ostracizing of anyone who merely entered the home or ate food prepared by a Christian. The narrative thus presents an egalitarian approach towards the religions and their practitioners. The religions themselves are not criticized. However, the rigid observance of certain rules of Hinduism, as well as Christianity, posits the practice of both religions as contributory to the ethnic conflict extant at the time.

One also glimpses the manner whereby an individual, simply on the grounds of suspicion, could be veritably persecuted and made to confess to a crime not even committed. This is clearly evinced in the episode where Santan, a villager, goes out at night to hunt for a hare. His actions are misrepresented out of context and he is tortured as if he were a seasoned criminal who must confess to a much greater crime.

He [Santan] had been out one night to trap a hare he had tracked to its warren, when he was apprehended and brought before the investigator. He readily confessed to snaring hares; that was not a crime. But what else was he doing at such an hour, on a night when the moon would not rise, in a place where few dared to be when darkness came? Santan had no answer.

So into the [torture] chamber he went, trembling with fear and trepidation. There they pricked him and scratched him, they stretched him and racked him, they subjected him to the *strappado*. They tortured him till he grew hoarse crying in pain.

“You must confess,” they said.

“Confess? Yes, yes, to what?” Santan cried.

“You must confess. We cannot now let you go. It is better an innocent man be condemned than have the reputation of the San Officio questioned. You must confess.”

“Tell me what wrong I have done,” he cried. “What crime must I confess to? Tell me please, tell me now. Oh! Oh! The pain.”

Satan confessed: he made potions for the sick; he had the secret for a good harvest; he knew where the herbs grew and the time of the night when they were to be plucked. Santan confessed to being a sorcerer, though he did not know what one actually did. His confession lifted the threat of torture from him but brought the looming day of judgment closer. (9-10)

The Officers of the San Officio, the commission conducting the inquiry regarding the *Auto de Fé* are clearly unscrupulous and only bother about the public image of the commission. They do not really have proper grounds for the torture of individuals.

Individuals are randomly rounded up on the grounds of mere suspicion based on vague criteria such as being out at a late time of the night. Santan, who is unaware of what the word 'sorcerer' means, agrees that he is one, simply because the physical torture is unbearable.

Other atrocities inflicted upon the village elders and the local community are also elaborated upon. The villagers, in accordance with the customs of the Church, were forced to give away one-third of their harvests to the Bhonsulo or the village chieftain. This chieftain served as a middleman between the villagers and the Portuguese authorities. However, due to the ongoing wars and conflicts, the people are made to also give away one-third of their annual income, as a 'loan' to fund wars with the Dutch, Mughals and Marathas:

The representatives of the twelve clans that comprised the *ganvkars* of the village met as per time-honoured tradition, beneath the old oak tree. Senhor Gonçalo informed them that the Dutch blockade of Goa's ports had drastically reduced customs revenues while the continuing skirmishes with the Bhonsulo had put enormous strain on military expenditure. The government had no option but to ask all villages to advance a loan amounting to a third of their annual income.

"Loan?" asked Damu. 'But how and when will it be repaid?"

"It will be repaid when the situation returns to normal," replied Senhor Gonçalo.

"When will that be?" asked Damu.

"Where is the money?" asked Vithoba

"Bhonsulo has stolen our last three harvests," said Purke

"Where are the soldiers?" asked Manoel.

"You increase taxes every year. How can we pay?" asked Gaspar.

"I don't know," said Senhor Gonçalo. "You know the law; don't pay, your land goes." (14)

The common man had no interest in these wars, but was a hapless and helpless victim of the circumstances created by the atmosphere of religious dogmatism and the quest for one's religion's supremacy amongst the various existing imperial powers. The Gaunvkars, or village elders, too are not able to meet often as a result of the skirmishes and the tense atmosphere. Additionally, the colonial Portuguese regime creates the threat of both the Inquisition as well as the forced recruitment into the army as a fear and control mechanism. The Government also exerts a thinly-veiled monetary extortion mechanism: those who are unable to pay taxes or provide the government with the military 'loan' it requires would find their property confiscated and consequent dislocation.

While the first portion of the novel covers the aftermath of the Goa Inquisition, the last part of the novel traces out the shift of power to the Muslim regime of Tipu Sultan. While Tipu Sultan himself never appears as a character, the epigraphs as well as the events unfolding in the novel present one with the parallel commentary regarding hegemonic torture, and forced conversions. The epigraph preceding the eighteenth chapter presents the reader with an extract from the *Sultaun-u-Towareek* or *The King of Histories*, written as per the directives of Tipu Sultan, the then Sultan of Mysore, quoted in Mark Wilk's *History of Mysore*. What is striking is that even the Islamic regime is seen to consider the religious conversion of Christians an 'event' and a memorable one: 'Among the memorable events of the wonderful year, was the making Mussulmans of the Nazarene Christians (229).' The extract also details the number: 60,000 persons are 'seized (229)' and are of both sexes. However, erasure is also observed, as it is only mentioned that a number of these converts are 'formed into battalions (229)' – a reference to the male converts. No mention is made of what happens to the female converts. In another extract, the epigraph to chapter nineteen, the novel presents Fr, Miranda's summary report of 1783:

'The Christians in the kingdom have been taken to Srirangapatna. A great number have died....The churches of the Mission of Mysore have been demolished and its missionaries banished...Salvoes of guns were fired, banquets were held, bands were played and money was distributed on the day on which the Christians were circumcised...(243).'

The report gives one an idea of the state of Christian people following the Seige of the Mangalore Fort by Tipu Sultan's army. Multitudes of Christians are taken to Tipu Sultan's capital city, and are dislocated from their homes. Additionally, their Churches are destroyed. The cruelty and pain of the process of conversion, especially the male converts, is seemingly a cause for celebration – showing that the true victory lay not in capturing the fort, but in converting the Christians to Islam. In a gruesome passage, the conversion of one of the principal characters, Foka, a mere boy on the brink of adolescence, is vividly described, to drive home the atrocities that accompanied this process of forced conversion:

'Foka was drafted into the Ahmedy Corps, comprised of boys and young men from outlying regions made military slaves. (...) The barber shaved his head and brought him to a guarded maidan to join the others. They [Recruiting Officers of Tipu's army] gave them lumps of *majum* [opium] to chew. One by one, they were held fast while a barber deringed their exposed penis. They lay on mats to recuperate, some laughing, most crying, all in opium-suppressed pain. (248)'

Foka and other lads are recruited at a very tender age into the army and with absolute indifference, sent to fight in battle against the British barely a couple of days after they are both circumcised and emasculated. The tragic fate that Foka meets is a testament to the novel's indictment of the role that forced conversions and ideological ethnic conflict have played in destabilizing the entire Konkan region. The military slavery that is engendered as a result of the war is also a disturbing aspect explored. Machado (Prabhu)'s novel throws light on an aspect of history that is often side-lined and even ignored or erased from official accounts.

One might also observe that the technique of juxtaposing the fictional narrative of the two families with extracts from official historical texts lends both credibility as well as a sense of tragedy. One cannot resolve the fissures in a societal fabric, unless one confronts the traumatic history of a region, which is recovered and re-presented through the novelist's re-imagined representation in literature. It is here that Machado (Prabhu) succeeds in representing the trauma, dislocation and loss due to ethnic conflict and forced conversion. War, conversion and slaving are simply the result of hegemonic forces that abuse religion for vested interest and the novel, through its stark depiction, amply illustrates that it is not religion, but the circulation of power utilizing the tool of religious control, that requires a re-assessment and sustained analysis.

#### Works Cited:

- Gaitonde, Edila. *The Tulsi and other short stories from Goa*. Goa: Goa 1556 and Broadway Publishing House, 2011. Print.
- Gomes, Antonio. *The Sting of Peppercorns: A Novel set in Goa*. Sãligão and Panjim, Goa: Goa 1556 and Broadway Publishing House, 2010. Print.
- Machado (Prabhu), Alan. *Shades within Shadows*. Sãligão and Bangalore: Goa 1556 and ATC Publications, 2012. Print.
- Malekandathil, Pius. *Maritime India: Trade, Religion & Polity in the Indian Ocean (Revised Edition)*. New Delhi: Primus Books, 2015. © 2010. Print.
- Pearson, Michael. *The New Cambridge History of India: The Portuguese in India*. Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1990; © 1987. Print.
- Priolkar, A.K. *The Goa Inquisition: The Terrible Tribunal for the East (A Quarter century Commemoration Study of the Inquisition in India)*. Panaji: Rajhauns Vitaran, 2008; © 1961. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Indian Ocean*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.