Gossiping about the Goan Ayah: Migration, Diaspora, and Anxieties at Home in *Karmelin*¹

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Abstract. This paper examines the representation of the Goan ayah in the recent history of Goa. Taking Damodar Mauzo’s *Karmelin* (1981), a novel which portrays the life of a Goan woman who migrates to Kuwait for employment, as an entry point, I will attempt to discuss the various issues pertaining to the representation of the Goan ayah found in the historical record. It is claimed that the figure of the Goan ayah was viewed with suspicion when they migrated from Goa to Bombay, to be employed as domestic helpers. I attempt to highlight how Goan men and a few upper-class Goan women, in Goa and Bombay, shared an anxiety that in the anonymity of the metropolis the Goan ayah might transgress various boundaries: sexual, religious, caste, moral, and societal. Following this logic, I argue that rather than being a complex narrative about Goan women, *Karmelin* is a reiteration of a form of representation that harbors suspicion and anxiety about the migrating woman. *Karmelin* places the figure of the Goan ayah as central in its storyline precisely because stories about the ‘scandalous’ behavior of the ayahs in the diaspora have been circulating in Goan society for many years.

Keywords: Ayah, Bombay, Goan women, Konkani, Goan literature

Damodar Mauzo’s novel, *Karmelin* (1981), won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1983. Because it was an honor bestowed by the Indian National Academy of Letters, the award brought him much fame and catapulted his novel into the spotlight. In addition to being exposed to literature-reading publics from other South Asian languages, *Karmelin* was debated in the Goan press following its release and the reception of the Sahitya Akademi award. Mauzo, who writes in Nagari-script Konkani,² has been translated in many languages, and not just English; *Karmelin* itself was translated into several South Asian languages, such as Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, Oriya, and Sindhi.³ More recently in 2015, a collection of his short stories, *Teresa’s Man and Other Short Stories from Goa* (2014), translated by Xavier Cota, was long-listed for the Frank O’Connor Short Story Award. Mauzo is also associated with the annual Goa Arts and Literature Festival, which features many local, national, and international literary
personalities. As a writer, therefore, Mauzo enjoys the attention of literary circles as well as the local and national press.

This influential position that Karmelin and Mauzo enjoy can be linked to the fact that the Nagari script alone enjoys state patronage in Goa. This state patronage, plus a massive injection of funds for publication of books and grants for writers, put writers in the Nagari-script Konkani in a position of power. Consequently, writers who write in this script also enjoy an influential position in literary circles and official institutions of the state. However, despite this influential position, literary productions in the Nagari script are not consumed by a majority of Konkani speakers. Indeed, Konkani literature in the Roman script is a far more popular expression of the language in Goa than Konkani in the Nagari script.

This ‘script politics,’ as various scholars have called it (for instance, see Ferrão, “The Shadow of the Past”; Ferrão, Being a Goan Christian; J. K. Fernandes, “Citizenship Experiences of the Goan Catholics”), places authors who write in the Nagari script in a hegemonic position. It can be argued that by occupying this position of enunciation, upper-caste and upper-class writers are able to describe, label, and legitimize a vision of Goan identity, culture, and society according to Sanskritic/Indian and upper-caste Hindu norms (see J. K. Fernandes, “Citizenship Experiences of the Goan Catholics” 22). Thus, the representation of communities like the Catholics in Goa in Nagari literature is often produced by persons who do not originate from these communities. For instance, Mauzo’s attempt at accurately reproducing the speech or dialect of Catholics of the region of Salcette, in which the novel is set, can be considered a part of this hegemonic process of representation. More often than not, the Catholic characters in Karmelin slip into the antruzi dialect, which in such circumstances sounds awkward. Slipping out of sociologically plausible speech, the Catholic characters in Karmelin appear to be figments of an upper-caste Hindu imagination. Reading Karmelin in the original, it becomes evident that the ‘Catholic Konkani’ exists in a hierarchical relationship with the ‘standard’ antruzi of the narratorial voice. Added to this is the unconventional manner in which the English translation renders Christian names: Karmelin, instead of Carmelina; Agnel, instead of Agnelo.4

This issue of the problematic representation of non-Hindu and non-upper-caste communities within the Nagari Konkani literature can also be linked to the manner in which Nagari writers claim to produce fiction that is ethnographically accurate. For instance, a recent novel by Maya Anil Kharangate, Amrutvell (2016), used interviews to collect details of the past. Interviewing many old people, particularly the older members of her own family, who recounted their memories, especially those memories that provided a glimpse of how women lived in the past, forms the basis of the claim of authentic representation (Kharangate, Preface). Along the same lines, Mauzo seems to also gain his inspiration and critical information about the lives of his characters through ethnographic observation. Besides being a writer, Mauzo owns a small general provisions store in his native village of Majorda. He claims that it is through his daily interactions as a shopkeeper that he is able to write about people authentically (see Ravi). Early reviewers of
Karmelin, too, stressed that Mauzo’s authority on the subject matter of the novel lay in his ethnographic observation (see Sardessai 89). In other words, at the core of this claim lies a form of ethnographic authority that gives these literary representations life-like authenticity (see Clifford).

Mauzo’s Karmelin draws its name from the novel’s eponymous heroine. It is a saga of the life and troubles of Karmelin from her childhood. Due to a series of misfortunes—family illnesses, deaths, heartbreaks, a failed marriage, an alcoholic and abusive husband, and financial woes—Karmelin has to migrate to Kuwait, during the 1970s, to make ends meet. She works as a domestic worker—an ayah—in the home of a wealthy Arab couple, Nissar and his wife, Nooriya. After a while Karmelin starts having sexual relations with Nissar, subsequent to which she rationalizes this relationship as providing her with sexual fulfillment and a way to make extra money. The exact nature of the relationship that Karmelin shares with her Arab employer is not clear, whether they are in a romantic relationship or if it is an exchange of cash for sexual favors.

Karmelin loses her younger brother, her father, and her mother to a fever epidemic that spreads throughout her village while she is just a child. Orphaned, she is adopted by her paternal uncle, Joao Philip. He lives with his wife, Fernanda, and their son, Agnel. While her adoptive father and brother are fond of Karmelin, her adoptive mother does not accept Karmelin as her own. Growing up in the company of her adoptive brother Agnel, Karmelin starts developing feelings for him. These feelings turn out to be mutual. Once Fernanda comes to know about the romantic involvement of Agnel and Karmelin, she quickly arranges for Agnel to marry someone else. Much to Karmelin’s disappointment, Agnel agrees to his mother’s wishes and soon moves to East Africa with his wife. Karmelin thus experiences her first heartbreak, which has a profound impact on her.

Karmelin’s adoptive father understands her plight and decides to make things right in Karmelin’s life. He arranges a match for her—to Jose. After her marriage to Jose, Karmelin enters a household where she is despised by her inlaws. Her new life rapidly descends into hardships, largely because her husband starts drinking and becomes neglectful. The silver lining to her new existence comes in the form of Isabel, Karmelin’s sister-in-law, who lives very close to Karmelin’s new house.

As Isabel and Bostiao had entered into an inter-caste marriage, Bostiao was thrown out of his own house. Being despised by the same people provides Isabel and Karmelin with a common thread that binds them into lasting friendship and sisterhood. In times of financial crises, Isabel always helps Karmelin out. In fact, over a period of time when Jose’s alcoholism escalates, Karmelin and Isabel start farming a small piece of land; Karmelin provides the labor, and Isabel the initial capital.

Owing to the fact that Karmelin’s financial woes continue unabated, and also because Karmelin now has a young daughter to support, she decides to seek work as a domestic help in Kuwait on Isabel’s advice. Before taking up the job, Karmelin is worried about how she will be treated abroad; she is worried about sexual exploitation by Arab men. Despite all these problems, Karmelin has no
choice but to take the job in Kuwait. Such a circumstance that led women to take employment in domestic work was not uncommon in Goa, and we shall return to this aspect later in this article.

To locate and critically appreciate Karmelin in its proper context, it is important to understand the representational history of the Goan ayah. Thus, it is critical to discuss the historical context wherein Goan women migrated for work as ayahs from the late-nineteenth century onwards, and how their migration was perceived and represented in Goan society.

The Goan Ayah in Historical Context: Fears of Breached Boundaries

Rochelle Pinto argues that the representation of women in nineteenth-century textual productions was highly controlled and mediated through gossip. Primarily looking at the representation of women in Goan novels in Portuguese, set during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Pinto suggests that “familial control” over the lives of women characters appeared to be absolute. Information about the women characters in such novels was largely conveyed to the readers through gossip (Pinto 212). Even if Pinto discusses the lives of upper-class women from landed families, information about whom was mediated through gossip, the representation of the Goan ayah seems to be also trapped within a similar paradigm. The effect of gossip on women of different classes and castes may have been different, yet it cannot be denied that gossip about their lives—especially those of working women—was an intrinsic part of their lived reality. While there are no monographs available on the history of Goan ayahs in Bombay, the Goan ayah finds mention in works of fiction such as Rohinton Mistry’s Family Matters (2001), and Salman Rushdie’s celebrated Midnight’s Children (1981). If the Goan ayah enters the historical record at all, she is, as Pinto’s analysis implies, accessible through gossipy accounts of her migration, work, and social life in the city of Bombay.

These gossipy accounts of the Goan ayahs are available through the debates conducted as part of the various Congresso Provincial da Índia Portuguesa conferences and in the Goan press in the 1930s. These debates were concerned with the sexual and moral behavior of working-class Goans in Bombay, both men and women. The Goan ayah primarily enters these debates through the problem she posed to Goan society by emigrating. Newsmagazines such as Ave Maria (published in Bombay), The Emigrant (also published in Bombay), and O Bharat (published in Goa) carried a series of articles in the early 1930s that expressed anxiety about the increasing number of Goan women working as domestic help in the houses of in Bombay, while living in the cuddis of that city. These debates were articulated as concern for bettering the lot of the working-class emigrant population, led by the upper-caste and upper-class Goan intellectuals, who sought to improve the conditions of a number of Goan working-class groups (see also Pinto 98, 115, 226). The manner in which the ayah is discussed in the debates of the Congresso Provincial is similar to the way in which Karmelin, who works as an ayah, is characterized in Mauzo’s novel. Thus,
I suggest a discursive link between the representation of Goan *ayahs* in the Congresso Provincial debates and that in *Karmelin*. This discourse on the Goan *ayahs* was a production of upper-class and upper-caste intellectuals. If the Goan *ayahs* were represented and labeled in a particular way and their mobility policed, it was largely due to the manner in which class and caste privilege operated (and operates) within Goan intellectual productions.

It is quite clear that all these reports shared an anxiety regarding the relationships that these women had or were believed to have with either their employers or other men in metropolises such as Bombay. The proceedings of the Congresso Provincial’s seventh iteration in 1927, held to discuss issues plaguing Goan society, established the link between emigration and a decline in moral and public health. The proceedings of the Congresso Provincial were then debated in the Goan press in the 1930s, and the behavior of women, including the *ayahs*, was scrutinized. For instance, Socrates de Noronha Jr., in his *Memória* of 1927, asserted the need to educate the Goan emigrants—both men and women—about the dangers of declining public health and morals in metropolises like Bombay. Promiscuous behavior and unsanitary living conditions led to crises of public health, he writes, as diseases such as syphilis and tuberculosis spread amongst Goan emigrants in Bombay and their respective villages in Goa (Noronha Jr. 2). He particularly singled out the *cudds* where men and women lived in “promiscuity,” among them, the Goan *ayahs*, who, he argues, easily fell victim to the wiles and charms of men who possessed “money and cunning” to hire them as maids (Noronha Jr. 4). From Noronha Jr.’s *Memória* it can be suggested that it was a widely held belief that the Goan *ayah* was one of the main groups responsible for loosening moral bounds and causing a breakdown of public health, along with her male working-class counterpart (see also Cunha 4; Cunha 6). This widely held belief further suggests that the Goan *ayah*, along with her working-class male counterpart, was made a scapegoat for issues that upper-class and upper-caste Goan intellectuals perceived to be threats to the moral order and potential health disasters in the making.7

However, there was one intervention in this debate by Domingos Custódio Fernandes which attempted to understand the problem as one not only of morality, but also of economic insecurity. It was obvious to him that all or most of the women who worked as *ayahs* came from non-elite caste and class backgrounds. While acknowledging claims of immoral behavior, Fernandes hinted at a social and economic situation then existing in Goa that forced Goan women from the lower echelons of society to migrate and work elsewhere as *ayahs*. Phrasing a riposte to the sanctimonious sentiments otherwise dominant in the popular sphere, Fernandes pointed out that the fate of young women in the homes of *bhatkars* or landlords was no different to what they suffered in Bombay (see Sour-Grapes and D. C. Fernandes 12). His unmasking of the societal hypocrisy of Goan intellectuals, such as those debating at the Congressos Provinciais, as essentially a concern of losing labor to the city of Bombay and the unsettling of the traditional order, is an important intervention. Apart from
exposing the hypocrisy of the privileged Goan intellectuals, as well as the societal oppression then prevalent in Goa against the working-class woman, Fernandes’s article also highlights the intersection of labor history with that of gender. The Goan ayah was located within a matrix of differential power relations of gender, labor, sexuality, and class and caste. His article can also be considered as a reminder for us that the Goan ayah, and in fact other such women in fiction and the historical record, cannot be understood in isolation from other historical processes, such as the demand for labor (see Parreñas; Jelin).

The debates in the many Congresso Provincial conferences as well as in the press focused on another issue that they believed was closely linked to emigration, public health, and the Goan ayahs. This was the issue of sex work that women from Goa were believed to be doing. Noronha Jr. in his Memória claimed that one-sixth of the sex workers enumerated in the 1920 census of Bombay came from Goa, and these largely consisted of the “Hindu bailadeiras” (Noronha Jr. 3, 4). Within Goa as well, there was a concern about “public women” (“public ostore[ō]”). A commentator claimed that these women were of both Christian and Hindu religious backgrounds, and he lamented that the ecclesiastical authorities, Hindu and Christian, were unable to put an end to such practices (see B. Mergulhão Carvalho, “Amcheo Ostoreo” 3). In fact, in order to fix this problem, the Congresso Provincial, too, discussed ways in which unmarried and/or unsupervised girls could be prevented from exiting the frontiers of Goa—either they had to prove that they were married, or have a good reference from either their parents in Goa or the family for whom they would work in Bombay (Cunha 4: 141).

The juxtaposition of the ayahs and the bailadeiras in the debates discussed above can deepen our understanding of this discourse of anxiety and suspicion. It is interesting to note that members of the kalavant caste (referred to as bailadeiras), which later morphed into the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, were represented just like the ayahs in the historical record. The members of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj also largely migrated to Bombay, as they could find employment in the theater and film industry in that city (see some studies on this theme: Arondekar, “In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts” 103, 112, 113–114; Arondekar, “What More Remains” 151–152; Arondekar, “Subject to Sex” 244, 249–250, 258–259). The labor history of the kalavant caste, in Bombay and Goa, was also deeply enmeshed in anxieties that women belonging to this caste group were engaged in sex work. In the historical record, particularly the press, the word ‘prostitute’ is interchangeably used with the word ‘colvont’ (see Editor 113, 114), a term associated with the kalavant group, usually in a derogatory sense. The report does not refer to the members of the kalavant caste directly, but what it indicates is that, at least from the early twentieth century, ‘colvont’ was interchangeably used for a ‘prostitute,’ or a woman considered being of loose morals. It can be argued that the Goan ayah was also viewed as a ‘colvont’ for her perceived failure to adhere to the expected dictates of moral behavior.
Not surprisingly, therefore, that throughout the known history wherein women from the kalavant caste were recorded, there was an anxiety and fear about them, as it was believed that such women (referred to as bailadeiras in Portuguese records from the sixteenth century) would tempt an individual to violate their faith, a morality circumscribed by the Christian religion, and the ideal heterosexual family unit. Studies available on Portuguese royal and governmental decrees in Goa issued from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries reveal that the state was anxious about the moral health of its subjects (see Boxer; Chaturvedula; Perez), in a similar way as the twentieth-century Goan intellectuals were concerned about the physical and moral health of the Goan working-class men and women. These studies also point towards a longer history of how labor, migration, and sexuality of women were viewed with suspicion and anxiety within Goan history. Even if this anxiety and suspicion emerged from different times and locations, it essentially had the same goal of controlling the mobility of subaltern, working-class women from Goa.

This is not to suggest that the Goan ayahs and members of the kalavant caste had similar experiences in Bombay and Goa; indeed, they seem to have lived separate lives. However, I would like to suggest that as far as the representation of these two groups of women is concerned, there is a similar anxiety and suspicion with which these women were viewed over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; likewise, aspects of their sexuality were held up to public scrutiny and gossip.

It was obvious that the moral universe that was feared to have been collapsing hinged on the behavior of lower-caste and working-class women. In the figure of the Goan ayah we see, therefore, the convergence of the various histories of gender, labor, sexuality, and morality that governed and policed the lives of women. Karmelin, it can be argued, participates in such a mode of representation that views the Goan ayah with anxiety and suspicion. A large part of the novel is about Karmelin’s life before and after marriage—how she grows up and how she faces numerous odds. And yet, the aspect of Karmelin’s life as an ayah becomes a central theme in the novel. As such, one needs to ask why the ayah is so central to the novel. This can be observed in the claims that an early reviewer made in relation to how the novel dealt with a sensitive socio-economic issue. The reviewer claims that the increasing number of single Goan Catholic women migrating to the Gulf states demonstrates that the case of Karmelin was not an isolated one, and hence connected to the reality of the migration of Goan women. This was an issue that had received a sympathetic exposition in such a “bold manner” (Sardessai 93–94) throughout the novel (see Sardessai 94).

The ayah is central precisely because there was already a patriarchal and sexist discourse prevalent in Goa that viewed the ayahs with suspicion. Their private lives were already publicly scrutinized and criticized, at least from the 1900s. It is precisely because the ‘virtue’ of lower-caste women was held to be suspect and there was an anxiety over its policing within Goan society—as can be observed in the case of the kalavants as well—that the figure of the ‘ayah’ becomes central in the novel. When Mauzo claims that the inspiration for Karmelin—as most of his
stories—came from listening to the stories that people shared with him, it could very well be that these stories were filtered through the lenses of suspicion and anxiety. Perhaps, it was largely gossip that Mauzo came across, in which the guilt of the Goan ayah—or the woman migrating for work—was pre-determined.

Before proceeding any further, we need to briefly note the gossipy character of the discussions—whether in the debates of the Congresso Provincial, the Goan press, or in Karmelin. It was not necessarily the case that men would use their own names while writing (or gossiping) in the press; there are many instances of newsmagazines running articles by anonymous authors or authors with a pen name. It was unmistakably clear that whatever was written on the issue was written from the perspective of a male patriarch. The issue of women—including Goan ayahs—transgressing moral boundaries is discussed by those who used pseudonyms such as “Sour-Grapes,” or “Mr. Cook,” or “Mr. Clown” (see, in this context, Pinto 135). As men were writing such gossipy accounts while hiding behind anonymity, one can suggest that such anonymity simultaneously allowed men to engage in gossip and distance themselves from a behavior that was associated with women or the feminine. With Karmelin, the issue of ‘anonymous gossip’ becomes complex—the author is no longer anonymous. However, the author can distance himself from idle gossip precisely by claiming that the novel is an authentic exposition of a socio-economic reality.

Scholars who have worked on gossip and scandal as forms of interaction within a society stress that, in addition to providing members with information and entertainment, gossip and scandal also have a social function. This is entwined in power relations of maintaining hierarchies and defining in-groups from out-groups (Fine and Rosnow; Gluckman 309, 311, 312; Rosnow; Stross 183; Vermeule 105, 112). Alternately, such gossip, when done within the confines of the upper classes and castes, would effectively be used to police the women within that particular ingroup, thus further sharpening the boundaries between the in-group and out-group by indicating to the women of the upper classes/castes that they should not behave like the women of the out-group.

Social Origins
What needs to be understood clearly, in the case of the Goan ayah, is the deep connections such a labor or migration history had (and perhaps, continues to have) with social location. The Goan ayah largely comes from a particular caste and class location. As Domingos Custódio Fernandes indicates in his abovementioned article in Ave Maria, most Goan ayahs hailed from the sudra underclass. However, in the novel the social origins of Karmelin are mostly vague. Nonetheless, there are certain indications that Karmelin was not born to a sudra, working-class family.

So what information—fragmentary as it is—does the novel provide regarding the social origins of its protagonist? That Karmelin’s adopted family possessed a certain high status—not properly identified and specified in the novel—is revealed via an incident. The São João festival in Goa involves, amongst other things, men
jumping into wells. Karmelin’s adoptive brother, Agnel, decides that he would jump into the well, along with some other boys. Being a dangerous ritual, as many die of drowning, Agnel’s mother tries to stop him. She says that “only inferiors celebrate in this manner . . .” Agnel responds, saying that joining the group of boys and celebrating together does not diminish his own social status (see Mauzo, Karmelin 69 (Original 57)). Karmelin’s adoptive family, connected to her own from her father’s side, can be said to enjoy a higher status.

Karmelin’s marriage to Jose is the best indicator of the social origins of the protagonist of the novel. The first time Jose meets Karmelin, he is struck by her beauty. Jose’s internal monologue is quite revealing: “She [Karmelin] was like a daughter to [the] landlord Joao Philip . . .” (see Mauzo, Karmelin 80 (Original 66)). Jose, too, comes from a family of landlords, although his father had gambled away most of their family fortune. One can argue that it was a marriage amongst social equals that further fixes Karmelin’s social identity to a particular caste and class location.

Despite her social location, it seems that economic hardships have always been Karmelin’s fate. The house in which Karmelin and Jose lived is transferred to another landlord, because Jose’s father had to mortgage it. Being unable to repay the mortgage, the landlord refers to Karmelin’s husband as a “pobre fidalgo.” The term would literally mean “poor aristocrat” or “poor landlord,” and was very much in use in Goa during the time when the novel is set, and would refer to a person who was upper-caste and once land-owning, but who has subsequently fallen on hard days. What it would indicate in the context of Karmelin is that the household into which the protagonist was married was an upper-caste, formerly land-owning family that was going through financial crises. As noted above, most of the Goan ayahs came from non-land-owning backgrounds. As such, it would be extremely rare or implausible for someone like Karmelin, forced by circumstances, to take up employment as an ayah.

As an illustration of how migration—particularly of women—is linked to the class and caste location, we can turn to narratives of financial hardships written by members of the land-owning classes that correspond to the fictional time of Karmelin. The privileged birth of such persons notwithstanding, these narratives project poverty or financial hardships as a condition not marked or influenced by caste or class. In other words, such views suggest that the experience of financial hardships and poverty would be the same across the board. Maria Aurora Couto’s account of her mother’s trials and tribulations, written partly as a memoir, in Filomena’s Journeys (2013), fits neatly into the category of the abovementioned writings. Battling problems such as her husband’s alcoholism and their consequently dwindling finances, Couto’s mother migrates in the 1950s with her five children to Dharwar. Though the family is going through some extremely tough times, a mother of five is able to support, educate, and raise her kids through recourse to a variety of personal and caste networks. Being born in a land-owning family and having received an education, such women do not necessarily face destitution (see Couto). It is quite true, as one reviewer of Filomena’s Journeys notes,
that land-owning elites or “the well born are never poor, but . . . [only fall] on bad
days” (J. K. Fernandes, “Beyond Nostalgia”). Thus, class and caste location
determine the experience of financial crises and consequently how such crises
would be tackled.

Shame and Purity
Mauzo uses the word, bhashtavumk, and its many forms to refer to the moral
dilemmas in which Karmelin finds herself. In a sense, bhashtavumk becomes a
substitute for expressing the feelings of shame that Karmelin experiences owing
to societal, patriarchal, and moral pressures. The term is used in various senses
in the novel, as being sullied or impure. This feeling of impurity experienced by
Karmelin is the result of her sexual liaisons. Therefore, it is critical to understand
the usage of the term in its various forms in the novel. The term and its usage in
the narration of Karmelin essentially provide the connections with the debates of
the 1920s and 1930s in which Goan intellectuals had expressed anxiety over
Goan women allegedly transgressing social, sexual, and moral boundaries.

S. R. Dalgado’s Diccionario Portuguez-Komkani (1905) explains bhashtavumk in
the context of the Portuguese words poluição (or poluição), polluir (or polluir), and
polluto (or poluido) (in English, respectively: pollution, to pollute, and polluted or
one who is polluted). There are also synonymous terms that Dalgado provides
for bhashtavumk: assudh (impure), bursavumk (to make dirty), apavitr (unholy or
impure), and batgo (someone who comes in contact with pollution and, as a result,
loses caste or is outcast) (Dalgado 624). Thus, the term bhashtavumk is not used
in the sense of physical dirt (for instance, in the sense of environmental
pollution), but in the sense of the integrity of the body, soul, and social universe
being violated. Additionally, the term bhashtavumk or pollution has casteist
overtones, as the exchange of bodily fluids, touch, and even commensality
outside the rigid caste groupings have consequences that lead to pollution.
Interestingly, the term batgo is used in contemporary Goa to refer to those who
had converted to Catholicism, thus signifying that a person was beyond the caste-
dictated morality and sociality (see Kharangate for how the term has been
deployed). Bhashtavumk, therefore, refers to the violation of an existing morality,
sociality, and codes of conduct of Hinduism. In the case of Karmelin, or even
the multitudes of Goan ayahs who had migrated abroad for work since the late
nineteenth century, the term would refer to the breaching of moral, religious,
sexual, and social codes. We had noted these anxieties regarding the breaching
of the social and moral universe in the context of the debates at the Congresso
Provincial and in the press. Mauzo’s repeated usage of bhashtavumk in Karmelin
suggests very clearly that the novel reproduces the pre-existing anxieties and fears
in Goan society—fears of breached boundaries.

The opening of the novel best captures the manner in which the story of
Karmelin latches onto ideas of purity and shame. Karmelin says, “I mustn’t even
think of Nissar today . . . he is the one responsible for my sins . . . for my shame!”
(Mauzo, Karmelin 3 (Original 2)). Owing to her sexual relations with her employer,
Karmelin experiences feelings of guilt, and thinks of their liaison as deeply shameful—an act that violates her pure soul. There is also an element of bodily impurity that Karmelin experiences, as she says that her body has been “sullied.” She contrasts her own condition with the future of her daughter, Belinda, who “must remain pure.” In anxiously imagining the ‘pure’ future of her daughter in contrast with her present ‘sullied’ situation, Karmelin reveals the extent to which the novel internalizes ideas associated with shame and impurity while also acknowledging that boundaries set by patriarchy, caste, and religious morality are trespassed (Mauzo, Karmelin 9 (Original 8)). On the other hand, by rationalizing the sexual relationship with the Arab employer as an easy way to make money, Karmelin borrows from the trope of the Goan ayahs as habitually exchanging sexual favors for money—as Noronha Jr. had suggested in his Memória of 1927. The manner in which Karmelin’s actions are justified in the novel buttresses my arguments stated above: “It was good money and he [Nissar] has given it out of his own free will. So, what if she had slept with him for money . . . she had come here to make money, hadn’t she? She wasn’t sleeping with just anybody . . . . Nissar was her employer” (Mauzo, Karmelin 3, 222 (Original 3, 190)). Just as the Congresso Provincial and newspaper debates of the 1930s that viewed the migration of women as leading to prostitution, the novel tacitly suggests that women working as ayahs in the diaspora eventually end up in prostitution, or prostitution-like circumstances. The undefined nature of Karmelin’s relationship with her Arab employer allows the novel to operate within the realm of gossip, wherein the already existing anxieties and suspicions regarding the Goan ayahs are reproduced and replayed for a contemporary audience.

The novel suggests that it is chiefly greed that leads the Goan ayahs to sleep with whoever would pay the most, and that such greed has a destructive end. This is told through the story of Mary, another Goan woman who works as a domestic helper, in addition to being told through Karmelin. Reflecting on the life of Mary, who is brutally gang-raped and left for dead because she tried to make money any which way, Karmelin is certain that it is greed that led to Mary’s unfortunate death, and she vows that she would not cross a certain limit, even if she can make more money (Mauzo, Karmelin 270, 272 (Original 237, 239)). Casting someone’s experience of brutal sexual violence as an outcome of greed only feeds into the idea that Goan women migrated, either married or unmarried, for the love of money. Further, it suggests that transgressing boundaries of morality has a destructive end; perhaps it is also a veiled warning to those who transgress these boundaries.

One could suggest that because the ethnographic gaze of the author fails to perceive the realities of Goan women migrating and the circumstances that lead to their migration, the representation of this reality in fiction can be, at best, superficial. In the absence of a proper appraisal of the historical processes and causes that led to Goan women migrating for work, any representation of Goan ayahs—whether in fiction or non-fiction—will always be trapped in reproducing a sexist and patriarchal discourse. These power relations are firmly in place not
only due to the extremely gendered nature of the representation of the Goan *ayahs* throughout Goan history, but also due to caste and class power that obscures the condition of subaltern women in the diaspora. Added to this is the fact that the contemporary Konkani language politics serves to uphold many of the previously existing unequal power relations, not least those relations that allow privileged men to label subaltern women.

**Stereotypes in *Karmelin***

Inasmuch as the novel fails to capture the historical, social, and economic complexities of the migration experience of Goan *ayahs*, it also reproduces numerous stereotypes about various communities. As already stated, Karmelin’s character evokes images of a loose Catholic woman abundantly found in Bollywood cinema; that she eventually justifies the acceptance of money from her Arab boss only reinforces this image. Karmelin’s husband, Jose, too, seems to be stereotypically characterized. He is a habitual drunk, who is unable to provide for his family and satisfy his wife.9

It is not just that Catholic men and women in the novel are stereotyped, but also the Arab Muslims. For instance, in the context of discussing the brutal gang-rape and murder of Mary, the narrator says, “One Arab can cause enough trouble . . . and there were five of them!” (Mauzo, *Karmelin* 271 (Original 237)). The novel narrates an anecdote of young Arab men, with their expensive cars, offering single women money for sex outside a Catholic church in Kuwait after the Sunday service is over. Ethnographic studies mention that the Holy Family Catholic Church in Kuwait City was indeed a place where Goan Catholic men and women would meet and spend time with each other as a way to maintain community bonds (see Weiner 9). However, it seems highly unlikely that young Arab men would try to pick up Goan women in such a blatant manner, and so close to the church, considering that there the women would be in the company of friends, family, and compatriots.

Nissar, the Arab boss, is described as well-endowed, perpetuating another stereotype about Arab men; indeed, after the first time that Karmelin has sex with Nissar, her body is described as being “sore for the next few days” (Mauzo, *Karmelin* 3). The sexual prowess of Nissar is often compared with Jose’s lack of ability (Mauzo, *Karmelin* 18), thus also simultaneously reinforcing the stereotype of Goan Catholic men as weak, habitually drunk, and unable to discharge their masculine duties. The fact that Muslim men can take as many as four wives also seems to be a way of evoking the image of a sexually rapacious Arab. For instance, Nooriya, the wife of Nissar, is often seen remarking that Nissar’s sexual needs are insatiable. In one instance Nooriya says, “I keep wishing Nissar would take another wife . . . he’s so virile . . . he doesn’t let me sleep in peace . . .” (see Mauzo, *Karmelin* 7, 233; Original 7, 201).

**Conclusion**

Seen from the perspective of the history of representation of the Goan *ayah*, *Karmelin* reiterates certain stereotypes about women—especially Catholic
Women. Considering the problematic representation and stereotypes of Catholic subjectivity in the novel, the linguistic power location from which the novel is written also facilitates the perpetuation of such stereotypes—even if the stereotypes have an origin that pre-dates the Nagari-script politics in Goa. This power relation, entrenched in caste, class, and patriarchy, produced anxiety and suspicion about the Goan woman migrating for work in the first place, and also perpetuates such stereotypical representation in fiction as well. In the Goan case, one can observe that though commentators would talk about women exercising their choice—mostly being scandalized by it—the issue was never about free choice. Instead, it was about the social and economic problems that seemed to threaten the order of that day. The gossip and scandal circulating about the migrating woman were part of this history that survives into our time.

Notes
1 The author wishes to thank Amita Kanekar, Jason Keith Fernandes, and R. Benedito Ferrão for their helpful comments and suggestions.
2 In Goa, the Konkani language is written chiefly in two scripts: the Roman script, which has a longer history of literary production from the sixteenth century, and the Nagari script, which was introduced from the nineteenth century, and which enjoys sole state patronage in contemporary Goa. This official support to the Nagari script is at the expense of the Roman script and the writers who use it. This exclusive treatment of the Nagari script has led to the emergence of contestations around scripts in the Goan public sphere (see J. K. Fernandes, “Citizenship Experiences of the Goan Catholics”; Desai 145–220).
3 This paper will make use of both, the original Nagari Konkani and the English versions. All quotations and references will be from the English translation (unless stated otherwise), followed by a parenthetical reference to the original Nagari Konkani text, as “Original”.
4 However, it must be mentioned that the Nagari text produces the names as persons in Goa would normally use them.
5 I have selected these news reports from the 1930s due to my familiarity with this archive. I am certain that newspapers of a later time would also have published similar reports.
6 The cuddis are a system of cheap and affordable lodgings, largely for Catholic working-class men. This system is, by and large, a communal form of living, where members share the responsibility of cooking and maintaining the premises. Each Goan village has its separate cuddi in a rented or owned space.
7 The debates in the press, especially those that immediately followed the ninth Congresso Provincial in 1929, followed the same logic as that found in Noronha Jr.’s Memória (see Sour-Grapes and D. C. Fernandes 12; C. D. Fernandes, “Correspondensam ‘Zabab’” 256; Mr. Cook 4). Other reports in the Goan press spoke of young girls who (apparently with the knowledge of their mothers) fraternized in the market places with the opposite sex; in fact, as these reports claimed, they visited markets solely to fraternize with boys. Moreover, these young women, who would dress up in attractive dresses (“atraentes medam”) and wear make-up were allegedly encouraged by their parents (see Bally Mergulhão Carvalho, “Potinincho Nett” 3; B. Mergulhão Carvalho, “Amcheo Ostoreo” 3).
8 Much of the discussion on the nature of the suspicion and anxiety that elite Goan intellectuals harbored against the Goan ayah comes from the writings of Catholic intellectuals. However, as will be noted below in the case of the kalavants, the suspicion and anxiety regarding the migrating Goan women was not just confined to the Catholic elite circles. Indeed, it is very obvious that the elite Catholic and Hindu classes of Goa equally shared in this anxiety of subaltern women migrating outside the boundaries of Goa for work. Rather than being an issue of religion, it is argued that this labeling of subaltern communities is a process tied to caste and class power. Thus, the labeling carried out in Nagari fiction of communities such as subaltern Catholics and Catholic women is also part of the caste and class dynamics in Goa.
9 These stereotypes are similar to those found in the representation of Goan Catholic men in Bollywood films. One can see how such stereotypes may have persisted and may have been
transmitted in different forms, considering that the Bollywood film industry in India is based in Bombay—a city where Goans migrated in large numbers from the nineteenth century (see N. Fernandes, “Morning You Play Different, Evening You Play Different”).

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