A Wall of Words: A Prologue to “The House Warming”

Heta Pandit

Language, like words, can be a great universal unifier or a divider. Language can be used to divide cultures, divide generations and either bring together or divide communities from one another. When I was working on the translation of the story ‘The Housewarming,’ written in Marathi by Manohar Hirba Sardessai, I not only saw the many divisions in the Goan society that I had become part of but also began to see how these divisions fitted into well-defined compartments. Here, words had become the walls that kept these compartments apart and reinforced the divide between them.

The late, eminent Konkani writer and thinker Mr. Chandrakant Keni, in a personal communication, once advised me to “understand the culture of the people you were translating.” He thought that unless one understood the cultural pool in which one was ankle deep, one could not pretend to know the waters. There is an ongoing debate in Goa over whether the local language Konkani is an actual language or merely a dialect of Marathi (which is spoken widely in the neighbouring state of Maharashtra). That is not the subject of this article.

When the erstwhile Portuguese government in Goa favoured the Portuguese language over Konkani and all primary education was imparted through the Portuguese-language Escolas Primárias, Goans became bilingual by default. They spoke Konkani at home and learnt Portuguese at school. To impart some culturally compatible “written” education to their young ones, Hindu Goans brought in Marathi teachers from neighbouring Maharashtra. Small classrooms under courtyard mango trees were set up to “home-school” the young ones of joint-family households in informal settings. Marathi teachers were treated as guests of the household at first and later as members of the household. Following the same logic, communicating in Marathi amongst Hindu Goans became both a pleasure and a necessity. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the author has chosen to write this story in Marathi.

Reading and writing in Marathi, in the Devanagari script, kept some people “in” just as it kept some others “out.” Knowledge of the Marathi language also became an asset when one migrated to neighbouring Maharashtra (earlier part of the Bombay Presidency) in search of work. The Housewarming is not just a story about a separation from one’s home and life in an alien environment. It is the story of the generation gap between a father and his son; of dependence, independence
and interdependence. When Damubab’s son Vasu says harshly “Commitments. Emotions. Sentiment. That’s for dolts.,” he is not just ridiculing his father for sticking fast to old-school values, he is also rejecting these values for himself.

A successful surgeon in Mumbai, Vasu does not wish to throw away his hard-earned money on repairs to the old house in the Goan village that he comes from. He prefers selective amnesia and does not want to be reminded of his roots. Having left the village of his ancestors when he was ten years old, for him the house in the village is a symbol of permanent loss, permanent destruction and what cannot and should not be resurrected. He surrounds himself with the trappings of wealth and modern life. He has servants, a wife and a young son, plus a car that takes him to a lucrative medical practice. His wife, Sharmishtha’s “bow-like eyebrows” becoming more “bow-like” when she hears that her father-in-law wishes to leave for the ancestral house draws us a word picture of both her deference to his wishes and her indifference to the outcome of such a journey.

That Damubab picks up the young child, his grandson, to hug and kiss on “both cheeks” as a gesture of farewell is also significant of a shift in culture. Tradition-bound Hindu Goans would have considered such a show of affection as a sign of weakness. Living in Bombay has not just changed Vasu, the surgeon son. It has even changed the way Damubab, who thrives on the memories of his life in the old house in the village, interacts with his own family.

Sharmishtha plays a role on the sidelines, only showing superficial concern for her father-in-law’s immediate welfare. This is an interesting aspect of the story only because when Damubab recalls his own childhood in the village house he seems to remember only the male members of the house! He recalls weddings held at the house and his father, uncles and grandfather, even the trees in the backyard, but none of the female members of the house.

Finally, at the end of the story, it is the crumbling old house and the ancient old trees that embrace a very lonely old man. “This-house-will-not-take-the-rain.” “This-house-will-not-last-the-monsoon,” the refrain that the thunder seems to be drumming on the roof is nothing but Damubab’s own heart, his own fear, his own invitation to Death. Damubab’s death apparently at the hands of a storm and the collapse of the old peepal tree and the loose stones over his sad, frail body speaks also of the death of Goan life in a remote village. It is not the collapsing house and the fall of a giant tree that kills Damubab in the story. It is out-migration, indifference to one’s roots and the neglect of culture that is killing the essential spirit of the Goan from Goa.

Heta Pandit (b.1954) is an independent researcher and writer based in Goa. She has 8 books on Goan architecture and several articles and lectures on the subject to her credit. Even her short fiction revolves around houses where the Goan house almost becomes a character in the stories. Ms. Pandit is fluent in four Indian languages including Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and Konkani. Her chosen language for writing is English and considers translating from Goa’s Marathi literature one of her most significant contributions to Goan literature.