The *Arco-Íris* between Goa and São Paulo: Joana's Life Narrative

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**Abstract.** In this narrative, Shelly Bhoil, Indian poet and scholar, resident in São Paulo, Brazil, tells the story of another long-time Indian resident in São Paulo, Joana Juliana Pinto Mascarenhas.

**Keywords:** Shelly Bhoil, Indian literature, Joana Mascarenhas, Brazil, Goa
'Life has come a long way from the simplicity of *dal-chawal* (lentil-rice) and *chapati-pappad* (Indian breads), hard iron beds, and hand-me-downs at my parents' cozy home that nestled eleven chirpy siblings in British-India to my now empty nest in Brazil! My kids have flown away from my nest as I had once from my parents.' Joana's tone is tinged with nostalgia as she recaps the 84 years of her life.

Joana Juliana Pinto Mascarenhas settled in the city of São Paulo in 1958. Her destiny as an immigrant is an offshoot of the political upheaval in the mid-twentieth century when a new political order was set upon Asia.

Joana’s House in Margão

Joana’s ancestral home-land Goa was one of Portugal’s possessions that it was trying to hold on to in the 1950s against the claims of the newly independent India. There was not only socio-political instability, but also unrest in commercial transactions in Goa. The tension led to an uprising in Dadra and Nagar Haveli in 1954. There were already large-scale sufferings in the sub-continent because of the Indo-Pak division. To escape the crises, several nervous Goans, some of whose stories remain undocumented left their homes. Joana and her husband, Armando Mascarenhas spent many sleepless nights scrutinizing the political situation before they decided to migrate to Portugal.

Armando belonged to one of the elite business families of Margão, Goa. He held a Portuguese Bilhete de Identidade (Identity card), issued by the Portuguese government to all those born in Goa before 1961, which came as a handy document for him to travel to Portugal. Besides, he had the benefit of being
educated in the Portuguese language. The migration of Goans to Portugal, and elsewhere, has been advantageous in a sense; however, it was, for many of them, a matter of destiny rather than choice, related to Goa’s political fate vis-à-vis that of Portugal. From one overseas territory of Portugal in Asia, Joana and Armando landed up in another former Portuguese territory in Latin America, both very far from each other.

Joana had an eventful life from the very start. She had come to see relatives in Goa from Karachi, where she was living at that time, when she first met her husband at a Christmas ball. Joana recollects the revelry: ‘All eyes were set on this charming bachelor, but his were fixed on me. I asked him if we had met
before, to which he replied, “Not here. We have met in another world!”” Armando asked Joana’s brother for permission to dance with her, and the two had the last dance at 5 am. Their love affair, which began when she was seventeen years old, Joana tells jauntily, ‘rocked the two cities of Karachi and Goa as it was uncommon in those days.’

Typical of fairytale romances, this one also has its adventures. Back then when girls left home in the protective company of male members of the family, and at a time when the frontiers were being closed in 1954 between India and Pakistan, twenty-one-year-old Joana traveled for her wedding from Karachi to Goa in a train full of soldiers. A man in her cabin mischievously suggested that she sleep next to him if she were afraid! With her stomach in knots, she sat on the upper berth, telling the beads of her rosary all night. Received by her prince charming in a Ford, Armando and Joana exchanged vows at Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa.

Armando left for Portugal, leaving behind his wife and two-and-half-year-old David, to establish himself. But he was advised that Brazil was the place of the future. Joined shortly by his family, the three left for the distant shores of Latin America in August 1958. Coming from the land of Mahatma Gandhi, the two were bombarded with questions on the culture and spirituality of India. They managed to nudge their way into the hearts of Brazilians on board, who insisted that they settle in São Paulo.

Joana never forgets the incident of losing their suitcase with its money, on their first day in Brazil. That they had lost the suitcase, and that it was returned to the docks by an honest Brazilian who found it on the road where it had fallen,
was to be the symbol of the difficulties they would face as immigrants and that they would overcome with the help of Brazilians.

Armando was hired by a foreign company, and Joana, being convent-educated, found work as a secretary and English teacher in São Paulo. While her husband was fluent in Portuguese, Joana overcame the language barrier in no time, taking inspiration from her unlettered mother who educated herself in English through the *London Weekly*. ‘My English language proficiency,’ she says, ‘served me as a survival weapon in Brazil.’ This is conspicuous because today language teaching is one of the less respected and least paid professions in Brazil.

Survival in a foreign land is also about culture, especially for women from conservative societies. Getting accustomed to greeting with kisses and embraces wasn’t easy for her, just as touching the feet of the elderly is unthinkable for Brazilians. As a woman, the contrast between the two cultures strongly influenced Joana. Women in her homeland were revered in their role as mothers, but the similar respect for women was missing in Brazil. However, women have been treated as the second sex and soft targets elsewhere too. She remembers being harassed several times by men in Karachi on her way to mass service. Joana was among the few privileged women in India to attend high school and work outside the home, but in Brazil she could discard the conservative codes for women and grow into her own fiercely independent person.

Accounts of migration are often replete with loss and unhappiness. But Joana doesn’t let her story take somber shades. Unable to meet her parents ever again, losing her young son David to the shores of Bahia in eastern Brazil, seeing the magic of her fairytale romance disappear from her life in the daily grind of earning a living, becoming the man of her house eleven years before her husband died in 1980, and the challenges of raising single-handedly her son, Leslie, and daughter, Legia, who were both born in Brazil, are some of the things Joana doesn’t like to talk about in detail. Instead, she digs a rosary out from her bag, given to her mother by a midwife at the time of Joana’s homebirth. Pressing its beads lovingly between her fingers, she says: ‘This rosary has been my mascot for decades, giving me strength at times of trouble.’

Stories of migration are often circumstance-driven, but the role of will power cannot be ruled out, especially now when we are global nomads. Joana’s story offers this worthwhile, alternate perspective to the narrative of migration. Determined to prove her mettle, she adopted a forward-looking attitude. She had ‘no time’ to miss home as she worked two jobs—office in the day and private tuitions in evenings. ‘Some wounds never heal and you never get over a few things. But your struggle,’ she insists, looking on the positive side, ‘makes you grow, which one must cherish. When I look back at my life, I feel proud of how I managed it all!’ Upon being asked how she managed the stress in her life, she heartily laughs, ‘Oh dear, the mind can perform its own acrobatics and spirit can let in poison. Let your mind be free, and see the path unfold!’

Does anything bother Joana at present? Yes, the complicated political overlaps in her identity, because of which her children can’t have access to their
father’s legacy in Goa! Born in Karachi, a part of British India, she moved to several Indian cities, was brought back to her ancestral land in the Portuguese colony of Goa after marriage, and then migrated to Brazil. Joana’s identity doesn’t fit into one easily defined national category. The antagonism of those who label her ‘Pakistani’ hurts her—“I was born before the birth of these nation-states. And the Karachi that I fondly remember from my childhood was a part of British India. The bureaucracy complicates my identity!”
When I suggest her identity is trans-national, she flings her hand up: ‘Whatever, but India feels innate in me and Brazil as an outer layer. India lies in the retina of my soul. From here come my certainties, my genetic code, my north and south; and it is here I return to when I feel outlandish or a stranger.’

It is for Joana’s bond with India that she co-founded the Indian Association of São Paulo in the mid-1980s with Prakash Shedonker (from the soon aborted State Bank of India in São Paulo) and a few more Indian families like the Dawars and the Nayars. Her Indian-ness is an open secret, and yet it is beyond the empathy of bureaucracy, which must adhere to geopolitics.

If something else bothers or doesn’t bother Joana, it is her age. ‘If the wrinkles of my experience show on me, it’s good. If they don’t, it’s even better,’ she winks, ‘I feel 60 at 84 years of age.’ Before I mistake it for her wish to remain youthful, she suggests that one must eat and live healthily in order to age gracefully without becoming a burden on others. Unsurprisingly, she works out, swims, drives, gives private tuitions, attends mass, travels around, indulges in reading and painting, and plans yet another trip—her sixth one—to India.

Joana believes ‘There is a quote . . . it is boring to be modern, now I want to be eternal. It is to our advantage that we are all mortal, but we can also be eternal in the memory of others, in the trees we plant or the books we write.’ *Arco-Íris*, which means rainbow, is her debut book of short stories that she published on her 80th birthday.

The octogenarian Joana Juliana Pinto Mascarenhas is one inspiring globalized woman immigrant, especially given the fact that her migration took place in a world that was being nationalized!

Note

1 A shorter version of this article was first published as “A Karachi-born Indian’s Quest for a ‘Casa’ in Brazil.” *The Quint*, 19 Mar 2018. https://www.thequint.com/voices/blogs/karachi-goa-immigrant-.

Joana Juliana Pinto Mascarenhas, 85 years old, is probably the first Indian immigrant in the 20th cent to have settled in the city of São Paulo in 1958. She is one of the founding members of the Indian Association of São Paulo, and author of a personal memoir-cum-short-story book titled *Arco-Íris* (2014).