**Extract from Hema Naik’s *Bhogdand***

Hema Naik

**Introduction**  
Augusto Pinto

*Bhogdand*, which means 'The Punishment for Lust' and was published in 1997, is a story of a lower-middle-class Christian family living in the village of Jua in Goa. The story is about Leslie who lives there in penury with his widowed mother Antonette. Leslie is an unemployed school dropout who idles his time away playing his guitar in the village. However, his fortunes change for the better when Newton, his late father’s friend, comes along. Leslie’s father had obliged Newton by lending him money when he wanted to go to Kuwait. On Newton’s visit to the family he notices their straitened circumstances and offers to take Leslie back to Kuwait with him and find him a job.

After getting to Kuwait, Leslie begins sending money back to Goa and soon enough Antonette gets busy repairing her house and arranging a match for Leslie. She proposes a match for Leslie with Gemma the daughter of friends from the village who also live in penury. The match is accepted eagerly by Gemma’s parents who see it as a way of raising themselves and their daughter out of their misery. What they do not realize however is that Gemma already has a boyfriend in the college where she studies and is not keen on this match. However, Gemma agrees to the marriage for the sake of her parents but soon after the marriage she resumes her trysts with her friend Andrew.

Migration as a means of freedom from the difficulties of Goan life is something which has happened for ages for a variety of reasons. The story of *Bhogdand* is one which highlights the problems which families faced when they migrated to Arabian Gulf countries like Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, a trend which accelerated after the oil boom around the nineteen seventies. Many Goans migrated there attracted by the salaries which offered them the hope of escaping the unemployment and poverty they faced in Goa. But while those in executive level posts could take their wives and families with them, those working at the lower end of the economic spectrum as drivers, cooks and servants in the houses of Arabs had to leave their spouses behind for periods of at least two years at a time. This sometimes led to frustrated spouses...
having affairs with lovers either back home or abroad. Bhogdand tells the story of one such couple.

The extract chosen describes the day of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait but also gives an idea of the kind of lives that Goans who worked as domestic servants had to endure.

Leslie
(An Extract from Chapter 19 of Bhogdand by Hema Naik)

Leslie’s mind traveled back to the past.

It was the second of August at around six thirty in the morning when Leslie awoke. As he usually did when he woke up, he thought about his wife Gemma. He began wondering: what is she doing today? Today’s Thursday, tomorrow’s Friday—Jummah, the day after is Saturday and then it’s Sunday. He got his weekly off on Sunday which was when he went out for Mass. There he’d meet friends from Goa and they’d get to talking among themselves and they’d tease him about Gemma. That outing was the thing he liked best about life there.

He got out of his mullak—the mullaks being the servants’ rooms. He lived in one of them with the driver while the next mullak was shared by the gatekeeper and the watchman. Nazrul the gatekeeper had already gone out while Imran the night watchman was sound asleep.

Leslie went to the bungalow where he worked as a cook and set about making breakfast in the kitchen for the Saab and the other occupants of the house. That’s when some tumult could be heard from the house. The Saab, who was the head, and other members of the household could be heard excitedly speaking to each other in Arabic while pointing outside. At first Leslie couldn’t figure out what was happening. Like the others he too lifted his head and looked outside. There he could see what he thought were armed Kuwaiti soldiers patrolling the streets. But when he looked closely he realized that they were wearing a different kind of uniform which was when he understood that they weren’t Kuwaiti but rather Iraqi soldiers.

From a distance the sound of gunshots could be heard. On the streets armoured personnel carriers could be seen moving around carrying soldiers with assault rifles in their hands. Tanks and other armoured vehicles with weapons could also be seen moving around. In the distance the sound of bombs exploding could be heard. At the gate Nazrul was quaking with fear, but he had no permission to come inside the house. He walked outside the gate for a while and then came inside the gate. All the Kuwaitis inside the house were terribly afraid. From their conversations Leslie began to piece together a few things: that dawn, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait and had seized the Kuwaiti royal palace and the oil fields. The Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jaber had fled to Saudi Arabia. When the Iraqi forces entered the royal palace there was a pitched battle. The brother of the Emir, Sheikh Fahad Al Ahmed was killed at the entrance of the palace itself. The battle between the Kuwaiti and Iraqi soldiers didn’t last long
because the Kuwaitis were outnumbered five to one. In this battle about six hundred Kuwaiti soldiers and civilians were killed and many were wounded. Saddam Hussein got control of Kuwait and now he was said to be planning to invade Saudi Arabia. The Kuwaitis were terrified of the Iraqi soldiers, and this was particularly so with the members of the Emir's family who were being sought out by the Iraqi forces and either arrested or killed.

The family for whom Leslie was a cook and servant were Kuwaiti Arabs. While all of them were Arabs, they belonged to different tribes. Some belonged to the elite Sabah tribe who were a small minority. Others belonged to the Saudi tribe, while some of them were Iranian by descent. They were all fair skinned. Besides, there were the Arabs of Kuwaiti descent who were darker in colour. The Bedouins were something altogether different and were looked down upon by the other Kuwaitis. Leslie's Saab was probably either a Saudi or Iranian Arab. He was as fair as *khubz*, the bread of Kuwait, but rather coarse too. He had a protruding belly but due to his height he had a presence as imposing as the date palm tree at the entrance of the house. In his demeanour he could be kindly but most of the time he was quick to anger, arrogant and had little patience. But then, tolerance and patience weren't virtues which the Kuwaitis were noted to possess.

The *Saab* was the head of his house but besides him there was a brother or brother-in-law who was six times more arrogant and hot-tempered than him. Leslie was intensely frightened of him. He appeared to be a bachelor. There were two women who he guessed must be the wives of the *Saab*. They had two children, one seven and the other nine years old. Currently both were with an uncle in America, where they were holidaying, as their exams were over and it was vacation time for schools in Kuwait. Every vacation they would go and stay in America. In a few days time, Leslie's *Saab* and his two wives were due to go to America too. The children not being in the house made Leslie's life a lot easier for when they were around he had to constantly be at their beck and call. There were also the *Saab's* elderly mother and an aged aunt. She was probably a widowed sister of the *Saab's* father's. To serve these people there were four employees: Leslie the Goan who was a cook and housekeeper; Nazrul the Bangladeshi gatekeeper; Imran the Pakistani watchman and Ratna the Sri Lankan driver.

There were four cars in the house: a Mercedes, a Cadillac, a BMW and a limousine. The stretch limousine was the biggest of them all—four times the size of an Indian Ambassador. These cars would be changed every two years. Apart from the children and the elderly women everybody in the house could drive. When the old women wanted to go out, then Ratna would chauffeur them around. When either of the *Saab's* wives took the cars out the two elderly women would fervently begin praying 'Allah! Allah!'. Leslie found this a little puzzling at first but later his roommate Ratna told him that the *Saab's* wives would drive very recklessly and had at least four accidents so far. It was for this reason that the elderly women would pray to Allah.

*Saab's* villa was a spacious two storied bungalow of twelve rooms. Around the bungalow was a ten-meter-high compound wall. There was a big gate which
was manned by Nazrul. Around the house there was a lot of land where date palm trees were planted the way coconut trees were planted in Goa. Besides this, plants had been grown and there were a variety of flowers many of which he could not recognize. At one end of the compound was a garage where the vehicles were kept and at the other end were the servants’ mullaks.

The work in the bungalow was systematically divided among the workers. There could be no dishonesty when it came to work: if there was any then one could expect no mercy. Everything was done by order and every order had to be followed faithfully.

When Leslie came here for the first time he was utterly petrified. Uncle Newton had got him to the Saab without having to go through an agency. As he did in Goa, in Kuwait too Uncle Newton helped him in a variety of ways such as getting the fingerprinting, the medical certificates, the blood tests, the chest x-rays and other such chores done. After introducing Leslie to the Saab, Uncle Newton stepped into the background for once the Saab was done with Newton he didn’t want him to be with Leslie anymore and had no hesitation in bluntly telling him so. Before leaving, Uncle Newton told Leslie, “We’ll meet at the Church after Mass on Sundays.” After Uncle Newton, who had shepherded him so far, left, Leslie began to feel very lonely. Newton had guided him about how to behave and speak and warned him about a hundred things. But whenever he had to personally face these situations he would begin to get nervous. For a while he thought to himself that it would have been better to slog it out in Goa, for all said and done one could live a stress-free life there. But what was the use of thinking all this? Now that he had leapt into this sea he would have to somehow learn to swim in it. The other workers in the mullaks recognized the sombre state he was in for they too had faced more or less the same situation when they first came here. They all tried to lift Leslie’s spirits up, especially his roommate Ratna the driver.

Slowly he began to get used to the house routine. Although he was brought here as a cook he had no idea about how to cook Kuwaiti food. The elderly women and the Saab’s wives taught him a couple of times how to cook various Kuwaiti dishes. They showed him what ingredients were used for a particular dish, and in what quantities spices had to be used. Later Leslie learned to cook these dishes independently. Unlike Goans, Arabs weren’t fond of spicy food. Their food was on the sweetish side and usually fish and meats, especially chicken and mutton, were a must. They were very fond of biriyani and they had the habit of squeezing a lime over their food. Zubaidi, which was a big pomphret, and hamour, a big sea fish, were their favourites, as were king prawns.

Arabs liked everything big: big villas, big cars, big necklaces, and big rings. Ratna would say: “Arabs have big everything!” And Leslie would chuckle at this—but they’d never dare laugh at an Arab on the face. The Arabs could not tolerate anyone making fun of them, and it was certainly unthinkable on the part of a servant. If he did do that he could land in a police lockup or be deported.
Once Leslie found himself in just such a situation when he happened to be playing with the Saab’s two children. Those children’s play consisted of ordering Leslie around: he had to lift a toy when they asked him to lift it and put it down when they told him to do so. Leslie spoke with them using a broken Arabic. He would utter a few Arabic words here and then a few English words there—it was a merry mixed salad. While he was speaking he happened to utter the word for camel which made the boys ask him again what he said. Leslie thought that they didn’t understand so he got down on his hands and knees and tried to imitate a camel and he said, ‘camel’. On hearing this the two youngsters, flushing pink as Arabian dates, went to their mothers inside. They were watching television and he still couldn’t recognize which of them was the mother. But both of them came and accosting Leslie accused him, “Have you been teasing my children by calling them camels?” Leslie was terrified and didn’t understand what was happening except that he had made some mistake. He began to blabber: “It won’t happen again. I had no idea…” Luckily both regained their calm for perhaps they felt that watching their television programme was more important than devising a punishment for Leslie. So Leslie managed to escape scot-free.

That night while having supper in the malluk Ratna explained to Leslie the significance of the incident that had occurred that day. Apparently, there was a time when Arabs would use the camel to travel around the desert. It was the proverbial ship of the desert. The more camels the Arab owned the wealthier he was. While traveling through the desert they would often face severe shortages of water. When their thirst would become unbearable, to save their lives, they would kill their camels and drink the water that the animal would store in a sac in its belly. But then the Arabs discovered oil in the deserts and in the sea around. Those oil wells became the hens that began to lay golden eggs for them and they completely transformed their lives. Now the camel became the symbol of a past which was pockmarked by poverty. They were ashamed to admit the significance these camels had for them in the past and drove them out of sight. Nowadays in populated areas it was rare to see a camel as it was banned from moving on the roads. In rural areas they were still used but in urban areas there was no sign of them. The Arabs considered themselves to be high class people and they would get furious if anyone insulted them by calling them camels.

After that incident Leslie made a resolution not to utter the word ‘camel’ ever again and never to get involved with those two children if he could help it. Come to think about it, they were children but in name, for they were quite adult in their appetites: they could gobble an entire tandoori chicken in no time and each would take from the oven two khubz loaves that were the size of a man’s lap and polish them off without much effort. Like the adults they could crack and eat dates but they were even more moody and bad tempered than the elders. Currently they were in America as it was their holidays and for this reason Leslie was hugely relieved.
Leslie’s *Saab* was a businessman who had interests in the petroleum industry and he was also an importer of foreign goods. In both these businesses his brother assisted him. Their forefathers had quite a different profession—they would extract pearls from the seabed. One of them was a particularly expert diver and there were photographs depicting him in action in the house. Seeing those pictures Leslie would recall the time when he went diving in the village wells during the feast of Saint John the Baptist and how he had once almost lost his life in the process.

Every morning Leslie would go to his *Saab* and wish him *Salaam Alaikum* and offer him a cup of hot tea before beginning his daily routine. That day too, he had prepared the tea but he didn’t have the courage to say *Salaam Alaikum* for his boss was in a foul mood—angry but frightened too. Chewing at his lips he kept muttering *Khallas! Khallas!* His sighs unnerved the rest of the household even more and given that those upon whom he depended were in a state of shock, Leslie state became even more pitiable.

Suddenly the telephone rang and everyone missed a heartbeat. The phone kept ringing but nobody attempted to pick up the phone and just looked at each other in confusion. Then the *Saab* called out to Leslie who came running forward. Pointing to the phone he told him in Arabic:

“Pick it up and answer it.”

“*I?*” said Leslie trembling.

“Yes. And tell the person calling that the *Saab* isn’t at home,” the *Saab* ordered Leslie.

Leslie lifted the receiver and listened. He could hear a strange voice speaking in Arabic asking for the *Saab* and wanting to know where he was. Leslie replied that he wasn’t there. The man again asked the same question and Leslie gave the same reply. As soon as the man ended the call Leslie put the phone down. The *Saab* then told him that henceforth he was to take all the phone calls and say that the *Saab* wasn’t home. Of all the jobs that he had to do till now Leslie felt that this was the most difficult. Usually his *Saab* and the members of his household treated him well but in these changed circumstances they too changed. Leslie feared the change inside the house even more than the changes that were happening outside.

The *Saab* was hot tempered by nature but he used to be kind to Leslie. At first Leslie used to be terrified of getting a scolding from the *Saab* but later he began to experience some of the softer sides of his nature. When he was happy with Leslie’s work he would at times give him a generous tip. After about two years of working there he had earned the trust of the *Saab* as well as of the other members of the house and in particular the women of the house. At the time when he came to know that Leslie would be going to go back to Goa to get married the *Saab* gave him 1250 dinars, which was about 50,000 rupees, as a present. Leslie realized that if he behaved well, he could with confidence expect them to treat him well, and he had stayed with them now for about three and a half years. But all this was about to change.
That night in the mullaks Imran, Rehman, Ratna and Leslie all got together. Their hearts were full of fear.

When the next day dawned, the Saab put the women in a car and sent them far away to some relatives where they would be safer. The fact that the children were in America was a great relief for him. The house was almost empty. Now there were just the Saab, his brother and the servants left in it. And there used to be so many people always in and out. Such a huge house! And what a house it was when it was full - it used to be always abuzz. Without realizing it Leslie had become very fond of this place and there was nothing surprising about that. He had prayed that this house of whose salt he had partaken would always remain wealthy. But now it seemed to be facing doom.

Leslie’s recalled how the diwaniya of the house used to get full—this was in the reception area of the house where the Saab’s family, his relatives and his friends would gather. At the diwaniya people were received and would share news, they would joke, eat, sing and dance. Leslie liked these occasions very much. Every ten to fifteen days a diwaniya would be hosted at the Saab’s house. In the summer a tent would be put up outside the house and the diwaniya would be held there. Just like in the Saab’s house, diwanis were held at other houses too and the Saab and his family would go there. Leslie hadn’t seen the diwanis at these other houses, but at this bungalow he had observed them being held. As he went around pouring tea, passing around the hookah and serving food, he would overhear their conversations. He couldn’t understand too much of this but he used to enjoy their songs and their dances which used to remind him of the mandos and dulpods of Goa. At times he’d feel that all music was one, for in their music too there were instruments like dholaks and violins. Leslie felt that if he could lay his hands on a guitar he too could have played along. Perhaps if his Saab came to know of his talent he might have allowed him to play, but this only remained a wish. One thing for sure, those diwanis used to fascinate Leslie.

Leslie began to wonder whether there ever would be a diwaniya in this house again and if there would, whether he would be there to witness it.

There was no way of finding out what was happening outside but still the driver Ratna had ventured out and brought one piece of news: foreigners working in Kuwait had begun to flee the country. All four began to contemplate doing the same. But Ratna said: “It’s not possible.” The other three looked at Ratna questioningly. He said: “Our passports are with the Saab and all that we have are our identity cards. What Ratna said was true: if they wanted to flee they had to have their passports otherwise at the border check posts they were bound to be arrested and thrown into some jail where they would rot. Either the Saab should give them back their passports or they had to go and ask him for them. But in these circumstances who had the courage to approach and ask him this?

—Traduzido de Konkani por Augusto Pinto
Augusto Pinto is an associate professor in the Department of English of S. S. Dempo College of Commerce and Economics in Goa. He is a book reviewer and essayist. He also translates from Konkani to English and has recently translated *The Salt of the Earth: Stories from Rustic Goa* (2017), a collection of short stories by award-winning Konkani writer Jayanti Naik. He has also co-edited and translated stories in *Monsoon Winds: Stories from Goa* (2016).

Hema Naik writes fiction in Konkani and translates from other languages into Konkani. Her work has received state and national prizes, including that of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. She has been active for the last 45 years in the literary, cultural and social field as a writer, editor, publisher, and producer of drama and film. She introduced a feminist trend into her literary work, drama and film which she believes has enlightened Goan women. She won the Sahitya Akademi award in 2002 for her novel *Bhogdand*. 