

**Goan Literature from Peter Nazareth:  
An Interview  
(8 November 1984)  
Charles C. Irby**

*Peter Nazareth is an associate professor in the English Department and the Afroamerican Studies Program at the University of Iowa. His job includes being an advisor to the International Writing Program, which brings published writers from thirty to forty countries to Iowa City each fall. During the fall of 1984, he accompanied Michael Anthony (Trinidad) and Flora Nwapa (Nigeria) to Iowa State University for readings, and it was a golden opportunity to get some insights about the growth and development of both Goan literature and its primary catalytic agent to date.*

*Goa, for those without a sense of geography or knowledge of the colonized world before 1960, is located on the west coast of the Indian Sub-Continent. It was a Portuguese colony from about 1510 until 1961, when it was taken over by India. Since 1962, Goa, along with Daman and Diu, forms a Union Territory of the Republic of India. Consequently, Goan literature developed out of a colonial heritage.*

*In a letter dated 23 November 1984, Nazareth tells of the most important things to have happened to him recently: (1) he was elected Vice President of the African Literature Association and will become President in March of 1985; (2) his second novel, *The General Is Up*, was published in October, 1984, (in India); (3) he received the 1984 Distinguished Independent Study Course Award from the National University Continuing Education Association for a study guide, *Literatures of the African Peoples*; and (4) a book of criticism, *Selected Essays* was published, in translation, by Europa Publishing House in Budapest, Hungary, in October of 1984. The book consists of selected essays on African literature.*

*In the exorcised parts of the interview, Nazareth credits the late Professor Charles Davis for his fellowship at Yale University (after In*

a Brown Mantle was published) and his move to the University of Iowa. He also talked about his ancestral origins—some of which remains intact here. Nazareth was born in Uganda, and went to Goa twice as a child. The interview begins with his perceptions of Goa as an African of Goan ancestry.

CI: What recollection do you have of Goa?

PN: I have some mythic memories of Goa which are reinforced by members of my family who have been there. I remember, for example, that we had to travel over a lot of water to get to Goa. We crossed on a big ship from Mombasa in Kenya to Bombay, and then on a smaller ship which took us to Goa. It was a country chiefly of old people, because the young went and worked outside; there were a lot of people dying and you would hear the church bells tolling.

CI: How did Goa fit your East African paradigm?

PN: In East Africa, the colonial system took a racial form, and it seemed that people's class position was a form of racial identity. Goans were civil servants: that seemed to be the Goan characteristic. And black Africans were low on the colonial hierarchy, inferior. This was a justification for colonial rule: the white people were ruling because they were supposed to be culturally, racially, and morally superior. I was astonished when I went to Goa the first time to see Goans along the whole range of classes, even workers and peasants who wore something called a *kashti*, a little loin cloth. The men, I mean.

CI: So you grew up with Goans?

PN: Yes, I did. I went to a Goan primary school in Entebbe, which is a small civil service town. I went to secondary school in Kampala, an Indian secondary school (Goans were not considered to be Indian). In those days, Goans used to be sent after primary education to Goa or to India. My father decided not to send me away because he felt I would grow apart from the family. After the Indian secondary school, I was very keen on going to the local University, Makerere, which was affiliated with London University. I was one of the earliest Asians (meaning East Indian) to be admitted. I could have gone to England to study, and everybody was telling my father to send me there, but again my father did not want me to grow away from the family. So you can see my experience with racial stratification. In spite of all this, a kind of racial intermingling took place. Language was affected.

When Goans speak we make this chirping sound, which they do in the West Indies, too. It's an African sound to express displeasure or anger; it's almost a curse. We had servants and I was, to a large extent, brought up by an *ayah* (nannie). I'm not saying that this is the best kind of intermingling, but it is wrong to think that we merely lived in a communal bubble. I traveled by bus many times, or by taxi, the taxi that picks up passengers, which carried mainly Africans. We would communicate in some fashion in Kiswahili.

CI: Tell me about the development and propagation of Goan literature.

PN: I got to Goan literature very late in my career. My degree and graduate work are in English literature. I got really interested in African literature, of which I am a part. I know a number of the African writers. Ngugi wa Thiong'o was at Makerere with me and then later at Leeds, and I began to read a lot of African literature and to contribute to it. After all I was living in Africa. I am an African. I was also an editor of *Penpoint*, a seminal literary journal at Makerere. While working for the Ministry of Finance in the late sixties, I felt that we could all make better decisions if we knew, imaginatively, what was going on: so I read a lot of African literature. I extended my interest to Indian literature, whatever was written or available in English.

When I came to this country I began to learn as much as I could about Afroamerican literature, because outside this country you just know a handful of Afroamerican writers—say Baldwin and Richard Wright. I didn't know there was this great wealth of black American literature, very diverse, very complex, very entertaining: that's what I began to read when I came to the U.S. Goan literature was not at the front of my mind when I arrived. It was almost an accident that I got invited to edit an issue of the *Journal of South Asian Literature* on Goan literature.

The invitation was made across the lunch table at Michigan State University, where I gave a lecture to the faculty entitled "Time in the Third World." I didn't hear the invitation correctly, and I agreed to it. Much later, I discovered what it was I had agreed to, and I was going to write back to say that I couldn't do it. I didn't know Goan literature. But there was an Indian writer in our Program, Dilip Chitre, who had been to Goa and knew Goan writers, and he told me to give it a shot. So, I said, "All right, let me try." I didn't know then what I know now: namely, how difficult it was. I discovered that Goan writers did exist.

They were spread out all over the world and they had written in at least fourteen different languages. Konkani, the Goan mother tongue, is written in at least three different scripts: Roman, Devanagari and Kannada.

The task seemed beyond me. I found out that when you try to get things done in Goan literature, people just don't move very fast. I was used to moving quickly. I worked fast in the civil service; I could move fast in African literature, as a critic and writer of fiction. But with Goan literature, it was like swimming through mud. I had many moments of discouragement and almost gave up. The only thing that kept me at it was that the Afroamerican Studies Program gave me a research assistant, Joseph K. Henry, a black American, and I was obliged to give him work. I gave him materials I had received from Goan writers. Being a black American, Henry could understand colonial alienation and displacement, the elements that figured in Goan writing. At the same time, he was an outsider and could point out to me what in the work was valuable and what was not. We kept each other working at the literature. We got to the point where we were ready and we did produce the volume. I gave Joseph Henry credit in the anthology; his name is up there with mine, "Assisted by Joseph K. Henry," because I believe strongly that people must be given credit for what they do. If a person has been a research assistant, give that person full credit; I don't believe that I lose anything. On the contrary, I gain something. I told Joe that when I receive flak, as I probably will from Goan writers, I'll put him out in front. Goans are polite to non-Goans, but very vicious to one another. They would say, "We cannot be so rude, he's an outsider, he's a black American." That's half a joke, but it's also half serious.

And Joe has benefitted too. He gave a presentation on Goan literature on a panel I chaired in 1982 at the Eleventh Annual Conference on South Asia, held at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He focused on a novel by Leslie de Noronha, *The Mango and the Tamarind Tree*. His paper is being published in India in *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*. Joe is thus bringing an Afroamerican perspective to Goan literature in India.

The response to the anthology has been good. The first edition sold out in a year, and now we are in the process of preparing a second edition. A second edition, not just a second printing, with a new introduction, an updated bibliography, and corrections to

typographical errors.

CI: What's the name of the second edition?

PN: The journal is the *Journal of South Asian Literature* published by Michigan State University at East Lansing and the issue is called *Goan Literature: A Modern Reader*. We are focusing on the modern period although there are inescapable references to the past. We do not call it "Modern Goan Literature"—we call it "A Modern Reader." The past is in the present. Still, it's in the modern period that I can operate best.

Professor John Hobgood of Chicago State University calls Goans "cultural brokers." There may be some truth in that term because I am able to take something from one literature to another, to take strengths, perspectives, and energy because colonial rule means a loss of energy. This idea is expressed in Ishmael Reed's novel, *Flight to Canada*. We think of energy in terms of the energy of the earth, bauxite, gold, uranium, oil—energy that's taken away from the third world and brought to the first world. But there is also psychic energy that's taken away. I've come to the conclusion that a loss of psychic energy occurred over generations of colonial rule. How do you get it back?

Ishmael Reed said in an interview I did with him that the highest form of multiculturalism is when you look at another culture in order to understand your own. I was able to take these energies from my involvement with black American, Caribbean, and African literature and use them to resurrect Goan literature, to bring it to a point where it can take off. No other Goan writer was able to do it. So, paradoxically, my Goan identity gets affirmed. And why not? Why should I be only one thing and not another? I'm an African writer of Goan origin, but I've lived in the United States eleven years and that's also part of me. I'm not going to deny any of it. I'm not going to say that this leads to a cultural crisis of identity. No, I will be all these things, creatively.

CI: Let's hope so, because all of us are more than one thing. The question I wanted to ask, which you've already answered in part, is: Do you find the things you know from African and Afroamerican literature to be helpful rather than limiting in the process of developing Goan literature?

PN: It is like opening a door that swings both ways. Let me give an example: I love the music of Elvis [Presley] at his best. When I was at Makerere doing English honors, the professors looked down on me for liking rock 'n roll. Today, I'm still discovering how much Elvis took from other singers, chiefly black but also white, and the list is endless: Big Mama Thornton, Little

Richard, Lowell Fulson, Chuck Berry, Mario Lanza . . . . Elvis had an influence on the Beatles and others. So, Elvis is an anthology, he is a carrier. Through him, I can enter worlds I could never have entered before, because, for example, I would never have heard of Big Mama Thornton. Something or somebody can be a carrier of other things if one's mind is open. It can be a bit scary because we like to have fixed concepts and inhabit fixed worlds.

My approach to the Goan anthology was not to enclose things, not to enter a cage and put up a sign saying, "This is mine, keep off." This anthology opens things up because I have a broad perspective. I'm the one who provides the pattern and puts things there. But then a lot of the literature is Goan and more than Goan. There is Violet Dias Lannoy who was born in Mozambique, lived in Goa, and died in England. I have a story by her in the anthology set completely in Kenya among the Gikuyu. I've discovered that she wrote a novel, *Pears of the Willow Tree*, that was praised by Richard Wright; she completed the novel in his house in France and apparently he was going to see it through publication, but then he died. His death was a blow to black Americans, but as it turns out, and I discovered this years later, it was a blow to a Goan writer who did not get anything published in her lifetime. I'm against things being closed-in. "This is mine" can also be "divide and rule." Once before, you were denied knowledge of your own group, yourself, your past, your culture, your history. The moment you began to realize it and retrieve it, the same whimsical force says, "Well that's yours, that's all you can have." That's dangerous too. That's why I support the idea of true multiculturalism, because we are all multicultural.

CI: What psychic experience does Goan literature have for you in a deep cultural sense?

PN: I was quite wrong to not want to find out about it earlier. It's a good thing I was forced into it. Maybe it was not an accident, maybe the time was right. I needed to know that part of Goan culture and history important to me and to my family; why they came to be where they were, why we think the way we do. I've been very catholic with this anthology. Although I started out by saying I'm an African writer not a Goan writer, I did include an extract from my own work in this anthology. There were some other writers, like the late Raul Furtado who died in Toronto last year; if you look at his collections of stories and poems, you would be hard put to say he's a Goan writer. He has a story set in

Chicago, the heart of which is a jazz solo, and it could be any good writer who wrote it. He has a poem he wrote in tribute to Martin Luther King, published in *The Journal of Negro History*.

My writing could be both African and Goan—although I say primarily African, because I was influenced in my writing style by other African writers, by friends and colleagues, by the kind of openness you find in East African writing, by the environment. Editing the Goan anthology was a very good psychic experience. As I was involved in the process of gathering-in the literature, my own psyche, my own experience, my own consciousness were part of the problem of perception; so, I made myself part of that literature. We are not only involved in writing literature but also we are part of it. I began to feel the responsibility to make it happen. I felt like a dog that had grabbed a bone that was buried and although I couldn't pull it out I wasn't going to let go of it. I finally did pull it out. It's a very important psychic experience. I edited an anthology of Goan literature rather than Fijian literature, because Goan literature was of fundamental importance to me—it had to be; I saw a kinship the moment I came across the material. When other Goans saw there was somebody who was going to do it, somebody with some reputation, I got a great response. It's as if there were people waiting for this to happen.

You see the editor, too, is an artist. The editor is an artist who brings something into existence.

CI: So, you became a catalyst.

PN: Of course, the process hasn't ended. I brought it to life, but I have to continually give it life. I'm a critic so I have written about it and presented papers. A long critique I have written on the anthology has been accepted for publication by *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and *World Literature Today*. I realized a while back you have to train yourself for things. You have to recognize what you don't know and then begin re-educating yourself. The process never really ends. When I discovered in England that I had been miseducated, that the mother country was not what I had been led to believe, it was a major crisis for me. There wasn't the literature at that time to deal with the crisis—there is now, and I've been one of the people involved in developing it. It took me about three years to do a basic re-education. The same thing began to happen with the Goan anthology. When I tried to move at the same speed at which I moved with African literature, it just wasn't working. I had to retrain myself: I had to build up Goan

muscles, you might say. I began to write short reviews of Goan books for *World Literature Today*. I began to write about Goan literature slowly until I got to a point where I had the confidence that I could do more. The Goan anthology took nearly seven years to produce whereas I edited *African Writing Today*, a double issue of *Pacific Moana Quarterly*, in less than three years.

Somebody might say that the level of my writing on Goan literature is lower than the level at which I'm writing, for example, on Ishmael Reed. Someone might say that. I wouldn't say that because a critic can do many different things. I haven't come across a Goan work that is technically as complex as anything by Ishmael Reed. But one may turn up. I may make it turn up by keeping this anthology in existence. I have a credibility, and the next time around more Goan materials may come to me. I am now going to receive a copy of the novel I mentioned—by Violet Dias Lannoy, praised by Richard Wright. I don't think Wright would praise something that was just garbage. The novel is going to become available because of this anthology. I have already received from her husband a copy of a novella she wrote, *The Murmur in the Depth of the River*. It is a fine work, and Flora Nwapa has expressed an interest in publishing it.

There are other kinds of by-products. Goa was taken over by India in 1961 and there's still argument as to whether it was re-integrated or whether it was captured; but whatever it was, there are neighboring states that want to swallow-up Goa. A chief minister of a neighboring state said something like, "Goans don't exist as a people; where is their literature?" I have provided the answer. Politicians in Goa who may not like the anthology, or who may not read it, can pick it up and hold it up and say, "Here it is." It has weight and force. If they read the book, their minds will be opened. Even the writers who are in it will see a much vaster world than they had imagined, because writers can also be limited by the traps of their history; they can have tunnel vision, too. I found a number of Goan writers who are very good but in a narrow way. I'm the one who says, "Hey, look, there's a broader world out there of which you are a part, but you don't realize it. Now see it." And that writer won't be the same again, I hope.

CI: Are there Goans in Goa writing literature now, or are they all expatriates?

PN: There would be something radically wrong if they were all expatriates. Although the colonial forces leading to emigration are still extant, there are writers inside and there are writers



outside. One of the problems has been of not putting the experiences together. I take as my model here something from Ngugi's novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. Those in the detention camps during the guerilla freedom fight in the fifties think that those outside are having a good time, and vice-versa. *They needed to put the experiences together* and realize that they all had hard times because of the same oppressive force. Goans in Goa tended to think that those who went outside had a good time, became exploiters, or vanished; they became un-Goan in some way. Those outside tended to think that those who stayed inside were compromised, mediocre, or lazy. All this must be put together to create a dialogue. That's what I've done in this anthology. A Goan leader, Luis de Menezes Braganza, said in the late thirties that he sometimes thought the youth had to leave Goa just to breathe the air of the times, so intense was the colonial exploitation. Some people went away just so they could deal with the colonial situation, but you know they cannot come back easily. The process of return is a complex one.

CI: Especially to the same kind of situation.

PN: This Goan anthology is a kind of return, more complex than a physical return. I have used as the epigraph to the anthology a quotation from Desmond Hogan, an Irish novelist: "a momentum leading towards exile and an exile always pivoting on the point of return." I have not physically gone back to Goa. Not that I don't want to go. I want to go back to Africa, too. And Michel Haddad, a poet in our present session of the International Writing Program, a writer from Nazareth, Israel, tells me I must come to visit *my* town. How many places can I go back to? Well, as a writer I can go back to all. And as a writer, I have an advantage that few other writers have, because the colonial experience was a world-wide phenomenon. Why did the Uganda economy become dependent on cotton? The answer cannot be found within Uganda itself. The mills in England were afraid that the United States would at some point stop selling high grade cotton to England. India couldn't produce high grade cotton at that time, and the land in Egypt was limited. So, don't let Ugandans grow rubber, make them grown cotton. The Ugandans couldn't find out why the economy was dependent on cotton until they took in the whole picture. The basis for the whole picture is in my consciousness. *I have to think of Uganda, and Goa, and India, and Malaysia.* I grew up on American music—country music, blues, jazz, and so forth. I had a British

education. I have a potential advantage if I use it.

CI: You have a good position to use it, too, since the world comes to you at Iowa City.

PN: [W.E.B.] DuBois talked of the double consciousness, and in a recent issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, Ishmael Reed, reviewing a book by John Wideman, mentions “triple consciousness.” I agree with that: it’s not only double but also can be triple, quadruple, and more. This kind of consciousness is both a reality and strength. A monolithic mold can destroy you. I don’t want someone to come to me and say, “Look, you’re a Goan, you’ve got to love only Goan music, you cannot love the blues.” I grew up on the blues, and I cannot imagine listening to music without the blues; if I must choose, I’d choose the blues rather than the Goan *mando*. But I don’t want to choose, I want to have both.

CI: I’m not sure a dualistic culture is any better than a monoculture in the final analysis.

PN: You are using “dualistic” with a different meaning from DuBois’s “double consciousness.” I agree. Dualism is one of the problems with the Western approach to Africa and the Third World countries—the imposition of a Manichaeian world: good and evil, black and white. The absolutes—the evil is out there and the good is in here—is one of the most dangerous concepts that Europe has produced; it was the means by which one could totally exterminate “the other.” If you wanted to grab their land you could exterminate them because you said they were, by definition, evil. If you have multiple perspectives, you cannot easily dismiss other people as evil with no right to be alive. You’d say to yourself, “Well, maybe I don’t know them. But there might be something in me that can relate to that somebody out there whose culture I don’t know.”

CI: I think the idea of creating Goan literature, even though it exists, is really a fascinating concept. Too frequently too many Afro-american, for example, see black literature as protest literature rather than see the complexities represented.

PN: I found in Goan literature multiple qualities and themes and subjects and psyches—for example, ghost stories, which you find in Latin cultures, and a radical leftist approach to land alienation in Goa. I say “Let’s have all these.” Although I don’t like colonialism, I cannot wave a wand and say that it didn’t happen and didn’t affect our psyches. Every culture has multiple things in it, multiple possibilities. The Portuguese who came and conquered Goa and *cahtolicized* it had themselves been ruled by the

Moors for 400 years. Something gets absorbed in colonial relations and you cannot kick it all out, because it's in your psyche.

So what can you make of it? You can only make something if you look at the totality. If Raul Furtado studied in Chicago, wrote a story in which the protagonist is lonely, went to a jazz club and listened to a jazz solo, is that not a Goan experience? And just because he's not a leftist, it doesn't mean I'm going to exclude him. Orlando Da Costa writes in Portuguese. His novel, *O Signo Da Ira*, is about land alienation and exploitation of the workers and peasants in Goa during the Second World War. He won an award in Portugal for this novel although it was banned by Salazar, perhaps because he was a member of the Communist party. Da Costa's ideology would contradict that of Raul Furtado, but I say let's have them both, they're good writers. I don't want to be one-sided, and I include work of Hindu Goans such as Manohar Sardessai and R.V. Pandit in addition to the Catholics like Adelaide de Souza. I include the poems of a feminist, Eunice de Souza, beside the obsessive fiction of Loy Saldanha. And there are humorous essays on the Goan world and Goan social behavior by Ladis da Silva, George Menezes, and the late Lucio Rodrigues. And what about myself? In the first edition, I listed a bare minimum of my work in the bibliography; but now, for the second edition, I will include more of my work. I wrote a paper on Ishmael Reed, "Heading them off at the Pass, The Fiction of Ishmael Reed," which I presented last year at the conference at UCLA on Black Literature entitled *Of Our Spiritual Strivings: Recent Developments in Black Literature and Criticism*. Reed liked the paper very much, and because of that, it got published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. The Afro-american experience helped me understand the Goan experience. I discovered that Goans have been trying to get to Canada for the last 100 years and it's the same situation as with black Americans. I never understood why there was this thing in the Goan psyche until I read *Flight to Canada*. Instead of denying my background, I was bringing it forward. This essay should be available to Goans, so I'm listing it as well.

CI: In addition to that, you should include everything you've ever written because you were a Goan when you wrote it—even if you were writing African literature.

PN: There are certain moments in time when a writer has to take the responsibility of opening out things for his people, his group, by using his own name, as long as he does not fool himself. I should

not think I'm a great guy because I'm doing these things; I have a reputation, part of it genuine, part of it just the mythification of anybody who has some position in the United States. I can use myself to gather things and to open things out. And maybe at some point I can step aside and the literature will take off by itself, it won't need me.

CI: Or there will be someone else to stand in your place.

PN: Yes. I'm not talking about building up my own ego because that's one of the curses of the Goan situation like that of any other small people. Some writers are big fish in a small pond and want to preserve their privileged position. I don't want that.

CI: We can stop the interview at this point, and probably continue in the future, as Goan literature develops. Meanwhile, thank you for sharing aspects of Goan literature with me, NAIES members, and the world.

[**Editor's Note:** *Goan Literature: A Modern Reader* can be ordered from Kay Fitzgerald, Managing Editor, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824. Each copy costs \$12.00, including postage.]