

Yearning for Goa: Diasporic Longing and Cultural Memory in the Poetry of Antonio Gomes

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Introduction

The concept of “diaspora” has undergone significant evolution, extending beyond its historical origins to encompass a wide array of identities and cultural experiences shaped by migration and transnationalism. Originally, diaspora referred primarily to the displacement of people from a homeland, often under conditions of conflict or economic hardship. Classic examples include the Jewish diaspora following the Babylonian exile and the African diaspora, shaped by the transatlantic slave trade. These forced migrations have historically been viewed as collective journeys of displacement, laying a foundational understanding of diaspora as both a site of loss and of cultural preservation (Cohen, 1997).

Today, diaspora has expanded into a broader, more complex concept influenced by globalization, communication advances, and increased migration flows, creating what scholars now refer to as a “transnational diaspora.” Avtar Brah’s notion of “diaspora space” (Brah, 1996) underscores this shift, framing diaspora not just as a geographic displacement but as a realm where past memories and present realities merge. This space becomes a unique axis where diasporic individuals negotiate belonging and identity, navigating between multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural influences.

The emergence of digital platforms has further transformed diaspora, creating virtual communities that enable individuals to engage with their cultural heritage regardless of physical distance, forming what is often described as a “digital diaspora.” These platforms offer a new avenue for maintaining collective memory and cultural practices, as exemplified

by the Indian diaspora, which actively preserves its customs and fosters economic and cultural exchanges across North America, Europe, the Middle East, and beyond (Brah, 1996; Cohen, 1997).

Theoretical perspectives on cultural hybridity, notably developed by Homi K. Bhabha, provide a lens for understanding how diasporic identities emerge from the continuous negotiation of cultural influences in what he calls the “Third Space”—a conceptual realm where individuals synthesize multiple cultural identities (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha’s hybridity is vividly illustrated within the Chinese diaspora across Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe, where communities blend Chinese heritage with local customs, creating a dynamic, hybrid identity that reflects both adaptation and cultural continuity. This synthesis challenges singular categorizations, contributing to a global cultural tapestry where diasporic communities are not passive bearers of heritage but active participants in cultural production.

While diaspora facilitates cultural enrichment and diversity, it also presents challenges, including identity crises, experiences of discrimination, and a persistent sense of displacement. This tension between cultural preservation and assimilation, as highlighted by Brah (1996), often triggers complex social dynamics within diasporic communities as they navigate the pressures of both belonging and estrangement. The delicate balance between maintaining cultural heritage and adapting to the host society’s norms underlines the ongoing evolution of diasporic identity, making diaspora a powerful framework for understanding transnational lives in the 21st century.

The Goan diaspora

The Goan diaspora is a compelling mosaic of culture, migration, and identity that has evolved across continents over the centuries. Originating from the coastal state of Goa in southwestern India, this diaspora reflects a diverse community shaped by colonial history, global trade networks, and the pursuit of economic opportunities. According to researchers, Goa’s history as a Portuguese colony—lasting until its liberation in 1961—

imbued its society with a unique blend of indigenous traditions and European influences, creating a culturally syncretic identity that has carried into the diaspora.

The forced migrations that occurred during the Inquisition, when Goans were compelled to leave due to religious persecution, laid the groundwork for a diasporic journey that continued to unfold as Goans migrated for economic reasons in subsequent centuries. One significant phase of this diaspora involved migration to East Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Economic pressures and the search for better livelihoods drove Goans to British-ruled East Africa, where communities flourished in countries like Kenya and Tanzania, demonstrating remarkable adaptability and resilience in foreign settings.

In recent decades, the Goan diaspora has expanded further, establishing a strong presence in the Gulf countries, North America, and Europe. The contemporary Goan diaspora contributes to a wide range of professional fields, including medicine, engineering, hospitality, and information technology, particularly in the Gulf region. Here, Goan expatriates have significantly bolstered both the economies of their host countries and their home state of Goa through remittances and skills transfer.

Despite their global dispersal, Goans have tenaciously preserved their unique cultural identity. Traditional festivals such as Carnival and Shigmo, as well as culinary practices involving dishes like fish curry rice and bebinca, serve as cultural anchors, creating a transnational identity that bridges the geographic distances of the diaspora. This transnationalism aligns with Robin Cohen's concept of cultural diaspora, where traditions are maintained across borders, fostering a sense of collective identity despite physical separation (Cohen 98).

Cultural hybridity within the Goan diaspora is particularly evident in the blending of Goan customs with those of adopted homelands. For example, the Goan Catholic community has seamlessly integrated elements of Portuguese Catholicism with the cultural practices of their host countries, creating a distinctive diasporic identity that reflects a harmonious

coexistence of multiple influences. This hybridity resonates with Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the "Third Space," where diasporic identities continuously evolve through negotiation between cultures.

Literature Review

The study of diaspora has evolved significantly, moving beyond its original connotation of dispersion to include complex cultural, emotional, and identity-based dimensions that define transnational experiences. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "cultural hybridity" is a cornerstone in understanding how diasporic identities are constructed within an "in-between space," which he describes as a "Third Space" where different cultural elements intersect to form new, hybrid identities (Bhabha, 1994). This theory is pertinent to analyzing Antonio Gomes' poetry, as his work often reflects a blend of cultural influences from both his homeland, Goa, and his experiences in the diaspora. Bhabha's framework helps explain how Gomes' identity as a Goan expatriate is negotiated through a complex interplay of memory, heritage, and adaptation, illustrating the unique cultural hybridity that characterizes diasporic lives.

In addition to hybridity, Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space" adds depth to the understanding of how displaced individuals create a space that transcends physical borders and exists within both memory and experience. Brah (1996) defines diaspora space as a "multi-axial" realm where past memories of homeland intersect with the realities of host land, creating a continuous process of identity formation that is neither fixed nor wholly traditional. Gomes' poetic nostalgia for Goa and his reimagining of its landscapes and traditions capture this diasporic space, bridging his past in Goa with his present identity, underscoring the ongoing negotiation between remembrance and adaptation that defines diaspora.

Robin Cohen's typologies of diaspora offer another relevant framework, particularly his categorization of economic diaspora. Cohen (1997) argues that economic migration often leads to the preservation of a strong cultural identity through shared symbols and collective memory, despite geographic dispersion. Gomes' poetic references to Goan cultural

symbols, such as local festivals and foods, highlight how the Goan diaspora maintains a collective identity by preserving these traditions. Cohen's typology provides a useful context for understanding how Gomes' poems embody the resilient cultural memory that is characteristic of diasporic communities, serving as a bridge between his physical displacement and his cultural heritage.

Diasporic Longing and Cultural Memory in the Poetry of Antonio Gomes

Antonio Gomes' poetry in *Mirrored Reflections: A Collection of Poems* serves as a symbolic representation of the nostalgic yearning embedded in the diasporic experience. His work encapsulates the emotional pull towards his homeland, Goa, as he reflects on both the transformations of his homeland and his enduring connection to it. This longing is shaped by what Avtar Brah (1996) describes as "diaspora space"—a space where memories of homeland intersect with the experiences in the hostland. As a Professor of Medicine and Director of Cardiac Electrophysiology at Mount Sinai Medical Centre, NYC, Gomes exemplifies the diasporic Goan who, despite geographical distance, maintains a deep-rooted bond with his origins. His poetry offers a poignant look at his past, the familiar landscapes and people he left behind, and the "saudade" he feels—a Portuguese term capturing profound, melancholic nostalgia for one's roots.

In the preface of his book, Gomes articulates this connection to ancestry, which Brah (1996) would interpret as an ongoing negotiation within diaspora space. Gomes writes,

"Many of these pages reflect my ancestry; my villages of Loutolim and Aldona in Goa... there are a few poems dedicated to special people, some who had considerable impact on my life" (Gomes 9).

This statement echoes the idea that diasporic individuals recreate "home" through memory, as Brah describes, maintaining links with past and people in a symbolic form.

In the poem *This Place, This Day*, Gomes explores the concept of “Aparanta,” the ancient land that now feels altered. He recalls,

*This place, Aparanta: a place beyond the end
where Shivalinga-Dharalinga oozed sapient water
Where Siddhartha’s followers brought Buddhism
and temple dancing Mahalakshmi was Satvika...(Gomes,14)*

This yearning reflects Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of “cultural hybridity,” wherein Gomes navigates between his rooted identity in Goa and his diasporic perspective. Bhabha (1994) suggests that cultural identity for diasporic individuals emerges in a “Third Space,” where they blend elements from both homeland and hostland. Gomes’ reference to Goa as a sacred land altered by time captures this hybridity, as he preserves the cultural essence of Goa while reconciling it with the present-day transformations he perceives from afar.

Further in the poem, Gomes invokes historical memory:

*Where Hindus sacked by Islamic invaders plotted
with Albuquerque, who followed Vasco da Gama(Gomes,15)*

This line reveals an acknowledgement of Goa’s syncretic social fabric, echoing Bhabha’s idea of hybridity in the coexistence of multiple cultural influences. Gomes paints Goa as a land shaped by diverse philosophies and religions, where

*Where West met East, ocean met land, spice met
bland, life met death, intermingled and drew apart.(Gomes,15)*

Such imagery aligns with the “Third Space,” representing Goa as a cultural mosaic and a hybrid identity that diasporic Goans like Gomes carry forward.

The poet’s reference to everyday symbols of Goa, such as the baroque Church facade adorned with bougainvillea and the vibrant festivals where

*Sunday Mass at the Church with baroque facade
adorned with white bougainvillea browned by sun.
Where Manguesh, Nagesh, Ganesh, Saptakotes dance
to the beat of drums...(Gomes,15)*

reinforces Cohen's (1997) typology of cultural diaspora, which emphasizes the preservation of traditional practices even amidst displacement. Diasporic individuals often rely on cultural symbols as a "memory bank" to maintain continuity with their heritage, a theme evident in Gomes' poetry.

Towards the end of *This Place, This Day*, Gomes juxtaposes his nostalgic vision of Goa with a sense of estrangement. He writes,

*...on dusty roads, rock and sand; gaze at a photograph,
a tamarind tree, a coconut grove, a sunset* –(Gomes,16)

This imagery encapsulates Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space, where the homeland is not a static place but a dynamic repository of memories that continually evolve. Brah (1996) emphasizes that diaspora space is a realm where nostalgia meets the realities of change, allowing individuals to engage with their homeland symbolically. Gomes' juxtaposition of past and present captures this duality, as his idealized memory of Goa clashes with the reality of its transformation.

In *Dusk in Loutolim*, Gomes further elaborates on the essence of his diasporic experience. He writes,

*Ding-dong, ding-dong, the church bells
chime and villagers the angelus sing,
a 'good night' here, a 'good night' there,
saffron dusk settles on the village square.
Cows, sheep, and shepherds tread home
the smell of dung and crimson dust
fills the air; bungalows their iron doors
bolt, drunk Kundbi the dark alleys roam.
...The dark night crawls into my home,
the ponti-light dances on the wall,
my ayah's shining eyes and graying hair
move in the aroma of curried pots. (Gomes, 17)*

This depiction of Goan village life from afar is a classic expression of “saudade,” or deep longing, which is central to diasporic identity. Bhabha’s notion of cultural hybridity is apparent here, as Gomes reconstructs an image of his village through fragments of memory, maintaining his Goan identity in a manner that merges his past with his diasporic present. As he nostalgically describes “the smell of dung and crimson dust,” Gomes envisions Goa as a place that exists vividly in memory, even as it recedes from his present life.

In the poem *House*, Gomes delves into the decaying yet cherished symbols of his ancestral home, capturing both its “*black stained wood, carvings of lotus flowers... remnants of the Hindu past*” alongside “*an Oratory with ivory saints, gold-crowned Christ Crucified*” (Gomes 20). This imagery resonates with Bhabha’s hybridity, where cultural symbols from both Hindu and Catholic traditions merge. By integrating the colonial and indigenous influences in the architecture of the house, Gomes’ poem illustrates the syncretic identity that characterizes Goan

culture, even as the physical space falls into decline:

House: now empty rooms,
 stained silk, dusty furniture
 of what remains of what
 was sold -a dying remnant
 of the Old. (Gomes, 21)

Here, Gomes mourns the gradual erosion of his heritage, aligning with Kamala Das’s sense of loss in *My Grandmother’s House*, as he expresses the pain of a “dying remnant of the Old.”

Gomes’ *The Arabian Sea* celebrates Goa’s role as a nexus of trade and cultural exchange, writing,

*Sea, where Arabs sailed dhows, traded horses
 pepper and ginger, clove and nutmeg*(Gomes 29).

This poem connects Goan history to broader narratives of diaspora as described by Cohen (1997), who notes that economic diasporas often retain strong cultural identities. Gomes' verses celebrate the Arabian Sea as a bridge of cultural and commercial exchanges, embodying Cohen's typology by linking Goa's identity to the flows of goods, ideas, and migrations across the seas.

In *Saudades*, Gomes embodies the quintessential diasporic sentiment, writing,

*Traveling through space-time
deserting familiar shores:
a room, a house, a view
that becomes unfamiliar
or fades, to be reborn
in the crevices of the mind...(Gomes, 36)*

This profound sense of longing echoes Brah's diaspora space, where the homeland becomes a mythic place, constructed and reconstructed in memory. Gomes describes this bittersweet attachment to his roots, where

*forlorn faces of mothers,
fathers, cousins and friends
like totem poles that stood and
stared at the figures vanishing
behind the check-in curtain
to discover a new world
Intermingling or staying apart
struggling for new identities...(Gomes, 37)*

This yearning aligns with Pierre Nora's concept of "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory), where the homeland exists both as a tangible place and an emotional anchor for diasporic individuals. Pierre Nora, a French historian and one of the leading figures in the field of memory studies,

who is best known for his concept of “*lieux de mémoire*” (sites of memory) says,

“Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.”(Nora, 1989, p. 8)

Conclusion

Antonio Gomes’ *Mirrored Reflections* poignantly captures the essence of diasporic identity, rooted in memory and nostalgia while embracing cultural hybridity. Through his reflective verses, Gomes constructs a symbolic “diaspora space,” as defined by Avtar Brah, where memories of his homeland intersect with his life in the diaspora (Brah 1996). This space enables him to navigate his identity between the traditional essence of Goa and the transformations imposed by time and distance. Gomes’ poems embody Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space,” illustrating the hybridity that emerges from the blending of cultures; the poet’s descriptions of Goan architecture, Catholic and Hindu symbols, and historical references all convey this complex layering of identity (Bhabha 1994). Such hybridity challenges any simplistic notion of identity, presenting instead a fluid, evolving self that reconciles both homeland and hostland influences.

The poet’s work also resonates with Robin Cohen’s typologies of diaspora, particularly the cultural and economic aspects, as Gomes’ attachment to Goan festivals, cuisine, and social practices reflects a resilient cultural memory that remains vibrant despite geographical separation (Cohen 1997). Furthermore, Gomes’ expression of “saudade”—the Portuguese term for an intense, almost melancholic longing—mirrors Pierre Nora’s notion of *lieux de mémoire*, where memory becomes a site of identity preservation and emotional anchoring for diasporic individuals (Nora 8). For Gomes, the memories of his village and homeland remain alive, continuously evolving and transforming within him, yet rooted in a deep-seated sense of loss.

Through the lens of Gomes' poetry, this study illustrates how diasporic literature serves as both a repository and a re-imagining of cultural identity, bridging past and present, memory and reality. By using poetic expression to immortalize his connection to Goa, Gomes exemplifies how diaspora enables both the preservation of heritage and the embrace of transformation. His work highlights the significance of poetry in articulating the personal and collective memories of diasporic communities, underscoring that while physical distance may separate individuals from their homeland, memory and cultural practices can bridge these gaps, fostering a transnational identity that thrives in the liminal spaces of the diaspora.

Works Cited

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