



Scheherazade: Goan Gothic as Decolonial Storying

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Abstract

This Gothic short story, set in Goa – a Portuguese colony until 1961 and then annexed by India – tells the tale of a beautiful storyteller’s long journey to find herself. She seeks out a Tarot card reader to give her insight, but her destiny will still prevail. She is seduced by a wealthy politician, only to be imprisoned in a palatial Portuguese mansion hidden in a remote jungle. Over time, her lover abandons her and the jungle house takes on mystical qualities. She feels she is losing her mind until she slowly recognises the voices of the creatures and the spirits around her. Within these relations the house of her imprisonment turns into a sanctuary, until she is eventually rescued and returned to the “normal” life of contemporary Goa. In the end, she accepts the past, which allows her to move forward into life. Like Scheherazade’s elaborate storytelling which was life-saving, this story presents stories within stories, to recover (post) colonized lives. A decolonial reading of this storying alludes to the tarot reader as an observer of the historical events; the corrupt politician as an archetypal colonizer (colonial and neocolonial); and the storyteller as the colonized – physically and psychologically. The story suggests that the way to move forward is to understand colonialism and its continuing impacts, as well as to recognize the appearances of neocolonialism in the present. In this regard, the story can also be read as the struggle for the central government of India, based in Delhi, to accept the 451-year Portuguese colonial history as an indelible part of Goa. Finally, storying in itself is a decolonial practice, a way for Goans to find self.

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I could pick out all the Major Arcana cards in a Rider-Waite tarot deck by three years old. Even though I excelled at my studies and could have chosen any profession, I decided to become a tarot card reader. People flew to Goa just to see me, though I only worked through word of mouth and largely preserved my anonymity. As time passed, I became reclusive and picky about whom I was reading for.

She appeared on my doorstep one day. Said that she'd heard about me from a friend. Jet-black hair down to her hips, and a natural deep red pout. She said that she was a professional storyteller. I was intrigued.

Her body silently glided to a melody that only she could hear, as she moved across my living room to the dining table. I gestured for her to sit. Her eyes darted around my minimalist interiors as she settled in her chair. Perhaps she'd been expecting plush dark velvet furnishings, candelabra, and a crystal ball. She had a lilt to her voice that reminded me of a quiet stream in a secluded rainforest. It was unforgettable.

She spoke in mini-stories that had the sense of a beginning and a middle, but left you wanting more. She was a seductive tale-weaver with an unbreakable beauty. When I handed her a cup of tea, I touched her fingers and felt what was bubbling beneath her self-composure. Only troubled souls came to me in search of their future; hoping to receive certainty where there was none to have.

The cards lay quietly between us. She took two sips of the milky cardamom tea. Her attention skipped around the room, as if in search of a distraction. I noticed her nails were bitten down to stubs. I waited patiently for her to reveal what was really on her heart.

She began to speak about a man she had met on a dating app. They'd seen each other briefly in Goa before he returned to Dubai where he worked as a movie producer. She began to regale the details of over two months of back and forth exchanges across different time zones, while they were deciding whether they were in a relationship or something else. She described to me how, as she demanded more of his time, he pulled away to play video games.

"So, what are we?" she asked.

I felt the tone of betrayal coming through in her question as I pulled out the Three of Swords: sharp tips piercing a robust heart. He was not the one.

Then she spoke about her boss; an educated, intellectually stimulating, “interesting” guy. Their exchanges began innocently enough. There were discussions about books they were reading, in between talking about work tasks. He began sending her dal-laden secrets from his mother, that could have come out of Madhur Jaffrey’s latest recipe book for all she knew. He switched from one-off work emails to daily WhatsApp messages, sharing with her photographs of his travels. Her eyes lit up when she described his Instagram pictures as tapestries of colour and adventure. He confided in her that his last girlfriend had broken up with him because she felt suffocated. She told me she’d started to feel uncomfortable when he began sending her semi-nude pictures of himself.

“So, what is he to me?” she asked.

The High Priestess card appeared.

“What does your intuition tell you?” I asked her in response.

She looked away for a moment and chewed a stub of nail.

“What’s happening in my love life right now?” she asked in frustration.

The Two of Pentacles came out, a card signifying imbalance and indecision. I told her that she was stuck trying to make a decision of some kind that involved love. She burst into tears telling me that she was fostering a kitten and was on the verge of returning the mewling baby after five sleepless nights. The kitten required milk every three hours and attention twenty-four seven. She wanted her life back.

I pulled out another card and there she was, the Queen of Cups, sitting regally on her throne, surrounded by treasure and flowing water, but all by herself. The storyteller had found someone to pour all her love into, but the kitten couldn’t give her the emotional closeness she craved in return.

“Should I give her back?”

It was the High Priestess again. “You know the answer,” I replied.

She looked forlorn, but relieved.

I could see that she was on a quest for love, but couldn’t see the direction she was heading. I pulled out six cards for a broad picture of what was happening in her life.

The Four of Pentacles was a warning to save, not spend, and she told me about how she created stories and poems out of air, weaving words into lines from sunlight and the wind, from thunderstorms and the rain. She said that she was struggling with money and with something else, a sort of anxiety that created the urge to latch and unlatch her door five times in quick succession every night before she went to bed. She described how she regularly re-arranged her flat. I understood that this was for the illusion of being able to control something in her life that was beyond her understanding to control.

The Two of Cups and Six of Cups appeared together. I placed them next to each other and she told me about the love of her life, whose passion for her, sixteen years later, was still entangled around her little finger. I saw it then, the thick green cord moving out of her sacral chakra, winding its way out my front door. I felt a chill shudder through me, and had one of those moments when I saw the next three cards before I flipped them over. The Devil. The Tower. Death. They signalled endings and inevitable transformation.

Then, it got worse. The Seven of Swords turned up, followed by the Seven of Wands. A difficult time with an unknown, mysterious outcome where she would be subject to manipulation and deceit, and be required to stand up for what she thought was right. I kept going, because I had been taught to never end on a challenging card. I sighed with relief when The Lovers and The Sun came out together. All would be well, eventually. She looked at me with her wide eyes, I told her that a difficult time might be ahead, but that she would come out happy and well from it. There was no way I could have seen exactly how that was to play out.

In lieu of payment, she offered me the large tiffin of frozen chicken cafreal she had made last night for a cousin she was going to meet. I watched her tread carefully over the laterite stones that formed the pathway to my doorstep, heavy energy and tangled cords trailing behind her as she walked away. A woman sweeping leaves in her courtyard looked up and stared at her.

I woke up the next morning to the lingering aroma of green chillies, coriander and ginger-garlic that lightly peppered my home with the after-fragrance of last night's dinner. Her cooking filled me with longing for more. While brushing my teeth, I saw The Hanged Man in my peripheral vision and knew that I hadn't seen the last of the gifted storyteller, who made wonderful chicken curry.

Years passed before I saw her again. I walked into Café Literati, a quiet reprieve from the stifling heat and humidity in Candolim, to kill time in the bookstore before meeting up with a friend for coffee. Sifting through the small collection of occult books on the overflowing floor to ceiling bookshelves in the front room, I heard a light, familiar voice. I wandered through the anterooms of the bookshop until they opened up to the rear garden café. About fifty people of various ages were gathered around a woman whose back was to me. She was talking animatedly as her audience listened in rapt attention.

Her hair was the same length as when I'd first met her, and even though she was standing in a fixed spot, her body moved in the familiar way I remembered from years ago when she walked across my living room.

I listened as she spoke in that mellifluous voice about a beautiful storyteller who'd gone to an Oracle for help with her love life. She talked about how the storyteller had, soon after, fallen for a powerful politician from Delhi who had moved to Goa, and had seduced her with his charm and promises of love and fidelity.

The politician was besotted. Ever since he was a little boy, while classmates dreamed of becoming teachers or policemen, the politician dreamt of possessing beauty, in all of its purity. He could only find joy in flowers with perfect whorls of petals, drink from glasses that weren't chipped, eat from plates that weren't scratched, wear clothes with perfect stitching in them. Any flaw and his sharp eye would catch it. As a child, he threw tantrums. But, as he grew older, he evolved into an expert at manipulating people and usurped so much power and money that he was able to build and command a world of order and perfection around him. He began to collect houses across Goa, each one developed into a private fortress that reflected his inner world and aspirations for perfection. He alone determined the design and décor, turning each abode into a citadel of ravishing beauty. The privileged few who were invited to visit, claimed they had never before seen so much thought and care put into every detail. All his visitors said that they never wanted to leave.

He was speaking at a public event in Panjim city's Central Library, spreading his vision to turn the former capital of Portuguese India into a shiny smart city – old colonial architecture giving way to technologically enhanced urbanism and modern infrastructure. On his way out, he heard her. He followed the thread of her voice past shelves and study desks to the main reading room, where she sat weaving tales for the children during Story Hour. He watched her from the entrance for only a short time before falling for her extraordinary beauty.

She initially rebuffed his advances. But he pursued her mercilessly, using all his charm, money and power to wind his way into her affections. Much later, he told her that it was her voice that had enraptured him, and made him realise that she embodied his dream come to life.

She'd grown exhausted by her loneliness, and the pain of being on her own all the time. His undivided attention fed a need in her and she found herself oddly attracted to his addiction to beauty defined by flawlessness. His admiration for her grew addictive and soon she fell under the spell of his love-making. She got used to the perks and privileges of being his lover, and the access to local celebrities and powerful people. She didn't even notice when he began to bind her to him until he owned her body, heart and soul. Family and friends, especially the ones who pointed out his flaws, were left behind as she began to spend all her time with him. Even her storytelling fell by the wayside as she learned to accommodate his needs over hers.

Isolated from her family, friends and the life that she had before, she became so dependent on him that it became impossible to remember that there was any other way of being. She'd forgotten that there was a time when she took care of herself.

In spite of her growing submission, she appeared to blossom under his patriarchal care. Her glowing beauty was the envy of everyone around him. Yet, as he watched more people begin to vie for her attention, seek her friendship, and ask her for favours, a deep sense of possession overwhelmed him. He began to plan a way to enclose her so that he wouldn't have to share her with anyone else.

One of the properties he owned lay deep in the Goan jungle on the border with the powerful state of Karnataka, an isolated enclave far away from any city or village. It had belonged to someone who couldn't repay a great debt. As compensation, the politician took over his ancestral property. He thought it might make a useful safehouse in case he had to escape the authorities one day. Nobody even knew that he officially owned it.

There was a dilapidated two-storey mansion on the property, built when the Portuguese still ruled Goa, it was once palatial and surrounded by a vast garden. Now it was in various states of collapse and enclosed in such a thick growth of trees, vines and overgrown undergrowth, that you might have easily walked past it without seeing the high terracotta-tiled roof or the rainwater harvesting tower, or the white-washed walls. Bats nested here and monkeys sat on the turret eating ripe mangoes and breaking tiles with the hairy stones they had sucked dry and flung away. Termites and red ants built their fortresses in the walls. Bees had constructed complex citadels in almost every room. Monitor lizards and bulbuls were neighbours.

Mobs of jungle warblers darted around the many *balcões* of the house, spreading gossip to anyone who cared to hear.

This overflowing ecology was cut away and pushed further into the depths of the jungle to make space for the politician's storyteller. He had the gardens landscaped, the sprawling house re-tiled and repainted. The floors were scrubbed until the white marble gleamed alive once more. The colonial house which had fallen into ruin as the world decided to develop elsewhere and progress left this place behind, was restored to its previous resplendence and filled with beautiful things to help make her feel at home. He ensured that there was no discernible road to the house, so that she would not be able to escape without getting lost in the jungle. When everything was ready, he brought her secretly under cover of darkness to this jungle palace and there installed his very own Scheherazade.

At first, this beautiful spirit, whom he had managed to beguile and charm, cried herself to sleep. She spent the morning hours exploring ways to escape the house until she got completely lost in the jungle and nearly disturbed a family of wild boar. She was relieved to find her way back to the mansion. The next time she tried, she noticed that all the landmarks she'd made a note of had disappeared under fresh new forest growth. Something shifted inside her then. She decided to stop resisting and began to make a home of this jungle palace.

He left her there for months at a time, with provisions and two trusted servants, visiting only when he cared to. The servants also had no idea where they were, but carried out their master's instructions to look after the person entrusted to their care.

"Wait. Are you saying that this Delhi politician kidnapped the storyteller, and she let him? Without a fight?" asked someone from the audience.

All heads turned towards the young woman, then back to the storyteller, who seemed a little perturbed to have been interrupted mid-flow.

"Yes, sort of."

"How is that possible? In this day and age?"

"It's just a story," said a voice.

"Yeah, it's not real, lady," said another.

"Wait, just listen," said the storyteller gently to everyone. "Patience."

When the politician visited her a month after installing her, he found her pliable. She'd rearranged the furniture, decorated using what was in the house to the best of her ability. She requested the freshest of fruits and the best quality linen, which arrived every month when the politician came to visit her. She understood his need for perfection and had made the palace as beautiful as possible. He was pleased with all of her additions and enjoyed watching her turn the palace into a sanctuary.

She embodied the perfect, caged beauty he'd dreamed of possessing his entire life. It was in that moment of realisation that he began to get bored with her.

Monthly visits turned into quarterly arrivals, which turned into occasional drop-ins. He'd always loved listening to her speak, or sing or read to him, and begged her to tell him a story whenever he had trouble sleeping. Her voice soothed him. But their exchanges began to dwindle as he spent less time with her. As he pulled away, she turned towards the home she had created. Provisions, as well as orders for supplies and special items, continued to arrive regularly, but apart from the occasional drivers who made deliveries, her only chance to converse was with the two servants. She cooked and cleaned better than they could, but after a couple of years, let them take over while she let her mind and her feet wander a bit more in the jungle that constantly threatened to re-engulf the gardens and house.

She learned the calls of the birds, even though there was no one to teach her their names. She made up her own names for them, kept their babies as pets and let them fly away through open windows whenever they were ready to leave. The wild boar got used to her presence and stopped trying to attack every time she wandered past their territory on the edges of the wilderness. The deer grew less skittish and approached her to have their foreheads stroked. At night, she chose different bedrooms to sleep in, based on her mood. There were eleven of them and she had spent time decorating them all.

She'd always loved mornings; found there was magic in them. She noticed the early sunlight played differently in each room, dappling curtains and creating patterns on floors. She spent her days watching the swathes of light move across the walls and the ceiling, pulling shadows out of objects and furniture she'd placed carefully to civilise and tame every room in the palace. She kept the windows open and willed the living beings around her to converse with her home, as she eavesdropped on their stories.

But, as the years passed, her favourite time of the day became night-time, when the dark silence was intensified by the music of owl hoots and the cacophony of cricket

chirps and frog croaks. She'd listen for swishes of low-flying bats hunting insects in the blackness; the soft cries of caught prey and the almost silent rustles of shrubbery as invisible feet padded around in search of food or safety. She would throw open the window of her bedroom and listen to it all, waiting for stories to come to her. As a tale began to take shape before her senses, she'd utter and murmur the words. And she'd listen for the responses, which always came, every night – no matter which room she was in. The stories of the jungle night grew thicker.

The more time she spent in solitude, the more the house also came alive at night. At first, she felt frightened when she heard the hushed voices, the gentle whispers. She hid under the sheets and trembled when she heard a soft voice whispering her name in the darkness. She shrank away from the shadows when she noticed them starting to move around all by themselves. She began to wonder if she was losing her mind; imagining voices, seeing things that weren't there. Perhaps her eyesight was getting bad.

"No, she was definitely losing it," said the same lady who had spoken up before.

She made as if she was going to get up and leave, but then seemed to change her mind and stayed. The storyteller took no notice and seamlessly continued telling her tale.

As time moved on, she understood that the spirits of the jungle had moved in a long time ago and made this place their home. They'd just taken their time revealing themselves to her. Some of them were ancestral spirits trying to converse with her. What was clear was that they saw her as a kindred soul, welcomed her to their sanctuary and that's how their haven became hers too. She began to feel like she'd finally come home, to a place where her soul dwelled with kindred spirits, who shared their tales with her, as they listened to her stories.

As time passed, and the politician aged, he finally lost his power to younger, more ambitious men and women – with ever more shiny visions for grander achievements. As revenge and betrayal replaced the sycophancy of his political acolytes and influential friends, he found it more difficult to extract himself from the situations he was always embroiled in. One day, Goa's Chief of Police came in person to arrest him for committing fraud, extortion, and murder. Nobody noticed the servant that slipped a note into the Chief's hand. It had the location of the kidnapped storyteller.

It took a few days before the assembled posse found the palace and entered it, expecting to find a hidden trove of treasure. Instead, they found the politician's Scheherezade. The storyteller still had clarity in her lovely wide eyes and her pout

had evolved into a luscious cupid's bow, but her hair had grown white and fell down past her knees. At some point, she'd given up cutting it and had taken to cocooning herself in her hair at night, curling up in the light strands like a silkworm and dreaming deeply while wrapped in the scent of her own tresses.

They added kidnapping to the list of the politician's crimes. After they had cut her hair, trimmed her nails and bathed her, she couldn't recognise herself in the newspaper photographs that carried the story of her confinement. When they asked her questions about her experience, she said that it wasn't that bad, hadn't felt like a kidnapping, that she had chosen to be there, that it was her home. The friends she was staying with seemed more in shock than she was. It took them a long time to convince her to remain with them.

One day, much later when the storyteller finally seemed to have settled back into contemporary life, she contacted the Chief of Police and asked him to take her back to see her home, just once. On his day off, he obliged, driving up to the exact spot where they had finally found her, wandering around the tropical garden, chattering to a pair of purple sunbirds, and looking bewildered when they walked up to her. In the years since she'd been taken away, the jungle had reclaimed the palace and reduced it to ruins again, overrun with lush creepers, profusions of wild ferns, and a thick patina of moss.

She stood on the spot where her home once was. Though her eyes couldn't see the palace. When she shut them, she again heard the familiar bird calls, the rustling of nests, the owl hooting the same distance away. With her eyes tightly shut, she saw the palace rise before her and when she put out her hands, she felt the edges of the walls that had once kept her safe and sound; heard the soft whispers of her name caught in the breeze that played with the tendrils of her hair.

The Chief of Police watched as the beautiful storyteller clutched at the air, murmured something absently to herself and smiled hauntingly. Then she opened her eyes and told him that she was ready to leave.

I heard her give a wistful sigh that melted into the silence from the audience that was held in the thrall of her closing words.

I slipped away unnoticed from the periphery of the throng around her and left to meet my friend, framing an apology in my mind for my tardiness, but content that I got to witness *The Lovers* and *The Sun* at play in the storyteller's eyes.

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Jessica Faleiro's fiction, poetry, essays and travel pieces have been published in *Asia Literary Review*, *Forbes*, *Indian Quarterly*, *India Currents*, *Coldnoon*, *Joao Roque Literary Journal*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Muse India*, *eTropic* and *The Times of India* as well as in various anthologies, most recently, *The Greatest Goan Stories Ever Told*. Her first novel *Afterlife: Ghost stories from Goa* (2012) is about a Goan family and their 'ghostly' encounters, and her second, *The Delicate Balance of Little Lives* (2018), is a collection of interlinked stories about five middle-class Goan women trying to cope with loss. She won the Joao Roque Literary Award 'Best in Fiction' 2017 for her short story 'Unmatched'. Jessica previously worked for Kingston University Press as a sub-editor and co-edited the March 2018 issue of the *Joao Roque Literary Journal's* edition on Writing from the Goan Diaspora. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Kingston University, UK, talks about creativity, and runs creative writing workshops. As she, Jessica, notes: I write from the perspective of being a Goan of colonial Portuguese heritage and South Asian descent, and a member of the Goan diaspora. I also write from the position of being a woman of colour.