

Book Review

Ferrão, R. Benedito. *The Many Lives of Vamona Navelcar*. Cinnamon Teal, 2017.

There is India, and then there is Goa with a side of India, a state of being that transcends the physical borders of Goa, carving out a national identity that supersedes an Indian one. *The Many Lives of Vamona Navelcar* is a collection of essays, fiction, poetry and a moving graphic novel that serves as an interpretation of this multicultural transnational state of being. It does so by taking us on an exploration of the Goan painter and artist Vamona Navelcar, told to us by a variety of Goan writers and artists.

This is a beautifully conceptualized collection that began as a companion piece to a retrospective of Navelcar's work, held at the Fundação Oriente in Goa from December 7, 2017 to January 13, 2018, which Navelcar attended. The cover of the book features Navelcar's "DETA Airlines" (1968), in which we see unidentifiable people staring up at a commercial airliner, as if not knowing whether to board it or not. *The Many Lives of Vamona Navelcar* is edited by R. Benedito Ferrão, an assistant professor at The College of William and Mary and himself a transnational Goan. He selected this cover because, as he writes in the opening essay, "So What Happens When You Lose Everything?" this painting best tests "conceptions of culture as being bounded by time, geography and nation."

Navelcar's work, professionally printed in this book, runs from the whimsical to the sorrowful. His biographer, Anne Ketteringham, maintains in her essay contribution to this volume ("Cue the Clowns") that Navelcar's Clown Series, which spanned decades and in which the line drawings of the lanky clown also serve as a self-portrait, tell us more about the artist than he will ever say. "Navelcar once told me that his works show happiness and never sadness," she writes. "At the time, I refuted the claim, citing his Clown Series. He just smiled and moved on to the next subject as he often did when he did not wish to discuss something."

Navelcar, now in his 80s, returned to Goa in 1982 after three decades abroad, struggling to find a home as his art developed during the decline of Portuguese colonial rule in Goa and Africa. He began studying art in Portugal in 1954 but was blacklisted by Portuguese authorities for refusing to say his siblings back in Goa were suffering repression after Goa became part of India in 1961. In 1963, he moved to Mozambique, where he taught until 1975. At that time, he and 32 students were arrested for indecent behavior at a party, which included drinking and, in his case, dancing with two white students. He had already been planning to leave Mozambique, as the revolution against the Portuguese was well underway. After being released six weeks later, Navelcar decided to return to Portugal, with only a few dollars in his pocket and two suitcases. This would be the most devastating moment of his life as an artist. One of the suitcases, containing around 1,000 pieces of his artwork, was lost in transit. He would never find it, and thus he learned about the impermanence not only of place but also art. In the short section of this volume that includes previously published essays, Margaret Mascarenhas shares the transcripts of some of her conversations with Navelcar, in which he says he felt the presence of his deceased brother, Ganesh, comforting him at the time; from that moment on, he began to sign his work as “Ganesh.”

Religion, like nationality, also holds no fixed rules for Navelcar. A Hindu by birth, his work, such as his Goan-flavored “The Last Supper” (2009), reflects the power of Catholicism in Goa. In the essay “Mother, Other,” art critic and professor Vishvesh Kandolkar notes that Navelcar’s “Mother and Child” (1957), tender in its simplicity, echoes the complexity of Goan identity through its evocation of the Madonna. Similarly, in the essay “A Cure for Foolishness,” Jason Keith Fernandes describes Navelcar’s untitled 2009 work, which is essentially an Arabic sentence that translates as: “Foolishness/stupidity is a disease that has no cure/treatment.” Boldly written twice on a painted canvas, this is a jab against the Indian nationalist tendency, which favors a Sanskrit past, although Goa also has an Arab/Muslim past.

While this collection could have used a one or two-paragraph introductory biography of Navelcar for people unfamiliar with his work and his story, we learn enough to know him and to know that he belongs undisputedly to one group, artists, some of whom write loving tributes to him here, even through short fiction and poetry.

Indeed, the most moving and engaging part of this book is the 17-page graphic novel titled, “The Destination is the Journey.” It was written by Ferrão, with art direction by Vanessa De Sa, and it cleverly uses a vast selection of Navelcar’s artwork to tell the story of the lost suitcase, “the most famous suitcase in Goan history, maybe even in all art history.” It concludes with that with which Navelcar himself had to come to terms: “We both made the journey. We both arrived at our destination. But only one of us was exactly where he was supposed to be.”

We now exist in a world where many people spend their lives getting on and off planes in the search for permanence, looking for lost baggage and getting rid of other baggage. The essays in this collection, like the title itself, remind us that there is no one answer to the question of home and that we are strongest when we accept impermanence as a permanent condition.

Alia Yunis
Zayed University, Abu Dhabi