

The Atlantic Critical Review (ISSN 0972-6373)

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The Atlantic Critical Review is published quarterly in New Delhi and  
sponsored by Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd., B-2, Vishal Enclave,  
Opp. Rajouri Garden Police Station, New Delhi-110 027 (India).

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infrequent, and often extremely irregular in publication. This journal, thus, as envisaged,  
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Continued on back inner cover...

# THE ATLANTIC CRITICAL REVIEW

Q U A R T E R L Y

A Peer Reviewed Journal Indexed in  
MLA Directory of Periodicals

APRIL - JUNE 2018

VOLUME 17 NUMBER 2

**ATLANTIC**  
PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS (P) LTD

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## THE ATLANTIC CRITICAL REVIEW

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### CONTENTS

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- Dylan Thomas's "And Death Shall Have No Dominion"  
*S. Bharadwaj* 1
- Eco-criticism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*  
*J. Vijayalakshmi* 45
- Satire and Humour in the Writings of Tripura  
*Bhaskar Roy Barman* 51
- Namita Gokhale's *A Himalayan Love Story: A Looking Glass of Ecology and Female Sensibility*  
*Beena Agarwal* 67
- Mahabaleshwar Sail's Fiction in English Translation:  
A Critical Exploration of Traditions, Ethos and Myths  
*Glenis Maria Mendonça* 76
- Nature and Man in British Literature: A Historical  
Overview  
*Jayeeta Deb* 87

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## Mahabaleshwar Sail's Fiction in English Translation: A Critical Exploration of Traditions, Ethos and Myths

GLENIS MARIA MENDONÇA

### Introduction

KONKANI fiction is seemingly a mini-scale literary arena, sans translation. It is indeed translation which enables this fiction to blur its linguistic and geographical boundaries and explore new territories to find a place for itself in the expansive panorama of Indian literature. Konkani fiction writers like Damodar Mauzo, Mahabaleshwar Sail, Pundalik Naik, Prakash Paryekar, and Jayanti Naik, among others, have found a place for themselves in the camp of Konkani fiction writers who have been translated into English and other Indian/foreign languages.

Mahabaleshwar Sail is a significant name in recent times after having three novels (out of five), viz. *Kali Ganga* (2003), *The Kiln* (2011), *The Age of Frenzy* (2017) and one novella *Forest Saga* (2015)—all translated into English by Vidya Pai. In an 'Introduction' to his translation of *Aranyakaand* into English, Kiran Budkuley observes:

Mahabaleshwar Sail brought into fiction the distilled essence of his agrarian background and the enriching experiences of his life in the army—hitherto a novelty in Konkani literature. A creative sensibility shaped by rural upbringing and fine-tuned to the natural environment underlies Sail's distinct eco-cultural perspective.... (H)e was honoured for literary excellence with a Sahitya Akademi award for *Tarangam*. (xxx1)

Most recently, Sail has been in the limelight after having bagged the K.K. Birla Foundation's Saraswati Samman 2016, which

has well deservedly brought his novel *Havthan* translated as *The Kiln* to the forefront. This process has been painstaking and the author has many more works which are waiting to be read and critically explored.

As a tribute to this author who has brought Konkani literature on the national lit-map, this paper will attempt to critically explore traditions, ethos and myths in *Kali Ganga*, *The Kiln* and *Forest Saga*.

### Tradition, Ethos and Myths: Definitions

At the outset, it would be beneficial to closely understand and define the key terms used in this paper, i.e. *tradition*, *ethos* and *myths*. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1996), the word 'tradition' refers to "a custom, opinion or belief handed down to posterity specially orally or by practice" (1478). The term 'ethos' on the other hand, is a noun referring to "the characteristic spirit or attitudes of a community, people or system, or of a literary work, etc." The same dictionary traces its etymology to the Greek *êthos* meaning 'nature' or 'disposition' (463). The word 'myth' finds its etymology again in the Greek *muthos* and refers to "a traditional narrative usually involving supernatural or imaginary persons and often embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena" (900). Collectively, too, such narratives are referred to as myths.

These three terms will be understood with textual references from the novels under study. Sail's writings are replete with traditions of specific communities and throw light on their ways of living, ethos and myths. His writings explore the subaltern spaces of communities victimised by compelling circumstances who are trying hard to thrive in a harsh world where only the affluent and powerful survive.

### Mythos and Ethos in a Traditional Setting: A Critical Study of *Kali Ganga*

*Kali Ganga* (2003) is a poignant narrative telling the tale of the motherless girls Manjul and Suman who are raised up by their father Ganesh. It is an androcentric novel where the man takes centre stage and most beliefs, practices and myths are all directed to glorify 'him' and 'otherise' the woman. The tradition

of farming here is so male-centric. So when the orphaned Suman decides to take the plough in hand, the villagers object to her act of defying tradition (221). Manjul's father-in-law, the patriarch incarnate, holds the key to the store room (86) but also to all familial authority and decision-making, such that she cannot even join her husband at Simla in order to avoid his displeasure. A run-away bride like Sumati (Sridhar's sister) is ostracized for fleeing away from her marital home and staying with her lover Sadanand. She is forced to live in the woods in a shanty. Her father refers to her as 'an impure creature' who has 'brought shame to our clan' (89). A married girl cannot even retain her original name. Manjul is forced to accept her mother-in-law's name as her own.

Likewise, Shobha has to face humiliation as a widow at the hands of her in-laws. Her lascivious father-in-law Soyru paws her till she has no option but to jump in the well and end her life. Sail's use of creative similes heightens her poignant portrayal. With her cheeks like sweet mangoes, petal-like lips and her braid like the rope around the oxen's neck (59), her subaltern status in the tradition-bound household of Soyru makes her vulnerable to meet her tragic end.

Tradition earmarks the age a girl gets married. Ganesh is anxiety stricken to get his daughter married. Dowry is yet another concern. "Doesn't have to be rich. Her mother has left some gold...", he avers (67). Treatment of widows is also seen through the character of Salu *ajji*, the old wizened widow who selflessly serves as an apothecary to the villagers. Along with Tatu *maam*, she represents the mature voices of the village steeped in myths and superstition.

The mythological story of Seetachavar is narrated: Seeta's necklace is broken when Ravana was dragging her, the plant was about to bloom when Seeta passed (125). The lives of the peasants are woven on the tapestry of constellations and stars: Sakrant coming on a camel signifies drought and famine, and when on a buffalo, it implies floods. They also believe in ghosts, spirits and the Mharu. When Suman's *Appa* is mentally unsound, there is a suggestion made to take him to a 'ghadi or joishi' (138). "We'll sacrifice a cock with upturned feathers on

the next moonless night...must keep the Betal happy" (139), a villager suggests. Likewise, Avdu *ajji's* rooster who seems 'like a demon' is kept to "be sacrificed before the image of the Betal during the festival" (169).

Numerous festivals, feasts and auspicious events are celebrated with traditional fervour. Suman visits her sister's house for the *jatra* at Chaitra Punav. Her sister Manjul has to wear a festive saree and serve food in specific brass utensils which have to be kept shining and clean. The brass pitcher symbolises an eternal union with the spouse: "If your husband drinks the water...he'll be yours for life" (152). Suman is admonished. A festive meal is prepared by Manjul consisting of nirpanas, shaak, polis, khatkhathey and payas (157). Mhalu, Manjul's father-in-law offers it to Suman ceremoniously saying: "If you eat, I will feel that a *suwashin* has been served..." (158).

The villagers are deeply enmeshed in tradition. But gradually, this paves the way to modernity. The dark and stout fisherwoman Gulabi, who meets Manjul in the boat, has abandoned her traditional door-to-door fish selling to become a temple cook. Her son too has taken up a job in an office in Panjim. Later, Suman too challenges the patriarchal tradition by herself taking the ploughing activity. She even consummates her marriage in a symbolic act of defiance of tradition, thus displaying how the novel embodies a traditional fabric which weakens with time.

The novel is named after the popular Kali river which holds in its depths several myths and beliefs illustrated with metaphorical language. Its water 'gushes forward in a turbulent dance' and in the darkness, 'the streams take on the appearance of serpents' (6). The river overlooks the tribulations and trials of the villagers. It is a silent witness to the villages which it passes through, and buries within its shimmering waters several sinister tales. This is quite obvious at the end of the novel when Govind commits suicide by jumping in its waters, leaving the unmarried yet widowed Suman shattered. And the authorial voice takes a melancholy strain: "How dark are the waters of the river Kali" (252). The same river whose name resounds with the echoes of *Kaliyug*, or in whose bosom

young lovers end their lives, and who witnessed the suicide of Ganesh in its vicinity, almost assumes the role of a significant omniscient character. Thus, *Kali Ganga* is teeming with a tradition-bound ethos.

### Traditional Pottery: Challenges of Survival in *The Kiln*

Mahabaleshwar Sail's *The Kiln* deals with the crisis of survival of the traditional *kumbhars* or potters in the wake of industrialisation and modernization. The angst of the potters is evident when the dam is sounded to be built on the Majale river, which would deprive the potters of the soft and pliable clay at the river bed, as now it would be perennially logged with water. The novel which is congregated with over eighty characters has about thirty-two females which face the wrath of being subalterns in a thoroughly patriarchal tradition of pottery. The potter-women are always seen carrying the clay from the river bed after a dry spell, bringing it home and kneading it with a baton to a smooth texture. The honour of moulding the pots on the wheel is that of the men. The women then dry the pots over a week and fire the kiln. The men bake them and expect the women to carry them in baskets and travel by foot to neighbouring villages and sell them door to door. In all this, the tradition of pottery gives the prized tasks to the males while the women are assigned the tedious and sweat inducing labour.

There is a clearly visible caste identity associated with the potter community. Sail makes a deft use of myth that the potters are known to have been descendants of the *Devli* caste, whose mother was a *Devleen* (a temple cleaner and prostitute). Pottery offered them the respite as they ran away from the temple to set up a community of their own. It was the tradition of pottery which uplifted and empowered this downtrodden caste (10). The potters were honoured to mould earthen ware, and clay figurines used for *Jogvani* (harvest) rituals, some would even mould Ganesha idols for Chovoth, while one or two were specialists at the *ghumot* and the earthen drum to distil liquor.

A close reading of *The Kiln* shows the remarkable insights and importance to nitty-gritty detailing given by Sail to rituals and practices of the potters. The flowers offered at the Gunai

shrine by women during *Shravan* (10), rituals offerings for the *Jogvani* which Purso was specialised in, Shanu's quotidian rituals to ward off his wife's spirits which were apparently haunting through screams in the forest, Shivrām's dexterity at trying his hand at beating the liquor pot which was Dharmu's forte or even the fertility rituals of the barren Aprupe rubbing her chest to the fruit-laden *kirambo* (mango tree) and making seven offerings every Wednesday to pray for conception—all these were beliefs/rituals and practices among the potters to reinforce their faith in traditional community living.

There were rituals for everything; birth of a child, first menstrual cycle, weddings as well as death. Shanu's wife Ambu, was buried deep in the forest as she died while being pregnant. There were elaborate rituals and practices related to marriage. The singing of the *ovis*, the *haldi* rituals, the worship of the hearth at the *roshya matov* (where the bride kindles the fire and five married women put fistfuls of varied cereals and grain), the chanting of the *mangalashataka* by the priest, the rituals around the sacred pyre till the *mangalsutra* is worn by the bride and then the elaborate marriage meal (89-90).

Besides, there were myths and legends too associated with the trade. The legend of Gunai, the pretty potter woman who was gang-raped while on her round of selling pots, who sets herself on fire after breaking the clay pots on the Sati stone, was a well-known one among the potters (37). The mythical reference of Lord Dattatreya with implements in his four hands, parallels the act of moulding pots to that of creation of the universe by Lord Brahma. The potter twirls the wheel, the Lord twirls the *Sudarshan chakra*, the potter's baton is like the Lord's mace (*gada*), the paddle and pot-shaping is the lotus (*Padma*) while the flat stone of pottery is the Lord's conch (*shankh*) (87). Tales told by Kustha Ajja reveal the association of specific kinds of earthen pots with auspicious rituals, viz. weddings, funerals, house-warming, *Jogvanni*, *asthabhandan* and so on.

*The Kiln* becomes an androcentric novel particularly due to the traditions, practices and beliefs associated with potter women which implicitly treat them subservient to their male counterparts. There is a stigma attached to barren women as

seen in the case of Aprupe (79). The treatment meted towards potter widows is queer. They are disallowed from twirling the wheel and baking in their own kiln as the act is akin to giving birth. However, they are consoled by allowing them to mould rimless earthen ware and firing at any neighbouring potter's kiln (67). Sitai the elderly widow who also has a widowed daughter-in-law, face this predicament. Women like Baiji who have been abandoned by their spouse, are looked down with disdain.

Potter-men treated their wives quite callously. "The potters didn't care if their wives were ill or lame or pregnant; they took them to the lake and to the hill and hoisted loads of mud on to their heads.... They looked like upright skeletons with hardly any flesh on their frames as they tottered unsteadily..." (67). Potter-women seemed mal-nourished and appeared emaciated due to starvation. They went with loads of pots on their heads, pleading people to buy their wares, more so in the rains. "Racked by fits of coughing, they'd sit in their homes, scratching their lice-infested scalps" (68).

Though the potters face utter penury in the wake of urbanisation, mechanisation and dwindling traditions, they still uphold their practices and ceremonies. Their commitment to *Vagro* Worship, the *Tulsi puja*, the *Bhandi jatra*, the *Jogvanni* and their responsibilities at clay idol making at *Chovoth* is unparalleled. Though times change and traditions start waning, deep within their hearts they know that the new generation is only pulled towards alternate jobs due to their dire circumstances. They regretfully sell the mango tree which offered them shade and succulent fruit. The youth are coerced into finding alternate trades: Raghoba takes to plucking coconuts, Ghanshyam's son who earlier helped his father with the pots, now works as a truck-cleaner and Sitai manages to get a job for her grandson in a bakery in Goa.

Nevertheless, in all these dire circumstances, the voice of conscience through the elderly Sitai *avo* is loud and clear: "You can't uproot tradition, just because your bellies must be filled...(76). Yet, she foresees the metaphorical 'tiger in the forest' roaring to devour the tradition of pottery. She can

hear the 'gurgle of death' due to the forthcoming dam, and the novel ends on a sombre note when Sitai "flopped down on the ground, as though someone had broken her limbs" (132), as if beckoning the doomsday for the tradition of pottery. The traditions and myths linked to pottery are waning and cry out for preservation.

### **Forest Saga: Alien Wayfarers on the Run**

*Aranyakand* or *Forest Saga* is Mahabaleshwar Sail's novella which provides arresting insights into the poignant tale of stone quarry labourers who battle the utterly hostile travails of the forest maze where they are on the run to reach their destination to escape the harsh treatment of being bonded labour to tyrannous employers. The tale has four subaltern tribal families playing the pivotal role and are pitted against another family of a lower caste, seemingly Dalit and marginalised. This clash within a community of peasants-turned-stone quarry labourers, is a microcosm of a wider societal arena which Sail envisages for his readers. Kiran Budkuley in her *Introduction to Forest Saga*, pays a befitting tribute to the author's creative genius and says:

His (Sail's) authorial view envelops the entire canvas of their (the character's) community life: kinships and cultural traits, traditions and superstitions, quirks and quarrels, existential qualms and ethics, compromises and defiance, animosity and camaraderie—all find a place in this cosmic saga of human tribulations.... Their unenviable predicament, apprehensions, frustrations, and sorrows are so gripping that they continue to haunt the reader's sensibility long after the novella is put away. (xxxvi)

The novella captures the ethos of the subaltern peasants on the run for greener pastures and safer terrains. They see God in every simple thing close to them; a tree, a cow, a snake or even a rock. The stone becomes an object of devotion, their Shankar Mahadev, bringing to their spiritually arid lives a sense of completion and grace. An old woman from the settlement narrates the legend of this God: "They say that Shankar Mahadev once came to our forefather's door begging for alms. Our forefather failed to recognize him and tossed a

piece of stone into his bowl. The Lord was enraged.... We've been suffering for that lapse ever since" (24).

Mahabaleshwar Sail's depiction of a turbulent drama for human survival is profoundly universal and yet distinctively individual. With a brilliant fast-paced plot, this novella has characters that are thoroughly realistic as well as idealistic and naïve, steeped in beliefs, superstition and tradition. The peasants run away from the tyrannous trap of Kashiram Savkar only to be further chained in the quagmire of their stone quarry bosses in an unknown land.

The entire drama, packed in little less than a hundred pages, is tense and engrossing. It is a tale which resonates with the experience of subalternity. The elderly Ballapa spells their predicament in simplistic terms: "Ours is a hand-to-mouth existence, what does it matter...forest or plain! Just stay alive" (20). Though living a life of vagabonds on the go, they are quite caste conscious. Gangaram declares that the low-caste family of Gopu should stay far away from the rest. The supervisor however intervenes saying there is no caste in the labour force; no divisions (21). Gopu's retort is heart wrenching: "We're from a lower caste, but we share the same grief and suffering that you do". Realising that they were given a raw deal by the Supervisor of the stone quarry, the peasants decide to forget all differences and flee in the forest to save themselves from debt and bondage. It is here that they face the harsh vagaries of nature in the labyrinthine maze of the forest as they journey along without a drop of water to drink.

A close sub-textual reading of *Forest Saga* helps to unearth the numerous matrices of superstitious beliefs and religious rituals practiced by this community of labourers. The relationship between Janappa's son Narsu with the low-caste Gopu's daughter Renu, was disparaged as unworthy due to the unequal caste configuration. The authorial voice is quite audible. "...[A] mountain of obstacles lay between them. How would they overcome these prickly issues of caste and class?" (33). The stone cutter Gundappa has turned demented as his young wife was killed by a boulder which rolled downhill over her (25). Dattu's wife Lakshumi was having her monthly

period and could not touch the idol of Mahadev (45), thus corroborating that sanctity of the gods loses purity at the touch of a menstruating woman.

Though hit by hard times in the forest maze, their faith in God is undeterred. Though their spirits were broken and exhaustion swept over them, on their lips there was a prayer: "Lord Nandi, come to our aid. We'll celebrate the annual feast at your shrine; we'll make the ritual offerings..." (72). As desperation drives mothers to breastfeed their infants with blood instead of milk (77) and frustration compels Balappa to throttle and kill his son (86), there is nothing left but the will to drag on and survive. In all this Ballapa can still manage to console the little Kempa by weaving a mythical tale: "I went to a temple one day and walked away with the idol of the Goddess. I sprinkled some holy water on the idol and it turned into your mother" (87).

Thus, this veritable saga of subalterns from debt to death, from the Savkar's wrath to the labyrinthine quagmire of the quarry force, lands them to desperation, drought and death.

### Conclusion

With a sensitive portrayal of subaltern peasants in *Kali Ganga*, penury stricken potters in *The Kiln* and the debt-burdened quarry labourers on the run in *Forest Saga*, Mahabaleshwar Sail has brought to his fiction the freshness of realism by incorporating the ethos and mythos of the common folk with their quivering anxieties and failing dreams. All the three novels are teeming with tradition: farming and pottery, which is invariably sacrificed at the altar of modernisation, monetary gain and urbanisation. Incidentally, all the three novels portray the close interplay of Nature with the lives of the rural or tribal man. They also unravel the androcentric practices which glorify the man as superior vis-à-vis the woman. The realism in the three texts is so stark that it is no surprise to find that in the subaltern consciousness the end always beckons lament and pathos. It is thus inevitable that Sail's fiction under study ends on a tragic chord; a shattered Suman lamenting over her unwedded widowhood in *Kali Ganga*, a crestfallen Sitai shattered on seeing the dam work resume

in *The Kiln* and a heart-wrenching shriek by Vithai over the dead corpse of Ballapa in *Forest Saga*. The three texts under study implicitly celebrate the traditions, ethos and myths of subaltern communities who straddle with trying circumstances and brace up to meet them.

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## Nature and Man in British Literature: A Historical Overview

JAYEETA DEB

ECOCRITICISM is an interdisciplinary field of study. The people of 21st century are obsessively occupied with technology. This tech-savvy nature of people has alienated them from nature. Recently, various issues like Global Warming, rapid growth of industrialization, etc. have compelled today's otherwise tech-savvy people to ponder over restoring balance to nature. The random uses of words like 'biodegradable', 'recycle', 'eco-friendly', etc. in stationery articles, essential commodities have made people to brood over restoring ecological balance to mother earth. This concern for nature has given this environment-based writing a new fillip. It has gained momentum in today's fast-paced twenty-first century too. Ecocriticism is relatively a new addition to the theoretical paradigm. It has been heralded as a new theoretical genre with the emergence of the publication of the canonical text *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson. Ecocriticism tries to make an interconnectedness between literature and environment. William Rueckert is the first person who used the term "Ecocriticism" in 1978 in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". He defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (xx). According to Cheryl Glotfelty

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class