

Interview with Margaret Mascarenhas

Jayesh Needham

I had the opportunity to interview Margaret Mascarenhas, author of the best-selling novel, *Skin*, Penguin India's first fiction title of 2001. An American citizen who grew up in Venezuela and attended college in the US, Ms. Mascarenhas divides her time between Goa and California. She has completed a new novel, *Passion Fruit*, which was renamed *The Disappearance of Irene Dos Santos* and which came out in June of 2009 from Grand Central. She is now working on her third novel, *The French Club* (which is a working title) as well as on collections of her columns and short stories.¹

Skin features the main character Pagan and follows the history of her family throughout several generations in Portuguese Goa (with side stories taking place in the US, Paris, and Angola), interweaving elements of mystical storytelling while simultaneously tackling issues of Portuguese colonialism, slavery, and identity (post-colonial, neo-colonial, or otherwise). In particular, issues of identity formation resonate throughout the pages of *Skin*, as Pagan divides her time between the US and India, with a white mother and Goan father. As the novel unfolds, and the family's complex history is revealed in anecdotes and magical-realist narratives, these issues of identity and Pagan's sense of belonging become further complicated. As a student of Portuguese colonialism and as a product of biracial parents myself (my mother being Indian and my father American) I—having grown up in the US but having also spent extensive time in India—was particularly interested in Mascarenhas' novel and in the issues it raises.

JN: *Why did you want to write this book? What was your investment in the book's subject matter?*

MM: I don't think the process (for me) can be described as having consciously "wanted" to write this particular book—it wasn't a dissertation; I had no preconceived plan. It began as an extremely fragmented collection of notes and stories I wrote off and on over a period of ten years in my free time, of which there wasn't a lot. While on holiday in the summer of 2000, I wove it into the beginning of a novel, around 100 pages. A friend had a look at it, sent it to Penguin without my knowledge, and Penguin suddenly called to ask where the rest of the story was. So at that time I became "invested" in finishing the novel, although I believe my investment would have been the same with any other story or subject matter. As a result of the Penguin offer, I became more serious and methodical in my research on the subject of the slave trade in Goa, and it captured my imagination.

JN: *To what extent, if any, has your background as an American citizen of Goan origin influenced the writing of Skin, especially the formation and development of the main character Pagan?*

MM: Well, I'm inclined to write what I know, so to that extent, my knowledge, first- or secondhand, my ability to observe, and my life experience are all key influences. However, there are quite a few differences between my own experience and worldview and those of the Pagan character.

Although I was born in the US, I grew up in Caracas, Venezuela. And I never lived in India as a young child, only visited for brief periods of time. I am not an only child or a twin; my parents are alive and well; I have no exotic boyfriend in Brazil. Though my Indian grandparents considered themselves "Catholic" Saraswat Brahmins, I had no knowledge or understanding of that as a child. Only as a young adult, when I returned to India to work as an editor in Mumbai, did I become aware of the societal structures and the color consciousness that exist in Goa and the rest of India.

Growing up in Caracas, which I would describe as having a well-integrated multi-racial society, and attending multi-racial, multi-cultural, bi-lingual primary and secondary schools, I personally never suffered the identity or alienation problems that assail the Pagan character, though I am acquainted with, and have interviewed, a number of people with bi- or multi-racial backgrounds, as well as people considered part of the African and Indian diaspora, who struggle with these issues. My interest in casteism

and racism (or indeed the development of any hierarchal societal structures) has evolved over time.

JN: *Skin* reminds me of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude) because of its combination of realistic detail and magical, mystical elements (thus giving it a magical realism feel), not to mention the fact that both books follow a family through several generations, fleshing out each family's history through stories and anecdotes. Have you read this book, and, if so, were you at all influenced by it? Were you influenced by any other authors or scholars in particular during the writing of this novel?

MM: It was the Venezuelan essayist, Arturo Uslar Pietri, who applied the term "magic realism" to a very specific South American literary genre, before the advent of García Márquez, and I was familiar with the term and the genre as a student. I believe that my early formation and education predisposed me to both South American literature and a distinctly South American view of the world. And in fact, part of *Skin* was first written in Spanish, and then translated by me into English. I wouldn't say I was consciously influenced by specific authors in terms of format (in fiction the family saga is not unique to Márquez, and is almost always enhanced by anecdotal material). However, surely I am to some degree influenced by what I read as a child and by what I like to read as an adult. In high school, though I studied South American lit in general as well as English lit, Venezuelan lit was a mandatory subject. Most saliently (though there were many others) I recall studying Pedro Simón, Andrés Bello, Rómulo Gallegos, Teresa de la Palma, Guillermo Meneses. In college, I majored in Comp Lit, with a focus on contemporary South American writers. During that period I read voraciously and eclectically. I have read everything by Mario Vargas Llosa, of whom I am a great admirer. In no particular order, among my other favored authors, some of whom may have helped shape my thinking, if not precisely my writing, are: Miguel Ángel Asturias, Jorge Luis Borges, García Márquez, García Lorca, Oscar Hijuelos, Carlos Fuentes, Pablo Neruda, Antonia Palacios, José Ramón Medina, Julio Cortázar, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Milan Kundera, Italo Calvino, Günter Grass, Louis de Bernieres, Isaac Singer, Somerset Maugham, Ben Okri, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Michael Ondaatje, Anchee Min, Margaret Atwood, Louise Erdrich, John Irving, Salman Rushdie, Ruth Prawer Jhabwallah, Rumer Godden. I am unable to analyze the degree/effect any have had on my writing, but I don't believe it to be direct, other than the temptation to blur the

line between the real and the fantastic. This way of telling a story comes naturally to me, especially in a story set mostly in Goa, which is full of magical lore.

JN: *Many scholars of post-colonialism are preoccupied with the idea of identity formation (especially the formation of minority identities), a theme clearly present throughout Skin. Do you feel the formation of a post-colonial identity with regards to Portuguese colonialism is unique and/or similar when compared to the colonialism of other countries (such as England, France, etc.)? In as much as Portuguese colonialism in India was in many ways an earlier, and in comparison to England, a less consolidated form of colonialism, and in as much as Christianity—one of the primary religious identities in Goa—remains a minority religious identity in India, do you think the formation of post-liberation/post-colonial identities that arise from these circumstances are more difficult or complex to track?*

MM: I am not a scholar of post-colonialism. I have more of a predilection for the examination of neo-colonialism, though I would not consider myself a scholar in that area either. Under that caveat, I can say that during my research for the final avatar of *Skin*, I discovered that the Portuguese were inclined to integrate with those they colonized. They were not, for example, averse to intermarriage, and in fact encouraged it among their soldiers and officers. Among the Goan Hindus who did not intermarry (for Goa was predominantly Hindu when the Portuguese established their presence, despite Muslim rule when they made their appearance), identity in terms of ethnicity and belief systems is fairly easy to track because of the entrenchment of casteism in the Indian psyche. Casteism has survived Portuguese rule, conversion, and liberation. Basically, whether Hindu or Catholic, natives were and continue to a large extent to be bound by caste identity.

JN: *Pagan, in particular, is constantly questioning her identity and who she really is, especially because of her “inability as a cross-cultural hybrid to figure out where [she] belongs.” How do you think the issue of identity formation is further complicated for those in the Portuguese or Portuguese-speaking diaspora? Do you think identity becomes more or less crucial to those in the diaspora?*

MM: I have no empirical evidence of it, but I believe that a majority of those who make up the diaspora, whether Portuguese speaking or not, are very much concerned with roots.

JN: *During a conversation in the novel between Saudade and Livia, Saudade exclaims: "what identity do I have at present? I am a descendant of slaves without a surname." Do you think that people that have been forcibly removed from their homelands lack a strong sense of identity?*

MM: Certainly. How could they not? Empirically, this is evinced by a study of the Siddhi community in India. Unlike the wishfully thought-out characters of *Skin*, the Siddhis have no long-term oral history, no specific memories, handed down, of their African roots. They have certain rituals, but are disconnected from the source and meaning of them. Or the meaning has been reinterpreted, diluted, mixed up with the belief systems of the host country.

JN: *Later, Saudade also says: "Help me forget who I am and where I come from and what has happened to me." How do you think the colonial past, with all of its brutality and manipulation, should be addressed in the present? How do you think the colonial past can be addressed through fiction?*

MM: Colonialism continues to operate under a different guise in the present day. For me, it is a matter of resistance. Throughout history, storytellers around the world have resisted all forms of oppression. It is also a matter of representation, giving voice to the voiceless through stories. And finally, it is a matter of identity, a way of remembering where we come from, of celebrating our diverse histories.

JN: *Names are obviously very important to the formation of one's identity and, in India, names in many cases are identifiers of one's background from a particular state (with last names such as Da Silva and Cabral identifying you as Goan and last names such as Mathews and Thomas identifying you as Malayali, for example). How important and difficult was it for you to select the characters' names in Skin? How do you think the process of naming has changed in Goa over generations?*

MM: This was not difficult at all. I didn't spend much time thinking about it. The process of naming has changed more or less in the way I described it in *Skin*—when English took over from Portuguese as the primary language in schools, and spoken at home, Goan Catholics began using Anglicized first names, or, alternatively, Hindu first names. For Hindu Goans the process hasn't changed at all.

JN: *Skin, the title of the novel, also is intimately tied to one's identity. It is an element of differentiation, as readers clearly see when both Pagan and her*

grandmother, Dona Gabriela, are given preferential treatment at the Immaculate Conception School for Girls for their light skin or when Gor-Gor refers to his mixed child with Consolação as “some dirty mulatto half-slave.” To what extent, if any, do you think differentiation according to race and other factors (such as class, gender, etc.) was further exacerbated by Portuguese colonialism or Portuguese colonial policy?

MM: Not at all. The entitlement issues surrounding racial/caste purity and its preservation, especially among the Brahmins, who continue to hold much political and economic power, is very much an Indian problem.

JN: *Furthermore, a handful of scholars of Lusotropicalism claim that the Portuguese empire exhibited a “milder” or “softer” form of colonialism. One such scholar is Gilberto Freyre, who claims that the most characteristic tendency of the Portuguese empire was towards “integration” rather than the violent subjection or systematic assimilation that was characteristic of other European empires. As Skin clearly tackles issues of colonial society in Goa, how would you evaluate this statement? Do you agree?*

MM: Yes, in general. However, there is the matter of the Inquisition, which cannot be entirely separated from the Portuguese empire.

JN: *In the opening prologue of the book, the idea of “Portuguese India, where East meets West,” is introduced. António de Oliveira Salazar, when responding to the Indian Independence movement’s challenge to Portugal’s hold over Goa, discussed the idea of Goa being an entirely different land from India where there was a “transplantation of the West onto Eastern lands, the expression of Portugal in India.” Do you think this statement is accurate?*

MM: Not really. An overlay, perhaps, and that too for a time, but not a transplantation or an expression of Portugal.

JN: *Storytelling, especially as it relates to the transmission of history, is another important theme of the book. As there is very little academic material on Goa and the Portuguese in Goa, did you feel either compelled or obligated to include some history of Portuguese Goa in your book? Or did you feel this material was essential to your book?*

MM: This line of questioning is very difficult for me to address, since when I am writing fiction, I don’t think too much or have a planned trajectory. I felt it was important to set the scene, create a context for the story.

JN: *The presence of characters such as Esperança, Consolação, and Saudade, as well as references to Angola and Mozambique demonstrate the idea that Portuguese colonialism (or colonialism in general) is a transnational enterprise that transcends national boundaries. Was this idea part of your thought-process when you included these characters and references in Skin or were there other reasons for their inclusion in the novel?*

MM: *Skin* is less about Portuguese colonialism than it is about a kind of colonization of the mind and spirit, about separations among people, collectively and individually, that are based on power equations, about the many layers, some subtle, some not, of these separations. True, the Portuguese slave trade was international and monumental in its scope. And though this is a story mostly about Goa, a former Portuguese colony, the slaves and bonded laborers in Goa came mostly from Angola and Mozambique.

JN: *What do you think fiction can add to one's understanding of colonialism? How do you think Skin augments one's understanding of Portuguese colonialism and of Portuguese Goa?*

MM: I'll have to leave that for others to determine, since this is not my purpose.

Note

¹ See <http://mmasgoa.tripod.com/> for this and further information.

Jayesh Needham is the Campus Coordinator for Oberlin Shansi, a non-profit organization at Oberlin College that promotes understanding, communication, and intercultural exchange between Asians and Americans through individual and group educational programs and community projects. He received his A.B. in International Relations in 2007 from Brown University with a track focus in Politics, Culture, and Identity, and conducted his interview with Margaret Mascarenhas during his Senior Capstone Seminar on Portuguese Colonialism with Professor Cristiana Bastos. E-mail: jayesh.needham@gmail.com