

# Mirage

and other stories

DAMODAR MAUZO

Translated from the Konkani by Vidya Pai



UNDER THE  
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# Preface

I love the short story. Going by its definition, the form requires an economy of setting and a concise narrative. Given these constraints, it is very satisfying when one actually meets this challenge. After the first two decades of my writing short fiction, suddenly these five stories emerged. Stories that were not so short. So what would I call them, if not short stories? Had I gone overboard? Had I crossed the limits of brevity?

I will be happy if the readers agree with my answer: a firm 'no'. The 'single effect' concept is clearly present in these stories. The short story is a genre that is said to be autonomous – without any rules to conform to. As a style it continues to evolve. It gives me the freedom to write stories my way. Notwithstanding my apprehensions on the acceptable length of the short story, I am now told that 'longreads' are getting trendy.

Now, three decades after they were written in the original Konkani, the stories are reaching out to a wider readership in translation, first into Marathi and now English. The readers will have to bear in mind the period in which the stories are set. Over the decades the locales depicted in the stories have changed. When I researched for *The New Case*, the Mental Hospital was at Altinho in Panjim. The two major political parties of Goa were the MGP (Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party) and the UGP (United Goans Party). You could get a peg of feni for a few annas, a denomination of the rupee that is now forgotten. Instead of the twelfth standard nowadays, you were

required to pass 'Intermediate Science' for admission to an engineering college.

All the five stories in *Mirage* are thematically diverse. Of these, one is a science fiction tale. I often made fervent appeals to Konkani writers to attempt writing science fiction, a genre that had been largely ignored. I then felt, why not try my own hand at it? Then one day as I was reading Asimov, I felt inspired and immediately got to work. Thus was born the *Vishutian* (*Vishuti* in Konkani).

*Mirage* is made possible by a few well-meaning friends. I express my deep gratitude to my publishers, Leonard Fernandes and Queenie Fernandes of Under The Peepal Tree, who ensured a fine quality of production. I thank my fellow-writer, José Lourenço, who painstakingly copyedited the entire script. Lastly, I remain deeply indebted to my translator, Vidya Pai, whose love for Konkani and passion for translation has taken Konkani literature across the linguistic boundaries.

*Damodar Mauzo*

# Illusion

It is true! Man changes according to the circumstances in which he finds himself. This happens automatically, as a matter of course! This thought flashed through my mind as soon as I woke up. How else would I have woken up at six after going to bed so late?

I thought of how agitated I had been last night and heaved a deep sigh. Perhaps I shouldn't have gone to Sharma's place for dinner ... this sense of unease and regret wouldn't have befallen me. Sharma must have gone to bed late, too. He too must have risen early ... but filled with fresh energy in anticipation of the nights ahead. And I? What use have I for such nights that stretch so empty?

Sharma takes me home sometimes so that I can have the pleasure of eating home-cooked food. I accept the invitation at once because I enjoy their company. Mrs Sharma takes great care to see that I eat well and they treat me like a member of their family. Yet ...

Take last night, for instance. Sharma and his wife are remarkably free in the way they behave with each other. They don't consider me an outsider, so they display their affection for each other without a trace of self-consciousness even when I am around. They've been married for three years now, but they act like newly-weds, slapping and nudging and tapping each other playfully.

'If you say that again I'll eat you up, right here, in front of Desai saheb,' he warned, pinching his wife on the cheek and lunging forward with his mouth wide open as she ran from the room.

Mrs Sharma was a good-looking woman, slim and fair and blessed with a good figure. What made her more attractive were her coquettish ways. Her sensual movements, her coy smiles and the manner in which she bent her head as she glanced up at someone were enough to hold them in her thrall.

‘It must be way past Desai saheb’s bedtime. Why are you holding him up?’ she demanded of her husband as we continued to chat after dinner.

‘So what? He is lucky to go to sleep as soon as he gets home. But that’s not the case with us!’ Sharma had retorted.

‘You shameless ...’ his wife had blushed and gestured at him in mock anger.

I had tossed and turned in bed for a long time. Sharma’s wife seemed to float before my eyes, keeping sleep at bay. And then, when I did fall asleep, she visited me in my dreams.

I was ready by half past seven. This had become a routine since I got to Dubai. Back home in Goa I could barely open my eyes at seven thirty or eight, but out here I am awake at six. I brew a cup of tea as I brush my teeth and fry some eggs while I am getting dressed. My chores are all done and I am in office by eight every morning.

Enmeshed as I am in this routine, my whole life has become mechanical, like a robotic machine. My body moves, I can walk ... but that’s not the point. I have a mind, so I know I am alive. It is this mind that causes problems. It makes me think too much. People who are very sensitive shouldn’t choose to stay in the Gulf.

My eyes strayed towards Sharma’s flat in the next building as I walked towards my car. Mrs Sharma may have been at the window, but I avoided looking in that direction as I got into my Mazda and drove away.

The sun was high up in the sky as my car left the Karama

Housing Society behind and sped towards Jumbo Electronics. It was very cold and people were swaddled in sweaters, jackets and warm clothes. The traffic had become quite heavy. One could see more cars than pedestrians in these parts. The people out on the road were mostly Asians but the really posh cars belonged to the Arabs. Each car seemed to be a brand new acquisition. Perhaps the Sheikhs employed people to keep a tab on the number of cars they owned!

I had just driven into the parking lot of Jumbo Electronics when Sharma's car came up behind mine.

'Good morning, Desai saheb,' he greeted me. Must have had a good time last night, seems quite chirpy today, I thought.

'Good morning, Sharma ji.'

'We have to go to Deira today, don't we? When should we start?'

Ah, yes. We had to go to the site at Deira but the thought of going there in this cold was quite unnerving. I would have bunked office if I were in Goa, but I couldn't do that now. Besides, what would I do all day? The thought of being idle for so long itself seemed like punishment! At least I'd have Sharma for company during the drive to the site.

'We'll leave after lunch. Let's finish work at the office first.'

I was quite content in Dubai, surrounded by every material luxury. I took home a hefty monthly salary. I had a car and lived in a flat equipped with a TV, a music system, a washing machine and other appliances, all of which were provided by the company. In Goa, acquiring all these gadgets and maintaining them in good condition would have drained me of all my resources.

Yet, despite being surrounded by all these material comforts, I felt there was something missing deep inside. Time seemed to pass well enough when I was busy with