

## Book Review of The D'Costa Family novel

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### Bibliographic Information:

**Name of the Book:** The D'Costa Family

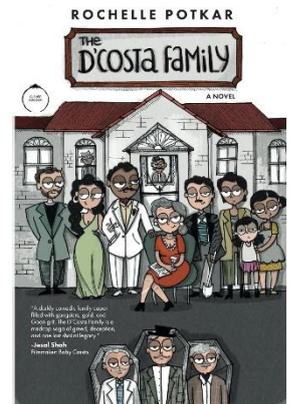
**Author:** Rochelle Potkar

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Rochelle Potkar is a prolific writer, and *The D'Costa Family* is her debut novel, with three more in the pipeline. Drawing on her experience as a scriptwriter for films, Rochelle has produced a highly readable novel a rambunctious, Bollywood-style comedy with dark undercurrents. The two families locked in conflict are the Anglo-Indian Josephs and the Goan D'Costas. Rochelle may well have found in inspiration in Salman Rushdie, for Joseph D'Costa is a character in *Midnight's Children*. She possesses formidable linguistic ability, a strong storytelling instinct, and impressive control over plot and narrative.

Let us also remind ourselves, as Nietzsche knew, that no writer is free from the confessional habit. Callian, where much of the action unfolds, is in fact Kalyan, the Bombay suburb where Rochelle was raised in a Goan landlord's home. She has said that from the eccentrics of this community, she has through the application of imagination created a gangster world filled with dark secrets, mysteries, affairs, and, yes, murders.

Rita loves Roberto and is pregnant with his child, but on the day of her marriage she discovers that the entire Anglo-Indian Joseph estate has been burnt down by Theodore, the D'Costa Don, who watches the conflagration with satisfaction.

Before his death, Theodore appoints Pedro as successor, but the will stipulates that a re-election must take place within three months of his demise. For the moment, Pedro assumes control, and Rita faces the prospect of dependency on him. As part of Rita's grand design for vengeance, she, supporting Jason, urges the tenants to vote against Pedro. The flesh and blood of the novel lie in its details. Rochelle draws us into the mysteries of Burgundy Estate and its inhabitants in small, suggestive doses. Rita plays a dangerous and vicious role in her pursuit of revenge. Pedro is brutal and aggressive, yet spineless when faced with imminent

annihilation. Jason, fascinated by burials, prepares bodies and digs graves himself. Everyone harbours secrets, revealed gradually. There is a plenitude of characters, and each is compelling. Gaitonde is a bullying, shrewd, Bollywood-style policeman, complete with a sidekick who sings paeans to his superior. Each character adds texture and value to the narrative.

The names themselves are memorable Myna and Philomena, the D'Costa servants; Jarrett and Barrett, Brandon and Landon, Pedro's bodyguards; and, of course, the inimitable Gaitonde.

Rochelle has an impish, mischievous streak. She satirises everything the Dons, their turf wars, the women's affairs, the building syndicate, the police, and the Church. This is necessarily a sketchy outline and scarcely conveys the speed of the narrative. The plot, with its many twists and turns, races toward a climax on the day of Seneca's wedding. Food plays an important role in Rochelle's imagination. There are lavish descriptions of Goan cuisine, and she delights in naming dishes. Seneca and Milind, she says, get along like *khari* biscuit and tea. There is pleasure in the litany of *balchao*, *chorizo*, *sorpotel*, *bhakris*, *vindaloo*, beetroots, carrots, yellow dal, black moong, and red rajma. It is not merely the dish but its colour that attracts her. The kitchen at Burgundy House is perpetually active *sanna* batter fermenting, chutneys being ground, eggs boiling, garlic being peeled, ginger crushed. Annette tends a flourishing vegetable garden with ginger, lemon, fenugreek, coriander, aloe vera, and more. Anglo-Indian dishes such as kedgeree and fish rissoles appear alongside endless parties, where all the characters prove to be hearty trenchermen and women. The drinks flow freely too *feni*, *ghodumba*, wine, and beer.

Henry James spoke of 'solidity of specification' as essential to the novel, and Rochelle demonstrates this in her descriptions of the estate: the furniture, towering chandeliers, large windows, brass lampshades, the grandfather clock, and walls lined with large-framed portraits of ancestors, the fiercest being Carmino D'Costa. The Library of Secrets, Rita's favourite refuge, is stocked with maroon-bound tomes embossed with gold lettering, and a weather-beaten highchair that Rita unfailingly associates with her father, Anton Joseph. It also serves as her hiding place for the building plans she has unearthed, and the guns intended for her deadly schemes.

Religion and caste are significant within the Goan Roman Catholic and Anglo-Indian milieu. "Looks are not everything," Rita tells Annette. "It's blood skin and bloodline." Blanca is said to be Konkani Kharvi, not quite low caste but still far down the hierarchy. The Goans remain deeply caste-conscious despite their Catholicism, and Rochelle takes pleasure in listing them Gawda, Bhandari, Kharvi, Chari, Vani, Gawli, Kansar, Kalaikar, Satarkar, Shet, Kumbhar. Rita, the Anglo-Indian-turned-Catholic Goan, knows them all like nursery rhymes. Years of Catholicism have not erased her awareness of race, which matters greatly, particularly among Anglo-Indians. They trace their lineage to Sir Wolverine Joseph, an Englishman who married an Indian woman, and to their historical ties with the East India Company.

One could continue at length about this sumptuous work, but it suffices to say that if this novel is any indication, Rochelle Potkar will soon emerge as one of the leading lights of Indian fiction in English. That recognition will come sooner rather than later.

**Reviewer's Details:**

Mohan Ramanan retired as Professor of English from the University of Hyderabad. He is widely published and has authored more than twenty books, including several edited volumes. His scholarly work spans modern English, American and Indian poetry, R. K. Narayan, and Rt. Hon. Srinivasa Sastri. He has also published two volumes of poetry *Grills and Other Poems* and *My Son's Father Confessor*.

He has served as Deputy Director of the then American Studies Research Centre, as Head of the Department of English, and as Dean of the School of Humanities at the University of Hyderabad. His international fellowships include a British Council Fellowship at Merton College, Oxford University (1983); a Fulbright Scholarship at Amherst College, Massachusetts, USA (1989-90); a Fulbright-Nehru Teaching Fellowship at Missouri Southern University, Joplin, USA (2013); and a Montserrat Teaching Fellowship at the University of Barcelona (2005). He lives in Hyderabad, pursuing his literary and spiritual interests, as well as Carnatic music.