

MAJOR THEMES IN EARLY POETRY OF DOM MORAES: A STUDY OF COLLECTED POEM 1954-2004

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ABSTRACT

As an internationally acknowledged poet from the community of Indian English writers, Dom Moraes has recognized the art of writing poetry as revelation of his tapestry of imagination incorporation the trajectory between real to surreal, rural to urban, subjective to objective, home to homelessness. Chiefly expounding inner turmoil and desires of a life lacking harmony, Moraes in his early poetry is found to be lonely and exiled in search of a 'promised land' where he can share his lonely moments in utter ecstasy and wish-fulfillment. What is striking in such a perspective is that he always seems to be endeavored to create a "space" within his self- a private space of imagination, legend, romance pastoral or fairytale away from harsh reality of life and society. That imaginary "space" was so compelling to the poet that reality often seems distorted and self-critical to him, while imagination always beautiful and enhancing. In many cases, memory and imaginations in the form of therapeutic re-membering have become two strategic maneuvers to come into terms with his ancestral root and to bring the sense of rootedness. Oscillating in between the eastern and western epistemology and artifice of poetic art, Moraes often reveals a tendency to encompass private associations, allusions and conventions which ultimately overwhelm the coherence of his poems. Hence in most of his confessional moments, he is a poet of convention, of literary allusion, civilization and a world of personal imagination at the same time.

Keywords: Tapestry of Imagination, 'Promised Land', Confessional, Therapeutic Re-Membering

I have grown up, hand on the primal bone,
Making the poem, taking the word from the stream,
Fighting the sand for the speech, fighting the stone

(Moraes "Autobiography")

The Oxford scholar and the Bombay (now Mumbai) born poet Dom Moraes when started his career with *A Beginning* in 1957, he was just a nineteen years old student at Oxford University. Still, the creation received the Hawthornden Prize, making Moraes, at nineteen, the youngest and first non-English writer to win the award. His mastery over cadence, lyrical beauty, exceptional yet obscure look towards life and experience always not only enthrall his readers but also his critics into a mesmerizing world of passion, imagination and meditative pensiveness. His has the ability to introspect over human condition starting with particular to universal incorporating the trajectory between real to surreal, rural to urban, subjective to objective, home to homelessness. It is the tapestry of imagination that binds variety of themes and moods within a self composed with western and eastern epistemologies. In his sophisticated analysis of modern Indian English poetry, Bruce King has rightly included Moraes in the section dealing with the maturity of the genre towards the last decades of the twentieth century (2001). If we consider that modern Indian English poetry is basically a type of experimental poetry writing the self, then definitely Moraes with his preponderant subjective poems is one of the true representatives of modern Indian English poetry and the only poet of the present generation who has acquired such an uncanny vision of life and literature which, in turn, constituted the sustaining power of his poetic ability. Like Seamus Heaney, writing poetry to him is akin to digging, a kind of digging into the stream of knowledge, digging into the world of imagination- a kind of discipline that demands more than the expected craftsmanship.

Dominic Francis Moraes was born on July 19 of 1938, to Frank Moraes, an attorney and journalist, and Beryl Moraes, a doctor. The family moved often during Moraes' childhood, and he traveled extensively with his father, the editor of *The Times of India*, especially to Australia and Southeast Asia and up to the end of life, except Antarctica, Moraes traveled all the countries of the planet. Moraes began writing poetry at age twelve and attended a Jesuit high school and spent eight years in Britain. At age eighteen he entered Oxford University where he met the influential poets W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, who left lifelong impression to him. In 1960, Moraes published *Poems*, and the autobiographical *Gone Away*, about his travels in India. *The Brass Serpent* - translations from Hebrew poetry - followed in 1964, and *John Nobody* the year after that. His *John Nobody* was followed by a chapbook, *Beldam & Others* (1967). All were received well, Dom becoming a familiar and well-liked figure at poetry readings and in poets' pubs. By 1966, he had published *Poems 1955-65*. Two years later, settled in Islington, he published more autobiography, *My Son's Father*. In 1968, Dom settled back in India for good, only resuming the writing of verse in the late 1970s. In 1971 he became the editor of *The Asia Magazine* and further edited several magazines in London, Hong Kong and New York. He scripted and partially directed over 20 television documentaries for the BBC and ITV and became a war correspondent in Algeria, Israel and Vietnam. In 1976 he joined the *United Nations*. In 1988, he published his *Collected Poems 1957-1987*, and two years after *Serendip* and *Typed with One Finger* were published.

A third volume of autobiography, *Never At Home* (1994), was followed in 2001 by another poetry collection, *In Cinnamon Shade*. He also contributed to *Voices Of The Crossing* (2000), edited by Naseem Khan and Ferdinand Dennis, on the impact of England on writers from the subcontinent and the Caribbean. He co-edited *The Penguin Book Of Indian Journeys* (2001). In the same year he published his one of the most popular collections *In Cinnamon Shade* which was followed by *The Long Strider* in the next year.

His *Collected Poems 1954-2004* (2004) was the last publication of his poetic career. This is the year of his departure from this world to the unknown one. In these 66 years of his stuffy life from 1938 to 2004 Moraes has contributed a lot to the granary of Indian English poetry. Just as Salman Rushdie gave Indian English novel a prominent place in the international scene, so Moraes brought Indian English poetry from the margin to the centre of English literature. Assuredly his inclination towards the English literature, especially poetry has begun in his childhood when he was merely an apprentice of his father's occupation. As Bruce King in *Three Indian Poets* (2005) observes that "from the very beginning, Dom Moraes was a poet thoroughly immersed in the themes, language conventions, and attitudes of poetry, especially of the English poetic tradition" (136).

Right from the beginning that tendency was found to be a dominating strain in his poetry which ultimately broadened his sense of belongingness and debunked that sense at the same time. If, on the one hand "the world of imagination" (King 140) seems to be the vital element of his narrative strategy, the same imagination often remains a path of exclusion for the so called "Indianness" from his poetry, on the other. For example, the poem "Figure in the Landscape" begins with a Donne like metaphysical anguish towards death ("Dying is just the same as going to sleep") and ends with an acceptance of the Wordsworthian optimism in life:

Walking in lonely fields at break of day
He remembered a Dream, looked at the sky
And wondered would a stranger come that way
To take his hand and say, I long to die.
(“Figure in the Landscape”, *A Beginning*)

Such Wordsworthian celebration continues in “Glitter of Pebbles” where the poet, like Wordsworth in “I Wondered Lonely as a Cloud”, enjoys the glittering beauty of pebbles in a sunny day. The difference is simply that the mossy stone in Wordsworth is more shy and hidden than Moraes’ pebbles; instead he felt ecstasy and the eye pleasure in both of them. These types of Wordsworthian wonder and ecstasy are found almost in all the poems written on Nature. The wonder and ecstasy that the poet finds in Nature are roots of the sustaining romantic strain in his poetry. As the poet believes:

... Wordsworth lies chilly in Grasmere
And his bones are absolved and dissolved in the tears of the rain
(“Bells for William Wordsworth”, *A Beginning*)

However some poems of this collection also deal with the theme of the relationship between the artist and what Keats called “the longing for easeful death” (ibid 140). They often begin with Keatsian ecstasy and longing for fulfillment in a dreamy imaginary world and ends with hopelessness and pessimism regarding the inevitability of death. Following beginning and ending lines of these poems reveal it clearly:

1. The gross sun squats above
... And dance and flute will cease (“Song”, *A Beginning*)
2. What Corn or Fire dance do you want to join,
... O imitate the sunset as you die
(“Words to a Dancer”, *A Beginning*)
3. The swift romantic touch among the meadows
... An ice of life, to crag amidst her death.
(“In Meadows”, *A Beginning*)
4. Visit the rumoured stranger on the stair
... He missed, one day in spring, his time to die.
(“An Ordinary Care”, *A Beginning*)

These are only four examples; the group can be enlarged with poems like “Landscape Painter”, “Figures in the Landscape”, “Shyness” and so on. Such changes of perspective are definitely symptomatic of the poet’s mental conflict, pessimistic outlook and unwanted acceptance of harsh reality of life. Sometimes they too reveal the “carpe diem” motif behind the poet’s realization of the brevity of life and the inevitability of death. For example the “Words to a Dancer” introduces Marvellian “carpe diem” motif when the poet appeals to the “dancer” to acquire the art before her death. Not only in these early poems, but throughout his career Moraes shows this echoing homage to English literature from Spencer to Auden and often mimics the technical skills of the British English poetry.

In this present paper, however, only early poetry of Moraes will be studied with special reference to the extracted volumes *A Beginning* (1957) and *Poems* (1960) available in the *Collected Poems 1954-2004*, some of the major themes and approaches of his poetry might have been left from our study. But, still, those themes and approaches which gave Moraes’ poetry a unique significance and the base for improvement, a peculiar identity and wholeness will surely be studied and critically analyzed. And undoubtedly those themes, on which Moraes experimented later on and achieved his world wide popularity with maturity, were those earlier themes.

It has already been mentioned that when Moraes published *A Beginning* he was a nineteen years old student. Instead having a larger perspective and multicolored experiences of life, Moraes mainly projected his family problems, loneliness, introspection over sense-data or previous readings and personal anxieties on imagined situations in those early poems. It is the main reason why many poems in *A Beginning* are about reality and failure, including the failure built into the relationship between imagination and reality, between desire and experience. As he remarks:

We have found the promised land.
Now our unrest returns; we burn again,
... (T)hat we have nothing to look forward to.
(“The Pilgrims”, *A Beginning*)

This sense of failure often has constructed the embryo of his early poetry. In search of that “promised land” the poet feels always alienated, exiled and lonely. As he believes that complex societies always create their own complexities and forms of alienation. He has been an outsider right from the beginning of his poetic career whereas only at home in language and poetry. Hence loneliness haunts him as the poet introspects over his present situation and the sense of belonging:

I have grown up, I think, to live alone
To keep my old illusions, sometimes dream,
Glumly, hat I am unloved and forlorn
(“Autobiography” *A Beginning*)

In such “forlorn” moment the meaning of love seems meaningless to him as if it lost the prevailing “innocence” that the poet often found in it. As a result of the fact life falls into utter pessimism and self-pity:

Your hand, your hands in his, like blows relieve
Not helplessness or sorrow, but self pity.
He missed, one day in spring, his time to die
(“An Ordinary Care” *A Beginning*)

The same comprehensive vision often obstructs the poet to have the required pleasure of life. In “An Afternoon tea” life does not remain the same as it lost its pleasure and ecstasy:

... then things changed: and do not ask me why:
But privately and gently, as her hand
Might let mine fall, all love became a lie:
(“Afternoon Tea”, *A Beginning*)

In these poems a kind of Blakonian perspective towards life is found dominating his thought as the poet enters into greater maturity. If, like William Blake, innocence is the core product of the dreamy imaginary land of the poet, reality or Blake’s state of experience is the hallmark of conceiving pessimism and self-pity:

The morning changed, grew chilly and transparent.
Suddenly all the light shrank and was gone...
(“Cainsmorning”, *A Beginning*)

In this period, what is striking is that the poet’s perspective in all the spheres of life was confined within his individual perception without considering any possibility beyond that. Hence he always endeavored to create a “space” within his self- a private space of imagination, legend, romance pastoral or fairytale. In “Afternoon Tea” the poet mentions the “space” as-

... in my wandering dream
Were boulder-broken valleys, a strange land.
Remote, astonished...
(“Afternoon Tea”, *A Beginning*)

His “Moz” is the direct creation of that private space whereas “Shyness” and “At Seven O’Clock” are the recreations of that private space of imagination in which making of a poem is akin to a sexual act and the birth of a new life to the poet:

Riding through death upon each other’s thighs
Create, within their death, a life, a voice
(“Shyness”, *A Beginning*)

In his early poems, the impact of that imaginary “space” was so potent that the poet always found a big hiatus between reality and imagination. Reality seems often distorted and self-critical, while imagination is always beautiful and enhancing. As he remarks:

My dream was broken by the knock of day.
Yet, within my mind, these pictures linger
(“Snow on a Mountain”, *A Beginning*)

This self-created pessimism propels the poet to be ironical and hopeless regarding his existence. In “Landscape Painter”, for example, the poet mocks the perspective of the poetic persona “(A)s though he wore clothes that

did not quite fit :/(Perhaps) a dead man's coat". In the "Afternoon Tea" the poet's urge to sink into the past is debunked by the anger of his wife.

Although this urge of re-rooting into tradition and ancestors is a dominant strategy found in all the Indian English poets and poets of previously colonized nations through which (writing in an alien language) they seek to achieve the so called "Indianness" or the sense of belonging. In Moraes' poetry, this urge is the source of his belonging and pessimism too. If, on the one hand he accepts writing poetry a universal phenomenon, still, on the other hand, his sense of rootlessness and urge to project into his ancestors are clearly visible in those poems in which the poet explicitly reveals his life story:

I remember my grandmother, crescent-browed,
Falling from time, leaf-light, too much alone,
And my grandfather, who was small and proud.
Tumult of images, where have you gone?
(*"Autobiography", A Beginning*)

The poet always carries those "old illusion" and "dream" with him which, on one level remind him about his loneliness and provide him the root to have an identity on the other. His internalization of colonial legacy is clearly evident in "Kanheri Caves" in which the poet describes the cave in terms of colonial dominance and resistance.

Instead of these self-criticisms and the realization of the futility of the dreamy imaginative world, there is a wholeness or in a sense a completeness in the volume. Towards the end of the collection the poet's acceptance of harsh reality and his departure from that visionary space indicate the beginning of a new horizon of his perspective. The penultimate poem of the volume namely "A Man Dreaming" is the indication of that transformation. Whereas in "Snow in a Mountain" the poet's dream was broken by "the knock of day"; in "Being Married" loneliness does merge with his awakening and in "Sailing to England" the poet cannot raise from his "dream land", in "A Man Dreaming" the poet throws that loneliness as he enters into reality:

And then he knew his dream for what it was.
... Then he woke.
He caught his breath and rearranged his brain,
But took sometime to know himself again.
(*"A Man Dreaming", A Beginning*)

Here the poet as the poetic persona is not lost in reality; rather he endeavors a self-critical examination of that dreamy "imaginary space" which was before the core of his poetic ability. But now it is not far dominating... he is not at all in favor of that dreamer persona. So he questions:

... the dreamer who had known all things,
Could not remember why, or who'd descended...
(*"Being Married", A Beginning*)

Now recognizing the shortcomings of his dream land the poet here becomes more skeptical and metaphorical.

The obscurity of his second volume, *Poems* (1960), arises because of its mingling of variety of themes and expressions. It is the volume in which Moraes encompasses influences from Caroline to Cavalier vocabulary, romantic revival of the British movement poets, autobiographical accounts and mythologized perspective towards life and learning. Being a Goan in India and an Indian in England his sense of otherness during that time culminated to such a point that ultimately led him to a potent instinct for assimilation and self-realization. His inclination towards British English poetry is explicitly revealed through his revitalization of traditional rhyme and rhythm of British English poetry and his creative imitation of the modern English language poets. Bruce king in this sense remarks on this volume-

"The modern poetry he had been reading started to influence his sensibility and expression. The dreamy world of Keats and early Yeats are challenged by the sexual guilt of early Dylan Thomas and by the common sense and skepticism of Auden...he had learned Yeats' trick of self-dramatization, of making his own life the subject of his verse" (142).

Whereas Ezekiel was influenced by the rational outlook of the time and Kolatkar by the mythical technique of the modern Europeans and Mehrotra by the Surrealistic mode of writing, Moraes carried on mainly the romantic and modern strains of the respective poets.

From a larger perspective poems in this volume can be divided into three distinct parts- some are revised early verses of *A Beginning*; some are on self-realization and some are about his trip to his homeland that is the subject of "Gone Away". Although the poetic persona of the second group is omnipresent in all the other poems of his career in which Moraes projects himself as a romantic, wandering homeless young poet searching a peaceful nest in his restless world. As he speaks:

Except in you I have no rest,
For always with you I am safe.
(*"Gone Away", Poems*)

And in search of the peaceful nest, he dedicated this particular volume to "D", who was said as Dorothy, a British actress with whom Moraes was for a time in love. In the poem "For Dorothy", Moraes depicts her as an epitome of mysterious beauty and generosity. Most of the poems in this volume like "Girl", "Queen", and "The Final Word" are addressed to this heroine figure. In "Girl" the poet has idealized her with such exotic vocabularies as if she is his sovereign mistress:

In the dark wood where my thoughts move
She stood: I dared not go too close
But dreamt for days of courtly love. (*"Girl", Poems*)

In "The Final Words" the poet's sentiment and expression are conventionalized when he tends to speak about the religion of love:

And my true love, a skylark in each eye,
Walks the small grass, and the small frighten things
Scurry to her for comfort, and can't die.
(*"The Final Words", Poems*)

The poem brings together the autobiographical and the Cavalier strains through its graceful, amateur and highly individualized skills. Unlike *A Beginning*, here, in his personal revelation, Moraes is found to be more mature and idealistic. In "A Latter" the poet is not only in love with Dorothy, but has the persona of a love poet:

Three winters I was drunk: one early spring
Brought me first love for you, my great good news.
(*"A Latter", Poems*)

It is not only a mere kind of personal revelation, but something which is sanctioned by poetic convention and which is felt by most of the conventional poets.

Certainly it is this conglomeration that leads the poet to extreme self-realization and self-revelation. The poems like "Card Game" and "French Lesson" deal with the poet's sense of guilt that he felt in his teens:

...my memories turn to ink:
Buried in all our pasts are greed and lies,
Anger and hateful actions...
(*"Card Game", Poems*)

In "French Lesson" the poet sinks into utter pessimism as he thinks about his past deeds:

I think of the tears I have wept and shall weep.
There's a child in my body: it longs to confess.
(*"French Lesson", Poems*)

In both the poems the poet is seen to be obscuring his own feelings as if he has been suffering from some kind of emotional block or imbalance. He fails to present clearly what actually is going on in his mind, instead to it

metaphorically. It is neither his sense of belongingness nor inferiority but a kind of mental conflict from which he often tends to make himself free:

My hands are two wide-eyed, two terrified deer.
Your eyes shine like mirrors. I cannot look in them.
(“French Lesson”, *Poems*)

Both the poems deal with the poet's inability to express what exactly is going on in his mind. The problem persists in most of the modern Indian English poets also who, enable to be openly confessional, prefer to incline towards modern American and Canadian verses through their use of less formal language skills and highly personal voices to write about ordinary experiences. In Moraes, the problem is more explicit and strong in those poems which are written without having any subject. It was undoubtedly the impact of the modernist movement in English poetry on Moraes which preferred the dislocation of the authorial presence as a feature of impersonality. To obtain the required impersonality of art, Moraes often reveals a tendency to encompass private associations, allusions and conventions which ultimately overwhelms the coherence of his poems. In *Poems* “The Inland” is the victim of such a tendency. The poem is written in a sequence of four different poems on a dead hero, a dragon, prophecy, angels and a blighted land. Here Moraes, like Eliot's “Waste Land”, rewrites some of the medieval fairy tales from the perspective of a modern poet.

Throughout the volume, it is true to say that, the poet is dealing with different themes and techniques to reveal his personal account. The title itself signifies the heterogeneity of subject matters and Moraes' inability to locate them into any single specific context. It is his intensity of love that binds all poems together and brings the required unity. He cannot even escape from this poetic persona in those poems in which he writes about the social reality of India. In “Gone Away”, the poet begins with consumptive beggars and the “bronze” discharge of their lungs in Mumbai and ends with the importance of love in his personal life. “The Frontier” begins with a report of an invasion in Tibet and ends with an explicit celebration of his love.

Even on this dark frontiers, in rhyme.
No matter where I travel, she is there.
(“The Frontier”, *Poems*)

In “From Tibet”, however, the same poetic persona is like a Cavalier poet expressing his emotion in a chivalric manner:

My book will tell the truth
But it will not be true,
Till I return to you,
My truth, my miracle.
While I keep my old faith
In you, I shall write well.
(“From Tibet”, *Poems*)

Here the poet's sense of love is highly conventionalized like sixteenth and seventeenth century verses where the poetic persona often goes abroad leaving his mistress at home.

Certainly there is growth towards maturity in these poems, an increasing concern with more significant themes and a greater appreciation of the depth of love. Throughout the volume Moraes reveals himself into different ways. Unlike Ezekiel, he is extremely musical and lyrical and more imitative in his technical skills vis-à-vis his other contemporaries. In *Poems*, he is an autobiographical love poet and at the same times an existential moralist, trying to make sense of the world. As an alienated, caste way he might have same anxieties like other modern Indian poets in English, but these anxieties were not expressed as ideas. They are rather revealed like some naïve emotions having the meaning of his love for the mistress.

Thus it seems clear that Moraes is an autobiographical poet having a fine sense of eternal requirements of life. He is a poet of love and serenity. He, as revealed in his early poetry, loves those brooding moments in which he can able to sink into his past and memory, into the magical world of imagination and fancy. Even in his most confessional moments, he is a poet of convention, of literary allusion and civilization. It is undoubtedly the insecurities of his childhood, alienation and of being an Indian in England that contribute to a need for a tradition or a relationship to the history. In most of the poems he reconciles myth and reality, tradition and society, or in a sense past and present so as to acquire the required identity and individuality in his poetry. Although unlike the other post-independent poets on Indian writing in English, Moraes hardly mentions about

any specific traditional or cultural elements in his poetry. To him poetry should not be confined within the narrow boundaries of nationalism and culture. His poetry offers little to those seeking literature about cultural conflict and social justice; it is to him a universal phenomenon, a product of universal human nature. It is the reason, whereas most of the Indian English poets use to write poems of national heroes and legendary figures, Moraes writes poems on some universally accepted figures like Wordsworth or Ophelia. Hence Indianness in Moraes' poetry is always a debatable issue. It is not the technical varieties and illusions that make his poems Indian. It is only his Indian sentiment that always dominates Moraes' thoughts and emotion and which ultimately makes his poems Indian.

Furthermore, most of his poems are marked with haunted surreal nightmares, deliriums of private anxieties, sexual desires and memories of a troubled family history, fears about his own future and labyrinth-like movement, skepticism regarding self and cosmopolitan taste. In some of his early poems a kind of metaphysical strain is also found to be dominating his thoughts which are metaphysical and fragmented at the same time as if he lacks a unified vision. He is globally acknowledged "chiefly by virtue of his repertory of experiences and perceptions, mostly unusual and extraordinary" (Tiwary 113). Hence, Moraes' poetry offers more to those who are interested in difference and multiculturalism, who are willing to look beyond simple notion of class, race and nationality. Certainly, he is not effortlessly fit into usual categories of criticism; it is his larger-than-life perspective that makes his poetry extremely popular and not easily apprehensible. His poems eventually will find their place in the literary history of the world without recognizing the importance of any criticism. He brought Indian English poetry into the domain of world literature.

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