

## The Keening Muse<sup>1</sup> : Imagination And Music In The Poetry Of Dom Moraes

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No one absorbs the past as thoroughly as a poet, if only out of fear of inventing the already invented. This is why, a poet is so often regarded as being 'ahead of his time'.<sup>2</sup> And no poem is ever written for its story line's sake only, just as no life is lived for the sake of an obituary. What is called the music of a poem is essentially time restructured in such a way that it brings this poem's content into a linguistically inevitable, memorable focus. Sound, in other words, is the seat of time in the poem, a background against which its content acquires a stereoscopic quality.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Brodsky's remarks on the art of poetry can well be used to comment on the poet Dom Moraes (1938 - 2004) and his poetry. An English poet of Goan origin, Domnic Francis Moraes was a poet ahead of his time. While he was still a student at Oxford he won the prestigious Hawthorndon Prize in 1958 for his first collection *A Beginning*, the first non-English poet and the youngest person ever to get this honour. His mastery over cadence allowed him to break music with surprise.<sup>4</sup> The lyrical beauty and technical virtuosity that are the hallmarks of his poetry have enthralled readers for almost five decades, drawing them into a mesmerizing world of passion, romance, fear, grief, death and renewal. Characterized by an elegant and hypnotic imagery, the

<sup>1</sup> Phrase borrowed from Joseph Brodsky's 'The Keening Muse', *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1987, p.34; first publ. 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Brodsky Joseph, 'The Keening Muse', *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1987, p.34; first publ. 1986.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38

<sup>4</sup> Hoskote Ranjit, *The Hindu*, June 1, 2004

surreal textures of his poems weave together a variety of themes-love and war, friendship and alienation, myth and religion.

Dom Moraes was a loner and defied fashionable labels like postcolonial or post modern. He had paid his dues to the tradition of late English romanticism and surrealism of the 1930s and 1940s, to which he was an inheritor. E.M Forster called him "An excellent mixer, if farouche". Stephen Spender confirmed him as a poet while William Dalrymple describes him as 'the finest prose stylist... in the subcontinent'. He covered wars, won prizes, loved a series of women and wrote some bloody good poems say Jerry Pinto.

#### INFLUENCES ON MORAES'POETRY

The influences, which shaped his poetry, were his own personal background and his vast experience in various fields. An only child of Frank Moraes, the famous journalist from Goa, and Beryl, a doctor by profession, Moraes left for England at the age of 17, to fashion himself into an English poet. As a child he suffered from his mother's nervous breakdown and eventual descent into insanity.

Besides writing prose and poetry, the young Dom Moraes travelled through Sri Lanka, Australia, New Zealand and the whole of South-East Asia with his father, territories he was often to revisit in the course of his career. He is reported to have said that he visited every country in the world except Antarctica, which, he added, is not a country. He was a journalist and edited magazines in London, Hong Kong and New York, a correspondent in various wars and an official of a UN agency. He wrote 23 prose books and scripted and partially directed over 20 television documentaries from England, India, Cuba, and Israel for the BBC and ITV. This perhaps set the tone for his future career as a wandering reporter. It also must have unsettled him for life as his works reflect a migrant's compulsive desire to witness and report and not to get involved.<sup>5</sup>

In England, he was an inexplicable Indian, brilliant at his craft and magical in his themes. Dom was a figure of paradox: belonging, to him, was a matter of being at home in a period rather than a place, the London and Oxford of his youth, and yet he

<sup>5</sup> Ramakrishnan E.V, *Decan Herald*, June 13, 2004

could make himself at home on the road, travelling from one crisis to another, adjusting his focal length to the human condition as he confronted it in a variety of locations from rural England through war-struck Israel to the riverine darkness of Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

Characteristically, his prose treatment of these experiences is self-deprecating, while the alchemy of poetry allowed him to weave them into a tapestry of love and quest, sex and death.<sup>7</sup>

And poems grew like maggots in my head.  
A fighting South-East Asia, with each gun  
Talking to me; then homeward to the green  
And dung-smeared plains ruled over by the sun.  
When I had done with that, I was fifteen.  
( *A Letter* )

#### MORAES' POETRY: A VARIETY OF ABSENCES

In the 1957 *A Beginning* his idiom is rooted only in his imagination. The very first poem, about a piper losing his children, is prophetic:

Even their voices went away.  
And left an absence: glitter of loss  
(*A Beginning*)

These are the themes that recur in his poems: absence, departure dislocation, invasion, exile, loss. And the metaphors: song, stone, sculptures. And the myths, which are not of our land.<sup>8</sup> In his poems, which have been called hermetic but are never obscure, we meet the isolated child, hurt and confused; the young outsider in England, making up for his insecurity by his dazzling presence; the solitary exile, steering among the illusions and uncertainties of belonging.

<sup>6</sup> Hoskote Ranjit , *The Hindu*, June 1, 2004

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Nambisn Vijay, *The Hindu*, Aug 1, 2004

Behind the facade of his tight and taut lines there is the pain of an insecure and vulnerable self, which was never totally at-home in this world. He found the right metaphors for the imaginative world of a man who was homeless in a fundamental sense.<sup>9</sup>

I have grown up, I think, to live alone  
To keep my old illusions, sometimes dream,  
Glumly, that I am unloved and forlorn...  
( *Autobiography* )

"I was never conscious of  
being lonely. I found myself very interesting, a vice that has persisted,"  
( *Gone Away* )

For Dom Moraes absence is a metaphor for life. In a poem, which gives the title to this collection of three over-lapping memoirs written over a period of three decades, he says that this world is only held together by its variety of absences. He himself has lived in a state of homelessness, always ignorant, of what the next step would be.<sup>10</sup>

No sound would be heard if  
So much silence was not heard.  
Clouds scuff like sheep on the cliff.  
The echoes of stones are restored.  
No longer any foreshore  
Or any abyss, this  
World only held together  
By its variety of absences.  
( *A Variety Of Absences* )

There had always been a strong self-destructive streak, a romantic element of death-worship in his poetry, and indeed, in his world-view.

Dying is just the same as going to sleep  
The piper whispered, 'close your eyes'...  
( *Figures in the Landscape* )

<sup>9</sup> Ramakrishnan E.V, *Decan Herald*, June 13, 2004

<sup>10</sup> Amur G.S, *Decan Herald* , June 13, 2004

If one were to examine Moraes' poetic journey, it can be said that while the later poems demonstrate "a clarity (he) once did not possess" in terms of personal feelings or emotional outbursts, the early work is characterised by the distant or the impersonal.<sup>11</sup>

She shapes her sari with herself, flows  
within it, past admirers at windows.  
I confess I feel envy for her clothes.  
Suppose from temple stone a goddess had  
Stepped into flesh to drive admirers mad,  
That would be she. Goddesses went unclad.  
(*Typed with one Finger*)

His mastery over cadence allowed him to break music with surprise; the recurrent leitmotifs of his poems, his suns, sails, bones and journeys, are offset by the richness of specific detail, the precise adjectives and adverbs, the weight of syllables, the viscosity of the images.

Much of Moraes' early work is practically canonical. His later poems reveal that he has perfected the art, no doubt, of carving out words and images, metaphors and similes, the implicit and the explicit, motifs and expressions that have now stood out for over five decades for their distinctive style. A style that remains distinctly western in tone and temperament. No doubt, the old fire and vibrancy has been replaced with greater clarity and profundity, and there is obviously a much wiser and mature voice.<sup>12</sup>

The following lines reveal the tone and temper of his new exposition:

When I am not there in the maze  
where the long road ends, think  
of the clumsy stutter of my limp  
behind you always, hindering you,  
trying to help you, all my days.  
(*Typed With One Finger*)

#### CRITICS ON DOM'S POETRY

Dom Moraes has not lacked for critics, who argue that he is a *recherché* figure.

<sup>11</sup> Kohli Suresh, *The Tribune*, June 15, 2004

<sup>12</sup> Kohli Suresh, *The Tribune*, June 15, 2004

According to Ian Hamilton, Moraes is "a slave to the regular iambic line . . . melodramatising a parody version of the alienated, fierily Bohemian romantic artist." His poetry suffers from "the tepid adjective, the unrelenting rhyme-scheme, the over-all tendency of his language to seek out a level of polished anonymity and rest there"<sup>13</sup>. Ezekiel feels that while Moraes' Collected Poems is an "impressive collection" from which "much may be learnt . . . about the art," yet "he writes like an English poet, and does not reflect any significant aspect of Indian life."<sup>14</sup> One lacks in his poetry the power of plain speech and the wisdom born of self-questioning.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

No matter what the poet Moraes planned to say at the moment of speech he always inherited the subject. The music of his poems brings the poem's content into a linguistically inevitable and memorable focus.

Every word that I wrote was true  
This way or that meant to praise  
Whatever was worth it on earth  
(*Typed with One Finger*)

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<sup>13</sup> *The London Magazine*, October 1965

<sup>14</sup> Haq Kaiser, *The Daily Star*, May 29, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Ramakrishnan E.V., *Decan Herald*, June 13, 2004

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