Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science & English Language,
Online ISSN 2348-3083, SJ IMPACT FACTOR 2021: 7.278, www.srjis.com
PEER REVIEWED & REFEREED JOURNAL, JUNE-JULY, 2022, VOL-10/52

ORACLES IN INK: DOM MORAES AS A PROPHET OF INDIAN POETRY

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On Moraes's own admission his poetic powers had come to a standstill and they could be revived only with the publication of his privately printed volume *Absences* in 1983. These were the years of utmost turmoil and wandering in the poet's life and he discharged important assignments of various National and International agencies. In his personal life also he suffered set backs. His marriage with Judith got broken in 1970 and he shifted his love to a divorcee Leela Naidu, a reputed actress of the time. His exposure to the artists abroad made him realize that his rootlessness (partly literal and mostly metaphorical) has been a great handicap to his creative powers. It were such feelings which compelled him to eventually settle down in India in 1979. However, these experiences instilled greater maturity in his art and his mask of poseur was replaced by a confident artist who articulates his vision with conviction. The warmth of love received from Leela Naidu partly helped him overcome the sense of betrayal he frequently talks about in his early poems. There is a growing sense of tolerance, of adjustment with the not-so-happy propositions of life in the poems written since his historic decision to stay in the country of his birth. The verse-volume *Absences* was followed by *Serendip* in 1990 (though in between his *Collected Poems 1957-1987* also appeared). Then followed a period of prolific creativity—*In Cinnamon Shade* (2001), *Typed with One Finger* (2003) and *New Poems* (2003-04)—and thus the 'writer's block or the phase of sterility was more than compensated by these publications.

The title piece of the volume *Absences*, which inaugurates this phase conveniently titled 'Poet as Prophet' is also incidentally a poem on death as was the opening poem of the first phase, "Figures in the Landscape". But the earlier perception "Dying is just the same as going to sleep" (*CP* 3) has undergone a sea-change and the fear of death has assumed alarming proportions as never before. "Absences" is, to quote Moraes, "a poem about what it would be like if everything in the world was dead." Recalling the background of its composition, the poet treats it as a seminal piece born of an epiphanic experience when he was walking by the Arabian Sea:

> Certain words and phrases came to my mind. I went home, sat down, and began to write a poem… I was concentrated to such an extent that the world around me did, in fact, seem dead; there was only me left, and my writing hand…. It was the first poetry I had written in seventeen years which I felt was poetry… I feel a tremendous pride in it still, not because of its quality, but because it was the precursor of a great deal of new poetry in the years to come, a John the baptist. (*NAH* 328-29)

It apparently sounds cynical to visualise a situation when "everything in the world was dead." However, such ideas might be an outcome of personal dilemma which goes on compelling the artist for solution. The poet imagines that it would be complete dark when there will be no life on this macrocosm. Silence will reign supreme—"The prolonged vowel of silence/ Makes itself plainly heard" and all necessities to keep vigils will disappear. With this will also end all worries and anxieties which generate apprehension and envy. And consequently the possibility of inflicting hurts and injuries on others would be eliminated forever. Such concerns deeply imprinted in the poet's psyche have an upper hand because he has seen people being butchered in various wars he covered as a journalist: "No polyp admiral to sip/ Blood and whisky from a skull/ While fingering his warships." Since there would be no creature alive, there wouldn't be any attempt at beautifying oneself, a common human weakness. In short, nothing would disturb the balance of death which would be total and complete.

As a poet Moraes has always been faced with the problem of communicating his experiences. This brings him to the traditional binaries of sound and silence as to which of the two is more effective. However, the dilemma persists:

> No sound would be heard if
> So much silence was not heard.
> Clouds scuff like sheep on the cliff.
> The echoes of the stones are restored. (*CP* 127)

The poem closes with a sense of void which would prevail in such an eventuality. In an earlier poem "John Nobody" also he has been worried with the problem of "holding so vast an emptiness" (*CP* 102). Here the poet seems to have gone a step ahead when he identifies memory as the great link which can confer some sort of meaning and coherence to life: "World only held together/ By its variety of absences". In their assortments and multiplicity, memories have their own attraction and the term 'variety of absences' was so dear to Moraes's heart that

he chose it as the title for the omnibus collection of his three autobiographies— *My Son's Father, Gone Away, Never At Home*—published in 2002.

The scene of death and destruction is also pronounced in several poems, some born out of his war experience while others related to well known myths and legends. The frequency of war descriptions has been reduced in the second phase but at times they appear in an effective fashion. The following lines from the poem "Progressions" are an instance in point:

> Subduing the silence, a dove roars.
> Snails clank like tanks across the sill.
> Upon the hill the minotaurs
> Pull squealing calves down for the kill. (*CP* 130)

There is an element of regret and helplessness at not being able to check the onrush of violence:

> The wolves watch through the windowpain
> The paunchy poet short of death.
>
> His moist brown eyes will save no lives. (*CP* 130)

The poem "Mission" written about the Vietnam War is a still more telling description of gruesome activities of war. The title is ironic with its overtones of Jesuit missionries. The following lines give a vivid picture from within the cockpit of a bombing run over a jungle village:

> Smoke of their breakfasts below
> Like grey unfrightened wings of doves
> Slowly flying up from their nests.
> The kid pilot pulls on his gloves. (*CP* 135)

These lines show how Moraes could write cleanly and economically about the horrors of modern war without sentimentality and attitudinizing. He even goes to the extent of mocking the reporter's, cruel objectivity and toughness in the poem "The Message". The opening lines—"This message sent over miles / Reeks of Gorillas and fever"—imply that such an unpleasant message is no message at all. It is rather a clarion call for the dead to rouse from their graves. The poet also finds fault with the manners and habits of journalists who are prone to sensitize things with a view to impressing their potential readers and viewers. One may partly view them as the poet's disapproval of such mannerism since the following lines are overtly autobiographical:

> With slouch hat, misplaced

Cigarettes and notes, shaky hands,
You counted the corpses on a hill
Mainly to impress your friends. (*CP* 134)

It is really unbecoming of a journalist to go on counting "the corpses on a hill" as if he were a keeper of the netherworld maintaining an accurate record of the dead.

In several pieces, violence as an abominable part of normal life has been seen from a distance, via myth, legend and literature. The poems like "Casualties" employ ornamental diction ('fardels', 'umbered') unrelated to the everyday life they purport to evoke. But for a few specific topographical details, such poems are not anchored in time and space. They create the impression that these pieces exist in a predominantly literary world because they would otherwise be too painful to view. In "Rictus", for example, violence and misery seem almost to hide behind a Ted Hughes-like mythmaking. Rictus and his soldiers are an unstoppable force symbolic of fears of rape and enslavement, loss of identity and freedom. Moraes sheds the mask of the child to speak through mythical figures and to depict grotesque scenes that identify the contemporary world:

Through courtyards littered with choked birds

Squat soldiers clumped, showed us their knives.
Then, grunting, lowering their horns,
Mounted our daughters and our wives.

The long nights led to dreaded dawns.
The golden tremulous sea was full
Of drowned and putrid unicorns. (*CP* 167)

Metaphorical and literal mix up in "Gabriel" which is an allegory of the writers vocation and life. Moraes confesses that the wounds stored in his imagination, collective as well as individual impel him for an outlet:

Thorny crucifixes, steep
Outcrops of rock surround me
Dried up by heat and memory.
Lions, unseen, stop my sleep.
Groaned snores of their roars!
Dewinged, made man, I weep.

Over my unhealed sores. (*CP* 163)

Moraes's 'unhealed sores' were pretty deep and protean. In preface to *Never At Home* he lays bare his handicap:

> But there is a factor in my life which I can't define either as an acquisition or a loss. It is something which most people I know were born with, and I wasn't : a sense of belonging somewhere, of possessing roots and relatives and even a permanent home. (viii)

This complex of not having 'a permanent home' occupies a substantial space in Moraes's oeuvre, moreso in the volume under discussion. The poems like "A Letter", "Sailing to England", "Letter to My Mother" and "Autobiography" of the earlier phase do have apprehensions of rootlessness but that anxiety obtains a more gripping magnitude in later poems. It is not simply that the pieces on exile theme outnumber his other priorities, he also loves to identify rootless characters from history and legends with whom he has an obvious empathy.

The poem "For Peter" is one of such poems which centre round dramatic personal moments where the maturer poet is prepared to show himself vulnerable. It recalls an Oxford picnic with some close undergraduate friends like Peter Levi. These were the joyful times the memories of which are at times extremely unnerving and painful. The poem opens with a Christian imagery which compares the poet's miseries with those of Christ: "Taught about crucifixions tell me first/ How long, in your opinion, mine will lost." The close world of childhood was just like a paradise with "Champagne, smoked Salmon, the play, the Isis". The banishment from which might be one of "unhealed sores" referred to in the poem "Gabriel". Moraes contrasts his life afterwards with those of his friends and finds him disadvantageously placed. "Then you went home, all of you went home…./ All of you now have homes, Peter, not me." Home is not just an enclosure of four walls with a roof, it is a signpost of identity and the poet's anguish borders on self pity. Under such a predicament Moraes has to keep defining himself, go on manipulating links which is a very perturbing proposition. An ardent wish for being rooted, nostalgia for an imagined world without problems—"but to know/ Such and such will soon be so and so"—is an overt burden of the poem. Moraes as a traveller, reporter, editor, writer and investigator of United Nations had seen that violence had become a period value:

> Since those days I have witnessed violent ends
> Through napalm, firefights and bombs, to friends.
> Sometimes I've had to tell my dead friends' wives.

> Those gardens, far away, explain my lives. (*CP* 138)

The poet explains his predicament in terms of the devastation to which he has been a witness.

The sense of homelessness is not only disconcerting from the point of view of the poem, it has still intenser agonies behind it. The poem "Key" written in a non-traditional sonnet form is a very significant piece where pathos is focussed on lack of belonging. What had been an obliterated or forgotten relationship was revived with the receipt of a letter and Moraes uses a typical imagery to express it: "Ground in the Victorian lock, stiff,/ With difficulty screwed open." In his autobiography, he feelingly recalls a situation which compelled him to write this poem:

> I had a letter from Francis [his only son from Judith] whose name was now Heff, a derivative of Heffalump nickname of his childhood. I do not now have this letter… but what it said was something that impressed me deeply. Perhaps 'impressed' is the wrong word; what he wrote, in effect, said that… he didn't know about me really, or his history on my side of the family. I didn't know what to say in reply. I wrote a poem about this, which started with the title the word 'Key'. This key could have been the key to myself; I don't know. (*NAH* 339-40)

Literally key means a clue to property but it also implies a key to the emotional world of shared experiences which should bind father and son:

> Fifteen years later, he redescends,
> Not as a postponed child, but a letter
> Asking me for his father who now possesses
> No garden, no home, not even any key. (*CP* 140)

Moraes lacks keys to the memories of a life of fatherhood—property, possessions and community. He says that he sent Francis this poem with a letter giving a prose account of his family history. The letter went unacknowledged to because

> It wasn't a key, either for him or for me, to our pasts. That key, I thought, was lost forever, till he came to spend Christmas with us, in 1991 with his fiancee Nadia. Perhaps this is a key which will turn in the future; at any rate I hope so. (*NAH* 340)

It is very easy to surmise the pang of not being so frequently in touch with the only son (born of affairs with three beloveds Henrietta, Judith, Leela) whose birth had brought the young Moraes incalculable joy—"My son came through the burning bush" ("Son", *CP* 122).

The private wounds stored in memory quite often come as flashbacks causing great afflictions to a battered poet, looking for scaffolds to his anchorless existence. The crux of the piece "Friends" is that it is the concern for progeny that upsets him most:

> Dead stepdaughters, undead sons
> Nibbling at me from another country.
> …
> All right: I accept the pain.
> Did you have to force me, in a strange place,
> To accept it again and again?
> There are angry options. (*CP* 147)

Since they are away, the distancing has disturbed the nature of relationship, from descendants they have been reduced to the level of 'friends'. This realization has lent a rather more pathetic ambience when he imagines that a child born from Leela's womb will establish a continuity from Moraes's father through Dom to a possible child:

> My father's eyes looked into your with love.
> Time passed, he's dead, but isn't really dead.
> His eyes still operate inside my head.
> This is called the continuity of being alive.
> …
> And the promise in that body of a child. (*CP* 132)

Moraes's private hurt and the desire to survive in Leela's child takes him to an equally disconcerting situation where he dwells on her own tale of misery. That a divorcee from the Oberoi business family Leela might have her own emotional problems identical with Moraes's, was an introspection which invariably weighed heavy on the poet's psyche. In the poem "Asleep" he speaks of the distance between the comforts Leela brings him and her own happiness:

> You talk unhappily to yourself in sleep.
> I snore on the cool pillows of your breast.
> But fall awake as you slip down the slope
> To your private valley of unhappiness
> I cannot reach except with kiss and touch.
> …
> The deep hurt in you like the sun disturbs

My dawns: … (*CP* 146)

This 'disturbing of dawn' leads Moraes to ruminate over his relationship with Leela who came in his life some fourteen years back. Aptly titled "Fourteen Years" is an extremely personal poem that provides a glimpse into his marital life. The poet shares a very serious weakness of his personality with the reader: "Sometimes I am too tentative/ In my approaches towards fate." The word 'tentative' is overtly significant since it implies a strategy to cope with the complexities of life. It is more a matter of expediency rather than of conviction. The following lines reflect Moraes's vision of life which is one of adjustment and tolerance:

Her heart and mine have one beat
Her helplessness looks through my eyes.
Since we are both learning to die.
We had better first learn how to live. (*CP* 133)

Though the poem uses cliche ("Her heart and mine have one beat") and ends on a didactic note, emotional authenticity makes it a valuable piece where life is treated as a training ground to learn and improve.

The injunction 'first learn how to live' takes the poet to other people and persons who have adjusted themselves to new settings and surroundings. His eyes glance back to history to identify such situations which are broadly identical to his. The theme of 'home and not-home' is the burden of the poem "The Newcomers". It is a piece about the Aryan invasion of India and the difficulty which they faced in setting down firm roots on an alien soil. The poem is partly autobiographical in that it echoes Moraes's personal dilemmas in the early years of his English stay so frequently expressed in poems like "John Nobody" ("And I grow homesick for an Indian day") and "Letter to My Mother" ("I am tidying my life/ In this cold, tidy country"). It centres in the hazards that await the voyagers who go out to a new land where all is strange and bizarre. The poet identifies himself as one of the travellers—"Like us for a new country"—obviously to lend greater authoritativeness to the poem. The entire macrocasm with its flora and fauna provided a wonderful sight, all waiting to be familiarized and endeared. Adapting to a strange 'home has its own discomforts where everything had to be begun from scratch—("From a handscup we took sweet water, "But then our lips formed words./ And we made each one harmless with a name." The poem argues how language changes reality, making the different familiar, alleviating fears, allowing prayer and devotion:

So beast and tree were our familiars
The river led us through the windless days.

The syllables of waters in our ears

Taught us new words until we learnt to praise. (*CP* 129)

The hardships of the early years gradually disappeared and "Only in dream we saw the nomad years." The poem closes on an explicit desire to be settled and to be done with exile, and feel at home in the new scenario. Moraes's inference has the force of mystery behind it in that the Aryan settlers eventually became the natives and gave an altogether different shape to human civilization.

Moraes's expatriate sensibility is more exhaustively manifested in the poem "Babur", written about an important historical personality who is credited with having established the Moghul rule in India. If the "Newcomers" provides a generalized account of an expatriate's travails to acclamatizing in a strange place, Babur presents a concrete example of an invincible hero who shaped history as per his wishes and ambitions. Moraes's inner life is more intricately woven in this dramatic monologue because like Babur he has written his autobiographies and also like him he is both an insider as well as an outsider. That Moraes should choose to write one of his longest poems on "Babur" also speaks of there being something much more than personal which is intended to give an inlet into his vision of life. The hazards of a traveller's life have been powerfully depicted in the opening stanza with the word fire appearing in each of the five lines ('The hills burned, whorls of twined fire', 'Arabesques of fire', 'pools of fire', 'liquid fire') which reddened the rocks, rendering the atmosphere deserted and empty. This arsening and violence was obviously done by the tribesmen who were fleeing away for fear of invaders. Undeterred by physical hardships Babur camped a few miles away from that place but continued his normal routines—"The opium confection, then wine./ I heard music and I slapped"—as if this was part of his life with nothing unusual about it. Moraes does not forget to make Babur realize that war and aggression have their own toll of human lives. There is a pathetic hint that partly borders on sentimentalizing ("One, in that sleeping, seemed my son") with the poet bitterly ruminating over his distress—"As I am, lonely in all lands." However, the insatiable urge to conquer new lands overcame such weak moments and he continued marching on asusual. The gem of the poem are the following lines which draw a parallel between Babur and Dom Moraes:

I wrought words before I fought wars.

Steel in those words like swords

Hurt me also: my books are where I bleed,

As when they drove me out to the badlands,

Wifeless, to echo the cry of the wolf.
Then betrayals by friends: the death of friend. (*CP* 190)

In an attempt to juxtapose his situation with Babur's, the poet identifies the common attributes besides the homelessness which characterize their personality. He explains that he started writing poetry at a very early age, much before he started visiting war-torn countries as a reporter. His claim that "I fought wars" is obviously metaphorical but it does underscore the fact that like Babur he was emotionally involved in war happenings while discharging his duties as a correspondent though without the great Moghul's imperialistic designs. If Babur experienced physical injuries by fighting with sores continuously, Moraes's case is hardly different. The painful experiences encapsulated in poems simply reawaken bitter memories which hurt him deeply. He reiterates that his poems are exclusively focussed on harrowing events of his life, separation from beloveds deception in personal relationship and bereavement from intimate friends. It is this assertion which is startlingly self reflexive in the closing lines:

If you look for me, I am not here.
My writings will tell you where I am.
Tingribirdi, they point out my life like
Lines drawn in the map of my palm. (*CP* 190)

Moraes's interest in the dilemmas of rootless persons extends even beyond history and enveloped in its ken, even characters from commonly known stories and travelogues whose lives offered some analogy to that of the writer. The poem "Sinbad" is an instance in point. The life and wanderings of Sinbad, the sailor from Middle East form the content of the piece. Sinbad carried away by the immense bird is an obvious symbol for the poet as a world traveller, isolated, exiled, ill at ease in a home that is not his. There is in Sinbad story also a feeling of losing control over destiny, that fate is out of one's hands. In the poem "Fourteen Years" Moraes has subtly underlined his perception of life ("Sometimes I am too tentative/ In my approaches towards fate") and the sailor's story partly corroborates that idea. The vagaries of a traveller's life—"Flying over defunct countries…-- Old friends folding up in strange places./ New friends holding out hearts—prompt the speaker to advise Sinbad "Lose your shadow, it's of no use." The concluding stanza ends with an epigrammatic line:

Ashes and marred walls deface you.
Where is this wind from,
Sinbad, defining its own course?
Some of us never know home. (*CP* 178)

It may be rightly mentioned that the last line "Some of us never know home" anticipates the title of Moraes's third autobiography *Never At Home*.

Moraes claims in certain poems like the section 'Streams' in "Interludes" that with the increased awareness of reality his earlier premonitions about life have vanished. The visionary of early poetry has matured and no longer indulges in phantasies and day-dreaming—"I no longer roam/ The countries of my choice". Lest his perceptions might be mistaken as airy and ethereal Moraes proclaims in clear terms:

> My eyes became my voice
> Which looked in every street.
> My voice became my hand
> Which wrote of rock and sand,
> Blue mountains, hidden lakes. (*CP* 154)

That his experiences are based on his observations has also been claimed in an earlier Moraes poem titled "Prophet" ("My visions in my eye"). Moraes began as a Neo-Romantic who are casually dismissed as people far away from the mire of the world but his later poetry exhaustively deals with the complex configurations of human situation.

The foregoing analysis of poems written immediately after the phase of 'writer's block' was over, shows that the awareness of death, in one form or the other outweighs any other consideration. The pronounced appearance of poems on exile theme demonstrates that he is busy meditating over his dilemma of rootless artist. In the face of situations as overpowering as "No garden, no home, not even any key" ("Key"), and "lonely in all lands" ("Babur"), Moraes continued evolving means of survival. The poems of the next volume *Serendip* bear out the fact that the poet's search for human values was unending and it led him to the study of tribals and native inhabitants of the neighbouring island.

The deliberations on death have received a more poignant treatment in the poems of *Serendip*, whether small pieces are poem-sequences. The poem rightly titled "Intention" centres in the painful memories of the past which are far from consoling, whether personal or public and they intermittently make him restive—"Memories fill your nostrils,/ You intend not to smell." Knowing full well that excessively afflictive experiences should be kept in abeyance forever, he cannot help because quite a few of them are pretty personal:

> Some things best forgotten,
> You intend not to dream,
> But dream of snow, nomads,

Sons left in high passes. (*CP* 224)

The list of bereavements is fairly long and the poet's "typewriter's tired/ Thinking too much of death".

The pathos contained in the poem "Laureate" is still more touching. It tells the horrid feelings of a sick, hospitalised writer who is almost on his death bed. The graphic details of the writer's bohemian life, his interest in woman and in wine obviously link him with the poet himself. The following lines communicate the fear of death in very effective terms:

It suffers in its own way till it dies.
He contemplates the brittle shards it leaves,
And as the lifted blinds deny him dark,
He thinks its little death foreshadows his. (*CP* 233)

The montonous routines of a hospital ward comprising regular visits of nurses and attendents fail to diminish his depression since he is always occupied by the thoughts of death. The apprehension that the experiences of life which he has not been able to put into words will suddenly disappear when that inevitable hour comes, "Unmourned by him, who cannot mourn himself." The grimness assumes terrifying proportions when this world is viewed as a place of the dead—"This death or that, he can't remember whose." It is for the first time in his poetry that Moraes ponders over the predicament of a woman whose husband is dead. One can easily deduce and probably rightly so, that Moraes's Indian upbringing has instilled such values in him.

Then he is dressed and driven miles away,
And in large rooms not visited before
Must watch exquisite widows bend white breasts
Over glass boxes where his dead friends are.

(*CP* 234)

The poem "Dead Poet" addressed to Canon Andrew Young (1885-1971) contrasts the sensual life with the coldness of death. It is with really heart breaking that someone who wrote so passionately about life should lie buried in the grave. However there is a saving grace that his books once read bring memories of him alive. The dominant image of ship in the poem recalls the following lines from Larkin's "Next, Please" where death has been imaged in a similar manner:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break. (Roberts 363)

Such an overpowering sense of grimness is partly mitigated when the poet employs puns in the concluding stanza to bring sardonic irony and wit to what is extremely morbid:

With promises, dissected winds
Answer your favourite premises.
Grave business keeps you still at home,
Carried to darkness on a kiss. (*CP* 244)

Young was 'at home' in pleasures of youth while alive and he is equally 'at home' in being subjected to the agonies of death.

The ironic treatment of death gets a more perceptive treatment in the piece titled "Brandeth". This poem is a descendant of poems like "Beldam" in that it introduces a character who appears again in later poems. Brandeth was a poet who wrote very passionately about life and its complex experiences but, alas, he eventually became a victim of Time. No longer read, he has become 'a dead letter'. So much so that his message is now "lost down latrines". For the richness of imagery as well as for the profundity of thought, the following lines are too apt to be overlooked:

The spondylitic shadow limps the path.
The obsolete eyes and putrid breath.
And the corrupt wisdom of Brandeth
Of no consequences now, but casual litter

With microliths, leafmould, mouse skeletons,
His message unread, lost down latrines,
His envelope shed, he's a dead letter,
A single vowel without Consonance. (*CP* 230)

Brandeth's change from a man of letters to a dead letter is both literal and metaphorical because death has robbed him of all identities whatsoever.

Moraes's only poem in Arabic numerals titled "1668" also centres around the anxiety as to how the end might come. It recalls that the islands that comprise Bombay were part of the

dowry that Charles-I received from Portugal for marrying Catherine-de-Braganza. The poet imagines the illness and disappointments that might have gripped the first British marines who arrived in Bombay. In addition to physical hardships to which they are subjected in the new country, they are worried because "The churches and taverns are seas away." They feel extremely disheartened if they die in the new place they would be denied a fitting Christian burial:

> Our graves also, if no sail come.
> Our names listed in no parish, no deed
> That we, forsaken, before our undoing did,
> More than a hand raised from water as taken.
> So are we broken, so obliterated… (*CP* 229)

It is really strange that a poet like Moraes who has hardly any faith in religious dogmas should feel anxious as to what might happen to a dead body. The wish to be listed in some parish before being obliterated completely is a typical Christian angst and the poet is no exception. The poem "Theatre" recalls Shakespeare's well known lines 'All the world's a stage./ And all the men and women merely players.' The phenomenon of life has quite often been treated as a platform where people discharge their roles like the unreal characters in a play and they suddenly vanish without any logic or meaning. The absurdity of human existence has been tellingly depicted in the following lines:

> The sad collaboration of friends,
> Unfinished theatre of patch work lives
> That fall apart, not heard after.
> Such long preambles to absurd ends. (*CP* 243)

The concluding line argues that the transitoriness of life hardly needs majestic preludes and paraphernelia. Moraes views the microcosm as a landscape of departures where people have to move towards unknown destinations.

The poem "Landscapes" is written for Jehangir Sabvala, after whom the well known Jehangir Art Gallery has been named in Bombay. Since the poem is written for an artist it was appropriate that the poet should borrow a metaphor from Arts for the purpose. Written in a sonnet form the opening line—"These landscapes have the colour of Absence"—and the concluding line—"Save the sounds of the colours of Absence" underscore the element of

absence which is central to human situation. The exodus that started since the Fall is really very disconcerting:

> Endless departures have been made from them,
> Are being made, will in future be made.
> These landscapes keep endlessly departing
> From ours to a time beyond ours, to arrive
> Without luggage or passports, but themselves.

This journey 'to a time beyond' brings again to mind Shakespeare's appraisal of the locale of death 'That untravelled country from whose bourne no traveller returns'.

The curiosity of life after death leads Moraes to envisage the feelings of the dead. The three poem sequence "Steles", "Barrows" and the title poem "Serendip" combine several things in one, the hardship of the rootless traveller, his struggle at founding a culture and above all, reflections on human endeavours after being buried in graves. Moraes has implied the technique of poetic shorthands in these pieces which enjoin upon the reader greater dexterity and exposure. From early on the poet had unusual infatuation with old ruins and dilapidated monuments (MSF 40). In 'Introduction' to *Serendip* he writes:

> The dead, inclusive of the recent dead, seem to me to be absorbed into myths by their dying I do not mean to sound delphic about this, only to say that it is what happens in my mind, and what I have tried to convey in the two cycles of poems "Steles"and "Barrows".(10-11)

Moraes further refers to his frequent visits to archaeological sites and museums in Greece and Sweden, not to collect information on the tombs or the relics they contain as to "get the feel" of these places for his own pleasure. It is obvious that the poet is less interested in particular monuments erected in the memory of great men because his focus lies on the feelings of the dead and how they observe and comment on the life lived upon the earth. Be as it is, the central concern is with death or the afflictions that surround it.

Of these pieces "Steles", a dense series of ten poems and each of four quatrains is very significant in that it examines how greatness of man (who himself is transient) survives in an otherwise fleeting phenomenon. Steles means inscribed upright pillars which speak of the dead and his/her earthly achievements. The opening section contrasts the permanence of writing (art) with the transitoriness of the action. Recalling Genesis, the poem begins—"The word works. The world doesn't." The speaker vehemently argues that the word moves in a much wider area and therefore pleads: "Put one word on my stele." The poem takes up the contrast between

word and world echoing Eliot ("Common word exact without vulgarity/ Formal word precise but not pedantic/ Complete consort dancing together"— *CPP* 197) in the following lines:

No need for effusion
The words are firmly placed.
The worlds are words pressed
Together, like firm breasts. (*CP* 203)

The concluding lines—"The one word dancing always/ Towards desert horizons" point to the inevitability of death in precise but effective terms. The speaker of the second section is worried over the effects of time and nature which have disfigured his steles:

Ribbed cliffs, banal senilities
Of rock, ooze from their integuments
Yellow moss like a kind of pus
Refuting my silence and my words. (*CP* 204)

The image of pus is closely linked with the last line "Leaving an old wound." The anguish of the speaker "To translate my silence into worlds" has its own pathos, long starved of reflections.

The protagonist of the third part is endowed with defiance and dictatorial qualities. His boastful claim that he "Set my [his] feet in deaths furrow" and "At my orders great armies/ Shuffled in step to conquer" speaks of his indomitable courage and determination despite being a mortal. He is equally boastful with his steles highlighted his achievements:

I rest in the sun, my stele,
Armies on fire, made.
I close my hand on my kneecap,
Shell frail as the earth. (*CP* 205)

In this section and the section that follows events appear to be relevant simultaneously to the ancient past and also to the present. If great armies shuffle in stick to conquer at the speaker's command in the earlier part, the contemporary politics and turmoil in South America surfaces in the fourth part:

What is this airdrift from Chile
And murdered Allende, to freeze me?
Whose is the figure in the mind,
Caped and demanding entry? (*CP* 206)

The wonder at the entry of new guest in the world of the dead reminds the speaker of his happy domestic life in the concluding stanza when crows and vultures ride on his steles and damage it with their claws and beaks.

The concluding stanza of the poem sequence meditates on the usefulness or otherwise of steles because he feels that in our changed times few care to read inscriptions on Edicts, and thereby empathise with the man sleeping underneath. The irony is that it is not the physical beauty of man which is deformed after death their monuments are also damaged by Time.

> Have we time to inscribe our steles?
> And who will read them?
> Whose are those great caped figures
> Coming down, silent, from the floes? (*CP* 212)

The paper explains the prophetic vision of Dom Moraes where he gives importance to his voice of conscience and the vision for the betterment of humanity.

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