

LYRICAL ODYSSEY: UNVEILING THE LITERARY WORLD OF DOM MORAES

Dr Sandeep Kumar Yadav

Associate Professor, Department of English, Shyam Lal College (Evening) University of Delhi,
Delhi-32. E- Mail: somadeepyadav@gmail.com

Paper Received On: 18 JUNE 2021

Peer Reviewed On: 30 JUNE 2021

Published On: 1 JULY 2021

Dominic Francis Moraes was born on 19 July 1938 in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai). His father Frank Moraes was a Goan Roman Catholic and his mother Beryl also came from a Catholic family. Frank Moraes though a qualified barrister had literary leanings and became Literary Editor of *The Times of India*, while his mother was a pathologist and worked in a large hospital. Moraes's childhood was spent in the company of his mother when his father was sent to Burma as the first Indian war correspondent. The family held nationalist views and supported Gandhi and Nehru. Moraes was privileged to meet Gandhiji at the young age of six, when the latter had gone on a hunger strike and encamped at Juhu beach. Her mother being a doctor was sent to look after Gandhiji and one day she took him with her. Moraes recalls in his autobiography, Gandhiji saying "All our children should speak Hindi." (MSF 9)

On his father's return from war, Moraes used to accompany him to Royal Asiatic Library at Fort every Saturday where he read the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jeffrey Farnol and Conan Doyle among others. He was sent to Campion School for his early schooling in 1946. The symptoms of his mother's mental illness had started surfacing by now and, in the meanwhile, his father was sent to Ceylon to take up his new assignment as the editor of *The Times of Ceylon*. In view of his mother's abnormal behaviour, his father used to take him to his office to keep him out of his mother's way. An extremely perceptive boy as Moraes was, he reminisces those days in following words:

I must have been a considerable embarrassment to my father. I sat in his office all day reading, while his staff, his contributors, and his proprietors came in and out. (MSF 28)

In his father's library he read Swinburne and felt intoxicated by his thunderous rocking-horse lines. As a small boy he also wrote a biography misleadingly titled "The Epic of Gandhi".

During his stay in Ceylon he was introduced to some Veddahs, the original inhabitants of Ceylon. They were a stone-age people who fled to the depths of the forest when the Sinhalese first came. “Later the memory of these people,” writes Moraes “invaded some of my poetry.” (MSF 41) The title poem of the volume *Serendip* centres round Veddahs. On coming back to Bombay his father was again associated with *The Times of India* and planned to go to Australia where Moraes was exposed to the beauty and natural landscape of another country and also to that of New Zealand and Singapore on their way back.

The year 1951 saw the publication of Moraes’s *Green Is the Grass*, a book on cricket. This year was seminally important in the life of the poet as he met one of his great mentors, Spender and Auden, the major contemporary British poets, association with whom shaped the future course of his life. Before he met them, his idea of poetry was simply derived from what he had read from the volumes of Swinburne and early Yeats or anthologies like *Golden Treasury* and *Poems of Today*. His interest in Eliot, Auden and Spender was created by a Somerset Maugham anthology which he happened to lay hands on. He was introduced to Spender by his father and felt simply enthralled to be in his company. Spender’s encouraging words kept his morale high and he could visualize a career in literary field.

Moraes’s acquaintance with G.D. Tendulkar exposed him to the richness of Russian literature. By borrowing books from his library on Turgeniev and Gorky he was considerably drawn towards Marxist literature. Noting his interest in communist writers, Tendulkar used to call him Donski. The enthusiasm was so unresisting that he could at times go into the city by himself distributing his pocket money amongst the beggars. His sensibility was further expanded by his meeting with the British anthropologist Verrier Elwin, who had been his father’s friend at Oxford. It was this association that acquainted him with the works of Dylan Thomas, David Gascoyne, Sidney Kaeyes, Rupert Brook, English Metaphysical poets, Don Juan and Wordsworth.

Moraes’s ambition to appear in print could be fulfilled in the year 1953 when *The Illustrated Weekly of India* published his first story. It was in this year that he was introduced to Nissim Ezekiel, the greatest of his Indian literary influences. He followed Ezekiel’s advice very seriously and decided to learn French to read Rimbaud, Verlaine and Apollinaire in original. This led him to join a coaching institute called Alliance Francais, also because competence in French was a must to pass exams to be admitted in Oxford. How much competence he gained in French is a different matter, but he did show adolescent love for her French teacher Colette. This infatuation was so strong that he wrote a poem titled “French

Lesson” one of his earliest poems written at the age of fifteen. Moraes remembers this poem with pride since it won for him “congratulations” from Ezekiel (*MSF* 91).

Though Moraes’s were Roman Catholics the atmosphere of the family was not very rigid in respect of its rituals and practices. Before going to England he joined St Mary’s High School run by Jesuits. During his Catechism classes he could realize the hypocrisy inherent in Christianity which pleads for converting others lest as pagans they would go to hell. With a view to registering his protest he propped a copy of *Das Kapital* on his desk in the next Catechism class. This infuriated the teacher who believed that its author Marx was at that very moment roasting unhappily in hell and warned, “I shall *confiscate* that book... and I shall burn it.” (*MSF* 98) This incident confirmed Moraes’s opinion that religion was uncivilized but he felt satisfied that he had made his gesture.

It so happened that Stephen Spender again visited Bombay in 1955 and Moraes could discuss his Oxford plans with him in detail. As usual Spender promised him all help and encouragement whenever he moved to England. It was during this period that Moraes appeared in an essay contest sponsored by the Government and was declared to be the best among the contestants. The prize for the winner was a trip to America, but as per term and conditions of the award the winner was supposed to speak Hindi. Moraes was denied the award for his deficiency in Hindi language and felt cheated and baffled by this incident. In his school he was supposed to edit the school magazine called *The Monthly Review* but this plan could also not take off because of an unfortunate incident. It so happened that he wrote an essay on Auden which glorified his support to the Republican cause in Spanish Civil War, but this annoyed the Spaniard head master and the scheme of bringing out the monthly was nipped in the bud.

Moraes left for England in 1955 in the hope that he would be admitted to Jesus College Oxford the coming October. On board the ship he was drawn towards a fellow passenger Celia who was going to Scotland with her mother. Several days’ company on the ship drew Moraes emotionally to her but the thought that he cannot enjoy her company made him despaired. The pangs of this infatuation are expressed in the line “I am in love and long to be unhappy” which appears in the poem “Sailing to England” written at the age of seventeen.

On reaching London, he wanted to be a part of the social and cultural life there and his meeting with Spender at the latter’s *Encounter* office accelerated this proposition. Through Spender he was introduced to E.M. Forster and several other literary figures including Cyril Connolly. Now he was a regular visitor to Spender’s house in St. John’s Wood. A regular frequenter at Soho Club also, he had befriended several young men and women. Since there

were a few weeks left for classes to begin, Moraes sketched out plans to travel on the continent. During his stay in Paris he met David Gascoyne and then visited Rome and other European cities. On his way back to London he underwent an experience in Yugoslavia which he has immortalized in the poem “John Nobody” in the following lines:

It was the winter of my seventeenth
Year when I lost what some call innocence.
Lightly that night the snow fell on Belgrade...

(CP 100)

He had rented a flat in the city of Belgrade and was attracted by the landlady Dragika who was eight years his senior. This intimacy developed into the first sexual experience for Moraes and thus the phase of ‘innocence’ was replaced by one of experience to borrow the metaphor from Blake, the well known mystic poet.

Moraes met Eliot in 1956 and was greatly impressed by the senior poet’s endearing comments. At Soho club he met the famous painter Francis Bacon and gradually they became close friends. The poem “Landscape Painter” was born out of this friendship. His first volume of poems *A Beginning* was published by Parton Press in 1957. He also met a beautiful young lady whom he calls ‘K’ in his autobiography. (MSF 170) One can decode this K as Dorothy Turin, the British actress who was seven years senior and a frequenter at Soho club. His love affair with Dorothy continued for several years and poems like “Girl” express his sentiments for her. In 1958, he edited an issue of *Gemini*, an Oxford literary review. The same year he was honoured with Hawthornden Prize for the best work of imaginative literature. It may be mentioned here that it is the oldest of the British prizes and its earlier recipients included V.S. Naipaul and Ted Hughes. Moraes’s achievement was still more remarkable because it was for the first time that this award was declared since the War. It was the same year that he met Auden again when the latter visited Oxford as Professor of Poetry. He flew back to India in 1959 after taking a fourth class or ‘poet’s’ degree, and celebrated his 21st birthday. His book of memoirs based on his travels on India was published under the title *Gone Away* in 1960. In the meanwhile his affair with Dorothy was suddenly broken up and he found his next love in Henrietta in 1961 for whom several sonnets were written. But this marriage was broken up with Moraes telling her one morning that he was going to get some cigarettes and shall be back in ten minutes but he never returned and in her memoir titled *Henrietta* she calls him a ‘24-hour’ poet. It was in 1960 itself that Moraes’s second book of verses titled *Poems* was published. This was also the Autumn Choice of the Poetry Book Society. Moraes was also

awarded the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry by Lord Home, who later on became the Prime Minister of England.

In April 1961 he visited Israel to cover Eichmann Trial. During his stay there he met T. Carmi and translated his Hebrew poems. In December the same year he came into political limelight by writing vehemently against Goan Annexation to India. His activities incurred the displeasure of the Indian Government and he was compelled to go in for British citizenship. His emotional proximity came to an end in 1963 and Judith became his next love. In 1964 his translation of Hebrew poems appeared under the title *The Brass Serpent*, which was followed by the third volume of poems *John Nobody* in 1965. The following year Macmillan America brought out his *Collected Poems 1955-65*. In March 1966 his son Francis was born from Judith, an event which the poet celebrates in the poems titled “Son” and Gardener.” In 1967 Turret Books, London brought out his fourth volume of poems titled *Beldam Etcetera*.

Then followed the period of sterility in terms of poetic compositions which Moraes terms as ‘writer’s block’. This phase continued for fifteen years until 1983. The poet has regretted this period of barrenness obsessively in his writings. Ironically enough, this sterility was not confined to his poetic creativity it had also trespassed into his emotional life. His marital bond with Judith was also on the breaking point and finally they separated in 1969. It may be pointed out that all the four women—Dorothy, Henrietta, Dragika, and Judith—who became Moraes’s love one after the other were Whites and from the European continent. This time Moraes’s choice fell on one of his childhood friends, Leela Naidu, now a divorcee from Tikki Oberai. This was a period of hectic activity in the life of Moraes and he visited several countries on commissioned assignments from agencies like United Nations. In 1968 came out his autobiography *My Son’s Father*, one of the best sellers, applauded by Spender as “a minor classic”. He edited Sunday Magazine of *Newyork Times* from 1968-1971. He was also the managing editor of *Asia Magazine* from 1971 to 1973. Among his other prestigious positions include an Honorary Colonelship in the American Army. In 1971 his two books were published: *The Tempest Within: An Account of East Pakistan, From East and West*. His *The People Time Forgot* (1972), *A Matter of People* (1974), *The Open Eyes* (1976) and *A Family in Goa* are the prose publications that appeared during this period. It was around 1979 that Moraes decided to settle down permanently in India.

The return of poetic powers was nothing short of a miracle and Moraes reminisces:

In 1982 something happened to me which I can not account for. I not only started to write poetry once more but a new style seem to come to me without my ever trying to master it. (*Collected Poems* xii)

The first poem to be born out of this extraordinary experience bordering on revelation was “Absences”. Moraes treated this poem as the title of his next volume *Absences* (1983) printed privately in limited copies. Thus the period of writer’s block was over. Then followed a phase of unusual creative fecundity and Penguin India brought out his *Collected Poems 1957-1987* (1987), succeeded by *Serendip* (1990) which won for him the Sahitya Akademi Award. The second part of his autobiography *Never At Home* was published in 1992. It was around 1990 that Moraes’s relations with Leela ceased to be warm as usual and he was frantically on the look out for a new love. This time it was Sarayu Srivatsa, another divorcee with two children. However he dragged on with Leela Naidu until 1996 and finally they separated. Since then in fact from some years before, Sarayu Srivatsa has been his muse, companion, collaborator and co-author. His other prose works include *Bombay* (1980), *Mrs. Gandhi* (1980), *Answered by Flutes* (1983), *Trishna* (1987), *Sunil Gavaskar* (1987), *Rajasthan* (1988), *Out of God’s Oven* (co-authored, 2002), *A Variety of Absences* (2003), *Out of God’s Oven* (co-authored, 2002) and *The Long Strider* (co-authored, 2003). His latest volumes of poems include *In Cinnamon Shade* (2001), *Typed with One Finger* (2003) and *New Poems* included in *Collected Poems 1954-2004* (2004).

Moraes underwent an operation on 15 April 2002 for the removal of a malignant tumour which he had nicknamed Gorgi. He defied the doctors’ advice to go in for chemotherapy, thinking that it would interfere in his life or interrupt his work. He had adopted a girl child Bhanu in Chennai whom he wrote a letter, a few months before he passed away, saying he would love to come and see her someday soon. In 2003, he pondered over his relationships:

One of my ideas is to have no home and no relatives. But I do have a granddaughter, Leila [probably Francis’s daughter], who is five and whom I am very fond of. (Dougal *Outlook*)

That fatal day came on 2nd June 2004. In the end it was not cancer but a heart attack and Moraes breathed his last in a sleep.

Moraes was a prolific writer and he has left behind a huge bulk of creative writings, non-fiction and travelogues etc. He has also to his credit over twenty television documentaries scripted or produced from England, India Cuba and Israel for the BBC and ITV. ‘*Panjim-Card*

Players is one of his most famous paintings. Moraes's only novel "Horsemen Fell" is unpublished, manuscript is preserved in a folder of his literary agency, Curtis Brown and Co. As a columnist he regularly contributed to several newspapers and the simple fact that he completed his last two prose works racing against time testifies to his rare commitment to creativity and writing. It is to be noted that he largely shared the concerns and priorities with his contemporary writers like Ezekiel and Ramanujan among others and contributed significantly to the modernization of the idiom of Indian poetry in English.

Works Cited

- Das, Kamala. *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing. Kottayam: D C Books, 1996.*
- Dougal, Sundeep. "Gone Away". *Outlook* June 2004. 21 Feb. 2007. <<http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20040602 & fname=dommoraes&sid= 1>>
- Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems. 1989. New Delhi: OUP, 2nd ed. 2005.*
- Iyengar, K.R. Srinivas. *Indian Writing in English. 1962. New Delhi: Sterling, 5th ed. 1985.*
- Mehrotra, Arvind K. *Twelve Modern Indian Poets. New Delhi: OUP, 1992.*
- Moraes, Dom. *Collected Poems 1957-1987. New Delhi: Penguin, 1987. Referred to as Collected Poems in the text.*
 _____ *Collected Poems 1954-2004. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004. Referred to as CP in the text.*
 _____ *My Son's Father. 1968. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990. Referred to as MSF in the text.*
- Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982.*
- Paranjape, Makarand. ed. *Indian Poetry in English. Madras: Macmillan, 1993.*
- Ramanujan, A.K. *The Collected Poems of A.K. Ramanujan. New Delhi: OUP, 1995.*
- Sarang, Vilas. *Indian English Poetry Since 1950: An Anthology. Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1990.*