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***Serendip*: Dom Moraes' Poetic Flight from Personal to Universal**

Dr. Shrikant B. Sawant

Principal,
Gogate Walke College, Banda
Tal- Sawantwadi, Dist-Sindhudurg
(MS) 416511

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Abstract:

Dom Moraes' *Serendip* consists of the three sequence and eighteen other poems. In the opening sequence "Serendip", he writes about Ceylon (Sri Lanka), a former British colony and brings the landscape of that country alive in his poetry. The interaction between the colonial past and post-colonial present gives rise to the new kind of poetry in "Serendip". Moraes' interest in anthropology has contributed a lot to the second sequence of the poems "Steles" in this volume. He has got 'the feel' for places of archaeological sites and museums. The poems from "Barrow" sequence are ten monologues of the dead Norseman. The dead seems to be absorbed into the place and landscape of the country. Landscape and harking back to the past, love and death all attract Moraes' attention. His poetry is sometimes highly personal with persistent confessional note. It includes his fears, obsessions and desires. There is unique flight in his poetry from personal to general or universal.

Keywords: Serendip, Steles, Barrow, Dom Moraes.

Dom Moraes can be acknowledged as the precursor of the modern Indian English Poetry. His contribution is marvelous and bulky in the development of modern poetic sensibility. Born in Mumbai, July 19, 1938, of Goan Catholic parents, Dom Moraes is the son of well-known journalist and editor, Frank Moraes. As a child, Dom had a rather unusual childhood, travelling through Australia, New Zealand and the whole South East Asia with his father, when his mother was institutionalized. He began writing poetry at the age of twelve.

Dom Moraes' *Serendip* recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1994 consists of the three sequence and eighteen other poems. The title "Serendip" is a sequence of eight numbered poems plus a prologue and epilogue, ten parts in total, refer to an ancient name for Ceylon or Sri Lanka.

Moraes states-

As a child I lived for two years in Ceylon, and encountered the Veddahs, shy tribesmen who are said to have been the first inhabitant of the island. My recollections of these people, and of pilgrims with lamps climbing Adam's peak, are very clear and these sonnets I have tried to turn them into myth and symbols (*Serendip* 10)

Here myth, personal history and present horrors serendipitously intertwine in the poem. The poem alludes to the history of Sri Lanka from "The first man's footprint" on the island from its first discovery.

The first man's footprint,
Is stone on a hilltop,
The dead King's tooth,
Held steady in stone,
Is bereft of its body,
Now a forest stone
Celebrated on stone.(15)

Moraes tells us the Veddahs, the shy tribesman of the land are the first inhabitants of the island may serve as a model for someone. They formed language, evolved code of conduct and composed culture for themselves.

They settled, they bred,
Watched by eyes of the forests,
Shy behind helianthus.
They evolved codes of conduct.
With the wheel and the tool,
They composed a culture: (18)

In the course of time the fights and movements of the people between Sinhala and Elara continued.

South the Sinhala; northward,
Angry descendants of Elara.
In the forests, the survivors:
Luminous eyes sealed by leaves,
Footsteps no longer privileged.(20)

Moraes recalls the days when Ceylonese craft was popular and was sent overseas.

Processions of ivory elephants,
In diminishing sizes, birthstones,
In brooches, spices in bottles,
All these, sent beyond the sun
To be unshipped on cold quays
Of another island (21)

The continuing quarrels of the descendants of the early people led Sinhalas replacing the Tamils as the governing elite and the Tamils, turning to violence. The long bloody civil war begins on the island.

Old grudges, latent for years,
Were nudged to hate in the north,
Components, hidden under stone,
Lodged in stodgy armalite,

Were assembled iridescent
Compounds packed in containers. (22)

The poet tells us “production increased, the cottage/ Industry went national “but the ethnic violence and “the unforeseen nature of the product shook parliament”. The poet presents the violence brought by the “grenade-gun” culture of the modern ethnic conflict and horrors of the war. The shy children, the pensioners living peaceful retired life and their meek wives are under pressure of ethnic war and often being the innocent victims of grenade-gun culture.

The shy child whom the explosion,
Taught to fly, needed none.
The pensioners and their wives,
Gave their lives up meekly,
To grenade and to gun. (23)

Moraes shifts our attention to the present horrors. “Serendip” seems to be an attempt to cover the entire history of the island, from the wild inhabitants to the “grenade-gun” culture of the modern ethnic conflict” (Naik and Shyamala Narayan 147).

Moraes reaching back into the prehistoric times looks into the dim-future. He wonders “If such an evening waits”.

Perhaps a night will come
When the luminous eyes return
To the summit of the peak:
When the privileged foot stamps
To a dance beyond drums. (24)

Paranjape observes “Dom returned to the island, now war-ravaged and wracked by gory civil strife. Reaching back into prehistoric times and evoking ancient myth, he wonders if the pearl of the Indian Ocean can regain its eponymous tranquility” (225).

Moraes’ topic is more journalistic and the subject is the history of Sri Lanka; writing about the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese.

There are few real events in the poems which seem to be made of mist of words. If not for such markers as ‘Serendip’, ‘Elara’ and ‘Sinhala’, it is doubtful that anyone would know what the poem is about beyond there being implied chronology from a founding past to a violent postcolonial present (King, 175-176)

Moraes’ interest in anthropology has contributed a lot in the second sequence “Steles” and has got ‘the feel’ for places in archeological sites and museums. The sequence concerns death and how art is a monument to energies achievements and sufferings. Bruce King admits “I love the “Steles” sequence despite its faults. It contains some of Moraes’

best poetry (178). Moraes here contrasts the permanence of art of writing with impermanence of action and shows great need that monuments of art to be remembered.

The word works the world doesn't,
Oases dehydrate. The word
Moves where the sirocco hasn't,
Put one word on my stele (27)

There is a unique flight in Moraes' poetry from personal to general. His feelings are universalized in his poems. "History, contemporary politics, the role of art, eroticism, the apocalyptic and the personal exist side by side" (King 176). Moraes continues to say

The word walks to the finger,
On the key of the machine.
The world rock on the axis,
Like a sleepy sentry. (31)

The poet at times shifts the domestic scene - the 'scented flesh' of his wife and a siamese cat, a dachshund.

From far away I watch
Sound and wind take shape.
Lipstick touches my cheek
Before exhausted sleep (32)

When Moraes is his older manner the poems are lovely in romantic mood.

She in her youth arose
Shape moulded by mild winds:
Hips to launch many ships,
Nippled howls of cream and honey (33)

But such erotic romanticism is undermined by the grotesque horror presented.

Drying cowshit and snails mar
The symmetry of her stele
Red worms have stripped her bare
To squirm under skeletons (33)

In returning to surrealism he created the fantastic collage of effects ranging from the erotic to the praise of female beauty. Moraes is well aware that when he tries for the horrific, some images turned comically absurd. There are also allusions of computers, gasmasks, maces and archers in the poem. He raises a very important question, "Have we time to inscribe our steles? / and who will read them?" Bruce King remarks "Steles" is a Moraes' version of *The Wasteland* and *Hollow Men*, a strange and interesting attempt to write about – death, emotional dryness, the desire for renewal, and the role of poetry in history and memory" (177).

"Barrows" is another sequence of ten monologues, each using a different personae. The poet explains that archaeological sites and museums in Greece and Sweden interest him not to collect information on tombs and relics they contain but he likes to "get the feel of

these places “ for his pleasure”. The poem celebrates the Viking culture of Scandinavia, its vigour, daring, brutality and conquests, while recognizing that it now exists only in monuments” (King,178).

Moraes says-

I have always been greatly interested in archaeological excavations, and the discoveries made in them, also in anthropology. The behavior of people, even those in myths, has possessed certain common denominators and factors for thousand of year. The dead, inclusive of the recent dead, seems to be absorbed into myth by their dying(10).

The poems from “Barrows” sequence are complaints’ from the grave of various dead Norsemen. The speaker in the opening monologue complains:

Hej!
Kegs of beers all around me
Gifts, but how can I drink them?
Ghosts from the dark eat me. (39)

The blonde wife, proud of her long hair, dies before enjoying the jewels, fine clothes, ivory combs and sweetmeats brought by her husband from Byzantium complains from her grave.

Ivory combs, sweetmeats:
But I died of flux and the fever,
Before I could eat them.
I never used any of his gifts. (42)

The booty brought by her husband for her and the young maidservant to serve her was also buried with her.

He buried them all with me,
Also my young maidservant
So the combs might come in handy,
If only I had hair. (42)

In one of the monologue the son sincerely pleads his stern father.

I’m here, standing in the corner,
Even if I’m quiet quiet,
Now I am quiet, father (43).

The son assures him that he is quiet. He wants to come out of the grave with the permission, “Father, I’m really quiet, / Please can I come out?”

The poet describes the woman who died with the child in her belly, while her husband was away on a business trip in Africa. The wife requests her husband to come back soon from Africa to meet her daughter.

They preserved us with these chemicals,

Here in the Nordic Museum
Our daughter waits to see you,
Comeback soon from Africa: (45)

The dead persons in the grave say, "We were housed in transparent tombs, / Suddenly aware we were skeleton". They grudge, "What shall we do with our bones/ which refuse to rattle".

In the concluding monologue the long dead Swedish guards recalls being killed by the Danes finding his identity through tourists. "My tunic is still on flame / Under my black suit".

Bruce King in his article in Poetry Review observes-

Horrors, absences, the desire for comforting breasts, the way the life transformed into art, and how art memorializes the dead are themes found throughout the volume. The language can be knotted, clotted, chisled, and hammered into unusual, even Jacobean, word order. At times it can be biblical, traditional, poetical(10).

The other poems in the volume are also remarkable for variety of themes, rich imagery, irony and paradox, apt symbols and confessional mode of presentation. The speaker in the poem "Intention" tries to deaden each of the five senses, he intends not to hear, "But-hear echoed voices", he intends not see but through pain "lost faces are seen" and intends not to smell, not to touch and not to dream. The speaker is tired and even intends not to write.

Words like snails on the paper,
You intend not to write.
Your typewriter's tired,
Thinking too much of death. (53)

Moraes explains the ancient practice of human sacrifice at specified times of year are the centre of the poem "New Year". The poet is reluctant to regard the advent of New Year as a new morning.

One year decayed, another came,
Over and over and over.
One dormant fever, then another;
This year will it be terminal?
This year, bells clamour to climax. (54)

The poet regards morning is misnomer because with dawn one invariably associates a fresh beginning. "One could call this a new morning / But morning is misnomer".

The poem "1668" refers to Island of Mumbai where landed a party of British marines, another group of settler in 1667 to take possession on it formed part of the dowry brought by the Portuguese Princess, Catherine de Branganza to Charles I the English King. The vivacious spirit and the joy of discovery is pronounced in the poem.

Dowry for a dupe, corpses' ransom,

Fiction of the brindled Portuguese
Whose Christ, marooned in the marshland,
Held a wry hand up in benediction.(58)

Moraes presents picture of sickly and stinking island, unfit for human habitation-
“Though the swamps, breed so so much leeches / As wood bleed half London for a day”.

MakarandParanjape in his review article states

In “1668” the poem commemorating the year, the British took possession of Bombay, gifted to them as a part of Catherine de Branganza’s dowry. Dom paints a graphic picture of a sickly and stinking island. Unfit for human inhabitation what would later be the commercial capital of British India and of course, Dom’s home, is depicted as “beslimed acres” of a leach-infected and malarial swamp (227-228)

Moraes in the poem “Brandish” says Brandeth is now unread poet who haunts public parks. “His messages unread, lost down latrines, / His envelope shed he’s a read letter, / A single vowels without a consonance.”

The poem “Laureate” presents the horrid feelings of the sick hospitalized writer who seems only capable of interest in the breasts of his nurse.

The youngest nurse undresses bend white breasts
To lend him better access but he wakes.
And stares at her blurred shape in uniform.(65)

The poet persona needs more care to be taken. The poem concludes with his death.

The poem “Exile” is on the exile’s attempt to bear masks and adapt himself to his new milieu. In “Spring Song” the figure of Dracula, a modern myth, is used in the context of an Indian city.

Many of the Serendippoems have the theme of death and remembrance. “Moraes was often depressed; often spoke of the life he had left behind in England, of dead friends.” (King, 179). The poem “Dead Poet” is addressed to Canon Andrew Young (1885-1971). Moraestells the readers that Young’s life is over but the books once read bring memories of him alive. The poems Young wrote are buried in books unread on library shelves.

Thirty years dead, that mutant lust,
But your austere book, spine broken,
Sat on a London shelf, unread
Till it shed the shells of memory.”(75)

The three parts of “Acquisitions” concern a skeptic attracted towards spiritualism but who fears he will lose his sense of himself.

The poem "Future Plans" dwells on the perfect understanding that the poet developed with Leela who had been sharing his turbulent days for pretty long time. The poem is moving piece of Moraes' confessional mode. The speaker recalls how he and his wife were "absorbed with each other's flesh/ In the tumbled bed of our youth." He recalls how they had conversation with the children "Not born yet, but named". The poet concludes the poem saying "a little tired perhaps, but in the end/ Not unhappy to have lived",

Moraes stands apart from other Indian English poets, as much as an Indian, sharing an international reputation. K.K. Singh has rightly remarked on Moraes' contribution to India English poetry "Dom Moraes was extremely successful in making modern Indian English poetry authentic voice of the mass. His unique sense of betterment of human life makes his poems more charming and spiritual"(17).

The study of Dom Moraes poetry is interesting. The critics are often confused over the theme of Moraes' poems. He is neither subjective nor objective in true sense of the term. One finds a dominant confessional gesture in his poems. The theme of alienation, depression and frustration has been presented with ease and simplicity. The struggle of man for his survival in this world is one of the most discussed themes of Dom Moraes. There is unique flight in his poetry from personal to general or universal. His poetry is affirmation of life.

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