

Poet of Liminality: Dom Moraes's Love-Hate Relationship with India

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Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994) addresses those who live 'border lives' on the margins of different nations, in-between contrary homelands. Borders are important thresholds, full of contradiction and ambivalence. They are intermediate locations where one contemplates moving beyond a barrier. As Bhabha defines it, the 'beyond' is an in-between site of transition: 'the "beyond" is neither a new horizon, nor a learning behind the past ... we find ourselves in a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion'(ibid.:1). The space of the 'beyond' is often described in terms which emphasize this transitory, in-between sense: such as 'liminal', 'interstitial', or 'hybrid'. Theories of hybridity challenge notions of authentic or essential selfhood, nationhood and language. Bhabha argues for:

[T]he need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.(1-2)

The term 'liminality' comes from the Latin word *limen*, meaning 'a threshold'; liminality is a psychological, neurological, or metaphysical subjective, conscious state of being on the 'threshold' of or between two different existential planes, as defined in neurological psychology (a 'liminal state') and in the anthropological theories of ritual by such writers as Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, and others. In the anthropological theories, a rite of passage involves some change to the participants, especially in their social status. Liminal space or the 'in-between' location of cultural action has particular importance in post-colonial theory, since it identifies the interstitial environment in which cultural transformation can take place. Ashcroft *et al.*, who provide a useful discussion of liminality refer to it as the 'space in which cultural change may occur'. (130)

The lives and poetical works of Dom Moraes move like a *rite de passage*. Like the rites of initiation, these have three stages. 'Separation', 'transition' ('margin or limen') and 're-incorporation'. In and through such rituals individuals and groups change their state. Such a change of state is also symbolised by a change of place – a going away, a seclusion and a coming back, as is evident in the career of Moraes. However, in his journey he also becomes a marginal person, liminal like unhoused persons, 'betwixt and between' with their quest for the integration of the self. Van Gennep viewed the liminal or threshold stage as the second phase of the three-fold rite of passage. The concept of liminality has particular resonance in post-colonial situations, where cross-cultural lines of influence very obviously disturb the possibility of an unquestioned filial approach to tradition. While all forms of cultural interaction involve cross-fertilization, the post-colonial experience is at the cutting edge of hybrid encounters.

Many of the post-independence Indian English poets are concerned with their relationship to and alienation from the realities of the society. These poets are well educated, middle-class and part of or aware of the modern westernised culture of the cities, universities and professional classes. The supposedly traditional culture of the Hindi-speaking masses or of their Parsi, Jewish or Goan Catholic families, was either irrelevant to them or, in some cases, was part of the restrictions against which they were rebelling. Many of the poets left India for study and travelled abroad, while others returned. One such poet is Dom Moraes. Moraes is a Goan Roman Catholic. Like other post-independence poets of exile and alienation, he is an ironist and self-conscious alienated inhabitant of the modern city and of the contemporary

world of rapid travel, personal freedom and insecurity, moral relativism, and needs to create his own world and ethics. My endeavour in this paper will be to evaluate the theme of 'liminality' or 'in-betweenness' in the poetical works of Dom Moraes. The liminal state is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. One's sense of *identity* dissolves to some extent, bringing about disorientation. Liminality is a period of transition where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behaviour are relaxed – a situation which can lead to new perspectives.

Dominic Francis Moraes was born on 19th July, 1938 in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, to Frank Moraes, an attorney and editor of the *Times of India*, and Beryl Moraes, a hospital pathologist. Both of his parents were English speaking. His father was a Goan, sceptical, non-practising Roman Catholic; his mother, an Indian Roman Catholic from near Bombay. Dom began a life of disruptions when in 1945 his mother became mentally ill and eventually had to be institutionalized. He lived with his father in Ceylon for two years, 1947-48, and travelled for the next two years throughout the Pacific and the South East Asia before returning to Bombay, where he attended Campion School and St. Mary's High School until he went to England. Moraes spent eight years in Britain, living in London and Oxford (where he studied at the university and was a member of Jesus College), but spent most of his life in Mumbai (formerly Bombay).

After finishing his education in England he became, for a period, the darling of the literary cycle of London. These years of travel, changing homes, and a mentally ill, sometimes violent, mother are recalled in *My Son's Father : A Poet's Autobiography* (1968), published when he was only thirty years old, and are behind the loneliness and dreaminess of the early poems as well as being the subject of such poems as "At Seven O'Clock", "Autobiography", "A Letter", "Letter to My Mother" and "Grandfather".

In 1956, aged 18, he was courted by Henrietta Moraes. They married in 1961. He left her but, according to his close friends in London, did not divorce her. He had a son, Heff Moraes from his second wife Judy. He later married the celebrated Indian actress and beauty queen Leela Naidu and they were a star couple, known across several continents, for over two decades. They separated in the mid 1990s. Moraes ended his writing career, writing books in collaboration with the architect-author Sarayu Srivatsa. For the last ten years of his life she was his companion.

Collected Poems 1954-2004 is dedicated to Sarayu whom he refers to as “my closest friend, my harshest critic” (v).

Moraes was only 12 years old when he first started writing poetry. At 19, he published *A Beginning*, his debut book of poems. In 1958, the collection won Britain’s Hawthornden Prize; Moraes was the youngest, and the first non-British person, to win the award. His second collection, *Poems*, became the Autumn Choice of the Poetry Book Society. For the next half-century, Moraes became one of India’s leading literary figures. He published more than 30 books, including a biography of former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, several travelogues, two memoirs and scripts for more than 20 documentaries, which were aired on the BBC and Britain’s ITV. In 2001 *Cinnamon Shade: New and Selected Poems* was published which earned him the Sahitya Akedemi Award, India’s highest literary prize. During this period he also collaborated with his companion, Sarayu Srivatsa, who considered Moraes as her mentor. Moraes was diagnosed with cancer in the early 2000s but refused treatment. He died of a heart attack on June 2, 2004. “After he came to know he had cancer, he was racing against time. He said he had to complete a number of projects,” Vinod Mehta, the editor-in-chief of Outlook Group and a long time friend of Moraes told BBC News Online .

Dom Moraes often expressed dislike of life in India and his claim to be British contributed to a feeling that he was somehow outside the Indian literary canon. That his family was Roman Catholic and he did not speak Hindi or any regional language further made him seem an outsider. Moraes takes pain to disown his Indian heritage:

I am Indian by birth, but I have lived in England since I was a boy and I hold a British passport. The historical accident of British rule worked on my family so that I lived an English life there and spoke no Indian language... So English was my outlook, I found I could not fit in India. When eventually I came to England I fitted in at once (183-84).

Dom Moraes had a troubled childhood. Frank’s long absence while covering the war unsettled Dom’s mother, Beryl, a strongly religious woman who was a doctor specialising in pathology. In his 1968 memoir, *My Son’s Father*, Moraes recalled her suicide attempts, and the occasion when he had to fight her to gain control of the knife she was wielding. Not long afterwards, she was institutionalized;

this finds expression in "A Letter" published in *Poems* in 1960:

Almost I can recall where I was born:
The hot verandas where the chauffeurs drowse,
Backyard dominion of the ragged thorn,
And nameless servants in my father's house,
Whispering together in the backyard dirt
Until their talk came true for me one day:
My father hugging me so hard it hurt,
My mother mad, and time we went away.¹ (43)

For his mother's mental instability, Dom accompanied his father on jaunts to Sri Lanka, Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia and Britain. But this painful aspect of his life is represented in many of his poems; one such poem is "Letter to My Mother", in *Beldam Etcetera*, 1967:

You do not understand me.
I am tidying my life
In this cold, tidy country.
I am filling a small shelf
With my books. If you should find me crying,
As often when I was a child.
You will know I have reason to.
I am ashamed of myself
Since I was ashamed of you. (105)

He would often say that he had visited every country in the world except Antarctica, which, he would go on to add, is not a country. He was fascinated by the Congo, but would not like to live there as is evident in "A Letter":

We travelled, and I looked for love too young.
More travel, and I looked for lust instead.
I was not ruled by wanting: I was young,
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-smear'd plains ruled over by the sun.
When I had done with that, I was fifteen. (43)

Dom was certainly a child prodigy; by the time he was 10, he claimed he had already read all Russian classics, and was appropriately nicknamed 'Domski'; by the age of 12, he had begun to write poetry. By the time Dom turned 15, W.H. Auden had read and liked his poems. Stephen Spender published them in *Encounter* and Karl Shapiro did so in *Poetry Chicago*. At 19, studying for B.A. in English Literature at Oxford, he published his first book of poems, *A Beginning*, with the Parton Press in London which won the Hawthornden Prize for the best work of the imagination in 1958.

In 1960 his second book of verse, *Poems*, became the Autumn Choice of the Poetry Book Society. In 1965 came the third, much critically acclaimed book of verse, *John Nobody*. Apart from these three volumes, he published a pamphlet of verse, *Beldam & Others*, in 1967. From then to *Absences*, a privately printed book in 1983, there was to be no poetry.

Moraes was dissatisfied with himself and this continued for the 17 long years which he was to confess later in the Foreword of *Collected Poems 1957- 1987*:

For during that period I published no poetry at all. Someone years back had compared me to Rimbaud, too large a comparison to be sustained by my work. But I have often thought, over those 17 years, that perhaps I was like Rimbaud in one sense. I have never believed Rimbaud abandoned poetry, rather that poetry abandoned him. When he was approached, long after he had stopped writing, at the age of 19, by a number of young French poets for new work, he said, "I have done with that rubbish". This was what I constantly said to people who approached me.... In 1982 something happened to me which I cannot account for. I not only started to write poetry once more, but a new style seemed to come to me without my ever trying to master it. (xi)

Collected Poems in 1987 was not the last anthology, as *Serendip* followed in 1990 and *Cinnamon Shade* in 2001; and then came selections included in a new anthology, *Typed With One Finger* – all his life he had typed with one finger, the others were presumably kept too busy with countless cigarettes.

In *Out of God's Oven* (Viking, 2002) which he collaborated with Sarayu Srivasta, he admits that he has "an inexplicable block against learning Hindi". The reason, he writes, were the boys who spoke in Hindi outside his school. These boys

from India's new middle class seemed to Dom to be "uniformly crass in their behaviour". "I identified this crassness," he writes, "with their loudly spoken language, Hindi, and with their being Indian". To be fair to Dom, he admits that he is being less than fair in coming to such a conclusion. India "disgusts" him and he admits to "disliking" Indians. This love-hate relationship is a mark of 'rootlessness'.

In the end, it was a heart-attack. Dom Moraes did not want chemotherapy interfering with his life or interrupting his work. He died in his sleep. "He was alone at the time he died. His family friend Denzil Smith found him dead when he came to see him in the evening of June 2, 2004. The opening lines of the first poem, "Figures in the Landscape", in his first published book, *A Beginning* (1957) are: "Dying is just the same as going to sleep', / The piper whispered, 'close your eyes'... ."

Critics of his work have often complained that he was not quite one of India's poets, although he lived in Bombay from 1979. It is a fair point, except that Moraes never completely thought of himself as an Indian poet. In an obituary, Sandeep Dougal writes in the online edition of *Outlook India*:

Needless to say, there were many who found him effortlessly, even infuriatingly, patronising. And of course they would call him an outsider, an alien. A charge he would deny vehemently – for example, sample this from a recent interview:

Anyone who goes to Bihar, wherever he comes from, would feel a bit astounded. I got along pretty well with many people in Bihar, but Laloo seemed like someone from another planet ... People have accused me of being Western. But I don't think I belong anywhere. I feel no loyalties to either England or India. But I don't feel disloyalties either.

The insanity of his mother, his lack of home life, and his years of abroad with his father, meant that he would always feel placeless, alone. For such a person 'home' must and can be any place. There is a cool determination in his poems relating to India, the country of his origin. Unwilling to enter, he watches the scene from a distance: following are the lines from section II of "Letter to My Mother" in *Beldam Etcetera* :

I saw my whole country,

A defeated dream
Hiding itself in prayers,
A population of corpses, ...
It calls me every day
But I cannot enter it.
You know I will not return.
Forgive me my trespasses. (106)

An omnibus edition of *Gone Away, My Son's Father and Never at Home* was published as *A Variety of Absences: The Collected Memoirs of Dom Moraes* (2003). The word 'absence' significantly points to his feelings of loss, of homelessness, lack of family, lack of roots, lack of nationality, as well as his own instinct to withdraw when faced by problems. However, Ranjit Hoskote traces that during his career as a journalist and director of documentary films Moraes travelled 'far more widely in the jungles, deserts, and backwoods of India' than those who thought him Westernized and aloof from 'local realities' ('Dom Moraes Dead', *The Hindu*, 3 June, 2004). In the online edition of *The Hindu*, Ranjit Hoskote also noted:

His choices and expressions were often misunderstood because they anticipated the contexts in which they could be evaluated. During the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, he was viewed by Indian readers through the frame of a dogmatic nationalist sentiment: as a maverick whose refusal to subscribe to the dogma of Indianness exposed him to the charge of unpatriotic behaviour. Had he begun to write in the 1980s or 1990s, I have no doubt that his poetry would have been regarded as evidence of a postcolonial, even post-national play of identities: born to a Goan father and an East Indian mother, raised in a highly Anglicised ethos, he long saw himself and was regarded by others as an English poet living in exile in India;.... 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 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.

Naseem Khan noted in the online English *The Guardian* that Moraes' return to India leaving behind fame, wife and son in England was the beginning of a lengthy

and agonizing re-establishment of cordial relations between his country of origins and himself:

Dom Moraes's return to India in 1968 – leaving behind fame in England, as well as a wife and son – marked the beginning of a long, slow and painful rapprochement with both his country of origin and himself. The last 13 years, in which he collaborated with his new partner, Sarayu Srivatsa, brought that process to fruition.

His insistence on doing it his way was part of a nature with an implacable streak. It had him holding to his own views even when – as often happened – they led him into controversy, when his critical irony was taken by chauvinists as “anti-Indian”. It also drew him into dangerous areas.

The partnership between Dom and Sarayu from the mid-nineties allowed an intensely shy man to loosen up. His natural sociability was released and his meticulous wit flowered. The speed of his writing – always fluid – escalated, and, of course, he had started writing poetry again. But the speed was also caused by the diagnosis of cancer. Moraes turned down radiation therapy, and was determined that he should let his body follow its natural course. Time was running out, he knew, and he was brimful of things he still wanted to write about.

When the Gujarat riots erupted in 2002, with their heavy toll of Muslim dead, Moraes left for Ahmedabad the minute the news came through, claiming that since he was a Catholic, Muslims would not see him as an enemy. Even though he was physically in considerable pain by then, he was one of the first on the scene – a move that his upright father, would have applauded. But he paid a price. The stories he encountered – particularly of the eight-year-old girl who had been buggered by policemen – horrified him. He was shattered when he came back. He was drinking a lot and crying in his sleep. He couldn't handle it. He was writing poetry till the day of his death.

From the beginning Dom Moraes has been a dreamer – a romantic dreamer conscious of hurt, failure, disappointment. As he matured and gained knowledge of the ways of the world, the dreamer became an exile, a wounded poet, a man without home. The way Moraes's inner life is woven into the dramatic monologues can clearly be seen from “Babur”; with this poem Moraes's *Collected Poems 1957-1987* concludes. As warrior-hero and autobiographer, Babur is a natural

subject for Moraes. Important to Indian history, Babur is both nationalist and outsider. Moraes follows details from the writings of Babur including the 'opium confection' that he often takes. Babur sounds like Moraes when he confesses that he is 'lonely in all lands':

Awoke weeping, ate opium confection:

Drowsy afterwards, saw myself

As I am, lonely in all lands....

If you look for me, I am not here.

My writings will tell you where I am. (189-90)

Bruce King in his *Three Indian Poets* talks about Moraes's fascination with 'outsiders' and 'travellers':

Many of the characters Moraes writes about or impersonates are outsiders, travellers, or offer in their story some analogy to that of the writer. 'Sinbad', the sailor carried away by the immense bird, is an obvious symbol for the poet as world traveller, isolated, exiled ill at ease in a home that is not his home. (169)

Moraes's poetry is often about himself, his life in some transformation, or his fears, obsessions and desires. It attracts those who are willing to examine how he became an exile wherever he lived. In "The Newcomers" which is about the Aryan invasion of India, we find his desire to be settled, to be at home, to be done with exile, alienation and pains of life. Much has been written about the modern writer in exile, the writer forced by circumstances or personality to live an expatriate in a foreign land. His unusual childhood and life make Moraes like a snail in a shell in that he carries his exile with him even when at home. One can explain this in many ways, his childhood and the effective loss of his mother's care and love, the lost 'England' of his early success, but such emotions as insecurity, loneliness and feelings of disdain, disappointment and alienation clearly started early in his life; they are the basis on which his poetry has developed.

Note

1. In this paper I have quoted lines of Dom Moraes's poems from his *Collected Poems 1954-2004* published by Penguin Books India, New Delhi in 2004.

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