

Nostalgia, Love, Nature, Death and Existential Themes in The Poetry of Dom Moraes

Dr. Aravind Angadi,

Assistant Professor of English,

A.M.T.A Govt. First Grade College, Aland-585302 Dist. Kalaburagi.

Abstract :

Dom Moraes is one of the prominent Indian English poets of modern times. He was a poet, journalist, biographer and autobiographer. Since his childhood he had great interest in reading and writing poems. His poems received great appreciation in England. Memory and nostalgia are pivotal in Moraes' poetry, as he reflects on past experiences from childhood and illustrating how memories shape our perception of the present and deeply impact our emotions. Moraes frequently explores themes of identity, especially concerning his diverse heritage and upbringing in India. Moraes' poetry often contains vibrant depictions of nature and the natural world. Through imagery of landscapes, seasons, and environmental elements, he evokes emotions and explores profound themes.

Key words: Nostalgia, love, nature, imagery, memories, death etc.

Dom Moraes, a prominent figure in modern Indian English poetry, excelled as a poet, journalist, biographer, and autobiographer. Born in Bombay on July 19, 1938, he was the sole surviving child of Frank Moraes. Dom started his writing career at the age of twelve, with his poems appearing in school publications. Dom Moraes is renowned for his poetry, which is showcased in significant collections like *A Beginning* (1940), *Poems* (1958), *John Nobody* (1978), and *Beldam Etcetera* (1991). His works are praised for their deep exploration of both personal and universal themes. Dom Moraes' poetry is distinguished by its lyrical elegance, evocative imagery, and introspective tone. Through the use of metaphor and expressive language, he adeptly conveys profound emotions and intricate ideas. His poems are characterized by precise, sensory descriptions that deeply involve readers in the themes and subjects he explores. Moraes' skill in weaving personal experiences into universal themes allows his poetry to resonate universally, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. Recognized with accolades such as the 'Hawthornden Prize' (1958) for Poetry, Moraes is celebrated as a significant voice in Indian English poetry, contributing significantly to its evolution and gaining international recognition.

Central to his poetry are themes of love and relationships, which he explores with a range of

perspectives and emotions. Dom depicts love with intense intimacy and passion, capturing both the physical sensations and deep emotional connections. While celebrating love's beauty, his poems also delve into its complexities and tensions, portraying the challenges and contradictions that often characterize relationships, revealing human vulnerabilities and frailties along the way. In Dom Moraes' poetry, themes of longing and loss are recurrent, as he contemplates the ache of separation, nostalgia for past loves, and the emotional void left by absence. Memory and nostalgia are central themes in Moraes' poetry, where he reflects on past experiences, particularly from childhood, and significant moments. His exploration focuses on how memories shape our perceptions of the present and evoke powerful emotions.

*Almost I can recall where I was born:
The hot verandas where the chauffeurs drowse...
My father hugging me so hard it hurt,
My mother mad, and time we went away....
We travelled, and I looked for love too young.
More travel, and I looked for lust instead....*

(A Letter)

Dom Moraes' childhood was marked by significant challenges: his father's prolonged absences due to journalistic ventures and his mother's mental illness. His mother often isolated herself in a room, experiencing profound loneliness. Dom witnessed her outbursts directed at servants, and even

at him, at times injuring herself with a knife. The poem *A Letter* reflects Dom's melancholic longing for the love of his mother, which he rarely received. His recollections of childhood depict his struggle to navigate and comprehend these tumultuous surroundings. "...he early turned to poetry; while finishing his education in England he became, for a period, the darling of literary London. The hurts of childhood and feeling of insecurity in England were often transformed in his poetry to dream of fairylands, themes of loneliness, and the persona of the romantic, wounded poet..." (King 20)

While grounded in personal experiences, Moraes' verses resonate with universal themes of love and relationships, depicting moments and emotions that transcend cultural boundaries and time periods. His poetry reveals a keen sensitivity to the intricate dynamics of human connections and the profound emotional landscapes they engender. Through his work, Moraes skillfully intertwines personal introspection with universal insights into human intimacy and connection.

His ancestors had migrated from England to Goa. Goa then was ruled by the Portugal. The word "Moraes" is a Portuguese name. Dom Moraes' grandfather Anthony Xavier Moraes was a civil engineer in Bombay Presidency. His father Frank Moraes was a journalist, war correspondent and biographer. He became one of the popular journalists in India and his columns appeared in *The Times of India*. He also worked as an editor of *The Times of Ceylon*. Dom acquainted a galaxy of writers through his father. Frank Moraes was a great source of inspiration for Dom Moraes. Dom's parents spoke only English at home. As he grew up he understood a big gap between the culture of the east and the west. He always thought that he would not fit into Indian culture, as it was highly incomprehensible for him. He did not understand the language spoken by his servants at home. Dom developed a great interest in reading books. Edgar Rice Burroughs, Conan Doyle, Jeffery Fernol were his childhood heroes. He accompanied his father to Royal Asiatic Library on every Saturdays. Dom read political books, memoirs, comic books and novels from his father's library. "My idea of what poetry was like was derived from what I had read in my father's library: volumes of Swinburne and early Yeats, or anthologies like the

Golden Treasury and Poems of Today...I discovered an anthology...which included work of Eliot, Auden and Spender. It excited me immensely; I seemed to see for the first time how to write verse." (*My Son's Father* p 75) Dom began writing at the age of twelve and his poems were published in his school journals. Since his childhood he had great interest in writing poems hence, he wanted to be become a poet. He tried to write poems and wrote a biography of Mahatma Gandhi entitled *The Epic of Gandhi* about six pages.

His father introduced him to celebrated Indian English writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Nissim Ezekiel and G.V.Desani, distinguished American poets Karl Shapiro, James Laughlin and English poets Stephen Spender and W.H Auden. These writers instilled in him a great love for literature.

When he heard that England's one of the promising poets Stephen Spender was coming to Bombay to attend writer's conference, he was excited to meet his hero. His father introduced Spender to him. Dom was too excited that he could not utter words. "At last I blurted out words, "I want to be a poet." Spender began to laugh, then stopped and said gently, "Perhaps you are one." This remark intoxicated me: in it I saw recognition of one poet by another, transcending all barriers, and under this gratifying illusion doubled my output of verse." (*My Son's Father* p 75)

His meeting with Stephen Spender opened a new chapter in his life as he decided to leave India in search of his roots in England. He expressed his plans of studying at Oxford before his father, who agreed to it unconditionally. Dom first travelled to England in 1957 with a hope to meet his dream poets - Stephen Spender and W.H Auden and to become a poet. He records his feelings when he thought of his motherland England in *Sailing to England*. The poem is a reflective piece that captures the emotions and thoughts of the poet as he embarks on a journey from India to England.

*Fallen into a dream, I could not rise.
I am in love, and long to be unhappy.
Something within me raised her from the sea:
A delicate sad face, and stones for eyes.*
(*Sailing to England*)

The title *Sailing to England* immediately sets the geographical and thematic context of the poem. It suggests a physical journey across the sea, but also hints at a deeper metaphorical journey—perhaps one of self-discovery or cultural exploration. The poem explores themes of identity and belonging, as the poet navigates between his Indian heritage and the new environment he is sailing towards. There's an undertone of nostalgia and reflection as the poet looks back on what he is leaving behind and anticipates what lies ahead. His emotions are captured in the following lines:

*Something within me mumbles words and grieves
For three swept out, while inland watchers groaned
Humped, elbows jerking in a skein of waves
Like giant women knitting One was drowned
(Sailing to England)*

Moraes uses vivid imagery to depict the sea journey, capturing the vastness of the ocean and the sense of movement and distance. The sea becomes a powerful metaphor for the journey of life itself—full of uncertainties yet also holding promise. The language is evocative, creating a mood that oscillates between anticipation and melancholy. The use of sensory details helps to immerse the reader in the experience of sailing across the sea. The poem navigates through different emotional landscapes—there's excitement for the new adventure, a sense of homesickness or longing for what is left behind, and perhaps a tinge of anxiety about the unknown future. It captures the complex emotions of departure and arrival, encapsulating the bittersweet nature of leaving one's homeland for distant shores. The poem explores the themes of identity, transition, and emotional introspection. It invites readers to contemplate the universal experience of leaving home, embarking on new journeys, and grappling with the intersections of personal history and cultural change.

Dom Moraes' poetry is known for its lyrical quality and its exploration of diverse themes, drawing from his observations and experiences. He often delves into the complexities of Indian identity and culture, reflecting on its traditions, diversity, and the challenges posed by modernization. His work engages with social and political issues, offering commentary on topics such as justice, inequality, and the societal impacts of historical events. Moraes had

a profound connection with nature, vividly portraying landscapes, seasons, and natural phenomena in his poetry.

*The gross sun squats above
A valley full of shadows;
The wizard plays his flute
And lizards in green meadows
And archers in pursuit
Of antelope and dove
Grow dumb and cannot move. (Song)*

Figures in the Landscape is a notable poem by Dom Moraes, published in 1954. The poem laid the foundation for Moraes' subsequent works and established him as a significant voice in Indian literature. His ability to blend personal experiences with universal themes resonated with readers and critics alike, setting him apart as a poet of considerable talent and depth. *In Figures in the Landscape*, Moraes delves into themes of identity and belonging, drawing from his upbringing in India. His reflections touch upon the complexities of cultural heritage and personal identity in a dynamic global context. The poem opens and closes with the motif of 'dying - die,' which symbolizes a sense of hope and metamorphosis.

*Dying is just the same as going to sleep
The piper whispered, 'close your eyes,'.....
And gravely wandered in a private darkness,
Imagining death to be a way of looking....
(Figures in the Landscape)*

When Moraes suggests that 'dying is just the same as going to sleep,' he draws a parallel between the processes. Both entail a transition from consciousness to a state of unconsciousness or non-existence. This can be seen as a comforting or peaceful view of death, suggesting that it may be as gentle and natural as falling asleep. Metaphorically, the statement could imply a view of death as a form of rest or cessation of consciousness, akin to sleep. It may reflect a belief in an afterlife or a state of peaceful oblivion, where the individual rests peacefully after the end of life's struggles. Different cultures and religions interpret death and sleep differently. For example, in some cultures, death is seen as a transition to another realm or existence, much like waking from sleep into a new day. In

others, it might be viewed as a final rest after a life lived. The comparison can also address the emotional and psychological aspects of death. Equating dying to going to sleep may offer comfort to those contemplating mortality, framing death as a natural and inevitable part of life rather than something fearful or unknown. The words ‘gravely wandered’ and ‘darkness’ and ‘imagining death’ suggest his longing for transition to another realm:

*Walking in lonely fields at break of day
He remembered a dream, looked at the sky
And Wondered would a stranger come that way
To take his hand and say, I long to die
(Figures in the Landscape)*

The imagery of walking in lonely fields at dawn emphasizes solitude and introspection. The setting of open fields and the break of day can symbolize a time of renewal and introspection, where one reflects on deeper thoughts and feelings. The juxtaposition of remembering a dream and looking at the sky suggests a contrast between the internal world of dreams and the vast, external world of nature. The sky often represents vastness, eternity, and the unknown, prompting existential questioning.

Dom Moraes' poem *The Garden*, offers a vivid and reflective portrayal of a garden as a miniature world of life and nature. The poem begins by describing the garden as a peaceful and secluded "small kingdom," evoking a sense of calm and protection. This serene setting is characterized by its quietness, which is compared to velvet, enhancing the tranquil and gentle atmosphere of the garden.

*I wake and find myself in love:
And this one time I do not doubt...
(The Garden)*

Moraes employs vibrant imagery to capture the vitality and beauty of the garden. “Here in the garden, feel no fear” “And can’t go out for fear I meet” appears to evoke a sense of contrasting emotions or situations. The phrase reflects not just physical boundaries but also emotional or psychological states. It could symbolize a fear of the unknown or of leaving one's comfort zone, whether physically or metaphorically. The imagery conveys the vibrant and joyful nature:

*The lichen peels along the wall.
My conversation bores the dove.
He knows it all: that I'm in love
And you care much and not at all.
(The Garden)*

The final stanza unfolds with a delicate grace, weaving stray musings into the abandon of young love, culminating in lines that shimmer with priceless beauty:

*And I by shyness am undone
And can't go out for fear I meet
My poems dancing down the street
Telling your name to everyone. (The Garden)*

Gabriel is a reflective and introspective poem that delves into themes of love, memory, and the passage of time. The speaker communicates with Gabriel in a tone marked by finality and emotional detachment, while reminiscing about past experiences and emotions left unspoken. Gabriel remains undefined beyond the name itself, leaving room for readers to interpret the poem in various ways. This ambiguity allows Gabriel to potentially represent a specific individual from Moraes' life—a friend, lover, or family member—or to symbolize broader concepts like innocence, purity, or a spiritual presence. The poem revolves around themes of love, loss, memory, and the passage of time, with Gabriel serving as a central focus for the exploration of these themes.

The ambiguity surrounding Gabriel's identity serves to universalize the poem, inviting readers to connect their own experiences and emotions with the sentiments expressed. Through vivid imagery and repetitive elements, the poem underscores the speaker's deep contemplation of life's transient moments and their personal introspection.

*I found her in an orchard,
Squat, pockmarks in froglike face,
Grease upon it, not grace,
I uttered my speech, unheard.
She squawked of fidelity,
Duty, other such words
No hope she would listen to me. (Gabriel)*

The speaker suggests a sense of closure or finality by implying that all that needed to be expressed to Gabriel has been said. The absence of

Gabriel, whether physical or emotional, is acknowledged. The infrequency of seeing Gabriel is emphasized, suggesting rare encounters or fleeting moments together. The speaker further explains that their words and actions held deeper meaning beyond what Gabriel comprehended, hinting at unspoken feelings or emotions.

Girl by Dom Moraes is a poem that exalts the beauty and allure of a beloved woman. It lyrically explores the speaker's admiration and fascination with her. The poem begins with a vivid portrayal of her beauty and captivating presence:

*They told me first she was a tree
So tall, no man could ever climb... (Girl)*

The language of the poem is rich with sensory details and metaphors, highlighting the woman's attractiveness and the impact she has on those around her. The speaker's admiration is conveyed through poetic language and imagery, painting a vivid picture of the woman in the reader's imagination. The poem serves as a poetic tribute to feminine beauty and allure, celebrating her physical and metaphorical presence with evocative imagery and lyrical expression.

*We lay together in the mist
On clods the color of wet bread,
My hand enclosed her hand; we kissed
She trembled then and turned her head (Girl)*

The imagery of "lying together in the mist" creates a sense of a quiet, secluded place, possibly outdoors. The mist suggests a soft, ethereal atmosphere, adding a dream-like quality to the scene. "On clods the color of wet bread" describes the ground they are lying on. The comparison to wet bread implies a dull, pale color, perhaps hinting at an earthy or damp environment. The physical gesture of "my hand enclosed her hand" signifies closeness and connection between the speaker and the other person (presumably a romantic partner). "We kissed" emphasizes the intimacy and affection shared between them. It's a moment of closeness and emotional connection, possibly a culmination of their feelings for each other.

The poem *Valediction* by Dom Moraes is celebrated for its poignant reflection on his approaching death. Moraes imagines his future demise at the age of 65, using vivid imagery such as the presents brought by friends on his birthday and

the white sari he gifts to Sarayu, symbolizing his departure. Confident in his impending passing, he anticipates leaving behind memories, expressed through phrases like "I shall have carried her far off" and recalling their extensive travels together across India and even to the small English village of Odcombe, notable for its association with Thomas Coryate, who journeyed to the court of Jahangir in India on foot.

*In July, a month from today, I shall turn 65. Then
My friends will cosset me, give me useless
presents...*

*They won't know I'm not there, nor she in her
white
Sari, for I shall have carried her far off in my
mind
To places I visited with one or the other dead
friend...*

(Valediction)

Dom Moraes died of cancer in Bombay on Wednesday June 2, 2004. For Dom Moraes, 'death' was not an unexpected event; rather, he anticipated it and wished to approach it calmly and peacefully, as reflected in his desire to 'go gentle into that good night.' He was buried in the Sewari cemetery in Mumbai. Sarayu Srivatsa (his third wife) carried the soil from his grave to Odcombe, Somerset in England as per his last wish. "On 19th July 2004, on Dom's 66th birthday, 26 of his friends attended simple ceremony in which a tablet was placed near the entrance to the church of St.Peter and St.Paul in Odcombe. The 18-inch by 2-ft tablet of Jaisalmer stone read: "Dom Moraes who followed Thomas Coryate's footsteps and returned Home." (Bhattacharya 190)

Dom Moraes emerges as a poet of profound depth and versatility through his poetry, exploring a diverse range of themes with lyricism, sensitivity, and introspection. Spanning several decades, his work reflects a keen observation of human experiences, cultural landscapes, and the complexities of identity. Moraes delves into themes of love and relationships, intricately portraying the nuances of passion, longing, and emotional connection. He captures both the beauty and challenges of love through vivid imagery and evocative language, offering insightful reflections on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

Nature holds a prominent place in Moraes' poetry, depicted with vivid descriptions of landscapes, seasons, and natural phenomena. His deep appreciation for the natural world intertwines with themes of transience and the passage of time, reflecting on the ephemeral beauty and fragility of existence. Exploring existential themes such as mortality, memory, and the quest for meaning adds another layer of depth to Moraes' poetry. With sensitivity and introspection, he contemplates the complexities of the human condition, encouraging readers to introspect on their own lives and perceptions. Bruce King rightly remarks, "...he was one of the best poets and prose writers..." (King 28) and "...Moraes' poetry offers little to those seeking literature about nationalism, cultural conflict, or social justice. It could offer more to those interested in difference who are willing to look beyond simple notion..." (King 204)

In conclusion, Dom Moraes' poetry resonates with its lyrical quality, emotional depth, and profound insights into the human experience. His ability to interweave personal reflections with universal truths makes his poetry enduring and timeless, inviting readers to engage with life's complexities and the enduring power of artistic expression. Moraes' poetry continues to be studied and valued for its depth, insight, and enduring impact on Indian and global literature. His exploration of identity, love, nature, and existential themes remains pertinent and compelling for contemporary readers, capturing timeless aspects of the human condition. Dom Moraes' poetic works are esteemed for their lyrical beauty, emotional profundity, and profound engagement with a diverse range of themes. His ability to articulate life's complexities and emotions through poetry has firmly established him as a pivotal figure in Indian English literature.

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