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Juxtaposition as technique: A survey of seven poems from Beldam Etcetera by Dom Moraes

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Abstract: In Beldam Etcetera, Dom Moraes organises his poems by employing juxtaposition as the technique through which perspectives, situations or reactions are contrasted in highlighting the differences naturally inherent in reality. This

not only enriches the poems by depicting the complexity of reality but also envisages a poetry that is the opposite of subjective romanticising, which is a common refrain regarding his poetry in the first phase of his writing. By the technique of juxtaposition differences in the conception and articulation of reality in its entire complexity, depending on any individual, are explored without moralising or judging as that would entail the predominance of a single perspective over the multiple.

Keywords: Juxtaposition, perspective, reality, difference, complexity.

Introduction

Dominic Francis Moraes (1938-2004), better known as Dom Moraes, was a poet, writer and journalist. He, Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan were the 'best-known and most significant of Indian Poets writing in English. They may be considered the founders of modern poetry in English' (King 1). He was awarded the Hawthornden Prize for Literature for his first book of poetry, *A Beginning*, in 1958, and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1994 for *Serendip*.

This paper argues that Dom Moraes's poetry in *Beldam Etcetera* engages with reality by articulating an awareness and affirmation of reality and differences of situations and perspectives within it which constitute its complexity. Hence his poetry in the first phase of his oeuvre cannot be labelled as only 'concerned with himself as a poet, his dreams, insecurities, hurts' (King 137), and must therefore be considered according to newer principles.

According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, juxtaposition is the fact of putting people or things together, especially in order to show a contrast or a new relationship between them.

This survey of seven poems from Beldam Etcetera (1967) employs the text included in *Collected Poems* (1954-2004).

Letter to Mother

The juxtaposition of the speaker's attitude with his mother's brings out the contrast between them regarding parents, religion and country. The speaker's mother was religious but she did not notice 'The corpses around' (sec. II, line 14) her, whereas the irreligious speaker was more sensitive to what was happening in the country. But unlike his mother, who mourned for her father, the speaker is conscious of his guilt at abandoning his mother even as he is 'tidying' his life in a 'cold, tidy country' (sec. I, line 29).

Midsummer

The poem juxtaposes a moment of beauty (sec. I) with mundanity (sec. II). The speaker seems to suggest that reality (sec. III) is complex, because it is composed of both beauty and mundanity. But this does not mean that reality is a product of outlook. On the contrary, the speaker perceives reality to be what it is. However, for a better appreciation of reality, and therefore holistic personal realization, the speaker conceives that outlook matters since both beauty and mundanity complement each other. Therefore, reality can be appreciated better only if things are perceived imaginatively and practically.

War Correspondents

In this poem, the juxtaposition is between the drudgery ('We only had the night', line 22) that war correspondents experience in a warzone ('Enemy cannon thudded in the sky', line 27) and the way of life that they are used to. This juxtaposition enumerates the differences in the connotation of 'life' depending on the location: while for those in a war zone it means being able to survive ('dictators were no friends of life', line 17), for those unaffected by war or unrest it means more than simple survival ('I don't know why it is that everywhere's/ So boring', lines 33-34).

Beldam

The poem juxtaposes a Professor, a farmer, and the dead poet Beldam. The professor is visiting Beldam's grave ('He scrutinizes the stone', line 18); the farmer is looking for food ('with thunder in his belly', line 44); and Beldam is attempting 'as always, to escape' (line 5) from his grave- all of them are unaffected by the season ('It is winter', line 17) and the barren place ('which apocalypse/ Renders no longer arable', lines 41-42).

Speech in the Desert

The poem juxtaposes reason and orthodoxy to bring out morality, superstition, hedonism, and the mystery of life. In the form of an advice to a snail who hides in a cave, the speaker talks about reason ('I somehow doubt you reason much', line 26), putting in some effort even if it is not successful ('If you will quit your rocky shell/.../ The midday sun...', lines 14-16), and not being superstitious ('... hoarse with prayers', line 21). At the same time he also says that living must not all be work ('They squander labour in the leaves', line

28) but a certain degree of hedonism ('A number of politer ways/ To fondle time and calm your mind', lines 44,45) is better than 'Smothering under stones' (line 52) as everything in life is not completely decipherable ('... suddenly turned mild/... / Gleam with the pleasure of a child', lines 63-65).

Homo Sapiens

The poem through juxtaposition of the speaker's wish with his present state brings out how a human may not be contented, even when he is free ('I am free here', line 6) and has the freedom to develop all his faculties ('Someday I could be .../.../... what I am', lines 18-20). On the contrary, some find it difficult if not impossible to adapt to their changed environment ('Say I found it foolish to be free', line 32) and never 'choose to change' (line 35).

Son

The speaker's ignorance, anxiety and reaction are juxtaposed with that of his wife's and the mid-wife's. While he tries to do as best as he can- first for his wife ('I put my hand behind her head', line 3), later for his new-born son ('I put my hand behind his head', line 32)-, his wife and the mid-wife are more familiar with the goings on and hence relaxed ('But her face was smiled away', line 18; 'Was smiling also', line 22).

Juxtaposition and Reality

By employing juxtaposition, these poems do not remain remote or purely subjective. On the contrary, juxtaposition ensures that they are involved with reality by including multiple perspectives, situations and reactions in conceptualizing reality as not being dependent on any one perspective alone, which would otherwise be inadequate in grasping the complexity inherent in reality. This inclusion of

multiplicity, therefore, not only exhibits an awareness as well as affirmation of differences that are inherent in reality. It also through this engages with reality by depicting reality's complexity, albeit without moralising or judging.

The speaker in 'Letter to Mother' who is conscious of his guilt, or the professor in 'Beldam' who is visiting a dead poet's grave when a hungry peasant is searching food, or the speaker of 'Speech in the Desert' who is rational and reasonable, or the speaker's wife and the mid-wife who smile while he is anxious- all may appear insensitive, even heartless, if their respective predicament or situation or reactions are not considered in viewing their actions. It is only through juxtaposition that their perspectives, situations or reactions are contrasted in depicting the complexity of reality, and any critique of their individual actions would involve belittling them while viewing reality from others' perspective.

Even when the war correspondents can be criticised for yearning to have fun in a war zone; or the speaker in 'Midsummer' can be faulted for suggesting that an imaginative and practical outlook is best; or the speaker of 'Homo Sapiens' who should have been contented- all may appear to be woolly-headed, even divorced from reality. But it is their individual perspective, which may be found wanting and contradictory if judged on a moral scale but which does not belie their reality.

Conclusion

Although the poetry in the second phase– especially *Collected Poems* (1954-2004), which according to Thayil is by a 'hard-boiled, fearlessly engaged writer' (225) – is considerably different than those in the first phase, as Eliot said, '... every generation must provide its own literary criticism' (114), so the poetry of Dom Moraes in the first phase of his oeuvre must be considered anew, moving away from the usually straitjacketing aspects such as 'dispossession' or 'masks'

(Mehrotra 88,89) or, as quoted earlier from King, 'himself ... hurts'. This consideration should be according to newer principles which move away from older ones by taking note of the awareness and affirmation of reality in all its complexity that is exhibited in Beldam Etcetera.

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