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HOW DO DOM MORAES'S POEMS CONVEY DISPARATE EXPERIENCES OF DESPAIR DESPITE THEIR COMMON FOCUS ON MELANCHOLIA?

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ABSTRACT

Modernism marked a radical shift in cultural and aesthetic sensibilities of literature post World-War One with its subversion of the worldviews that previously existedⁱ. The disillusionment and fragmentation immanent in modernist works, has led critics to link Modernism to melancholia, or despair.

Dom Moraes's poetry strongly showcases human melancholia tinged with romanticised death-worship. Previous research on his work primarily explores postcolonial and biographical influences on his poetry. However, the despair reflected starkly in his poems, as a result of alienation felt by Moraes from both England and India, exemplifies a modernist melancholia.

Nevertheless, attributing the metaphysical anxiety of his works to either a larger modernist influence or his individual circumstances, reduces the complex, protean portrayal of despair in his poems, and portrays despair as uni-dimensional. This essay will examine Moraes's poems using a formalist lens to argue that each of Moraes's poems present different forms of despair by evoking differing sensory responses to melancholia. The poems investigated will be; "Absences", "The General", "A Letter", "The Garden" and "After Hours."

Keywords: Dom Moraes, Melancholia, Despair, Modernism, Indian poet

Introduction

For centuries, human beings have grappled with despair, an anxiety about understanding a vast and omnipresent unknown. Literature reflects this essential reality of being human: a ubiquitous struggle with despair. As times and circumstances have changed, although literature has assumed different forms, despair has been an all-pervasive element.

Modernism, which rejects the centrality of focus on the human narrator and belief in the perennial significance of a text, exemplifies the despair showcased across forms of literature. In its attempts to give a "shape and a significance to the

immense panorama of futility and anarchy"ⁱⁱ and in its psychological profundity, it often features a deep-seated melancholia that reflects both the circumstances of the literary movement, and the author. Consequently, seminal Modernist works like "The Wasteland" display a fragmentation that reflects an immense feeling of dislocation.

The contradictions apparent in Modernism are delineated by Peter Childs, who identifies "paradoxical if not opposed trends towards revolutionary and reactionary positions, fear of the new and delight at the disappearance of the old, nihilism and fanatical enthusiasm, creativity and despair."ⁱⁱⁱ Poetry in its representation of the complex emotional state of the human spirit, best

represents despair and melancholia, especially of that showcased in Modernist works.

In the Indo-Anglian context, despair is a prominent idea in the poetry of Toru Dutt, Dilip Chitre, Keki Daruwalla and Dom Moraes. For Dom Moraes, a poet born in Bombay, despair is a direct result of both his personal quest for identity as an adolescent, and horrific sights of violence he witnessed later in his life. Since his childhood, his feeling of isolation from his culture was two-pronged: being brought up in an Anglicised family, he felt entirely alienated from Indian culture – an Englishman in India. When he moved to England, this feeling of anxiety and isolation grew, as he was confined to the reputation of an exotic, Indian author in England by his literary circle. Finally, when he moved back to India, after being disconnected from his motherland, assimilating into Indian culture was virtually impossible. Throughout his life, he remained a victim of a minority complex in both countries, never able to ascertain a cultural identity.

The dislocation felt by Moraes in both British and Indian settings as he grappled with a reality fragmented by cultural barriers is reflected starkly in his poems, which feature a despair characteristic of Modernist works. Moreover, despite his alienation from India, Moraes's poetry features many references to Hinduism. This is characteristic of modernist writers like Emerson and Eliot, who often alluded to Hinduism in their works.

However, although modernist works showcase common elements, attributing all the melancholia to a modernist influence would be to falsely suggest that the despair portrayed in his works is uni-dimensional. In fact, although, the despair of Moraes's poetry was induced by common factors in his social context, the representation of despair in his poetry is multi-dimensional and takes many forms.

In this essay, I will examine four of Dom Moraes's poems – Absences, The General, A Letter, and After Hours. By analysing the sensory response Moraes evokes striking images and symbols of despair – of mindless destruction on the battlefield; the dichotomous whirring of wings, wispy, insubstantial shadows of people – I will be able to

distinguish between the various forms of despair that Moraes depicts in order to ask life's most difficult questions.

Absences

Comparable to the seminal "The Wasteland" by T.S. Eliot, Moraes's "Absences" features both a strong focus on nothingness and a search for renewal in an empty landscape, as a disillusioned speaker describes all-encompassing death on an island ravaged by war. The sense of overwhelming nothingness, and the inversion of the natural order permeates the poem, creating a palpable sense of loss.

The poem begins with a strong imperative - "smear out the last star" - which represents the force with which war has snuffed out the last source of hope for the island - "the last star". The verb "smear" connotes erasure by a human hand, and suggests that the erasure has left a stain.

This imperative is also reminiscent of Auden's "Funeral Blues": "the stars are not wanted now; put out every one". Immediately, this creates an inextricable link between the grief felt by Auden's narrator at the loss of the loved one and the destruction of his world, and the speaker's mourning for the loss of another kind of life, and his sorrow at experiencing the devastation of the island in "Absences".

Now that this source of hope has been eradicated, the island is in a state of despair. Moraes further emphasises the darkness the island has been plunged into with "no lights from the islands or hills". These lights are reminiscent not only of hope, but also of celebration and life, which the island is now devoid of, suggesting death has truly engulfed the landscape.

The darkness of the island is also significant from psychoanalytic perspective. According to Jung, the island is a common image in dreams. While the sea surrounding an island represents the unconscious mind, the conscious mind is represented by the island emerging from it.^{iv} The image of darkness engulfing the island could therefore suggest that while despair previously primarily tormented the speaker's unconscious

mind, an ineluctable sense of anguish has finally captured his thoughts and his conscious mind.

In addition to depicting the darkness of the island, the anaphoric “no” continues throughout the poem: there are “no lights”, “no vigils”, “no enemies”, “no polyp admiral” and “no wounds left to be healed amplifying the sense of emptiness. This places emphasis on what once was and on the negation of life force, which indicates that the memories of loss felt by the war-ravaged island are strong. The lack of lights suggests a lack of hope. While the lack of “vigils” and “enemies” indicates the island is no longer devastated by the aftermath of war, it is also associated with a melancholic emptiness and a lack of purpose. “No vigils left to keep, no enemies left to slaughter” creates the impression that war imbued the islander’s lives with a sense of direction and now without the preoccupations of war, their lives are devoid of meaning and function.

The poet juxtaposes “the great square”, signifying a vast, seemingly unending space, and the looming silence, which heightens the sense of emptiness. The description of the primordial, “prolonged vowel of silence” being “heard” suggests that although previously sounds of the island, were heard, now only silence exists. Where vowels were charged with noise, they are now filled with silence, as if the natural order of life has been subverted in the aftermath of war. The world has been so devastated that it appears to have retrogressed into an era preceding creation.

However, the fact that the island shelters “fossils” reflects that death and decay occurred very far in the past and emphasises this length of time that has passed.

Moraes highlights the image of desolation with the phrase a “ghost of a headland”, suggesting what once was a headland is now an insubstantial memory. This reference to a ghost is part of the same semantic field as “fossils, echoes”. All these objects are memento moris, recollections of the past, and represent the poem’s recurring theme that what once was, no longer exists. This suggests that the speaker laments the death of people who once inhabited the island.

Notably, throughout the first part of the poem, the depiction of despair lacks any dramatic elements. Moraes deliberately eschews the use of imagery to highlight despair itself. Instead, the despair of the poem is implied by the emphasis on nothingness. By accentuating the contrast between a once-flourishing setting and a setting bereft of life, the listener is induced to feel a similar, deep sense of loss.

Nevertheless, Moraes indicates that before the death of the island, it was overcome by war. The image of the “polyp admiral” sipping “blood” and “whisky” is gruesome. The “polyp admiral” is depicted as terrifyingly bestial and his drinking of blood is savage. Moraes here comments on the barbarism of war and its perpetrators. The image of him “fingering” warships indicates the callous ease with which he instigates war while others lay down their lives. Here Moraes also suggests that the life force in human beings tends towards passion, violence and war, and with the denial of this life force, one moves towards death.

These images therefore serve to question whether the death of the island is better than its life filled with violence. The lack of life of the island, although suffused with despair, also heralds the end of violence and protest, as if some elements of nature survive in their primeval beauty when man has finally died and satisfied his insatiable appetite to destroy.

This sense of inversion of nature is also reflected in Moraes’s comment that the “breathing of stromalites” disturbs the “balance of death”, a subversion of the idea of the “balance of life”. This indicates that the island has been in the throes of death for so long, death, not life, becomes the norm. However, the fact that “stromalites breathe” despite mass destruction suggests there is still some life and hope for the island. The rejuvenating power of life teems in the infinitesimal ‘plopping’ bubbles, suggesting the cycle of life can be restored through rebirth and highlighting the cyclical nature of the universe.

Here, Moraes alludes to the *Upanishads* from Hindu culture, according to which the universe and the Earth, along with humans and

other creatures, undergo repeated cycles (*pralaya*) of creation and destruction. In Hindu cosmology, a universe endures for one day in the existence of Brahma, the creator, and is then destroyed by fire or water elements.^v “Absences” reflects this idea of rebirth, suggesting that although the island is currently in a state of destruction, it will soon make way for creation.

According to Eliot, at the time Moraes was writing “Civilization to him appeared a crumbling edifice destined to perish in the flames of war. The tragedy of the human condition imposes an obligation on us to give meaning and significance to life”.^{vi} Here, Moraes’s use of Hindu philosophy, suggest his similar attempt to find meaning and significance in the destruction surrounding him.

Following the reference to the stromalites, the assertion that there are “no wounds left to be healed” heralds a shift in tone in the poem. The poem transitions from a sense of despair to a tone of hope and rejuvenation, implying the island can finally move on from memories of war.

This idea is illustrated by the change in the way silence is perceived in the next stanza: “silence”, previously associated with despair, now allows sounds to be heard. Emptiness and death pave the way for life to be reborn. Hope emerges from silence, and from nature the earth renews itself. The image of “clouds scuffing like sheep” represents the sounds of nature returning to their state of life. This reflects the natural environment compensating for the lack of living things, and is ready to move on with cycle of rebirth. “Scuff”, in fact, indicates the clouds are scraping or brushing the surface of another object, which suggests both movement and life. “Echoes of stone” are restored, as symbols of the past finally become reintegrated into the present.

By ending with the message that absence unites and “holds the world together”, Moraes inverts his initial depiction of despair as an extension of destruction or death. Instead, he emphasises that as humans recover from absences caused by conflict, despair paves the way for hope, and the cycle of life continues regardless, ironically suggesting that despair itself is an element in life’s natural order.

The General

“The General’s illustration of despair is diametrically opposite to that of “Absences”. The narrative of “The General” brims with regret, recounting the pathetic tale of a general who returns home, burdened by heavy disillusionment of war after a prolonged service. The sense of tragedy is heightened by the fact that the general himself drove the war effort. The poem is divided into six sections, the general’s despair growing with each section, until he finally surrenders to death. Here, Moraes’s poem presents the common Modernist idea that the general’s reality is created in the act of perceiving it. Therefore, at the end of the poem, when the dichotomy of good and evil finally reconciles within him, his previously fragmented reality disintegrates and he surrenders to death.

I

The first section begins with the hyperbole that the general’s “six weeks away seems long as years”. This indicates that time stretched on as his experiences of war were agonising. His evasion of the “foreign spear”, a metonym for death at the hands of foreign armies, should be accompanied by celebration, but is stated dispassionately, as if he no longer values life. “Death by spear” also foregrounds the thoughtlessness of war by representing a swift, yet thoughtless, cavalier death, the very death many of the general’s soldiers were victims of.

The general is described as “sore at buttock” and nursing a “sprained wrist”: his physical ailments are manifestations of a heavy, disillusioned heart and an exhaustion that is both physical and mental. Although he is received by a “crowd’s roar”, connoting a glorious victory, this “drains through [him]”. The suggests the roars leave him empty and hollow, because he thinks of other things, implying that despite the laurels of war, he feels no sense of achievement. Here the declarative “Nothing can be as it is before” heightens his sense of despair, a post-war angst. Here, Moraes’s poem also possibly reflects the angst felt by the general public post World War II. Therefore this poem could also serve as a means by which Moraes expresses an inner traumatic response felt by the public to exterior events of wartime, with the strong melancholia

functioning an emblem of the times, a cry for help, and a powerful social corrective.

Further accentuating the general's sense of despair, Moraes likens the rape of a girl to the general's first wartime experience. The "rape of a girl" from the losing country is described as a spoil of war, indicating that in wartime, a depraved act - a violation of another human - is reduced to a thrilling benefit. Hence, war becomes associated with injustice and a loss of humanity. Victory becomes inextricably linked to exploitation. The fact that her rapists have "cloaks like batwings" is significant, as wings are an extended metaphor for the dichotomy between good and evil within the same person. Additionally, bats symbolize death and are agents of the night, a time when evil spirits emerge. The soldiers' rape of this girl associates them with this evil.

Witnessing this exploitation perturbs the general, as he painfully realises that men's libidos are unrestrainable, and pay no cognisance to a woman's objection. This metaphorically reflects the inexhaustible capacity of man for violence, despite an ordinary citizen's objections. Therefore the general was responsible for the violation of a country as heinous as the rape of a girl.

Another important idea here, is that the general claims "I did not feel less pain than she". Her virginity is a metaphor for his innocence, and her virginity being violated is linked to his innocence being violated by his first experience of war, which causes him immense pain.

The image of the "hymen in [him] filling with blood and fear" is deeply visceral, emphasising his violation at the hands of war. He is no longer a war-virgin. His burst hymen cannot be healed. War has destroyed his innocence, which cannot be replaced even by angels, who represent goodness and purity

II

In the second section of the poem, the general's friends put a "spear through an anchorite" for their sadistic pleasure, suggested by their "crooked smiles". The general becomes aware of how war and violence is a means of attaining satisfaction which

adds to his despair. The anchorite's description as a "Locust eater" who is "coarse of face and limb" is significant. The ugly connotations of this description indicate the killers are demonising their enemy to justify his murder.

This reflects how, during wartime, the general demonised and vilified his enemies, to justify his war campaign, but now realises the cruelty of his action. The fact that ants "bore small bits (of him) away" evokes a striking image, and highlights how the anchorite had no funeral, instead his corpse was allowed to decompose and be eaten away by scavengers. This reminds the readers of the irony in the ultimate fate of all the other corpses on the battlefield: the bodies of mighty soldiers are torn apart by ants, highlighting the idea that regardless of his greatness and sacrifice on the battlefield, he has been reduced to this pitiable state in the aftermath of the war.

The image of "friendly ants" "kissing him" is antithetical: here destruction and decay is equated to the amorous act of kissing. Ironically, this indicates that this death is perhaps better than life on the battlefield. At the end of the section, the statement by the general that "You are loved most where you will not return" signifies a philosophy which is tinged with irony and sadness. The general feels it is only in absence that he can be cherished, suggesting he now sees himself as an unlovable murderer. This epiphany adds to his despair.

III

In the third section, the poem becomes increasingly nihilistic, as the general recalls the death of his friend and questions the meaning of life. The general describes having a friend whom "they killed": the pronominal opposition of "my" ("my friend") and "they" expresses his bitterness towards the enemy who killed his friend, and implies a strong sense of grief. The fact that the general's friend has a "blue eye" is significant. The blue eye symbolises what is beautiful, pure and unsullied, and the destruction of this innocence with the friend's death suggests that war destroys all that is pure and beautiful. The friend is said to "look at [him] before his death". This glance metaphorically represents a medium for the transfer of suffering from the friend

to the general. The fact that this is not a look of desperation or fear, but mere resignation, adds to the general's disillusionment about the inevitability of death. Thus, with this look, the friend transfers his physical suffering at the hands of the enemy to the general, exacerbating his mental suffering.

The friend's death itself is also metaphorical: someone who only brings joy to those around, a 'master of comedy', is subjected to a painful death. This highlights the tragedies of wartime, and how the innocent suffer. The image of his friend being "probed from anus to throat" creates the sense that his death is not just violent, but eviscerates him, completely violating his body. The general's statement that "they are both thirty-five" indicates his survivor's guilt. He seems to be questioning why he was the one who lived though they both were the same age, thirty-five. His assertion that "he has a bad liver", indicates he has accepted the fact that he will not live long in any case. This implies the general is now waiting for his inevitable death, his worldview coloured by despair and nihilism.

IV

In the fourth section of the poem, it seems that the general's nihilism transforms into self-loathing. He denigrates the physical consummation of love and attraction to the human body. The general describes himself as "clad in flesh"; the word 'clad' is reminiscent of armour, suggesting the general has been so accustomed to wearing armour, he feels uncomfortable in his own skin. His comment on his inability to "throw" his flesh "to his slave to wash" is interesting: here although the verb "throw" should suggest the thoughtlessness and disrespect with which he addresses and commands his slave, this statement seems more like a façade, meant to conceal his shame towards his privilege as a general. Moreover, his need to "wash" his flesh, stripping it of impurity, implies he is trying to eradicate a guilt that cannot be washed away.

The fact that he views "love as an ignominy of the flesh", suggests that he views himself as undeserving of love, hence love is shameful. More importantly, he sees sex, the culmination of love as an act that will permanently be impure. It seems

with his loss of humanity and feeling, he has lost the ability to feel intimate with another. The description of his love being like a "flash after the damp fuse is drawn" reinforces this idea: his love is simply a sodden remembrance of what it once was. He no longer has the capacity to love deeply. He seems to be withdrawing from contact with others, and descending into his empty, hollow shell. Adding to his despair, is the fact that the "spear" – the tool he wanted to use to avenge his friend was "too heavy". Metaphorically, the burden of avenging his friend was too much to bear, possibly because too many people were responsible; his "sprained wrist" represents this incapacity and this failure heightens his "ignominy".

V

The fifth section of the poem marks a turning point in the general's attitude. Overwhelming despair transforms to numbness and resignation. Having explored the world's riches, he returns home, mentally drained and tormented, which manifests in a "heart and buttock sore" However he stills hears the "whirring of terrible wings of advisers" in his ears. These wings, reminiscent of the wings of predatory birds who scavenge on the spoils of war, are symbolic of rapes and pillages carried out by his subordinates and friends. At home, memories and sights of the horrors that he was indirectly responsible for still haunt him. Nevertheless, the strong, assertive imperative "Hack at my heart, it will not bleed" suggests that even the violent "hacking" cannot hurt him, as nothing can exceed the death-like numbness that he is suffering. The description of him slowly "dying" reinforces the idea that with this hollowness, he moves away from life and into the arms of death. Even the loss of his mistress does not affect him - he is numb to pain already, on his way to death, and nothing can exacerbate his suffering. In fact, he states his mistress left him "at last", as if he was expecting it.

VI

The final section of the poem addresses how the general reminisces about his childhood, before finally being engulfed by despair and surrendering to death. The general's reminiscence of childhood suggests his life is flashing before his

eyes, before he finally dies. Here, he sees his name – which signifies the world’s perception of who he is – and “himself”, his real identity” as separate. The fact that he hears the “whirring of wings” is significant. The whirring of wings, throughout the poem represent the dichotomy of good and evil in him, represented by the contrast between the angel wings and the batwings. He perhaps sees his real identity as associated with the good; his self-perception as a cruel general, and his name, associated with evil. This distinction between himself and his actions is strengthened by his assertion: “myself and the things that happened to me are severed”, no longer making him perceive himself as an agent of evil.

However, on the night of his death, he hears “no wings”. This represents how the dichotomy of good and evil finally reconciles within him. His “name comes down and encloses him” as he finally accepts responsibility for his cruel actions during wartimes. With this, he resigns himself to suffering as if he believes he deserves to repent for his sins.

Paradoxically, he is “filled with what he has lost”, instead of anything he has gained. Therefore emptiness and negativity finally engulf him, and war finally steals from him the capacity to feel. This ending is significant as it suggests that at the end of his life, he is the perpetrator and the perpetrated. These are no longer separate entities, and he must feel the burden of actions he has done.

In the description of a reconciliation of good and evil within the general, Moraes again alludes to the concept of “Brahman”, transcendent reality” which is immutable, and independent of any cause but Itself,^{vii} as elucidated in the Bhagvad Gita. This is reminiscent of Emerson’s “Brahma”, another pioneering modernist work that merges ideas of Brahma and Brahman. In “Brahma” the speaker asserts “I am the doubter and the doubt”,^{viii} realising he is not separate from his thoughts and his thoughts are not separate from the world, both are emanations of “Brahman”. The speaker also paradoxically claims that “Shadow” and “sunlight”^{viii} are the same: here, by combining these completely antithetical concepts, Emerson highlights the true

nature of Brahman – the supreme reality which constitutes all that is living, and that from which everything emerges. The description of Brahman in the Bhagvad-Gita, as “I am the oblation and I the flame into which it is offered”^{ix} is similar – illustrating how the flame and the oblation, although divergent, both emerge entirely from Brahman.

In the General, the general himself and the general’s name, “come down and enclose him.” Although these two symbols represent the opposition of good and evil within him, with his death they come together, as they are both emanations of “Brahman.” With the ending of the poem, although the general’s physical form disintegrates, he is absorbed into supreme, transcendent reality, suggesting that even when a soul’s experience in human form is coloured by despair and melancholia, there is still some hope for spiritual redemption.

After Hours (for Francis Bacon)

In contrast to his other works, “After Hours” builds on a foundation of existential angst, while starkly depicting life as meaningless. In fact, it reflects ideas put forth by Eliot in “The Hollow Men” and “The Waste Land”. These poems, similar to “After Hours” feature a voice of moral deterioration, through which “chaos of the age and loss of human values”^x are heard and presented from an existentialist perspective. The poem describes an observer who watches people in a bar, people who are isolated from the world and hollow shells of themselves. The poem’s transitions from the dispassionate beginning to a despairing end as the observer begins to relate to them. The poem also serves as a warning, that just as the observer begrudgingly begins to relate with the lonely drinkers in the bar, the reader too may realise that s/he shares their circumstances and feelings, trapped in the unending cycle of pain s/he calls life. In this sense, the poem describes the pervasive modern sense of existential angst that seems to affect the lives of all its readers. The dedication of the poem to an existentialist, Francis Bacon, known for his dissolute lifestyle, highlights Moraes’s idea, suggesting that people lead their lives with no direction and no control and no meaning.

At the outset, people are described as “shadows” who cling to the “shapes”. This indicates these lonely drinkers are not people but phantasms of their past selves. They are hollow shells of what they were; unrecognisable, wispy and insubstantial. Their indistinct outlines also indicates their lack of identity as they have no significance in the world. This idea is strengthened by the observer’s statement that they do not “look like people”. Their “hunched shoulders” suggest their body language is defeated, a manifestation of a defeated mind. The word “cling” also suggests that memories of their past hold onto them, from which they will never be free.

The line, “we are not unlike the apes” indicates that these people have regressed into a state of numbness and indifference, paralysed by their crushing depression. The “cawing cardinal within their hearts” is a metaphor for pain and distress trapped within them that they cannot express. The alliteration of cacophonous sounds recalls the raw harshness of the cawing, and the jarring auditory imagery evokes emotions of pain and distress. The cardinal is particularly significant in Christian tradition where it represents the eternal nature of our soul and the sacrifice of Christ. The idea of the eternal nature of our soul creates an even deeper despair as it is interminable, with no end in sight. As a result, their “hearts bleed, but do not ache”, suggests they are injured, but beyond simple pain. This pain is duller and more permanent, more inescapable.

Moraes’s references to nature add another dimension to their pain. The drinkers are described as “following a sad star”. A star is typically a source of navigation or guidance, and so this indicates they are navigating themselves to loneliness and sadness. The pathetic fallacy in “sad star” indicates that even nature has been affected by this universal sadness. At the same time, the “cold eye of a creator” is a comment on the indifference of God, suggesting that even God has forsaken them, as they are worthless.

In the stanza that follows, the focus of the poem shifts to the observer, as it dawns on him that he is not as different from the bar drinkers as he

previously thought. His choice of “champagne”, a symbol of wealth and privilege, becomes his attempt to distinguish himself from the lonely bar drinkers. It seems the society the observer hobnobbed with was wealthy, privileged, intellectual, and so drinking champagne was fitting, but at the same time, as good a poison as any to numb the senses.

The realisation that his “wall” enables him to hold in his pain, is significant to the reader. Throughout the poem, the readers believe that the observer is immune to the angst, but in actuality, he is an inherent part of it. He is so consumed by his internal pain that he seems indifferent and incapable of feeling sympathy for others. The change in stanza here represents a shift in thought as the observer contemplates this tragic reality. A contrast is established between his previous joy and the sharp pain of realisation as the ‘kindled smile’ of the observer changes to a ‘wince’. ‘Kindled’ also indicates that even before this realisation, the observer’s smile was manufactured.

As this epiphany dawns on him, there is a change in pronouns from “them” to “we” in the last stanza. The observer, from an “unperturbed spectator” of this despair, becomes an integral part of it. The statement that “clocks drive us to a new day”, is a metaphor for how passage of time and cycle of day and night are meaningless for them. These people who lack agency are simply pushed along to the next phase in their life. Along with the cycle of day and night, these despairing souls are trapped in their own cycle of pain, with the lack of punctuations in the poem making the sentences seem unending, reflective of the unending pain these people are trapped in. The fact that they must “drift” out soon indicates they are aimless and that life has no purpose for them. Here, the bar perhaps also represents life. The fact that they “must leave, and cannot stay” is a reminder of their impending death. “Everyone there (here) is a drifter”, as if they lead their lives in a manner that is directionless and insignificant

The poem ends with a “terrible smile” with which he “turns away”. This oxymoron represents the observer’s realisation and acceptance of his

nihilistic fate. As he realises he can no longer maintain a façade, he surrenders to despair entirely.

A letter

"A letter", although arguably an existentialist poem, draws on Moraes's biographical experiences. Therefore, the tone of this poem is more personal and intimate than that of "After Hours". Rather than illustrating a point about human nature in the abstract, he recounts his struggles with anxiety and despair stemming from his inability to find a cultural identity, and how this results in a perpetual sense of alienation, deeply characteristic of Modernist works.

Moraes begins the poem by establishing a setting where the speaker feels alienated. Significantly, the poem is set in India where the class and caste divides are set in stone and create rifts in society. The description of "hot verandas where chauffeurs drowse" evokes tactile imagery of a tropical heat so intense that it drives people to sleep. This immediately suggests the poet's own unease and discomfort with the land of his birth, which leads to an overall rejection of all it contains. This also conveys to the readers that he grew up on the advantaged end of a class spectrum. His backyard is described as a "ragged thorn's dominion": here the thorn, a threatening symbol of danger, has complete control over a backyard that is supposed to be his dominion. Ragged also recalls people of a lower class, with the thorn suggesting they have the capacity to hurt and revolt against their masters. The home is overrun with these people who have established their dominion in a space that is meant to be his space of comfort.

Reinforcing this idea, his house is run by "nameless servants" which indicates the distance and lack of personal connection between him and those in his home. Interestingly, he also refers to it as "his father's house", which indicates he has not adopted it as his own. The "backyard dirt where they whisper" has connotations of his servants conspiring against the family, and indicates the hostility between them and him. Here, the whispering of the lower class is almost implicated in the separation of his parents.

After leaving his home, the description of poems "[growing] like maggots in [his] head" suggests he began to write poetry as a means of catharsis. His poems were not beautiful and aesthetic, but emotionally complex. Just as maggots consume flesh, the flesh of his thoughts was devoured by his poetry. It seems ironic that poetry, a form so artistic and precise, has such animalistic associations. However, this highlights the traumas of his childhood that his poems helped him cope with. Later, the personification in "each gun talking to me" suggests he was disturbed by the violence in his homeland, and confused about his identity. The image of both "green and dung-smear'd plains in his homeland" depicts a contrast between beauty and ugliness, entirely reflective of elements of his life that were both beautiful and ugly in his birth country. This simultaneous revulsion and attraction he feels indicates his complex relationship with India.

The setting of the poem transitions to England, and although the speaker migrates for a new beginning, he despairs at the still-powerful sense of isolation. His description of life in England as "an infant's trip where many knew to walk" represents his frustration at his own inexperience and vulnerability in contrast to others who were accustomed to the rhythm of life. The verb choice of him "stumbling dumbly", indicates that his lack of control is creating an exasperated sense of helplessness. His recounting of the humdrum rhythm of life and having to learn the "literature, drink, talk, talk, talk", emphasises his view that these activities were a "waste of breath" and suggests his existential angst. Moraes uses pathetic fallacy here to highlight his sense of despair: the gloom of the "English rain" is reflective of his bleak and desolate outlook on life. Interestingly, the cold English rain is the antithesis to the hot Indian sun, and yet he feels comfortable in neither setting. This represents his inability to find the comfort and solace of home in either England or India.

The image of the "English Valleys" which are "full of death" being "too wild and too walled" suggests he is both too restrained and too uncontrolled. The binary opposition between freedom and restraint again reflects his sense of

unhappiness at living in either extreme. These valleys also metaphorically represent the setting in which he explores England's "literature, drink, talk". This setting holds the propensity for his self-destruction, as he is both encouraged by excessive freedom to explore these English customs, while being limited by the need to conform. These oppositions heighten his despair in England.

A turning point in the poem, is when the speaker begins to find solace in the advice of an older poet. This poet, with his "conversation like an avalanche" suggests that the poet persona is bombarded with information, by his exotic mentor, made garrulous because of his consumption of alcohol. The mentor is described as a "tuskless elephant" indicating that he is large and imposing, but past his prime, now a "wrinkled and heaving dying poet". On the advice of the poet, he looks for love, which turns into heartbreak. From this point onwards, his constant search for love and lust becomes a repetitive motif – there is a lacuna in his life, which he is trying to fill with love.

The tone of celebration of his "first love" is immediately contrasted by his disillusionment when the love does not flourish. As a result, he "staggers through bars as a drunken king" which represents a reversion to a dissolute life without boundaries. The metaphor of "naked valleys shaken with alarms" represent warnings that he was headed down the path of self-destruction. The word "naked" also conjures the image of sexual encounters afforded by his boundless freedom. It seems that during these encounters the speaker is disturbed by humdrum aspects of the real world that impinge on his pleasure, represented by the sound of the physical alarm that shakes him out of his libidinous escapades.

However, there is heavy irony attached to the freedom of his overindulgent life. Because of ideas interpellated into him from youth about ideal love and the perfect union, his encounters are entirely restricted by his expectation of what love should be, recalling the idea that his life is both too wild and too walled. As a result, he cannot completely embrace his encounters, and begins to see them as "hawks" and "serpents". These are

predatory, poisonous creatures and symbolise the destruction they would have brought to his life. Sexual encounters, which could be considered liberating to some, can never be satisfying or bring him joy because of his traditional mindset about life, and his attempt to replicate the love he once had with his lover. This also marks a shift in the poem, from a speaker struggling with an overindulgent life, to one who begins to contemplate "the image of his lover in his arms", idealising what seems to be a mythical lover.

As the speaker imagines an "image" of his lover, this conveys immediately to the readers that this lover, was simply a part of his past. There is a silent despair associated with the fact that his "sail was driven to loneliness". Here the extended metaphor of navigation indicates he navigated himself towards loneliness, and sacrificed his relationship by giving up on his love and resorting to various encounters. As a result, the speaker abandons the "westward haven", a symbol for the utopian world and perfect love he yearned for. Instead, he now lives in idealistic memories of the past and what could have been. He now makes a "landfall" in a beautiful, idealistic dream. The image of him settling near a gentle river, where the swan sleeps with "her young under her wings" evokes visual imagery of an Arcadia, where the external world is unthreatening. The gentle river has connotations of clarity and innocence, while the image of the swan is strongly associated with eternal love, domesticity and wedded bliss. As a result, by the end of the poem, the poet's despair finally shifts to begrudging but peaceful resignation. He finally accepts a life where he can only experience this love as an idealistic dream. With this conclusion to the poem, Moraes conveys the power of despair to the reader, both as a catalyst for change and for the acceptance of a new reality.

Conclusion:

The prominence of despair in Moraes's poetry is unsurprising. In the words of Stephen Spender, he was victim of "a traumatic childhood" and adulthood, "caught between their English language and culture". Beleaguered by the lack of an identity, any man would be driven to despair, and

this is strongly reflected in his poetry. However, the modernist melancholia that he depicts is multifaceted: "Absences" and "A Letter", portray anguish as an essential element in the natural order of life, paving the way for renewal and the emergence of hope. Contrastingly, "After Hours" The General" poems are entirely nihilistic, prompting the readers to feel the same sense of anguished desolation.

The dichotomies between various experiences of despair presented in his poetry suggest that though Moraes was expressing the Weltanschauung of his era in his poetry, he managed to imbue the despair in his poems with shades of grey. Almost imperceptibly, ideas from Hindu philosophy of regrowth, regeneration, and the cycle of destruction followed by renewal, creep in, allowing his poems to be more than a purely dismal explorations of the "ambivalence, experience of dislocation, and feelings of fragmentation in the face of an unacknowledged, cognitively inaccessible

loss"^{xi}. So Moraes's portrayal of despair "contravenes easy resolutions" and "operates as both a propeller and a sustainer of the modernist project."^{xi} Moraes's modernistic poetry, tinged with ideas from Hindu philosophy, combines the predilections of his age with a philosophy that counters despair and provides hope and faith, by presenting despair as both a universal part of life and a multidimensional entity.

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