

## SHORT STORY

SHEILA DHAR

I could never have believed that at the ripe age of forty-five I would fall in love with the tone of a harmonium. I had considered the instrument an abomination throughout my life and was not at all prepared for what happened to me one wet evening at the Alternative Museum in New York. My life had suddenly cut me off from Indian music and I was so starved of it that anything that could even remotely remind me of my lost world was welcome. I saw in the newspapers that a Baul singer was to perform at a small centre for experimental art. Even though this was not my kind of music, I hungrily made my way to the address given in the New York Times in the hope that I would at least hear some healing sounds.

It was impossible for anyone or anything to be unobtrusive in the space to which I was led by unconventional ushers. Everyone present was an original, in their own fiercely individual ways. Funky music addicts with blue-dyed hair, clean-shaven Buddhist monks of European extraction, nostalgic Asians like myself, and regular, curious metropolitan young people interested in 'happenings' mingled self-consciously with one another as they found places to sit, squat or perch. The walls were plastered with the lurid art of over-confident young rebels which the organization obviously supported. I could not help thinking that it would be difficult to have traditional Indian concerts here, because the paintings were of the screaming variety and would have clashed hopelessly with the mood of almost any raga I could think of. The room was thick with human vibrations and I wondered with motherly concern how the simple Baul singer from Bangladesh would fare.

I need not have worried. The Baul was quite at home. In fact, he seemed to be carrying his home with him in his mind and confidently expected his audience to share it. The first plaintive cry of his hoarse voice was so convincing that everyone was transported. The instruments followed suit. The ill-tuned drums began to rumble happily,

and the strings twanged and rasped to a compulsive rhythm. It was hypnotic but disturbingly off-key. I consoled myself with the thought that at least the atmosphere was close to what I was longing for, even though there was nothing to soothe my ear. Just then, a disheveled member of the Baul's party returned from the washroom, smiled uncertainly and casually took his place behind a waiting harmonium. He ran his cadaverous fingers over the keys of the instrument. The melody that emerged took my breath away. It was the most tuneful, beautiful sound I had heard for months. Certainly I had never come across a harmonium that could hold its own like this. The double reeds were perfectly tuned, the tone was like velvet, and the silent breath had incredible range. Undoubtedly the creation of a master craftsman, I thought. The relief from the earlier sounds was overwhelming. I was so grateful to the wielder of this magic box that I rushed to congratulate him at the end of the evening. I was also curious about the instrument-maker whose skill had given me so much unexpected pleasure; but to my amazement the player seemed quite unaware of the quality of what he had just played. 'The *baja* is not ours. We have borrowed it from him', he said, pointing to a slightly flabby, clean-shaven man in his early forties. Owning and cherishing an instrument like this had so many implications that I just had to meet the real owner. He was bound to be an extraordinarily musical person, exactly like the kind of friend I needed just then. I asked to be led to him forthwith.

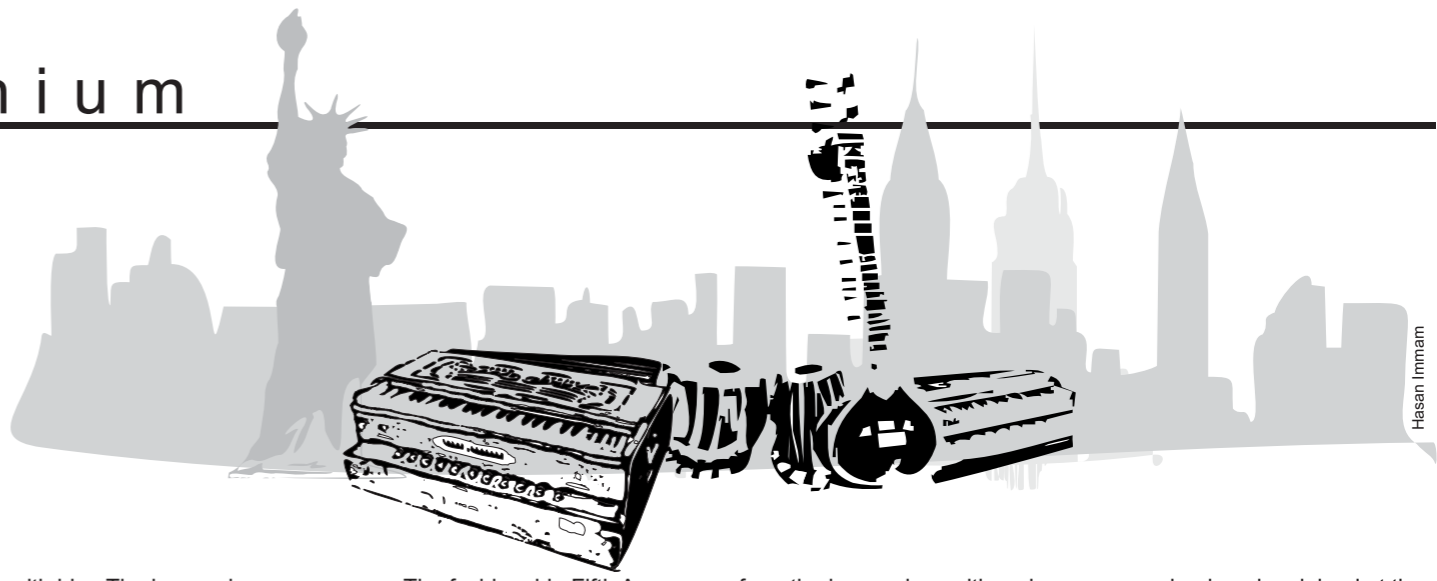
When I was facing him, I introduced myself, first in English, and then, encouraged by his polite and authentic 'ji', I slipped comfortably into Hindustani. He was much younger than I, and was deferential in a way I had become unused to. He was not articulate in English but the *Dilli ka muhavra* I deliberately served up to him evoked a powerful response. He was also from the Old City of Delhi but had not spoken or heard good Urdu for twenty years. For ten years he had lived among

Punjabis in Lahore, and then had escaped to the USA to settle down in Queens in New York. He was yearning for a cultural reconnection with his roots. He told me his name was Shahid Akhtar Khan, and we were soon chatting like long-lost friends. He glowed and blushed when I complimented him on his wonderful harmonium. 'Yes, it is in great demand in the Tri-Square area', he said with that special mixture of modesty and pride that only people from our subcontinent know how to use. The Baul party had returned the harmonium to him by now and it rested on a nearby chair, draped in a laced dark-green velvet cover that looked a hundred years old. He stroked and patted it lovingly as though it were a prize racehorse.

Now it was time for him to say something nice to me. Civilities snowballed, as they often do in oriental settings. Shahid complimented me on my speaking voice and my accent which reminded him of his mother, his favourite aunt, the *mohalla* of Ballimaran that he had grown up in, and everything else that was dear to him. Would I please go on talking to him in Urdu? Would I also please agree to talk to his elder sister on the telephone? She would be very grateful. She was married to a Polish businessman and lived in a state of pathological homesickness in New Jersey, with no relief in sight. I asked Shahid whether he himself was a musician. No, he said, though he had the resources or ability to make the same kind of effort. He told me frankly that the instrument belonged to Afrida Khanum, a celebrated ghazal singer of Pakistan, who was the mother-in-law of a friend of his in Queens. She had not been able to carry it back with her after a concert tour in the States and had left it in the indefinite custody of her son-in-law, to be transported at a future date. The son-in-law was transferred to Atlanta, Georgian, and had left his clutter with his friend. Ten years had passed and nobody seemed to be doing anything about restoring the harmonium to its owner. So far as Shahid was concerned, it was like a stray cat that had sneaked into his house and decided to live

with him. The harmonium was his by default. Even though he was not directly aware of its virtues, its performance as a magic carpet that could fly him almost anywhere slowly convinced him that he had come by a treasure. I had known Shahid for about two months when I got my first chance to perform in New York. A wealthy American patron of Indian dance and music organized an evening for interested people in his large apartment in Manhattan and invited me to give a vocal recital. I accepted and excitedly rang up Shahid. At last I could be on stage along with his fabulous harmonium! Would he accompany me? Yes, yes, of course, there was no question! He would go with me to the ends of the earth! He would take leave from his job, stand on his head, do whatever was needed. It would be an unprecedented honour for him, this *nacheez*, to be associated with my wonderful music. Clearly, it was all settled.

On the appointed evening, he came to our apartment in a flashy maroon car to take me and my large *tanpura* to the scene of action. He was dressed in an impressive Pakistani *shalwar* suit and smelt of musk or something equally overpowering. When I introduced him to my husband and elder son, he was courtly itself. But my family wasn't quite sure how to react, especially since I could not tell them where we were going and for how long. Shahid was taking care of the details and I was quite happy to be in his hands. 'If you are not back by midnight, I'm going to the police', my son stage-whispered fiercely as we left.



Hasan Inam

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The fashionable Fifth Avenue apartment which was our destination had been tuned into a *baithak* fit for an Indian cultural evening. *Diyas* flickered in antique brass lamps. Most of the American guests were turned out in ethnic Indian fabrics, beads and chunky silver jewellery which proclaimed their interest and support. An Indian dancer who lived in New York had brought a huge bowl of *kheer* for afterwards' and smilingly garnished it with red rose petals as she set it on the table meant for refreshments. Shahid and I settled down decorously on the Irani carpet with our instruments. Someone quickly checked the sound system and the recording apparatus. Shahid unveiled the harmonium and rested his fingers on the keys. His eyes were fixed expectantly on my face. At last the moment had come.

I started by singing a long note to introduce the raga. Even before I could hear myself properly, Shahid burst into a volley of applause. 'Wah, wah! *Kya kehne! Kya baat hai, kya awaaz hai!*' he expostulated, startling and mystifying everyone, including me. To things were clear. One, that he had no ear for music, otherwise he would have waited till I had really done something with my voice before exploding like that. Second, his enthusiasm had no connection with my caliber as a singer. He was determined to lionize me for some complicated psycho-cultural reasons of his own that I could not quite fathom. I was nonplussed but plodded on with the recital. At this point I noticed that no sound was emerging

from the harmonium, although Shahid was constantly emitting sounds of appreciation for my efforts from his throat. He concentrated his attention on the smallest whisper I might produce, but his fingers lay inert on the keys. I gestured to him several times to begin playing, but absolutely nothing happened. He did not even know what to do with the bellows. He gestured back helplessly, and to my utter disbelief mouthed the words: 'I don't know how to play', as though this was just a minor detail.

To Shahid, the harmonium was an important object in a serious ritual and he was the designated attendant. He saw nothing incongruous in the situation. Even while I was singing, it came to me in a flash that to him this harmonium was not so much a musical instrument as an insurance against loneliness. Because of it, he was in great demand, and on its wings was regularly able to escape from the dreariness of his suburban American existence. It was his credit card, an entrance ticket to a warmer and friendlier world, a priceless possession which lent him value and eminence. I thought of the accident which had left the harmonium in his care. A strange sympathy for him and his utter ignorance of the ways of the music world welled up in me. However, this cluelessness did not faze him in the least and he continued to greet the smallest musical phrase I uttered with loud cries of appreciation and encouragement, like a fervent spectator at a bull fight. There was no way out of my embarrassment. I could hardly pretend I had nothing to do with him. We

were clearly a duo, joined at the waist so far as the audience was concerned, and the sum total of the sound input that evening was squarely my responsibility.

At last my ordeal ended and the host invited the guests to ask any questions they wished. There were a number of innocuous ones which were neither here nor there. But then came a question that profoundly affected my own understanding of the music I had been practicing for years. An earnest American lady from the Asia Society furrowed her brow with concentration and said in slow, measured tones that she wanted a clarification. 'The gentleman sitting to your left seemed to be saying a lot of things all through the concert. I want to know what it was. Was it a part of the song? Or the music? I must say the gentleman's constant participation didn't sound much like music, but it seemed to fit right in!'

Nothing could have been more true. It set me thinking about some fundamental things. Yes, it was a part of the music in an organic sense, an inalienable part without which the intended communication in Indian music cannot really happen.

Neither Shahid nor the lady from the Asia Society can have any idea of how many doors they accidentally opened for my mind that evening.

Sheila Dhar is a classical singer and the author of *Here's Someone I'd Like You to Meet*. She lives in Delhi.

## Indian Poetry in English: Dom Moraes

KAISER HAQ

Dom Moraes was born at the fag end of the Raj, in 1938–19th July, to be precise—as Dominic Francis Moraes, the only child of Frank and Beryl Moraes. There was an illustrious upper-middle class family, with impressive connections. His father's family was Goan. His grandfather had been an engineer. Dom's father trained as a barrister but had literary interests and became first the literary editor of the *Times of India*, and later its legendary chief editor. His mother's parents were both doctors; his maternal grandmother in fact had the distinction of being the first Indian woman doctor. His mother followed in her parent's footsteps and became a medical practitioner, eventually specializing as a pathologist.

Moraes's two volumes of autobiography, *My Son's Father* (1968) and *Never at Home* (1992), give a vivid account of his life and times. His "parents were one of the bright young couples of Bombay. They gave and attended expensive cocktail parties . . . both drank and smoked." They had a serious side as well, "and, unusual in Indian Christians, held nationalist views. They supported Gandhi and Nehru"; and indeed played an active role in the independence struggle: "the flat was always full of unshaven and furtive young nationalists who had either just emerged from prison or were hiding from the police."

The above atmosphere was a conducive one for the would-be poet and writer. The publication of a short story while still an adolescent brought Dom Moraes to the attention of his father's writer's friends: Mulik Raj Anand and G. V. Desani, the latter just back from London where his novel *All About H. Hatter* had been praised by Eliot. There were others. As Moraes wrote:

(W. H.) Auden and (Stephen) Spender flew to Bombay... I went to hear them read, and could not believe it: there they actually were, physically present: Auden with a lined, expressive face, grave and heavy; Spender tall and stooped, with a white cloud of hair and large, intent blue eyes. I had thought of them as very young men, and was surprised: then a new idea of the poet came to me, the poet dedicated, apart, carrying his work on through a lifetime, wrapped in a vatic cloak.

Moraes's book of verses *A Beginning* won the Hawthornden Prize in 1957 while he was at Oxford. He has not won any other international prize, and a pattern seems to suggest itself: Precocity/Early Celebrity/Obscurity. But perhaps that would be too pat. From the early success of *A Beginning* (while Moraes subsequently embarked on a career as a war correspondent; as the editor of magazines in different countries; for the UNO; and on documentary films), through *Poems* (1960), a Poetry Book Society Choice; *John Nobody* (1965); the American selection *Poems 1955-65*, there is some sort of development, albeit unsensational. Then comes an agonizingly long

fallow period, the end of which is marked by a privately printed clutch of eleven poems, aptly titled *Absences* (1983). Slowly, Moraes's creative vitality returns: the *Collective Poems* of 1987 include enough new poems to make a slim collection on their own; *Serendip* (1990) is a sizeable new volume; and the recent *In Cinnamon Shade: New and Selected Poems* (2001) again contains enough new work to make a separate volume. It won the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's highest literary accolade. Moraes the prodigy and Moraes redivivus, then, add up to a substantial poetic career.

After a lifetime spent abroad, principally England, Dom Moraes returned to India in 1979 and now lives there.

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Dom Moraes has not lacked for critics, who argue that he is a *recherché* figure, once promising but ultimately a performer—a fine performer, one has to admit—in a minor key. As witness the brief review of *John Nobody* by Ian Hamilton: Moraes is "a slave to the regular iambic line . . . melodramatising a parody version of the alienated, fiercely Bohemian romantic artist." His poetry suffers from "the tepid adjective, the unrelenting rhyme-scheme, the over-all tendency of his language to seek out a level of polished anonymity and rest there" (*The London Magazine*, October 1965).

In India, Moraes's very English prosodic finesse and tone is generally regarded as foreign, a view expressed even by his early mentor Ezekiel, who wrote that while Moraes's *Collected Poems* is an "impressive collection" from which "much may be learnt . . . about the art," yet "It may be argued that Dom has nothing special to offer those Indians who use English for creative purposes. He writes like an English poet, and does not reflect any significant aspect of Indian life. There are allusions to his life in India but they are personal, with no social and cultural implications."

Ezekiel has a point there, but one could argue that it needs to be taken with a grain of salt, for young Indian poets like Jeet Thayil and Vijay Nambisan have been helped in learning the craft of verse by Moraes's example.

Perhaps it's best to approach Moraes as an individual talent whoshould not be seen in the context of any group or national tradition. He is an interesting loner who defies fashionable labels like postcolonial or postmodern. As the early "Autobiography," in *A Beginning*, has it:

I have grown up, I think, to live alone  
To keep my old illusions, sometimes dream,  
Glumly, that I am unloved and forlorn,  
Run away from strangers, often seem  
Unreal to myself in the pulpy warmth of a sunbeam.  
I have grown up, hand on the primal bone,  
Making the poem, taking the word from the stream,  
Fighting the sand for speech, fighting the stone.

The romantic stance, the rapid progress of images, the smooth polish of the verse, make up the Moraes hallmark.

Later, a breakthrough occurs in "Letter to My Mother," with its short lines of two or three stresses and its few scattered and inconspicuous rhymes. The tone is frankly confessional, the subject is the primal hurt in the poet's psyche, caused by his mother's prolonged mental ailment:

I address you only,  
My lonely mother.

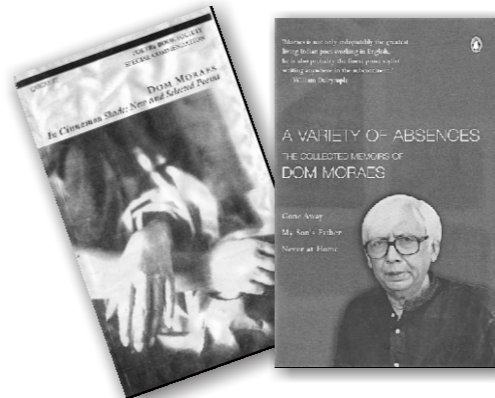
You do not understand me.  
I am tidying my life  
In this cold, tidy country.  
I am filling a small shelf  
With my books. If you should find me crying  
As often when I was a child  
You will know I have reason to.  
I am ashamed of myself  
Since I was ashamed of you.

The second section of the poem extends the view to take in the entire subcontinent. The speaker does not deny his umbilical connection with the land, even though he has exiled himself from it:

You eyes are like mine.  
When I last looked in them  
I saw my whole country.  
A defeated dream  
Hiding itself in prayers,  
A population of corpses,  
Of burnt bodies that cluttered  
The slow, deep rivers,  
Of Bodies stowed into earth  
Quickly before they stank  
Or cooked by the sun for vultures  
On a marble tower.

Here, at least, Moraes escapes Ezekiel's charge that he is without any larger cultural resonance. Here, and increasingly in his later poems, Moraes also escapes Hamilton's charge of formal conventionality.

It is no doubt a delicious irony that Moraes, who once believed he was English and has always written with an English accent, so to speak, should eventually find his literary niche in the context of the Indian subcontinent. His position in the canon of Indian poetry in English is secure, alongside Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Kolkatar, Parthasarathy, Kamala Das (now Surajai), Mehrotra, Vikram Seth, Agha Shahid Ali. Whatever caveats one might have, whether about his Un-Indian/English traits or his lack of a sense of belonging vis-a-vis India, the fact remains that the bulk of his readership is Indian. More importantly, as an influence on promising young poets, he rivals figures like Ezekiel and Mahapatra.



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## Meetings in Mumbai

On Sundays, usually, I find my ghost, bedraggled and unshaven, by my bed. Over black coffee, evenly scarred toast, we share the papers, but we do not speak. All conversation now would be grotesque. He clings like wet cloth, will not disappear. It's not my fault that he's become so weak, his dreadlocks white, his face in disrepair. Mirrors provide no help, take me to task. With bloodstained eyeballs he accuses me. When we left London he mistaid his mask, and, some days after that, his poetry.

Weeping, my shadow brother will not tell from where or for what reason he has come. He searched out coffins with no compromise, and tried, before his due time, to reach hell. The brittle framework that contained his eyes Ffell down through small erosive sips of rum. He's forced to wear his face, and when it cries it twitches, a wet snail pulled from its shell, or the spilled entrail of a butchered saint. Him my ghost envies, once left in the lurch by god and friends, but still preserved in paint on the drab wall of some suburban church.

A child's rhyme told his history all the while: the crooked mile he walked to where he is; the crooked sixpence underneath the style. London behind him, and his mask still lost, he floundered in the heat, his wilderness always within him, whom he looked at least.

Now when he looks out, under miles of blue, upon singing tree, shaped like a harp responsive to the wind, the birds accrue. Down arabesques of air they dart and chirp. They're not original in the things they do, but shake him now, because he did them too.

My brother's face leers at me, wornout, wan. My shadow enemy, my ghost who grieves each Sunday for the things he has not done. As his drained mouth explains itself to me, his sentences fall, soundless, like the leaves Swept up in parks, and burnt: like poetry.

(From *Cinnamon Shade: New and Selected Poems*, Carcanet Press, Manchester, 2001)