

Theme of Death with special reference to selected English and Arabic poets

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Abstract

Death is one of the universal phenomena. It is not limited to specific people, religion or region. It is a mystery and problem for all the people. This is why all the people have been talking about it since ever. There is universality in the thinking of the people about it and it is something quite natural.

Although with a lot of similarity and difference in that thinking one thing is quite clear that all these poets have universal approach irrespective of discrepancy based on religion in particular. Only a mystic poet will look at it from religious point of view but others will have a secular view regarding the topic under discussion.

It could be easily that all these poets have universality as well as individuality while dealing with the theme of death. Sometimes they express feeling which are not only common between them but can be termed as universal feeling hence giving the impression that all human beings think more or less the same about death. This universality nevertheless, is expressed in the most beautiful individual style of expression which lends a literary beauty to both the poets.

We furthermore, need to explore more ideas and feeling which are common among poets belonging to different cultures, backgrounds, different religions so that world peace may travel a step further.

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1. Introduction

“The mystery of death—whether one imagines it as a great nothingness, a transformation to another state, or a prelude to the next incarnation—has inspired poets to some of their most profound meditations”¹. Death is a great inspirational force yet at the same time it is a mystery as well because through it man is stimulated to utilize the life granted to him. While at the same time its reality has always eluded man and in many ways it has been beyond man’s comprehension. As says Pegg Patricia “Mystery, fascination and anxiety about death has been with man since his first awareness of its reality for him”.²

Death is in fact one of the biggest mysteries, questions and problems for human beings. Apparently it is so simple to say that whoever lives must die one day but as a matter of fact this is not as simple a phenomenon as this simple statement implies. There are so many questions associated with the apparently so simple but actually being the most bitter reality of life. Everyone knows that he to dies but at the same time he is curious to know what after death is. What will happen to him when one is dead? If one ultimately has to die then why then his is born? Is death the ultimate destination or end of one’s life or is it only a matter of transference from one world to another one and from one phase of life into yet another phase of it? These and so many other questions are there which strike every thinking and sensible person at one or other stage of life. Philosophers, thinkers, writers, poets, and even common people have been discussing death ever since the dawn of self-consciousness in man. They have discussed the matter so much so that one will hardly find any literature in any part of the world written in any language and by people belonging to any school of thought that has not discussed death from one or the another point of view.

Death is in fact one of the universal themes and phenomena. Each and every person is bound to confront it irrespective of any sort of religious creed or ethnic affiliation. It has taken Adam, the first man on earth, into its iron grip and eternal possession, and since then it has been taking away all living things one by one. But the paradox is that the “wisest creature” has totally been unable to probe into and reveal the reality of death, because once you experience it, you no longer there to reveal its mysteries to others.³

Life and Death brings together philosophical and literary works representing the many ways—metaphysical, scientific, analytic, phenomenological, literary—in which philosophers and others have reflected on questions about life and death.⁴ Neither scientists nor philosophers nor poets have succeeded to resolve the mystery of death. Scientists have tried to explain it in term of something concrete and

observable and to give biological explanation thereof, but they have failed to grasp it yet. On the other hand, artists in general and poets in particular have given vent to their flight of imagination, their intense feelings and sensibilities about things around but they also could not come up with some solid results save something that is based on pure guess work.

There are poets who have imagined death taking it sometimes as a friend and yet on another occasion the greatest foe of man. Some say that death is a source of relief from the worries of this world and some oppose them saying that death is the cruel things that deprives man off the joys and pleasure of the world and this glittering life.

In short, this discussion has been going on since ever and will go on forever. In the current research article we will have a comparative thematic study of the theme of death from selected English and Arabic poets and try to understand as to what they think and say about death. The current paper also aims at looking into the universality of the theme as has been earlier stated and try to reach a conclusion or draw attention of the reader to the point that death is something which needs to be studied more and more in order to have life which is more safe and pleasurable by understanding others views of death, which as and end at least to this earthly life. This will enhance the capacity of world peace by convincing people who enjoy ending the lives of others by throwing them into deep and dark valleys of death for mere satisfaction of their inner and vicious wishes and to prove their superiority over others and to subjugate them. This juxtaposing of the views of poets who belong to different parts, cast, religions and civilizations of the world is hoped to be source of understanding others and resultantly by giving others room to live and lead life of their choice. A comparative study of their theme of death is an interesting field that requires research and analysis. There are many points of similarities and differences between these poets. We have the obvious difference that these poets belonged to different cultures, societies and times. But at the same time being poets possessing high power of imagination and expression we see that in their treatment of the theme of death there is an individuality as well as universality.

In this paper we would carry out thematic analysis of the following poets from different identities:

1. Emily Dickinson
2. Taufiq Rafat
3. Ahmad Shooqi
4. Muslim Bin walid
5. Hafiz Ibrahim

We will compare and contrast views and the way they express these views in their poetry. To start with we will discuss Emily Dickinson, a native

poet of English followed by the poetry of Taufiq Rafat who although is not native English speakers but scribbles poetry in English. After this, we will discuss two of the most prominent Arab poets in order to have a broader view of all these poets on the topic under discussion.

The issue of gender plays a major role in the development of theme of death with different poets round the world. For although they reflect the emotion from their individual point of view, when we compare Dickinson and the male poets we have selected, we are at once struck by the significance gender places in the treatment of the theme of death in their poetry. Dickinson's approach is purely feminine. She has all the timidity and hesitation of a female living a sheltered and cloistered life. While the approach of majority of male poets is that of warrior who at first is not ready to accept its reality and when he does so, he faces it with blind courage and bravery.

Dickinson who belonged to the school of existentialism is more concerned with the process of death. Although she refers to immortality and eternity, her interest is fixed upon how it is to die. She appears not to delve into the mystery of eternity and immortality. That is left for male poets whom we have included and selected for the current study of the paper who have no problem in investigating through his rich imagination the world of eternity of which he is convinced is filled with the colour of love.

THEME OF DEATH IN EMILY DICKINSON

The obsession with death and its physical manifestation is a central feature of Dickinson's poetry. She is known as a poet of death because death is one of the major themes around which almost 600 of her poems revolve. The complexity is added to the theme in its variety. Sometimes she philosophies death and seems to be unable to resolve its riddle and mystery. She tries her level best to give meaning to Circumference, the farthest limit of what can be humanly known, in this case, about the meaning of death but on other occasions the same thing seems to be so simple for her and she describes it in a very simple and plain words as she does in her poem "I like the look of agony".⁵ On occasions, she asks the reader to accept the fiction that she is already dead and that she is speaking from the world hereafter to share her experience with the readers (I heard a fly buzz when I died;) and sometime she draws sketches of some dying person which is based purely on her minute observation (I've

seen a Dying Eye). Other times there is an imaginative deathbed scene in which she shows her own moments of dying (I felt a Funeral, in my Brain) and on the other hand there are poems in which she imagines someone else's dying moments and then reports those last feelings of the dying person to the reader (A Dying Tiger—moaned for Drink—).

In the following pages the researcher will be critically analyzing her different approaches or styles in her treatment of this theme. But in the very beginning it seems pertinent to mention that it is not an easy task to summarize this topic particularly when her personal history is of an unsocial person who spent her life in confinement and it was only posthumously that she was discovered as a great poet. This further adds to the complexity of analyzing her poetic themes of death and eternity. Mentioning this same complexity Wendy says:

Dickinson poems require the closest textual attention. They can't easily be cited as evidence in an arrangement, since closer textual work almost always uncovers further readings and implications not easily resolved or subsumed into a summary statement. (Martin, 2002, p. 130)

Commenting further upon the difficulties and paradoxes of her poetry the same writers says:

Dickinson text, as here, both say and unsay, claim and disclaim, desire and decline, offer and retreat and deny, gain and lose, define and circumvent definition.⁶

“Exultation is the going” is one of her famous poems. In this definition poem she considers the sea as a place and source of Eternity. Death and eternity have been her favorite themes throughout her poetry. In the poem under discussion she takes us on an imaginative journey of the inward soul to the sea so as to experience eternity. Once the soul passes the headland, eternity starts. But she also makes it clear that the sailors who daily experience this “Divine intoxication” cannot feel this great experience as they are now habitual to it. Only those can feel it for whom this is a new experience.

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses—past the headlands—
Into deep Eternity—
Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication

Of the first league out from land? ⁷

It is notable that there is no lyrical or typical “I” which Dickinson uses more often than not, but she is clearly talking about her own soul which has been deprived of experiencing the sea. This lack of experience is what interests her because depravity of this gives a real urge and joy. For her sea is like being in eternal life. The vastness of sea and its dominating fascination makes the poet take sea as a source and manifestation of eternity. Good moments are enjoyable for those who never have them. If one has them then they lose their charm for they (good moments) become a part of ordinary routine for such people. She writes:

Success is counted sweetest

By those who ne'er succeed.⁸

This lack of understanding and inability to resolve the riddle of death and eternity and drawing any final result and conclusion keeps taunting and pinching her throughout her life and her poetry is thereforlite full of different sorts of imaginative experiences and minute observations about death.

“I like the look of agony” is one of those poems in which she takes death not as some intricate philosophy but as a very simple transitional process from life to death. In this poem she tells us in very simple and plain words what death is? The poem starts with a beautiful attractive sentence which shocks the reader in the first reading. But as the poem progresses , this little shock changes into pleasuring surprise of truth conveyed in the beauty of poetic technique. The poem begins with:

I like the look of agony

But the second line clears it by explaining that she likes agony not because she is a masochist but because in agony one displays one’s genuine feeling. In agony one can hardly pretend the agony makes one real and exhibit one’s real character and true personality. So it is best opportunity to judge someone.

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe—

The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign⁹

It is in this state of agony, pain and anguish that the speaker observes dying person and then reports. Dismissing all sorts of intricacies aside, she says that there is no great philosophy involved in dying. It is just a matter of:

The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
In this poem she portrays death as an extreme experience of pain and suffering in which one does not feign. Commenting on the poem Sharon Leiter says.

Dickinson, whose poetry was driven by the need to understand death and its aftermath, seems to be saying: Here is a simple way of knowing what death is, without any way of being deceived.¹⁰

“I have never seen a dying Eye” is one of those poems in which Dickinson plays the role of an observer of a dying person. Here she does not depend on sheer imagination. Through her imagination she creates a scene of a Dying Eye and then reports it. In the beginning the eye is desperately looking and searching for some unknown subject. But as the movement passes her resulted search ends at failure as it dims and is finally “soldered down”. The poems proceeds like this:

I've seen a Dying Eye
Run round and round a Room—
In search of Something—as it seemed—
Then Cloudier become—
And then—obscure with Fog—
And then—be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be¹¹

The poem is a fine combination of movement and mystery. In the beginning there is movement and towards the end this movement ends into unresolved mystery. In the beginning we see that the Eye is eagerly moving in search of some unknown thing but we can clearly feel the tension and anxiety in this movement. It is not the normal search of an eye. But the end result of this desperate search is nothing more than a failure of the speaker. The speaker fails to realize and understand what

she is aiming at i.e. Death. The eye was searching for the reality of death to disclose its mystery but ultimately it failed to disclose anything.

There is another noticeable thing in this poem and that is we do not detect any connection between the two characters of the poem i.e. the dying one and the speaker. There is no communication between the two so ultimately the speaker fails to gather what she wants to know i.e. what it is like to die. The dying person could not communicate his experience to the poet.

“A Dying Tiger” is one of those poems in which Dickinson tries to resolve the Death riddle through her observation. But this differs from others in a sense that the deathbed scene is somewhere in the desert and the dying one is not a human being but a mighty masculine beast; the tiger. The poet tries her level best to save him by bringing him the available dripping water from the rock but all in vain.

A Dying Tiger—moaned for Drink—
I hunted all the Sand—
I caught the Dripping of a Rock
And bore it in my Hand—

His Mighty Balls—in death were thick—
But searching—I could see
A Vision on the Retina
Of Water—and of me—

'Twas not my blame—who sped too slow—
'Twas not his blame—who died
While I was reaching him—
But 'twas—the fact that He was dead—¹²

It is very interesting to study the two character of the poem. In the first stanza both the characters are separated from each other. One is dying and the other is trying to save him. But in the 2nd stanza both came together as the speaker can clearly see the dead “Mighty Balls” searching for water and the rescuer. The 3rd stanza is very important in which Dickinson concludes by saying that it is neither her fault who “sped too slow” nor is it fault of the tiger who dies. But she puts the blame on the fact that he is “dead”, “But 'twas—the fact that He was dead—”. In this poem again the speaker concludes on an uncertain note by saying that he died only because he is dead and none can be held responsible for it nor can there be any reason offered. The bitter reality is that death has overtaken the tiger. Excuses and reasons are no more valid.

And finally, she is no more afraid of death and accepts it as a bitter reality and according to her, when there is no escape from it then why not to get ready for it and why be afraid and apply coward tactics. She says:

A toad can die of light!
Death is the common right
Of toads and men,--
Of earl and midge
The privilege.
Why swagger then?
The gnat's supremacy
Is large as thine.

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Death peotr of Taufiq Rafat

Taufiq Rafat is a Pakistani poet who scribbles poetry in English language. In his life he remained paralyzed for almost three years and although he dint die out of it but nonetheless this period was not less than death for him. During those three long years he could feel and observe things but could not express them and one can imagine how strong feeling of a poet could be who has been thronged into a host of feelings but has been unable to share the with the world. He has expressed his strong feeling about death many poems but the following tow poems are most startling ones and we will confine ourselves to the study of these two poems only. The poems are:

1. Mr. Nachiketa
2. Reflection

The latter one is a very long poem which he wrote immediately after he recovered from paralysis and it carries very strong feelings. While in his "Mr. Nachiketa" he creates a dramatic sort of situation. It is a narrative poem in which there are four characters. The poem opens with description of the father of Mr. Nachiketa. Though he is the character who unconsciously opens the discussion about death ye he plays no important role in the latter part of the poem. In the beginning of the poem, the father gives impetus to his son to search for death by saying " I give you to death "

”¹⁴

The point here is that no father in the world asks his son to go and search for death but it seems as if we all were asking our dear ones to go and search for death though wer are not conscious of it because whoever is born has to die. It was not as a matter of fact all of a sudden that the father has asked his son to go to look for death. It actually was the son who was

asking for it. He was insisently asking his father that “to whom do you give me”¹⁵

In the third stanza of the poem, Mr. Nachiketa goes out in search of death. He searches it in mountains, swamps, lands, jungles and deserts but concludes that “there was no sign of death”¹⁶

Here Taufiq Rafat wants to tell us that death is not something which is present there in deserted place. The paradox as depicted by the poet is that death resides in cities and societies of living people but it turns places lived- in into deserted ones. And the same stanza, Mr. Nachiketa comes across mendicants and sadhus, the people who are disinterested in life and in this world, but these people also could tell him only about life but not death.

“they could tell me something of life

But nothing of death”¹⁷

In the forth stanza when Mr. Nachiketa

“tired, hungry, and discouraged,

Comes back to the village”

He suddenly feels that

“the places was familiar, and strange

It looked lived in and deserted”

It was the time when he noticed that “this is the house of death”.¹⁸

Here he met the third character of the poem, the servant of death. Mr. Nachiketa had a long conversation with the servant of death about death and his reality. Even the servant of death could not tell him where his master was. He could only tell that

“There will be nothing there

Nothing before, and nothing after

Nothing, nothing at all”.¹⁹

Ideas of Taufiq Rafat about death that we gather from his poetry can be summarized as following:

1. Death does not reside in jungles or deserted places but in lived-in places. It is there with each and every person but people are not wise enough to feel this.
2. Death is certain to come, every person knows this much. But where, when and how it will come, nobody knows. Even the servant of death himself doesn't know this.

Theme of death in the Arabic poetry

Arabic is among the oldest languages of the world. It is still very much current in large part of the world, not only for day – to- day usages but also for literary one. No doubt, that very few literatures in the world can compete with and reach the height Arabic language and literature have attained.²⁰

Out of generas of literature, it is poetry that has been and still is the most popular form of literature among Arabs. So much so that almost every single person, be literate or illiterate, was a poet in the pre and post Islamic era of Arab history.²¹ Among the most important themes of Arabic poetry are love, war, death, and national and tribal pride.

These four major these actually reflect a fairly big portion of tribal life in that part of the world where it has been very difficult to live a life of comfort and order as it is now possible. Besides all the other themes including religious one, they preferable focused on the four above mentioned themes and scribbles much poetry round them.

As far the theme of death is concerned, though, they dealt with it a lot yet they did not discuss it philosophically. No doubt, there is some philosophy in it, but their treatment of death is very simple, practical and less philosophical. Elegy being very popular form of poetry among the Arabs and one cannot have sufficient understanding of their treatment of the theme of death without going through these elegies. One can hardly find death poetry in general.

In the followings, we do not follow the pattern of selecting two Arab poets and discussing them with reference to the theme of death as we did in the first part of the paper by selecting two poets of English

language. This we did because we wanted not to miss so many poets who have written beautifully and marvelously on the said theme. So, we will discuss theme of death with general reference to Arab poets rather than two specific poets.

One of the greatest names of Arabic poetry is احمد شوقي who says that:

خلقنا للحياة وللممات

ومن هذين كل الكائنات
ومن يولد يعيش ويمت كان لم

يمر خياله با لكائينات²²

We are born for life and death.

It is out of these two that emerges all the phenomena of the world.

And whosoever lives, dies

As if his shadow didn't pass by this world.²³

In this quartet the poet very beautifully describes the whole process of the world in terms of life and death. Sigmund Freud says that sex is the cause of our each action but according to the poet it is life and death, the two events that are responsible for any other event or happening in this world. And whosoever is born, is destined to death. The in-between time is so limited that he cannot enjoy the beauty of the world.

The poet at another occasion expresses the feelings that death is a must and one cannot escape it but also calls it cruel when he says that:

كأس المنية في يد
عسرا ما منها فرار²⁴

The cup of or glass of death is in a harsh hand

From which there is no escape²⁵

According to him, it does not bring man any comfort, pleasure or security. It rather comes from the hand that is harsh and cruel and is very much dominant and powerful to an extent that not even a single person has the chance to escape it. This shows the weakness and frailty of man in front of death.

In his yet another verse, he depicts and explains life in a more biological manner when he says that:

وما العيش الا في ظل روحه
ولا الموت الا الروح فارقت الجسم²⁶

Life is nothing more than that the body under the shadow of soul

And death is nothing save this soul parting with body and leaving it for good.²⁷

This he says while lamenting the death of his mother. He gives a scientific description of what both life and death are. While dealing with life and death, he gives importance and preference over body. Though a common or a layman does not feel any problem with soul but to the poet it is the soul in the body which poses life or death. With one's soul in one's body one will be alive, but if soul travels away, the living person turns into a dead person. In *عيون الاخبار*, a book on Arabic poetry and wisdom, a short poem by Muslim Bin Waleed says that:

كم رأينا من أناس هلكوا
وبكوا احبايهم ثم بكوا
تركوا الدنيا لمن بعدهم
ودهم لو قدموا ما تركوا
كم رأينا من لكوك سوقة
ورأينا سوقة قد ملكوا
قلب الدهر عليهم وركا
فاستداروا حيث دار لفلكى²⁸

How many people we have seen dying and their fellows

Weep over them again and again

They left this world for generation to come

And we have seen many a kings becoming men-in- the streets

And the bizarre people becoming kings.

The world has turned its back against them

So now they rotate where the wheel of time rotates.²⁹

Another great Arab poet Ibrahim says that:

بالله ربك كم بيت مررت به
قد كان يعمر بالذات والطرب
طارت عقاب المنايا في سقائفه
فصار من بعدها للويل والحرب³⁰

By God they Lord, how many houses I have passed by which

Were built with great pleasure and joy

Above their roofs now fly Eagles of death

After death overtook, these houses became the shadow of curse
destruction³¹

In this quartet the poet has used the word eagle as a simile for death.
This is quite significant. To the Arabs, eagle is a very important bird which
doesn't miss its prey and therefore is esteemed among them.

Conclusion

Death is one of the universal phenomena. It is not limited to specific
people, religion or region. It is a mystery and problem for all the people.
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