

Treatment of Death: A Comparative Study of Gitanjali with Death Be Not Proud



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Abstract

Death is the inevitable part of human life. It is not predetermined. It has great power and force. It is unconquerable or invincible. Nobody can show his or her possession on Death. From the beginning of the world, it always remained a roun for all ordinary human beings and the great philosophers. It is still an intangible mystery and will remain same in the future also. Nobody will be able to solve about this mystery. This truth will remain forever behind the curtain. A number of the writers of English literature portrayed the concept of death in their literary works. They all used their own perspective in regard of death. Some writers presented Death in positive sense as; Rabindra Nath Tagore and Emily Dickinson while others presented it with negativity as we find in the works of John Donne and Dylon Thomas. Some writers took it as a medium to unite with God while others portrayed it with its cruelty and callousness. They thought that Death is merciless; it does not show any kind of pity and drives them away from their beloved ones. Rabindra Nath Tagore compares Death with God in his famous work *Gitanjali* and he considers that Death is the only gateway through which he can unite with Almighty or Supreme Soul. In his holy sonnet *Death BeNot Proud* john Donne does not treat Death in a pious manner. Even he does not provide any spiritual attribute to Death. In his sonnet he emphasizes death's powerlessness. Besides these two points of view the aim of the present paper is to show a third point of view of Death through the perspective of modern people. This paper consist three perspectives and shows how they all have their own philosophy in regard of Death.

Keywords: Death, R.N. Tagore, John Donne, Modern People, Powerlessness, Union, Horror, Resistance, medium of union.

Introduction

From the early dawn of civilization, the question of death puzzled everyone. It is a question which creates a kind of curiosity as well as fear in the heart of everyone. It does not only cover the vast area of English literature, but also reigns in the field of religion and philosophy. The process of birth and death is a natural process. Nature is following a cyclic pattern. In this moving pattern sometime it throws the happiness on the shore of life or sometime sorrows. But it is the ultimate end of every human being. Frank and Judith McMohan stated that, "we may have seen death, read about death, or even come close to death, but we may have never died. Thus we face the ultimate unknown, and the fact that our society refuses to admit that death is a natural process."(413)

Tagore, one of the greatest poet of Indian English literature was born on 7th May, 1861in Calcutta. He belongs to a Brahmin family. He was born at that time when India was passing through a number of turmoils and the minds of the people were filled with the squalor of superstitions and orthodoxy. He wrote a number of works as; Sandhya-Sangeet, Katha O Kahani, Manasi, Sonar Tari, Prabhat Sangeet, Gitanjali etc. Among all these works Gitanjali is one of the greatest works of Tagore which published in 1910 in Bengali language. Later it was translated into English language in 1912-13 and it got worldwide fame in Western world. For this work he was awarded with prestigious Nobel Prize of Literature in 1913. In the words of Radha Krishnan, "The poems of Gitanjali are offering of the finite to the infinite."

In most of the poems of Tagore we find death as a central theme. In *Gitanjali* also death is working as a dominating theme. He is very

passionate and yearning for death for it will transport him from this world to the world of Almighty. He died in 1941 and was mourned all the world over. Gandhi called him the 'Great Sentinel' for it was, "as a sentinel that he watched in an age of fading spirituality, the great idea of love, joy and freedom."

John Donne, one of the greatest metaphysical poets of 17th century was born in 1572 in London. He is famous as a poet of love and lyrics. In order to portray love imagery in his poems, he uses conceits and farfetched imagery. His poetry can be divided into two groups- (1) Secular poems, and (2) Divine poems. His sonnet *Death Be Not Proud* is taken from his *Holy Sonnet*, which is a group of 19 sacred sonnets.

Death: Medium of Union in Gitanjali

Death is presented on a grand scale by Tagore in *Gitanjali*. Tagore considers that Death is not the end of life rather it the beginning of new life. In Song LXXXIV, Tagore compares life with a pitcher. As a pitcher is filled again and again with water, in the same way life renews itself through death.

The day is no more, the shadow is upon the earth. It is the time that I go to the stream to fill my pitcher.
(Gitanjali- LXXXIV)

In song LXXXVI, Tagore considers Death as the messenger of God. He says that when this messenger comes to him after crossing the world of eternity or the world of God, he will give him a warm heart welcome. He will embrace him with his folded hands. He will offer to him the best that he has. When Death goes away he will give to him his life and all assets. He will give him everything except one thing that is the soul of the poet. He himself will offer it at the feet of almighty and it will be his last offering to his master.

Death, thy servant, is at my door. He has crossed the unknown sea and brought thy call to my home. The night is dark and my heart is fearful- yet I will take up the lamp, open my gates and bow to him my welcome. It is thy messenger who stands at my door.

I will worship him with folded hands, and with tears. I will worship him placing at his feet the treasure of my heart. He will go back with his errand done, leaving a dark shadow on my morning; and in my desolate home only my forlorn self will remain as my last offering to thee.

(Gitanjali- LXXXVI)

The poet is not afraid to Death rather he is ready to welcome Death. He will treat Death like a guest. He will never allow him to go away with empty handed. He will offer to Death whatever he has earned during his life span on earth. Tagore considers that death also has its own place in life. It is not the negation of life, but it is the gateway through which life completes its rhythm of birth-death-rebirth.

On the day when death will knock at thy door what will thou offer to him?

Oh, I will set before my guest the full vessel of my life- I will never let him go away with empty hands.

All the sweet vintage of all my autumn days and summer nights, all the earning and gleanings of my busy life will I place before him at the close of my days when death will knock at my door. (Gitanjali- XC)

Tagore considers Death as a bridegroom and to himself as a bride. Just as a bride finds the fulfillment in her union with the bridegroom, so also his life will be fulfilled when it will mingle with Death. Poet waits eagerly for his bridegroom death in the same manner as a bride waits for her bridegroom. He thinks that as soon as bridegroom death will come on earth their eyes will exchange a glance and after it he will surrender himself completely to his bridegroom death. He imagines that bridegroom has arrived on earth and there are garland around his neck which were woven already. The wedding ceremony is over and as it is usual that after wedding bride goes with bridegroom. So the poet will go with Death and in this union his life will get complete fulfillment.

O Thou the last fulfillment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me!

Day after day have I kept watch for thee; for thee have I borne the joys and pang of life.

All that I am, that I have, that I hope and all my love have ever flowed towards thee

in depth of secrecy. One final glance from thine eyes and my life will be over thine own.

The flowers have been woven and the garland is ready for bridegroom. After the wedding the bride shall leave her home and meet her lord alone in the solitude of night. (Gitanjali - XCI)

In song XCII, Tagore realizes that Death is the only thing which makes us realize that even the smallest and lowliest have their own value. Tagore compares Death with sea waves and says that as the sea waves has their own constant rhythm of rise and fall, in the same way life also follows this rhythm and sometime casts happiness and sometime sorrow on the shore of life.

hours heave like sea waves casting up pleasures and pains. (Gitanjali - XCII)

In Song C, Tagore says that now he has tired from this tiredness of life. So he is eager to die by entering into the fathomless sea of eternity. In the world of eternity God sits with His majesty and glory.

And now I am eager to die into the deathless. (Gitanjali - C)

Powerlessness of Death in Donne's Sonnet

Donne's sonnet '*Death Be Not Proud*' shows his attitude towards Death. Like Tagore, he does not portray Death as Spiritual human being. He portrays Death as a common person with whom he is talking in a very challenging manner, as it can be seen in the

very first line of the poem where poet warns Death not to be snobbish because some people call Death strong and dreadful. But in reality Death does not possess these qualities. He says that Death may feel pride by thinking that he has defeated those who died. But in reality they do not die.

Death be not proud, though some
have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not
soe,
For, those whom thou think'st, thou
dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst
thou kill me; (Death Be Not Proud; 1-4)

Donne compares Death with the image of sleep and rest. He says that it just gives a kind of rest and sleep to people and they enjoy it. Generally people feel good when they take rest and a good sleep helps them to free from the weariness of life.

From rest band sleepe, which but thy
pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much
more must flow.(Death Be Not
Proud;5-6)

Next Donne says that Death is the slave and fully controlled by fate and kings. He associates Death with poison, war and sickness. It is even inferior to opium and magic spell because these intoxicants can help in providing a better sleep than Death.

Thou art slave to Fate, chance,
kings and desperate men
And dost with poison, warre, and
sickness dwell,
And poppie, or charms can make
us sleepe as well,
And better than thy stroake; why
swell'st thou then?(Death Be Not
proud; 9-12)

In the last two lines of the poem he sums up his idea and says that Death provides a sleep only for little while. After this short sleep human beings awake and live eternally in another world. He shows the powerlessness of the Death when he says that it does not kill to anyone rather it dies itself.

And death shall be no more, Death
thou shall die. (Death Be Not Proud;
14)

Death: Horror to Modern People

Death is a word of terror amid modern people and society in which they live. They fear death in the same manner as a ghost fears in the presence of an enchanter. They know that it is the bitter truth of life but in spite of it they are not ready to accept it. They consider death as a bad omen. They think that it is the symbol of woes which brings all misfortune in their lives. They think that it is a hurdle which prevents them to lead a happy life and it is like darkness in which they lost everything. They do not think that death is the only thing which liberates us from all the pains and problems of life and by swallowing all those pains makes us victorious over woes. They still have the doubt in their mind regarding the existence of God. If they worship God it is only due to the fear. In

their happy days they do not remember God but if any calamity falls on them they begin to blame God and say that there is no divine power in this universe. It can be said that in the modern society the place of reverence has turned into selfish motive.

Generally it is considered that God sends the human beings on earth in order to fulfill some duties but after coming on the earth human beings forget all their responsibilities. In their whole life they remain busy in useless tasks. When the last beautiful moment of death comes they don't enjoy it. They show their resistance against death. They forget that in reality they belong to that place where they go after death. After passing some momentary pleasure on earth it is must to return back to the abode of Almighty. Even the philosophical talks do not impact their mind. If any true devotee of God tries to make them understand that what is happening in this world is right or whatever will happen, it will also be right. They make mockery on this person and say that he is mad or he is living in dream world. But the reality is something different. They do not know that they themselves have become habitual to live in the dream world that's why not able to understand the real world.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the present study is to show a comparative study between two poets how they both have their different perspective in regard of Death. With these two perspectives it also focuses on a third perspective which is shown from the point of view of modern people. This paper focuses on this thing that how the concept of death changed according to the different period of time. Tagore is presenting Death with its God's like attribute. In most of his verses he says that Death is the messenger of God. In his sonnet, John Donne compares Death with a slave. He is talking with death as if it is a human being. Modern people consider that Death is like an interloper which enters in their life and shatters their dreams. They have become too materialistic that they do not want to enjoy the Heavenly Bliss that is God.

Conclusion

Thus, at last it can be said that both poets have their own perspective in regard of death. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore celebrates Death on a grand level. For Tagore Death is God so it is very beautiful, pious and spiritual. Tagore says that Death is the only medium through which humans' souls mingle with their Supreme Soul and achieve eternity. On another hand this paper focuses on Donne's perspective. Donne does not celebrate death on such a grand scale as it is celebrated by Tagore. He says that death is an ordinary human being. It is not as powerful and dreadful as human beings treat it. He compares Death with the passive image of rest and sleep. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore says that when Death will come at his door he will give a pleasant and warm welcome to Death. He will give everything to Death whatever he possesses. But in the sonnet of Donne it can be seen that he is ready to confront Death. He shows his superiority over Death when he says that Death can't kill him. Tagore associates Death with heavenly power while Donne compares Death with slave and intoxications

and this comparison show that for Donne Death is an earthly creature.

In one matter Tagore and Donne are alike and stand on the same platform. Unlike Tagore, Donne also believes in this concept that there is a life after death. They both have the similar thinking that death is not the end of life rather it the gateway through which human souls enter into the world of eternity and enjoy its pleasure.

Now the third point of view which is completely different from the perspective of these two poets because modern people are showing their resistance against death. For Death Tagore is ready to sacrifice everything. Donne is emphasizing only this thing that Death is powerless except it unlike modern people he is not making any resistance against death. All the problems with modern people are for they have become the habitual of this fairy world. This fairy world has derived them very far from this real world. So they consider Death as an interloper which enters

in their life and shatter all their dreams. They discard this fact that death is the only moment which provides us peace. That day modern people will understand the true rhythm of life everything will be as cheerful to them as life including death also.

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