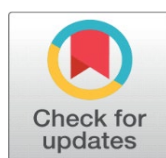


THE TRIUMPH OF EROS OVER THANATOS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF DEATH THEMATICS IN INDIAN ENGLISH WOMEN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Death is an inevitable reality and phenomenon of human life which continues to be a universal concern in literatures across Time and Space. The theme of death has evoked variegated responses from litterateurs ranging from 'rage rage against the dying of light' (Dylan Thomas) to a 'lover's pinch which hurts and is desired' (Shakespeare). It continues to be one of the significant themes in Indian English poetry also, finding expression in pre- and post -independence Indian writings. From Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu to the poets writing today, the poetry of Indian English women poets contains various and variegated literary representations of death .This paper takes up an in-depth study of the theme of death in the contemporary poets. It brings out their philosophy and vision of life vis-a-vis death, and also places them in a comparative international frame.

Keywords: Inevitable, Universal, Variegated Response, Pre and Post-Independence Poetry, Distinctive Vision, Comparative, International, Framework

1. INTRODUCTION

Such are the contemporary living conditions and circumstances that the sword of Damocles is always hanging over head, and humankind is presently face to face with death more relentlessly than ever before. Death is not God-made, but largely man-made now as the new and disturbing ways of death like wars, nuclear weapons and climate crisis threaten the existence of *homosapiens*. The break down of traditional values and beliefs has deprived writers of possible answers or antidotes to the despair of Age and they have turned to death to find the final answer. M.L. Rosenthal opines that "a reader of modern poetry finds death on every page". Modern Indian poets like Nissim Ezekiel, R.K. Parthasarthy, K.D. Katrak A. K. Mehrotra, A.K. Ramanujan, Daruwalla and Pritish Nandy have treated death as a biological or physical phenomenon- a mortgaged stage of energy or a symbol of nothingness. In the contemporary times, it is the man-made and mass-scale death which demeans death and deprives it of its mystical, divine, spiritual and epical grandeur. Contemporary Indian women poets have also variously responded to the phenomenon of death in their writings. They reveal the characteristic treatment of a contemporary writer's response to death, but also express their individual and distinctive viewpoints.

2. REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH IN WOMEN POETRY

These women poets have felt the omnipotence of time, the transience of life and the inevitability of death. All comes within Time's bending sickle's compass, be it body or mind:

Everything that must sag, sags.

Soft flesh that's known no pain

also sags.

(Malavika Sanghvi , 'Growing Old')

Each day takes us closer to death:

We're each dying at the same rate

One day at a time

(Ibid)

Achla Bhatia wants to enjoy all childhood activities like running, laughing, watching rain drops but like Shelley ,she feels 'chained and bowed' by time:

Time changes us all

gyres continue revolving

shadows turn stark dark

and I think of death and you.

('Retrospective')

In her poem 'Each Time' Nasima Aziz regrets : "we are getting worn away/with time and age (*One More* 11). The body parts wear out like on old automobile in Mary Gupta's poem 'Breakdown Service' (*The Circus of Love* 12). Time's power is strongly felt by Sunita Jain in her poem 'Parting':

Time...Time... always its time.

A plane waits at the end of the line.

Short-livedness of human life dismays Sujatha Modayil in her poem 'Life'. Life shines briefly like a 'jewel', reflecting colours of sun and the moon's pure light:

But it grows dim so soon

And is snatched away

And the poet regrets:

Between the first cell

And the last one.

Such a small gulf!

('Between')

Kamala Das laments her premature dessication:

Too early the autumn sights

Have come, too soon my lips

have lost their hunger.

('Summer in Calcutta')

Malavika Sanghvi accepts the limitations of human body:

The body's brief promise

Lets us all down

('Growing Old')

Death is inescapable and invincible, so death- consciousness is a part of human psyche. Even the sweeping passion cannot make Sujatha Modayil oblivious of this one stark reality of life:

And even as we laughed and ran,

Childlike, holding hands,

I saw the trees stand bare,

Saw death would touch us too.

('MinAelskeling')

Death is the only final reality. Lila Ray is well aware of the ultimate end:

*The end was death
The end is always death.*

3. DEATH BY CALAMITIES

Besides natural death, other types of death also afflict the human world. Natural calamities take their toll in the form of mass- ascale deaths. Suniti Namjoshi gives a moving account of the cyclone in Pakistan in 1970; how

*10,000 human beings
were swallowed by sea
in a single day.*

(‘Nov. 1970 Cyclone in Pak’)

Famines and epidemics also cause havoc. Margaret Chatterjee's ‘Famine’ contains a heart-rending picture of the famine-struck Indian landscape in "Bihar" where the ‘scent of death’ is all-pervasive, The sun scourged all - man and the animal world to the point of death. The village people fled to the town but old Rama could not make it and

*The vultures found him soon
In the valley of dry bones*

Due to the unhygienic conditions and lack of medical facilities, epidemics stalk the slums and villages:

*Sheetala small- pox goddess, rode
Her donkey out to Kalighat, slums
Behind her thick as files,
(Rukmini Nair, ‘Ginsberg in Calcutta’)*

4. THE AGONY OF MAN-MADE DEATH

More than natural calamities, it is man-made death which is destroying the modern human world. Wars, riots, chemical disasters and nuclear holocaust have left a trail of death and destruction behind them. Margaret Chatterjee's ‘Calcutta 1970’ and ‘From the Abyss’ are chorus of those who have known destruction and who were destroyed .The people are from Belsen, Paris, Berlin, Buchenwald, Hiroshima, Calcutta, Auschwitz, Troy, Noakhali and the loss is similar as "those who are dead are fathers, brothers, sons" (*Towards the Sun* 11).

The great homicide in the two world wars and loss of life in Indo-Pak wars has greatly hurt the poets:

*Stitching streets with threads of blood
bullets sew our species shroud.
The twitching carcass of the flame-stricken city
festers in pools of people killed without pity
(Lila Ray , ‘In Times of Unbelief and War’)*

Mary Gupta is heavily upset in ‘December 1972’ as Nixon's bombers obliterate Hanoi. Besides war, communal and religious violence also kills people. Sujata Bhatt is sick of "Hindus cutting open/Sikhs and Sikhs cutting open Hindus" (‘3 Nov. 1984’, *Brunizem* 86). Kamala Das knows how religious intolerance and fanaticism leads people to

*disembowel the young ones
And scatter on streets meagre innards.
(‘Inheritance’)*

At times ,the blessings of science also turn out to be curses when disasters like Chernobyl and Bhopal Gas tragedy take place. Sujata Bhatt painfully recalls in "'Wine from Bordeaux":

*In towns near Chernobyl
embryos didn't make it
foetuses didn't make it
(‘Monkey Shadows’)*

Death is also caused by social atrocities and callousness .Women have been the worst victims of such annihilation right from their moment of conception. Christine Gomez regrets that Indians pay tribute to womanhood in theory and in practice “kill the female foetus”. When a girl grows up, her fate in marriage is dreadful as we `proceed to kill our brides’.

For Vijaya Goel in 'Smile Please' the woman's destiny is "to be beaten and burnt". Domestic violence and deaths have become such a commonplace occurrence that even victims do not feel odd:

*When the kerosene was thrown
It was the only choice
She had ever known.*

(Imtiaz Dharker 'Another Woman')

Deaths of women during delivery is another common occurrence and Sujatha Modayil in 'Lines Written in the Hospital' laments that even queens like Mumtaz Mahal- 'light of the world died bearing a fourteenth child'. Vijaya Goel's 'Martyr' sums up the violence and death that befalls women in India:

*No! no invaders needed
for killing Laxmibais
Now we are strong
enough to do so
Now we need only excuses
to poison Meera
each time she is born.*

5. DEATH CONSCIOUSNESS

With so many possible forms of death, it is but natural that death haunts human consciousness to the extent that human beings cannot forget death even while asleep. It has become a part of our collective unconscious:

*Long passage impinged upon baby brain
First fear that haunts again and again
in sleep we face our birth and death*

(Malavika Sanghvi , 'Mute Alphabet')

Gauri Pant is simply obsessed with death:

*With claws in my heart,
Death sleeps under my pillow,
counting each breath,
each moment of my life.*

('Fear')

Sujatha Modayil's third volume *The Attic of Night* reveals the poet's strong haunting death-consciousness. She feels death to be always close at hand: "every inch of the way we have death/beside us" ('The Old' 60)

6. DEATH-A FRIEND AND A FOE

Women poets writing in English in India have portrayed death as both a Friend and a Foe. Monika Varma finds death to be the greatest giver :

*A flail of courage is its gift, courage to look upon
his face and be unafraid and clear,*
('An Answer')

Kamala Das seeks the solace of death:

*Let me lie still
without thought or will
for a benign hour or two
dear night, be my tomb*
('Substitute')

Sujatha Modayil refers to the relief of 'falling petals' in the poem 'Written in the Hospital'. Margaret Chatterjee welcomes death as her last Lover and the 'most persistent' one. This is the final union as here is the "last leap of flame to flame/complete, reciprocal" and for Margaret:

*Who wanted most of all
To be consumed
This last of lovers*

Was the best.

(‘Agni’)

Nilima Wig courts Death in ‘Each Time’: “I have wanted death for each perfect moment lived (*The Distant Echo* 33).

Death is also seen to be a Destroyer of love, life and dreams. It is a tragic waste as a man dies

Holding a thousand dreams,

Vision and longing and despair,

And love like a tender flower

(Sujatha Modayil, ‘Man’s Death’)

The face is stilled in cold silence and the body is shattered. Sujatha Modayil captures the destruction of death in images- Ship wrecked/ against an iceberg/flower scattered in a thousand frail petals.’The poet goes sentimental:

How can we watch without weeping?

How can we live without fearing?

(Ibid)

Death, the killer, brings grief to the entire humankind:

Your hear taches but bears

What my death may bring.

my heart breaks but bears

what your death brings.

(Nasima Aziz , ‘Illness’)

Death is ‘drought’ and life ‘water’ for Kamala Das in ‘Ghanashyam’.Sujatha Modayil laments that death cuts us off from light, love and

All the sources

of our joy

(‘Life’)

Gauri Deshpande has given a detailed treatment to death in her very first poem “Death . For its attempt at concretization of death and the poet’s varied responses to it, the poem can not be left out in a study of theme of death in modern Indian English poetry. Gauri Deshpande believes death to be a relieving force and welcomes it:

I want to see him coming

Scan his face joyously

Await him impatiently

As I would a tardy lover.

(Ibid)

It is also her husband with whom Gauri would walk ‘seven steps that make him my ally’. When the poet comes face to face with death, it turns out to be a benevolent presence:

You are my friend,

My brother who held my hand at every bend,

My lover about whose neck I must fall now

(Ibid, p.3)

Gauri Pant’s ‘Voodoo’ also deserves a separate consideration in a study of the Treatment of Death. It is the reverie of a man on the verge of death , recording his pre-death state of mind. Unknown fear coils around his heart like a serpent and there is a volcanic eruption inside him as all hopes crumble, all desires and wishes melt away:

I see visions of the past, present and future like a

yogi in stance (13)

The poem is remarkable for its expression of the psychology of a dying person.

7. DEATH – AN ENNOBLING AND ELEVATING FORCE

Death has its moralizing impact on human mind and it also brings an understanding of life’s higher truths. In Lakshmi Kannan’s words: “whenever it occurs and takes away people precious to me, it totally shakes me up and then I find a change coming over me, a change in my attitude to people, to time, to the transient present.” Sunita Jain’s father, a virtual terror, realizes his daughter’s potentials only at death-bed: “what my sons were not/my daughter would be”. The poet wonders: *Did imminence of death give, you sight ?*(‘Father’).

Fleeting time and approaching death have an ennobling effect:

*Why waste time over enmities and trivialities when each day
time is the thing that runs out?*
(Nilima Wig , 'The Journey')

Mamta Kalia, in her efforts to live 'life to full' ,aspires for a virtuous life with noble ideals:

Let's forgive all faults and defaults.

Let's shower gifts on love's behalf.

('Before Time Outlives Us')

Kamala Das realizes the futility of body and sex and wants people to know the same:

When I die

Don't throw meat and bones away

But pile them up

And let them tell

By their smell

What life was worth

on this earth

what love was worth

In the end

('A Request')

This realization leads the poet to the rejection of body and bodily hungers:

I throw the bodies out,

I cannot stand their smell.

Only the souls may enter

The vortex of the sea

('The Suicide')

8. IMMORTALITY OF SPIRIT

These poets have also revealed faith in the immortality of life and the philosophy of after-life. Sujatha Modayil is hopeful of hearing the sound of the lover and its echo in the other-life:

I shall hear that sound

It will come back again

And echo in these corridors

and haunt as

in another life

('We the Unreconciled')

For Kamala Das ,the basic hunger of human beings is:

to crumble

to dissolve

and to retain in other things

the potent fragments of oneself.

('Composition')

Her ultimate discovery is:

that we are immortal

...

I must linger on

Trapped in immortality.

(ibid)

Monika Verma finds death to be a way to new life:

Death takes you and breaks you in little

pieces,

*And then hands you over to life,
(‘An Answer’)*

In Sujatha Modayil's 'The Child and Death' a child is entrusted to point out renewal of life through death in his own innocent way:

*I know
What happens
They come back as new
As new he said.*

Death has also been looked upon as a means of salvation. Margaret Chatterjee longs for this last horizon "Beyond which there is no return" (*The Spring and The Spectacle* 31). She clamours for the supreme state of Nirvana, a point beyond which there is no return. Not rebirth but salvation is sought in Nasima Aziz's 'Getting in Deep' as she wants to be 'unborn'. One also feels detachment from life at the final hour. In Rohini Gupta's 'Bhishma', the great soul

*With no more passion than he killed a friend
He lost the last of bondage*

His only regret was that 'ideals died here'. King Parikshit got enlightenment from Saint Shukadeva which brought complete detachment on the eve of his death:

*My time spins out
No hands can calm me
No warm darkness around me
Kill me now.*

9. DEATH -IN-LIFE

A death very peculiar to the modern age is death-in-life. Death has undone not only the crowd flowing over London bridge in Eliot's *The Waste Land* but many more all over the world. Various factors make man experience this state of mind. Problems of job can have a nerve-wrecking impact and Mamta Kalia wants to 'have it all evened up' with her boss. She will make him

*taste the whole of death
gradually
As I tasted it for twenty three years
(‘Tit for Tat’)*

and won't let him die easily or earlier than she died'. For Monika Varma, people *sans* dreams are dead and she would 'avoid the dead/Avoid them whose dreams are dead' (Its' a Ten-o'clock Night', *Gita Govinda and Other Poems* 14). With the kind of life and circumstances where aspirations end in smoke, dust settles on cherished hopes, truth is trampled and corruption goes rampant; 'man dies a slow death' in Achla Bhatia's poem 'Life'. Hospitals have 'death-like roar and odour of death' in Nilima Wig's 'In the Hospital': 'Here we have people with hearts all dead'. Gauri Pant has painted the picture of living dead in her poem 'Psyche':

*I was dead long ago
Long before I was born
with glassy eyes and ghostly smiles
I greeted all.*

The state of lovelessness or frustration in love also brings in the state of death-in-life for these poets. Kamala Das speaks of a state where life and death are indistinguishable. To people heart-broken in love "death brings no loss". After a painful love experience, it is a 'dead face' that Sunita Jain hides in sheet-walls in 'Lord of Life'. Radha feels 'dead to husband's kisses in 'The Maggots' - "what is/it to the corpse if the maggots nip" (*The Descendants* 22). A life away from lover is like death-in-life. Sujatha Modayil has thus captured her experience in 'Love Loss'. Her lover is gone and her

*Feet feel heavy and useless
Dying away, life the rest of me,
She is like one
Who dies of thirst in a desert*

Because you are gone.

And death of a loved one and parting from him gives one a death-like experience:

Saying good-bye to you

Brought back

this old feeling

of earth.

Shovelled

Over the face

Of one who was dear

Or may be

the suffocation

Was my own death.

(‘Suffocation’)

Without the lover, Vijaya Goel leads a listless life:

Now I live devoid of life, like a flower

With no colour or fragrance.

(‘Without You’)

Sujatha Modayil reveals a new outlook upon death-in-life phenomena. This experience is perhaps a preparation for the ultimate human experience:

Life is a kind doctor who gives us death

in small daily doses

When at last, we drink

death's dark wine

we have already tasted its bitterness.

(‘Stones’)

10. TRIUMPH OF EROS

D.W. Harding has pointed out that “It is the final attitude towards the experience of death that has to be evaluated” and the final attitude of the poets is of Survival – the desire to live life to the last leas. Knowing well the transience of life, Sujatha Modayil, instead of feeling disgusted, accepts death as an inevitable reality and calls upon us:

Since this must be

oh , let us live

Today .

(‘Life’)

In fact, both life and death are integral parts of life and go hand-in-hand. Humanity rolls on in the cycle of creation and destruction and both are closely related. It is extinction that makes creation possible. The poet rejoices:

Death comes often here.

But my country lies drenched in sunlight.

And everyday new life is born.

(‘Easter 1966’)

She is not ready for death in ‘A Song of Joy’ and pleads:

Oh speak not to me

Of approaching night

Speak of this rejoicing day.

Death is redeemed by birth of the new and beautiful in Monika Varma's ‘Petal Fall’:

But the scent of roses fills my garden

As the petals fall ... die.

Sunita Jain expresses her desire for life in her poem 'The Month of Bacchanalia'. When Nature is pouring out her beauties, unlike the romantics, the poet courts life, not death :

*Who wants to die
in the month of Bacchanalia?
('Till I Find Myself)*

Vijaya Goel looks at the world with ' a wrinkled face' and wishes

*To live and live
and never to die,
('Desire')*

Lila Ray does not want any living thing to die inside me in her poem 'Alive and Dying'. Monika Varma demands the 'scent of life' from the sun in Autumn Mood. Roshen Alkazi would like to taste the sweetness and sourness of life again and again :

*To lose the breath, cry out in pain
To thrash in helpless frenzied fear
And yet emerge
To plunge again.*

('To Keep the Purity Within')

De Souza speaks about survival in the midst of loneliness in her poems 'Meditation' and 'Advice to Women'. Survival is celebrated in 'Songs of Survival' and she exhorts the readers : " Survive to know you can". Gauri Pant, a death-obsessed poet, lodges a protest against death in her poem 'Desire'. She wishes to warm her 'chilled heart' with love and does not want to leave the world. Sunita Jain, 'locked in the stench of death', requests for more life:

You who breathe through me

Breathe some more

('You Who Breathe through Me')

Mamta Kalia, forgetting all pain and suffering of existence, wants to make a new deal and enjoy a blissful life in 'New Deal':

*Let's live all over again,
Find new contexts with new references.
Let's change our texts.*

All drudgery of life like horrors-in-law, never-enough salary, all bills and even past love-affairs should be forgotten:

*In short, let 's forget
the proverbial thorn
And smell the proverbial rose.*

(ibid)

The armour against death is 'Positive Thinking'. One should not worry about primal disappointments. The poet does not want to live like mice in " I Do Feel National' and would rebel : "*As long as I am made to linger and not live*", (Poems 78 7). Kamala Das ,who has been declared a confessional poet 'for her obsession with death' ,has explicitly declared her love for life:

*I who love
this gift of life more than all
('Summer in Calcutta')*

Sea of death invites her in 'Invitation' : 'End in me', but the poet replies:

*No, I am still young
and need that man for construction and
Destruction. Leave me.*

The poets have their own ways to defeat death. The most effective way is love. Sunita Jain slights death in 'Let Death Be Done': "*To hell with dying*". The way out is thus expressed:

*Come
lips upon lips*

*gently
gather the soft
the greening
life to grips
fluid as life.*

As revealed in her poem 'The Suicide' Kamala Das basically wants to be loved. It is only if love is not to be had that she would want to be 'dead'. One lives in memories also. For Sujatha Modayil, her dear is

*Not dead
But you have found
Peaceful sanctuary
within the deep well
of my being.*

('Sanctuary')

De Souza in 'She and I' feels that her father never died as he was always alive in their minds. Her mother tells her his jokes, stories, likes and dislikes even when she is seventy-eight.

In fact, Death Instinct or *Thanatos* has not found much expression in these poets. Their life-instinct comes as a relief in the world of women, choked and suffocated by the writings and suicides of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Sexton reveals herself to be death-obsessed. She "had to learn/why I would rather/die than love" in a life in which "the world's full of enemies/there's no safe place"(David Hoffman). Plath reveals morbid fascination of self with sado-masochism and ecstasy of destruction in her poems 'Cut, Lady Lazarus' 'The Bee-Meeting', and 'The Arrival of Bee Box'. In Plath, the relationship of women and death is very close. In 'Edge' she exclaims "the woman is perfected only when she's dead" and

*Her dead body
wears
the smile of accomplish
ment*

11. CONCLUSION

Death does not percolate the world of contemporary Indian English women poets like that of Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich, and Indian poets have revealed fascination for life, not death. In these poets, we have no detailed studies or close and living encounters with death. Their response to the theme also differs from their early Indian predecessors. With these moderns, death is not divine, spiritual or esoteric in nature with metaphysical, cosmic or philosophical implications. In their realistic outlook, death is de-spiritualized, de-mythicized and to an extent de-sentimentalized. They have not composed any eulogizing elegies or indulged in highly sentimental mournings. Death has been portrayed as both - a benevolent and a malevolent force but there is no elation or panic. The overall mood is of acceptance of death as a fact of life and the poets are trying to place death in relation to life.

Dr. O.P. Bhatnagar has regretted the lack of anything more than mere stereotyped images of death in Indian poetry in English and asks "Are not there mass deaths by violence, adulteration, social tortures, ritual killing of self-destruction?" Though treatment of death is generally conventional, yet these poets have also explored some new facets of death in their writings. The new tragedy, as Kamala Das puts it, is 'not death but growth' and the poets have expressed a death unique to modern age, i.e., death-in-life. Mass-scale death caused by natural calamities, man-made deaths in wars, riots and social atrocities have been dwelt upon. Women deserve and have been given attention for their unique deaths in Sati, female-foeticide, infanticide, dowry-death and sexual violence. Desire of self-destruction also finds expression, though very rarely. Thus, the poets have brought greater immediacy and urgency to the hackneyed theme of Death. A very important and distinctive aspect of their treatment of death rooted in Indianness is that they consider death as a way to new life. Both death and life are closely correlated in their concept, and death has an ennobling impact on human mind. The unique feature of their writing on death is their final attitude of Survival. They are the inheritors of a legacy that enjoins upon man to "cast off fear of death - live a full life" and they are the descendants of Bhishma, who while he himself lay dying, taught Yudhishthir to live. Instead of being thrown into the abyss of despair over transience of human life, these poets try to find out ways to enrich life with greater significance. In death or death-in-life, Eros triumphs over Thanatos with these poets and they emerge as the celebrants of life:

Before time outlives us
Let us live life to the full.
(Mamta Kalia, 'Before Time Outlives Us')

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None

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