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Emily Dickinson's Perspectives on Death: An Interpretation of Dickinson's Poems on Death.

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A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become —
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun. (816)

Emily Dickinson

Emily Elizabeth¹ Dickinson (1830-1886) has often been pictured as a sensitive but isolated poet. During her lifetime she was little known and it is only after the publication of Thomas .H. Johnson's third edition of Dickinson's complete poems in 1952² that a renewed interest in her work was created in America as well as in abroad. Her work best defines the distinctive qualities of American Experience, an emanation of liberal independent soul as against the dogmatic thought of religious dependence of Calvinism³. Right from the beginning she was an introvert

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making rendezvous with her own soul. Later her introversion by and by led her to mystical experience called union with the soul or the divine. Her mystical experience enabled her to redefine everything in line with her spiritual thinking; and she wrote several poems under the intoxication of her spiritual thinking.

A close reading of Dickinson's poems indicates that the best of her poems revolve round the theme of death. Being a mystic she believes in the deathlessness of death. In fact if death is to be assigned any position in her world then it will be second only to God. Death is a free agent; it is evergreen and all powerful. All the man-made creations perish with the passage of time. All the kingdoms fall except death. This undoubtedly confirms the immortality of death and reinforces its divine nature. The gradual encroachment of death upon living beings imposed the only philosophically meaningful relationship between man and nature, the soul and the body:

Death is a Dialogue between

The Spirit and the Dust. (976)

Dickinson devoted about five hundred of her poems to the theme 'Death'. This particular theme begins in her early poetry and persists in her later poetry. She does not pursue death with a single attitude; it varies in tone from elegiac despair or horror at bodily decay to exalted and confident belief. For her Death is an unsolvable mystery. As she says in one of her poems:

Death leaves us homesick, who behind,

Expect that it is gone

Are ignorant of its concern

As if it were not born. (935)

When Dickinson was alive, death was always close at hand. Living in a rural setting a century and a half ago, she was aware of the cycle of existence, from birth to death and birth again. Most of the people also would have been aware of that cycle, living on farms, tending to animals, watching the seasons change. Moreover, this was a time before advances in health care when people would die from a simple infection or injury; women routinely died in childbirth, along

with the child; life expectancy was only about 40 or 50 years; few people would survive to old age as happens all the time now. Dickinson simply reflected in her writing what she saw in life, and the life in her lifetime which was constantly shadowed by death.

From the age of fifteen, till her twenty fifth years she witnessed the funeral processions of Amherst passing by to the adjacent cemetery, the “forest of the Death”, with its trees of white tombstones. The death of her friend Sofia Holland left her in a ‘fixed melancholy’ when she was only thirteen and the graphic description she gave of the sad event two years later is the measure of the depth of her sorrow:

Then it seem'd to me I should die too if I could not be permitted to watch over her even to look at her face... There she lay mild and beautiful as in health and her pale features lit up with an unearthly-smile.⁴

This was her first confrontation with, what she might feel as one feel of a hideous, inequitable mistake. She wrote to Higginson in February, 1863:

Perhaps Death – gave me awe for friends – striking sharp and earthly, for I hold them since – in a brittle love – of more alarm, than peace.⁵

On the developed sensibility to death of Dickinson, Conrad Aiken remarked that she must have consciously died a little everyday.⁶This experience is similar to that of Kabir who said that the entire world is afraid of that death which I enjoy right while alive.

Many critics have classified Dickinson’s death –poems into various headings. In his interpretative Biography Johnson writes:

The poems based on death fall into three groups. There are those which are concerned with the physical demise of the body, some describing the act of dying with clinical detachment, with emotional vehemence. Others muse upon death or depict the face and form of the body on which gazer’s attention is riveted. There are the poems in which death, the suitor, is personified – in which the theme deals less with life here and now, or of life to come, than with precise moment of transition from one state to the other.⁷

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Whereas Thomas Wallborn Food has grouped her poems as:

1. Poems dealing with death and immortality.
2. Poems dealing with the physical aspect of death.
3. Poems which personify death.
4. Poems with elegiac note.

Salamatullah Khan makes two divisions of death poems: "where death is described by the external appearance and signs, and where she imagines death happening to her as an experience."⁸ Most of her biographers like Whicher, Johnson and Chase had made a pattern based on three groups- poems written before 1860, poems written during 1860-65, and the poems written after 1865. This grouping is based on Dickinson's poetic career. The poems written in the first period deal with the death-immortality theme. Poems of the second period largely dramatize the physical aspects of death. The last period abounds in elegiac poems.

In The Long Shadow, Clark Griffith writes: "the most gripping of Emily Dickinson's poems are centered around the questions of 'what is death? Why is death? and what it is like to die?'"⁹ It seems that she had studied death from every conceivable angle and expressed this wisdom in poems after poems. She presented death not as one who would cringe away from it in terror. She rather presented it with philosophical detachment and blatant realism. She accepts death as a physical fact, as a material truth. "The most fascinating aspect of her poems on death is the presentation of death as a character."¹⁰ Salamatullah Khan remarks: "From the earliest poems one notices the personifications of death, sometimes as a fairy or a ghost, till he develops into a solid state oriental potentate with the traditional splendor of his bearing, court and state gathering. Again he appears as the "Cultured, gentle and persuasive suitor who escorts his love on a joy ride."¹¹ John B. Pickard in the same tone observes: "Throughout, death is seen from various perspectives: as a welcome relief from life's tensions; as a force which heightens one's satisfaction with life; as a lover gently conveying one to hidden pleasures; as a cynical caller who poses beneath a cordial exterior; and finally as a solemn guide leading one to the threshold of immortality."¹²

In the same book he writes: "As she surveyed the broad universe and society itself, Emily Dickinson perceived death the great unknown and never ceased to ponder its fascination any mystery of death resulted in despair and terror, it also brought rest and peace and increased one's

enjoyment of life.”¹³ In her poetry she has tried to portray death from each and every angle – as a lover, as the assassin, the physical corruptor and the ever free creature in nature.

“I suppose,” Dickinson wrote in a letter, “there are depths in every consciousness, from which we cannot rescue ourselves to which one can go with us- which represent us Mortally - the Adventure of Death.”¹⁴ In her own inimitable way, she surveys the “trackless waste love has never trod” and her poems present a persistent endeavour to discover what the human mind has failed to find out so far. She analyses her experience with characteristic acuteness, for “Dying is a wild Night and a New Road.”¹⁵

Now it is important to quote Dickinson’s poems one by one and analyse how she handles the theme of death in a mystical way. As the poems are numerous and the space is limited, it is necessary to take up only the significant ones.

In “Just lost, when I was saved,” (160) Death is presented as an objective fact to be explored, described and assessed. It is an enquiry in heading towards any definite knowledge of the meaning of death:

Just lost, when I was saved!

Just felt the world go by!

Just girt me for the onset with Eternity, (160)

Death may be seen in a slanting light on winter afternoons, in the west or in the bee that goads the victim but “will not state his sting”, in the insect “menacing the tree”. “All her great poems on the theme of death display kinesthetic imagery – images of motion, cessation and rest. Richard Chase’s insight is the most noteworthy here: “At the heart of Emily Dickinson’s vision of death ... is the sensation of motion and rest. Almost any persistent motion, almost any condition of static, in nature or human existence, was likely to summon up her mind this beautiful and menacing power.”¹⁶ One can say that, at deeper levels, her typical experience is motion involving pain or terror, cessation and an ensuing state of rest which either can be expressed by images or remains beyond perception. This fundamental trope tends to be the dramatic core of her mystical perceptions and that finds best expression in her death poems:

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Safe is their Alabaster Chambers –
Untouched by Morning –
And Untouched by Noon –
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection (216)

This poem acquires its emotional tension by contrasting the tones with the cyclic motion of nature and human affairs. Moreover in many of her poems Dickinson personifies death in various characters. For example, in “The only Ghost I ever saw” (274) she personifies Death as:

The only Ghost I ever saw
Was dressed in Mechlin – so –
He wore no sandal on his foot –
And stepped like flakes of snow – (274)

In this poem death is presented as someone whose chief qualities are elusiveness, his silence, his quiet laughter getting thinner with the breeze, his rapidity of gait, his grace, the lightness of his movements, and his apparent shyness of human experience. He is, in short, a gay but impalpable courtier. He suggests to us the only situation in which Dickinson's frivolity reaches the hall mark of poetic perfection, when with her rich sensibility she personifies death.

The poem “A clock stopped” (287) tries to determine the philosophical and religious meanings in death. In this poem life is compared with a timepiece:

A clock stopped–
Not the Mantel's –
Geneva's farthest skill
Can't put the puppet bowing – (287)

Commenting on the use of the image of the clock, Griffith writes: “By her early experience with the clock, Emily Dickinson's attention was drawn in a special and even a unique

way to the mysteries to time. Out of this experience, I believe, there ultimately developed her neurotic obsession with temporality, which is the chief obsession of her poetry.”¹⁷

The poem “There came a Day at Summer’s full”, (322) shows the two lovers who are sincere to each other but the world hinders their path of permanent union. The only sustaining hope for them is in heaven:

There came a Day at summers full,

Entirely for me ...

As if no soul the solstice passed

That maketh all things new – (322)

The severity of the endurance test leads them to their graves. So firm was their loyalty to one another that they awakened to that new marriage in Heaven, making themselves acceptable to God as the righteous by their abiding faith in each other. This idea of fulfillment after death is similar to that one finds in many poems of Browning.

In many poems, Dickinson creates a tense situation by contrasting the immobility of the dead with the mobility of the living and external growth of Nature. “I heard a fly buzz – when I died” (465) contrasts the expectations of death with its realistic occurrence. A small, trivial fly nullifies the traditional Christian belief that leads to eternal happiness. The pun in “signed” and “Assignable” ironically illustrates death’s supreme power, for only worthless documents, empty phrases, curious momentous, and a corrupting body can be left behind. The irony increases as the soul precisely arranges everything and waits confidently for death. Now the grand moment is at hand, but unfortunately a fly interrupts the ceremony:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –

The stillness in the Room

Was like Stillness in the Air –

Between the Heaves of Storm – (465)

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This poem can be seen as representative of Dickinson's mysticism. The physical death in it serves as an excuse to ponder over the infinity. The poet peeps into the realm of the Absolute when the soul gains a temporary insight into the Infinite. The poem combines both triumph and failure, for man must return to reality after knocking down all hindrances of sense into infinity. Moreover a literal fly is black, not blue, but the soul leaving the body experiences the blue of the spiritual eye through which it must travel. The "Buzz" sound would be the sound of the coccygeal center of spiritual energy as it begins its journey up the spine. Or depending on the spiritual advancement of the speaker, the "om" sound might be described as a buzz. Though Dickinson did not study yoga philosophy; her poems with their accurate descriptions of the dying process and after death experiences suggest that she had some natural mystic abilities.

Moreover many of her poems show a detached person observing death and its reaction on the dying person, meanwhile trying to comprehend the inner truth of the whole process. "I've seen a Dying Eye" is one of such mystical poem. The dying person searches for 'something' and is able to find it without giving any hint of it to the observer. In other words, death nullifies all human efforts to comprehend its meaning.

: I've seen a Dying Eye
Round and round a Room –
In search of Something – as it seemed –
Then Cloudier become – (547)

The concept of death as something to be embraced finds best expression in poem no. 712, where Dickinson actually personifies Death as a gentleman who kindly stops to collect the speaker in his carriage. Here, however, dying has largely preceded the action, and its physical aspects are only hinted at.

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –

The Carriage held but just Ourselves –

And Immortality.

James Reeves comments on this poem: “This is one of the best of those poems in which Emily triumphs over death by accepting calmly, civilly, as befits a gentlewoman receiving the attentions of a gentleman. It is an essay in death-in-life.”¹⁸ Jane Crosthwaite suggests that the poem is not a projection of the poet’s death but a record of her encounter with the fact or inevitability of death and the consequences of that discovery on the life remaining.¹⁹ This poem has elements of all of Emily’s diverse mystical preoccupations with death and immortality. It presents death as an objective fact. It reveals the morbidly fanciful attempt to think of her in the present as also, into that future objective condition. Death is here also experienced subjectively as deprivation and less possibility and symbolized by objective death, the grave.

In Dickinson’s world the presence of God may be dubious. But there is no doubt in the presence and action of death. One of the most favorite victims of death is man. The frost, one of her common symbols for death, is the “blond assassin” that “beheads” the “happy flower ... at its play”. Death is that icy “stranger hovering round” which the “flowers notice first” but which finally insinuates his way into human existence. Death is also king and emperor. He is a protean divinity, a universal power. Its insinuating power is to be felt, seen, heard, touched and smelled in nature and human life. As he appears in the poem, he is an image of nature – one of the most impressive concepts in English poetry since 17th century. As an image of man, he is one of the original and enduringly interesting characters of literature. The horror of death, when one is confronted with the stark nakedness of it, is the subject of the elegy: ‘The Last Night that she lived’ (1100):

The Last Night that She lived

It was a Common Night

Except the Dying – this to Us

Made Nature different (1100)

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Here the bereaved are faced with a corpse which they must dispose of. They must forget about tomorrow's 'awful leisure' and act in the present. But the present is confusing. The confrontation with death has left them in the state of discomfort. Their hearts are full of anguish and despair. This situation has been dramatized by the poet to the full extent. John B. Pickard comments on this poem that in it "death is imagined as a graceful departure into the sublime waters of immortality. Pain and loss recede as the dead woman obtains eternal peace."²⁰

S. Khan has drawn a neat comparison of Emily Dickinson's mystical probing of death mysteries to that of similar inquisition of Prince Gautama and the famous saint-poet Kabir. He writes: "...Prince Gautama who enquired about death from his charioteer, Channa and on being told that death was the inescapable fate of all mortals, renounced the world to find out the truth for himself. Dickinson was also a seeker after truth and in probing the mystery of death she has at least defined the limits of human knowledge which is stated thus by Kabir:

How strange it is that man on earth should roam

And lead a life of woe, but not forsake.

His rugged path; nor dare he view alone

His future doom which is but to awake.²¹

Khan mentions that Emily Dickinson's dealing with the various facets of death was similar to that of Kabir.²²

In a nutshell in this paper Dickinson's mystical views about death have been traced by extensively quoting from her poems. This critical analysis proves that Emily Dickinson is not only a great poet but she has a mystical temperament like many Indian yogis. One can find in her poetry a combination of Spencer and Milton, the simplicity of Wordsworth, the ambiguity of Coleridge, the picturesqueness of Keats, the fantasy of Shelley, the dramatic quality of Browning, the Myth of Yeats, and mystical insight of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson and many Indian mystic yogis like Kabir, Gautam Buddha etc. She has something of each one of these poets in her, yet she is an individual apart from all. In short Dickinson's short sweet lyrics have the wisdom of the Bible, the Vedas and the pragmatism of Bhagwad Gita and Upanishads.

Indeed, Dickinson's poems on the theme of death contain ripe views about the purpose of this life. In essence all her views are Mystical.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹See The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 4th ed, by James.D.Hart, New York; Oup 1965, P-224.

²The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Thomas. H.Johnson, Backby Books: Little, Brown and Company, New York, 1960, PP., 1-770. Textual quotations from Emily Dickinson's poetry have been quoted from this book with relevant poem no in parenthesis within the text of this paper.

³“Calvinism” is an “ism” after the name of John Calvin (1509-64), a young Renaissance religious scholar, who gave a very strict code of religion to people, which code is called Calvinism. The original settlers in all American colonies were by and large Calvinist. Emily's father was also a Calvinist.

⁴Cited in S. Khan, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: The Flood Subjects, Aarti Book Centre, New Delhi, 1969, P-108.

⁵Johnson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, The Belknap Press Cambridge 1956, p-423.

⁶ See Sewall. The Recognition of Emily Dickinson, p-15.

⁷ Thomas Johnson, An Interpretative Biography, p-203.

⁸Salamatullah Khan, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: The Flood subjects, p-108-109.

⁹Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry, Princeton Press, 1964, p-112.

¹⁰Salamatullah Khan, Emily Dickinson's poetry, p-121.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²John B. Pickard, Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation, p-55.

¹³Ibid., p-108.

¹⁴Cited in Salamatullah Khan, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p-108.

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¹⁵Ibid., p-108.

¹⁶Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson, p-223.

¹⁷Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow, p-280.

¹⁸James Reeves, in Emily Dickinson: A Collection of critical Essays, ed. by Richard Sewall, Prentice- Hall, 1963.

¹⁹American Literary Scholarship: An Annual / 1981 ed. James Woodress (Duke University Press, Durham North, Carolina, 1983), p-90.

²⁰John B. Pickard, Emily Dickinson, p-106.

²¹Cited in S. Khan, Emily Dickenson Poetry, p-124.

²²Ibid, p. 124.

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