

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN WALT WHITMAN AND SHAIKH AYAZ'S POEMS

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Abstract:

The current study is a part of my PhD thesis "A Comparative Study of Walt Whitman and Shaikh Ayaz as the poets of Political Freedom and Cultural Awareness" in which attempt is made to explore common concepts of love, freedom, cultural heritage, political tendencies and notion of death. So present study investigates depiction of death in poems of Walt Whitman and Shaikh Ayaz. Death is an undeniable fact of life. No one can escape from its lethal clasp. It is a universal phenomenon that one day all living beings are bound to perish and decay. It is observed that the subject of death is a topic of frequent discussions and writings with some writers. The Holy Scriptures, religious sermons, jail diaries, memoirs and other literary works have visibly presented its existence with arguments and proofs. Novelists, playwrights, biographers, essayists, travel writers and poets have portrayed it with sad and gloomy depictions but Walt Whitman and Shaikh hold different perspectives with regard to death. The current study is a qualitative research and textual analysis method has been used to undertake it. Findings reveal that Whitman and Shaikh Ayaz, two influential poets of different lands and regions, present their notions of death with optimistic views. They celebrate death. For them death is not an end of life rather a new beginning. Sometimes they hold similar notions but, in some cases, their treatment to death differs. In this connection, the present study will open new windows to the world of research.

Key words: Death, literature, poets, religion, America, Pakistan

Introduction:

Death is a natural phenomenon and it is an established fact that whoever gets birth is bound to pass away. In simple words death is a physical departure from this mortal world. For instance, Shaikh (2023) asserted that the permanent cessation of human organs like heart, brain and respiratory system are collectively named as death. Death discontinues one's journey from this universe permanently while the 9th Edition, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2022) defined death "the fact of somebody dying or being killed" (p.383). It explains that death is conceptualized as a permanent termination of life. Prof Mehrani (2021), an intellectual poet and authority on Latif, in his well-known research *Latifiyat jo Takqeeqi ain Tanqeedi Motailo*, mentioned Shah Latif is a universally acknowledged poet whose presentation of themes, motifs, folk characters and use of language is fascinating. His treatment to death is entirely different. Sometimes he illustrates pensive moods and tendencies sometimes he finds life in death. In one of the verses of Melody of 'Sassui, Ma'azoori' Shah Latif says, those live before their death, are immortally made, they will live forever, for them there will be no death. Moreover, Ali (2021) in his masterpiece, "*The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary*" cited that Allah, the Almighty declared, "Every soul will taste death" (3:185). This Holy Book has evidently explained that every soul has to die once it is born into this universe. It is outlined that all human beings will depart from this world according to their fixed program. In this context, Tanakh (2018, Hebrews, 9:27) explored "People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment". The Bible argues that every human being rich or poor, good or bad, physically fit or handicapped will leave this cosmos when death knocks at his door. It is considered that death is a devastating element for some families and wherever life is mentioned, death is automatically subjected.

There are many kinds of death. It is classified as natural death, accidental death, suicidal death and undetermined death. Besides, Siraj (2017), a renowned novelist, stated that death embraced for a cause is a pious action. His novel set in the background of Sindh and invasions carried out to occupy its land, multiple resources and resistance executed by the local are presented exemplary. Commenting upon the nature of death, Tahir (2013) asserted “to know you are going to die and be prepared for it at anytime. That’s the way you are actually more involved in your life when living” (p.114). Tahir communicates that if we recall our demise regularly and prepare for it, we can live our lives happily. Because we will take care of people around us, we won’t hurt and trouble others, we shan’t bring streams of disappointments in others’ lives. It has been observed that mystics are pleased when they remember the world of death. They are eagerly waiting to call on the crown of Creature. The mystic view about death is largely different than that of common folk. They celebrate death as a meeting with the Lord. As Barks (2007 cited Rumi) “our death is our wedding with eternity” (124). Rumi’s point of view is that death doesn’t portray the end of life, it opens a new phase of life. For mystics, life is a blessing and its departure from the mortal is more than ecstasy. Here, he employs Christian philosophy which highlights that death is commencement of another existence.

Literature Review:

The review of literature is built on studies on comparative literature, depiction of death in Walt Whitman’s poems, description of death in Shaikh Ayaz’s poetry and research questions.

Studies on Comparative Literature

Comparative literature is a branch of literature that studies two or more literary works of different writers. For instance, The University at Buffalo (n.d), discussed “comparative literature is traditionally known as the study of two or more literatures in comparison (English and German, for example) and their multi-dimensional components which may encompass aspects such as the historical, gender, economic, cultural, social, philosophical, religious, and linguistic factors of the distinct cultures being analysed” (College of Arts and Sciences). The above citation illustrates that comparative literature is beyond state borders. It includes study of regional literatures, national literatures and global literatures. This discipline also incorporates historical perspective, gender roles, cultural significance, economic and social developments, philosophical and religious elements and linguistic features of a literary work. While Naacchiyaar (2020) discusses “The scholars of comparative literature try to bring out the relationship between literature and other arts like music, painting, dance and film. They have to compare the disciplines like literature and psychology, science, history, sociology, architecture, politics, etc...Comparative Literature has become a universally accepted discipline today” (p.1). The scholar expressing his thought-provoking views argues that the field of comparative literature leads scholars to make comparison of literature with other disciplines like history, politics, sociology, psychology, architecture and archaeology and its graph of importance has considerably widened. In this regard, Brohi (2018) suggested “The comparative literature is the identification of two literary texts and its relation with other texts” (p.57). Brohi described comparative literature discusses different literary works and their relationships while Mirzayeva (2016), in his thesis “Comparative Analysis of P.B. Shelley’s and John Keats’s Literary Creative Activity” revealed that Shelley and Keats are key poets of Romantic period. Greek Mythology had deeply influenced both the giants. Shelley was a revolutionary artist while Keats was a “pure poet”. Shelley perceived death as most “enduring preoccupation”. On the other hand, Keats viewed death as “fanciful, romantic, almost a seduction”. They have employed different metaphors about death. However, Soomro (2009), in his comparative

study of “Shah & Qura’an” revealed that Shah Latif, a matchless bard of Sindh, is portrayed as a remarkably great mystic sage, social reformer, revolutionary poet and spiritual icon. To my understanding, he was an erudite religious scholar who interpreted the Holy Quran in his poetic contribution. He had a phenomenal command over Arabic language that he was capable of framing original Quranic text in his poetry artistically, maintaining delicate balance of rhyme and rhythm.

Depiction of Death in Walt Whitman’s Poems

Though Walt Whitman and Shaikh Ayaz hailed from two different regions and lands yet there are some similarities and differences in their thoughts and poetic universe. Whitman being a national poet of America has touched upon different themes and motifs. But death stands out as a major theme of his verses. In this connection, Ali (2022) argues death is a recurrent theme in the poems of Whitman. His *Leaves of Grass* and *Song of Myself* provide many references to death. Besides, Simonson (2019) in her study on “Emerson’s philosophy: A process of becoming through personal and public tragedy” believed death is a permanent feature of all living things. Our induction comes up when we are delivered into the world and exist is announced when eyes are shut. In her findings, Simonson revealed that Emerson was a great follower of nature and lived his life happily but his son, Waldo’s death, broke him into pieces. And he experienced big loss, inexpressible grief while watching his son die. His poems and writing reflect theme of death in various ways. In addition to the above study, Boostani (2018), undertook a comparative study of “Effects of Death in the poetry of Rumi and Whitman” and revealed “According to the both poets, a mystic death not only is not the end of his existence but also is the beginning and his rebirth; such a death causes the liberation of the soul from the cage of the body to achieve the eternal life. In Whitman’s view, death is manifested as the part and the cycle of life. Like Rumi, he believed everybody should be the seeker of death rather to be feared because death represents a transition from one state to another. He emphasized the immortality of the soul and body after death” (p.68). Boostani, an Indian scholar, traced out that Whitman and Rumi hold mystic view of death. They believe that death is freedom of soul from human body and commencement of a journey to rebirth. Whitman presents death as “the part and cycle of life” while Rumi regards it as a changeover from this mortal world to immortal world.

Depiction of Death in Shaikh Ayaz’s Poems

Shaikh Ayaz being an influential poet of the 20th century has composed verses of a high order on various themes. Death stands out as one of the significant themes in his poetry. Though he also mentioned the subject of death in his prose collections and autobiographies but his poems are prominently depicted with philosophy of death. He was an insatiable reader who studied western and eastern philosophy, literature, sociology, psychology, religion and many other fascinating subjects of human interest. This extensive study rid him from the fear of death. Moreover, Ayaz is a fearless poet. In this connection, Noorhusain (2006) said death, for Ayaz, was no more than stepping over the threshold. A deep investigation of Shaikh Ayaz’s poetic legacy reveals that he, in the opening pages of *Katian Kar Morria Jadhen, Part I* (1991), made a dialogue with the angel of death and wrote, “O’ Death! I am still authoring. You are not allowed to enter my room”. This great work, presented a large number of *Bait* (a genre of Sindhi poetry, a poem) about death with artistic presentation. Here, the poet sees death with a trace of a smile.

Research Questions:

The following research questions are framed to discover the pertinent answers.

- Q1. How do Walt Whitman and Shaikh Ayaz portray notion of death in their poetry?
Q2. What similarities do Walt Whitman and Shaikh Ayaz have with regard to concept of death?

Research Methodology

The current research is a comparative study of Walt Whitman and Shaikh Ayaz's selected poems with regard to the theme of death. Being qualitative research, this study applied textual method to objectively analyse the relevant texts.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is one of the methods of research used in qualitative research studies. It helps scholars to discover what the author intends to convey in his literary works. In this connection, Babbie (2014) argues "The researchers in the field of humanities adopt it to recognize the meaning or thought entrenched in the text. With its support researchers disclose the text, its meaning and message. It also reveals the symbols used to communicate specific meaning, helps to explore the text and analyse the content in various methods, differing from everyday way of reading a book enables to study the communicated that can be recorded, written or painted" (p.64). The renowned scholar, Babbie describes that the main objective of textual analysis is to investigate and delve deep into the texts. In other words, text is deciphered and interpreted. This method is mostly preferred to be chosen in the discipline of arts and humanities. Furthermore, Rockwell (2003) explained "Textual analysis as an element of close reading, it explores the question of the relationship between how we represent texts, how we see them, and our theories of textuality" (p.209). Rockwell is of the view that there are different methods of research and textual analysis is usually recommended for literary studies. It works to explore not only the relationship of texts but also shows what the writers like to transmit whereas Nunan (1992) suggested "Textual analysis is to examine, scrutinize and assemble the related text. The text comprises of words, meanings, ideas, pictures, themes, symbols, or the meaning that author shares. That text can be in any form like written, visualized, or spoken" (p.272). Nunan has described that the textual analysis reveals various techniques and guidelines to approach and disclose original meanings of literary works. They may be in spoken, written or visual formats.

Theoretical framework

This study is developed on the theoretical framework of Hungarian theorist, Zepetnek's book *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method and Application* (1998). He has introduced ten different principles of comparative literature but I have chosen the following principles.

The first guiding principle of Zeptenek's approach to Comparative Literature is to have the in-depth understanding of the two languages and the cultures from which the works of the writers are compared. The second important principle that Zeptenek's theory stresses is the dialogue between the selected works of the writers so that deeper insight may be acquired with reference to the artistic expression, cultural context, ideologies of the literary texts with special reference to global and local dimensions of these works. The third principle, grounds that comparative literature is theoretical, methodological and ideological in its nature.

Data Analysis

It has been practically witnessed and experienced that fear of death, basically, locks up our hopes to live further. Death is a bitter reality; we should willingly accept it and focus on our progress rather than entering into the gloomy world of distress and depression. Depression leads to passive aspects of life where dark clouds are hovering over to reduce the size of our happiness. Poets have depicted the element of death in various ways. Since the commencement of this world, themes of love, separation, war, isolation, divorce and death

have found their expressions with writers and poets. Almost all poets renowned and obscure wrote about death and their presentation of death is different.

Whitman's Views on Death

Like other poets of the globe, Walt Whitman and Pakistani bard, Shaikh Ayaz also penned different verses on the ultimate reality of death.

Before discussing Whitman's attitude to death, it is essential to understand background of different events and incident which took place during his life. It is believed that throughout the 19th century, death was "omnipresent" in the USA. There are many reasons behind it. The widespread of Tuberculosis which took lives of men, women and children. Outbreak of The Civil War (1861-1864), tendency of committing suicide by slaves who thought that killing themselves is the only way of freedom from painful conditions. In this regard, the French historian, Ariès (1976), described the 19th century as an "era of mourning" (p.67). In this context, Al-shwillay (2012) mentions:

"Part of the nineteenth century rituals were the funeral processions, mourning clothes, the spread of cemeteries and of their surface area, visits and pilgrimages to tombs and the cult of memory. This led to the emergence of numerous discourses dedicated to understanding and accepting the inevitability of death. Eventually, there were serious cultural attempts to face and heal the public fear of death during that turbulent age. So, Whitman's milieu was shadowed by death. His writings manifested serious attempts in expressing and redirecting people's attitude towards death" (p. 545).

She described that the 19th century America was littered with dead bodies, cemeteries were extended, funeral processions were taken out widely and mourning clothes were worn out as symbol of grief and bereavement. People unwillingly accepted inescapability of death. They were going through frightening state of affairs. In that turbulent period, Whitman attempted to transmit people's behaviour to death. Moreover, Whitman's pain sharply aggravated when members of his family specially grandmother, mother, father, brother and sister-in-law, brother died throwing him into the burning volcano of deep distress and depression. He described it "the great dark cloud of my life". Moreover, assassination of the American President, Abraham Lincoln injured his soul. He saw deaths everywhere that he even made his mind to buy a lot in the nearby cemetery bearing his name. Besides, Whitman added a few poems to the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass* which is called the "death edition".

The above-mentioned factors made Whitman a poet of death. His poem "Scented Herbage of My Breast" expresses the element of demise when he said "Through me shall the words be said to make death exhilarating".

For example, Whitman in his well-known poem "Whispers of Heavenly Death" writes:

Text:

"Whispers of heavenly death, murmur'd I hear;

Labial gossip of night—sibilant chorals;

Footsteps gently ascending—mystical breezes, wafted soft and low;

Ripples of unseen rivers—tides of a current, flowing, forever flowing..."

(Whispers of Heavenly Death, p.255)

The above poem was brought out in his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The stanza aesthetically reveals Whitman's vigorous perspective of death. He marvellously expresses that death is not a frightening episode of life. The poet perceives demise as 'heavenly' not

gloomy and terrifying. In portraying death, he uses mild language like ‘gently’, ‘mystical’ and ‘soft’. In simple words, death is explained as a pleasant and comfortable affair.

Text:

“Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?

I hasten to inform him or her just as lucky to die, and I know it”.

(Song of Myself, section, 07)

It is suggested that his observation and wise narration about death was not an ordinary endeavour. He was tremendous happy with his life and its actions. He found himself fortunate enough to know and understand mystery of life and death. Whitman had a sunny point of view about his life and existence. In this regard, Reynolds (2005) wrote his poetry asserted death, delight and “sanctity of life”.

Text:

**"And as to you death, you bitter hug of mortality.....
it is idle try to alarm me."**

(Song of Myself, section, 49)

These lines taken from Whitman’s monumental poem, “Song of Myself” describe his notion of death. After a careful reading of the text, we conclude that the poet is not afraid of the arrival of the angel of death. Death is an inseparable from living creatures. It is the subject matter of his various poems including “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “Lilacs Last in the Door Yard Bloom’d”, “Whispers of Heavenly Death”. Besides, some sections of *Song of Myself* also portray the content about death. He believes death does not come to end our existence. Man passes away and is reborn with different forms and manifestations.

Text:

**“I know I am solid and sound,
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.
I know I am deathless”**

(Song of Myself, Section, 20)

During the diabolic crisis of Civil War, he devoted his services as a male nurse in hospital to care the wounded soldiers. He experienced bigger tragedies, saw deaths of his loved ones but never surrendered. He calls himself strong, committed, firm like rock. The poet portrays that physical death cannot end his life, popularity and status. He has permanently defeated death that’s why uttered I am deathless. He considers death a transfer from this world to that world.

Shaikh Ayaz’s Views on Death

It is illustrated that Shaikh Ayaz never disappointed or feared consequences even though he was, several times, put behind bars and his three works were officially banned yet he was optimistic to the core. His treatment to death was extraordinarily different than his contemporaries and predecessors. In one of his free verses titled “After Life”, he utters:

Text:

**“O’ Death! Go back, I won’t intend to die,
I would willingly soon
Approach your cottage”.**

(Katian Kar Morria Jadhen, p.178)

In the above stanza, the giant poet, addressing to the angel of death, uttered I would like to live life to the fullest. I am still on the rise to write and richly contribute to the world of

literature. I am not mentally set to deliver myself to the hug of death. At another place, he expressed, “I am the life how can I give up the ghost, O’ Death! You will be frightened while taking my soul”. Ayaz is an immortal stuff. I haven’t gone through and found such type of courageous attitude to death in any poet as far as my study of literature is concerned. He used innovative images and inventive similes and metaphorical expressions to carry out his thought-provoking philosophy of life and death.

Text:

**“A poet is a tree,
Which flowers all the more
After death”.**

(Songs of Freedom, p.51)

The above brief poem of Shaikh Ayaz portrays positive, bright view of life like Dr Akash Anasri’s tremendously popular poem “If We Die during the journey”. Ayaz holds high hopes using metaphor of “tree” that death does not extinguish poets’ life, status and works. It is often noted that William Blake, Tennyson and Keats received world attention after their physical departure. Critics began composing masterly critiques to discover their excellence and artistic worth. Afterwards, they were internationally recognized. Sadly, their literary worth wasn’t acknowledged during their lifetime. But Ayaz was showered with honours during his life after his death, too. Featuring the theme of death, in his remarkably great opera, “Death of Dodo Soomro” a historical character of Sindh from Soomra Dynasty. Shaikh Ayaz wrote:

Text:

**Dodo: “Say what you will, I am not to die
Shall return after changing my apparel”**

(Songs of Freedom, p. 178)

Ayaz, does not like to depart physically from this world. He found extraordinary pleasures, amazing enjoyment, inviolable fame and love. He believed that corporeal departure does not end his life. It is just change of garments. He will come again to herald his presence with artistic appearance. The poet will sing songs of life, freedom, culture, humanity and sympathy.

Text:

**“I am not thinking about Hell or Paradise.
O’ Death! Come on! I will embrace you happily”.**

(Prayer of Poetry, p.177)

The above text indicates Shaikh Ayaz’s pleasant view of death. He has no fear of death rather he loves it. He does not ponder over ecstasy of Paradise or torment of Hell. He enthusiastically welcomes the angel of death. Many years ago, Girglani (cited Shaikh Ayaz, 2007) wrote, I have always said I shall die of my own volition, spread out a silken mattress, light up the whole house as on Shabe Barat, wearing garlands of jasmine (Rabel) bedeck my wife as a new bride on the wedding night, and then bid farewell to everyone, close my eyes and dive into the river of darkness, till I reach the other bank. This is how Shaikh Ayaz has gracefully painted his view of death. His depiction of death is very different than his contemporaries and predecessors.

Findings

The scholar has traced out that Whitman’s poetic works, *Leaves of Grass* and different sections of *Song of Myself*, have depicted various verses on the aspect of death while Shaikh

Ayaz in his books, *Katian Kar Morria Jadhen, Part I and II* (1991,1992), *Chholion Boolion Samund Joon, Prayers of Poetry*, Kapar to Kun Kary, Alwidey Geet, authored various poems and mentioned the subject of death in his autobiography, extensively. Whitman wrote in English whereas Ayaz chose his Sindhi and Urdu languages to draft his poetic creations. Afterwards, Ayaz's selected poetry was rendered into translation. The both writers, being poets of love, revolution, pleasure and pain, are also eminent lyricists of death. Besides, the mention of death, their rhymes remarkably portray themes of patriotism, mysticism, romanticism, individualism, womanhood, nature, universality, sexual leanings, democratic tendencies, political freedom and cultural awareness.

Conclusion

After intense study of Walt Whitman and Shaikh Ayaz's poetry, it is concluded that both poets were outstandingly successful in their artistic expressions, their popularity spread widely even after their passing away. They have presented the subject of death with grace and buoyancy. Though Whitman suffered some tragedies, watched dead bodies and flowing blood, severe injuries of soldiers of Civil War, shed tears on domestic deaths yet his attitude to death was extremely positive and full of life. In this context, Al-shwillay (2012) revealed "He believes that death must be welcomed and not to be feared because it represents a transition or a passageway from one state to another in an ongoing process of spiritual evolution" (547). Similarly, Shaikh Ayaz also portrayed his views about death with sanguinity. Shaikh Ayaz was jailed; his poetic collections were banned and his literary activities were restricted yet he did not mourn or expressed deep sadness on the subject of death. To a very limited extent, he had scenes of slight sadness but, on the whole, he depicted the subject of death with happy mood and graceful disposition. In this respect, Shaad (2011 cited Ameer Ali Chandio) asserted that his verses loudly introduce themselves as verses of hope and optimism. Furthermore, it was also revealed that Ayaz held dialogues with death and never feared the universally acknowledged reality.

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