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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Philosophical Musings over the Phenomenon of Death: A Thematic Study of Selected Poems of Shiv K Kumar's *Where Have the Dead Gone? And Other Poems*

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Abstract

This research article makes an attempt to thematically study the philosophical musings of Shiv K Kumar over death in his selected poems of *Where Have the Dead Gone? And Other Poems*. Kumar's first love is poetry and, therefore, he is called an intuitive and philosophical poet. In his scholarly collection of poems, he seriously cogitates on the occurrence of death and questions where man goes after he dies. He is quite certain that intellect and reason cannot

explain the mystery of life while intuitions can make us comprehend what life is. Through his poems, the poet makes his readers understand that life is balanced between the two absolutely opposite points of birth and death. It is a universally known fact that where there is birth, there is death. Birth is glorified and death is treated as something dreadful and is, hence, mourned. Intertwined in the philosophical riddle of birth and death, man has been trying for ages to delve into the mysteries of life, death, and rebirth. The poet wants to remain calm and composed and takes the life as it comes to him. In his collected poems, it is clearly understood that he treats the death of human beings and animals equally.

Keywords: Philosophy, Birth, Death, Rebirth, Musings, Funeral Procession, Cremation, Ashes, Physical Body, Soul, Intuition, Imagination, Maturity, Ghost, Trauma, Loneliness

I

Introduction

Life is balanced between the two diametrically opposite points of birth and death. It is a universally known fact that where there is birth, there is death. Birth is glorified and death is treated as something dreadful and is, hence, lamented. Entangled in the philosophical riddle of birth and death, man has been trying for ages to delve into the mysteries of life, death, and rebirth. “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” (Addonizio and Laux 39). Death is not only a mysterious phenomenon but also a greatly inspiring force to man through which he or she is inspired to utilise the granted life in a better way. In the post-modern period of unprecedented scientific and technological advancement, man has been leaving no stone unturned to unlock the secrets of man’s life after death. But what is after death has always been elusive to man, and it has been beyond the gamut of man’s knowledge. In this research article, Shiv K. Kumar’s philosophical reflections on the phenomenon of death are thematically dealt with in his selected poems of *Where Have the Dead Gone? And Other Poems* (2014).

Shiv K. Kumar – an exemplary academician, extraordinarily gifted writer, and erudite critic – is one of the brightest stars on the firmament of modern Indo-Anglian poetry. When B. Gopal Rao asked a question in an interview, published in *The Hindu* newspaper, as to what the driving force behind his fast pace as a writer is, Shiv K. Kumar aptly and subtly remarked: “Writing is a way of revitalising one’s energy.” (Rao, 2011, published in *The Hindu*). He has shown an unbelievable mastery not only in poetry, fiction, prose, but also in translations. His command of English and Urdu is quite exceptional. Though the poet calls himself “a late bloomer” (Sharma 55), Khushwant Singh appreciated him as a great poet by saying: “Shiv K Kumar is a gifted poet. This gift is given by God to very few” (Kumar 2018). He was a postcolonial poet and was influenced by the modern celebrated poets of the west such as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, and Baudelaire. Therefore, the reader of his poetry does not find any romantic appeal in his poems. It deals only with the acrimonious realities of life. A perspicacious reader of his poetry finds that Kumar does not admire the happenings of the past

but reveals the bitter present. His poems deal with contemporary issues of society and death. Keki N. Daruwalla has rightly called him “the high priest of modernism” (Singh 90). While philosophically pondering over the phenomenon of death and cogitating on where man goes after death, Shiv K. Kumar moved to the heavenly abode on 1st March 2017 to experience ‘death’. His sad demise has been truly an irreparable loss to all the lovers of his poetry. Be it as it may, he still continues to be in the hearts of his readers through his creative writings. Today he is well-acclaimed as a great poet albeit he tried his hand in other literary genres like fiction, translation, play, and short story.

II

Discussion

Shiv K. Kumar’s *Where Have the Dead Gone? and Other Poems*” (hereafter, *Where*), a collection of 67 famous poems, depicts the poet’s maturity, intuition, imagination, and his philosophical view of death. In his scholarly review published in *World Literature Today* in May 2015, Sudhir K. Arora remarks:

The poetic journey begins with a quest – “Where have they gone?” – and ends “in the woods,” with the determination to “learn to speak the language of trees, bushes, snakes, and beasts” via memory lanes, recalling the dreamworld of youth. What is striking in this poetry collection is Kumar’s imaginative skill, which has not blurred over his career. In the evening of his life, he never forgets the other world where he has to go— and so the dead, funeral processions, shadows, ghosts, tears, fire, hospital, sleepwalkers, time, pain, space, trains, sand, and all things associated with death remain flashing on the screen of his mind. He also often takes the reader to memory lanes from his childhood days—stars, hills, clouds, woods, river, the gardens of Chashme Shahi, flowers, along with the streets of Delhi” (Arora 121)

Shiv K. Kumar portrayed death as one of the most predominant themes in most of his poems. In his poem *Where have the Dead Gone*, he ruminates over the event of death and speculates where exactly man goes after he passes away. No one comes back after death to talk about his or her whereabouts. While inquisitively thinking over where the dead have gone at midnight, the narrator hears the hooting of owl which appears to be “summoning all the ghosts to take over from the living” (*Where* 13). He is afraid of hearing hooting and whispering of ghosts. Here, his other ‘self’ appears to be entering the dark and unknown world of the dead by means of a door of his imagination and intuition. As soon as he realises that he “descends into a dark labyrinth with spirits wailing and sighing all around” (*Where* 13), he becomes confounded, cross-examines himself and contemplates on the world beyond life. He hears a bizarre and frightening voice uttering: “You’ve come here to stay. There is no exit for you now” (*Where* 13). This very thought makes him feel that he is just an insect held in an octopus’ tight grip from which it cannot be released. In the poem, the poet’s wonderful portrayal of the dark labyrinth and his mental condition makes him feel like an insect:

Now you descend into a dark labyrinth
with spirits wailing and sighing all around.
Is this the world beyond life, I wonder.

I hear a voice in the air, weird and alarming:
'You've come here to stay. There is no exit for you now.
I feel like an insect entombed within the tentacles
of an octopus. (*Where* 13)

Kumar in his poem, *Death of My Pet Dog*, expresses his mental agony over his pet dog's unexpected and sad demise. As the poet's pet dog means a lot to him, the sudden demise of it came to him like a bolt from blue. The depth of his melancholy over the death of his pet dog is conspicuously observed in the very first line of the poem:

You shouldn't have forsaken me
While I was chasing the butterflies
In the backyard (*Where* 14).

The poet knows that his neighbours might have thought that the death of a pet dog was too insignificant to feel mentally agonised. But the poet could not treat it as a mere dog. He treated the death of animals and human beings in an equal measure. He could not stop looking at his deceased pet dog and he expresses his love and affection in his contemplative lines:

Now I see your body gone stiff
like a dog of wood hauled in to light a pyre.
What is it
that keeps the blood racing in the reins
and the heart palpitating? (*Where* 14)

The following reverberating poetic lines make the readers understand the depth of the relationship between the poet and his pet dog. It also makes the readers understand what a great emotional loss he has been experiencing with the premature death of his dog.

If only you had kept your eyes open,
We could have engaged ourselves in a colloquy
on disinheritance (*Where* 14)

Once again, the readers of the poem, *Death of a Sparrow*, find how the poet is emotionally and affectionately attached to the animals. His unfathomable sadness over the death of a sparrow is clearly observed in this poem. Having to see a sparrow perching on a window-sill and flurrying its wings is a common phenomenon. A sparrow used to sit on his window-sill daily and eat the grains provided by him. As the poet has not found the sparrow for three consecutive days, he flings open the window and to his utter consternation he finds the bird dead.

Three days gone
Without a flurry of wings on my window-sill
No chirping no pecking at my window-pane
With dread lurking in my mind,
I fling open the window only to see a fistful
of feathers, and a lump of flesh. (*Where* 15)

The poet, having found the bird dead on the window-sill, felt so confounded that there were tears in his eyes and his fingers started limping. He used to feel very happy listening to the chirping of the sparrow. He contemplates on the fate of the sparrow and probes himself asking

if it died a divorcee or spinster. Further, he says that it does not at all matter if the sparrow died a divorcee or spinster as it felt a sense of loneliness. He imagines himself to be a sparrow in the next birth. Thus, he ponders over the sparrow's death and feels the presence of it when it is not found on his window-sill. The value of anything can only be understood in its eternal absence.

The poet in his poem, *Letter from a Friend Who Died Five Days Ago*, writes about the description of dead man's view of his death, and how he perceives things after his own demise. Generally, people tremble to ponder over their own death. But there is a man in the poem who persistently meditates on how his soul travels after the death of his physical body and also the soul feels for its own physical body. The poet himself feels traumatic about this ineluctable phase of death. He writes:

It is an interlude between death
and rebirth that is traumatic
because memories keep erupting
like pustules on a fair face. (*Where* 16)

This poem portrays the rituals to be performed after the death of any person for the salvation of the souls. Be it as it may, the poet regretfully says that the sprinkling of milk over his ashes failed to pacify his soul.

The sprinkled milk over my ashes
but didn't calm my soul.

On the contrary, it was like pouring oil over fire. (*Where* 16)

But, at the same time, the poet expresses in the next stanza that the soul is in the universe where he does not feel lonely. He writes that "in the vast cosmos where I now live / with other souls, like members of fraternity" (*Where* 16). He enlightens his readers further by asking: "Who says that souls are entirely indeterminate?" and he himself clarifies: "They may not touch or eat / but they can see and feel (*Where* 16). He further replies by adding his perceptive thought that the souls "flit around each other like fireflies" (*Where* 16).

The poet depicts the existing Indian custom by saying that if the soul is detached from the deceased body with unfulfilled longings, it can never get its salvation. He explains why the soul could not be calmed down even though milk was sprinkled over his ashes. In the poem, he reveals that it is the dead being forgotten by their loved ones distress them the most. The poet saw his beloved Sheila weeping over his dead body. Albeit he feels gloomy for her grief, the typical human fear is that how long would she be weeping over his death is mentally upsetting him more.

In the midst of his cremation, I saw
and heard Sheila's tears
but how long did it take for them to dry up?
This was the most agonizing
of all remembrances
which kept stabbing me on the pyre
like nails on the body of the man on the cross. (*Where* 16)

A critical study of his poetry demonstrates that his poems deal with death, mental agony, illusion, frustration, delusion, attachment, possessiveness, detachment, desires, expectations, etc., – the feeling that is experienced by everyone at any phase of his or her life. Bijay Kumar Das befittingly remarks, “Kumar’s poetry begins with experiences of life felt in the blood and felt along the heart” (Das 19)

Kumar in the poem *Funeral Procession* says that he has followed every funeral procession of his relative, friend or stranger in his town. The lines of the poet, mentioned below, makes the reader understand the poet’s philosophical view of life and death at the time of funeral process:

A funeral procession is as long
as that of a wedding except that the mourners
are in black, their faces wan and the musicians
are playing drums muffled by a wet cloth.
No word spoken and no sighs heard. (*Where* 20)

In his opinion, one can understand the essence or temporal nature of our life. Philosophically, we do not bring anything with us into the world while taking birth and do not take anything with us while departing the world. This ultimate discerning Reality can be understood while attending any funeral procession. In fact, it reminds him of the ultimate goal of his life. His attending the funeral procession makes him reflect over life and its mysterious nature associated with the bamboozling question of the place where the dead go from this physical world.

III

Conclusion

Terry Eagleton says, “Human beings are perhaps the only animals who live in the perpetual shadow of death” (Eagleton 12). It has been a philosophical issue which most writers have explored and Shiv K Kumar has also tried to investigate into this issue in some of his poems. Without an iota of doubt, a close observation of his poems certainly reveals that Kumar’s understanding of man’s or animal’s birth-death-rebirth cycle in a philosophical way is quite noteworthy and praiseworthy.

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