

A Comparative Study of the Theme of Death in the Poems of Gauri Deshpande and Mamta Kalia

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Abstract – Modern Indian-English women poets have explored different themes like love, man, Nature, death, God and social issues in their poems. In this paper I have compared the theme of Death in the poems of Gauri Deshpande and Mamta Kalia. Gauri Deshpande presents death in different ways. In one poem, she welcomes death; in another poem she presents death as horror. I discuss different views of Gauri Deshpande on a single issue i.e death in her poems. Mamta Kalia is another poet who also explores the theme of death in her poems. She expresses that death should be welcomed with positive note. Gauri Deshpande has connected death with traditional aspects, whereas Mamata Kalai has connected death with material world. The detailed analysis of these two poets about death has been presented in this paper with a comparative note on these two writers.

Keywords: Death, Identity, Welcome, Positive Thinking, Disappointment, Humans, Life.

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The predominant themes taken up by Indian-English poets have been love, man, Nature, death, God and social issues etc.; usually not much penchant has been shown for death as a major concern in their writings. But in the modern age more interest in this area has been roused as a part of the poet's purpose to understand his or her self. The poetic identity and poetic creativity have become valid and significant poetic subjects now. Thus we find the modern women poets of this period setting out exploring their internal and external worlds. In the process of self-analysis, the process of their poetic creativity, a probe into their identity as a poet and the cause of their initiation into writing became unavoidable subjects. These poets attempted to unravel the mystery of their poetic psyche in their writings.

But the existence of an independent identity of a woman has not received much attention or acknowledgement in the society. Traditionally a woman's identity has been expected to merge with her various roles as a wife, beloved, mother, daughter and so on. The possibility of being a SHE, an independent woman, a person capable of achieving individualism is denied to her. As Lila Ray puts it in a nutshell, "She is the 'Angel-in-the-House' whose world is of 'Kinder, Kuche, Kirche'—children, kitchen and church" (20). She is divested of all individual traits of a human being and thus is dehumanized. The traditional feminine identity is imposed by men, a weak identity, one which has no consequence.

A woman has no independent existence, identity or freedom of will and she always exists in relation to others. Entire rearing and gearing up of a girl is male-oriented and her salvation lies in marriage. Mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers—all condition her for this destiny, right since her childhood. But, long before the influence of the West, Indian women attempted to evolve their own values in life. Modern women poets have revealed acute awareness of the tragic fate which comes with the fact of being born as a woman.

Against this backdrop, Gauri Deshpande and Mamta Kalia, the two poets being studied here, are well-known in the literary circles. They made their name in the field of Indian English Poetry. Both were introduced to the poetry reading public, and both are poets of a certain stature and talent. Both of them display a unique social consciousness in their verse.

Known for expressing herself boldly and fearlessly, Gauri Deshpande (born 1942) writes poetry, essays and short stories in Marathi and English. She comes from a family of social reformers and intellectuals. Her three collections of poetry, *Between Births* (1968), *Lost Love* (1970) and *Beyond The Slaughter House* (1972) show a similar sensitiveness to the changing moods of nature, while some of her love poems recreate the drama of Man-Woman relationship as evocatively as Kamala Das, though on a much more limited scale and in a less challenging manner. Some of

her lyrics are, however, stained by tear-mongering (i.e., 'If only I'd die').

Gauri Deshpande's first collection begins with a wonderful poem 'Death', which baffles the imagination and holds our breath. It is a poem, which requires a careful reading and calls for mature judgment. The poem 'Death' is in four sections. In the first section Death is imagined as a lover, who is also the future husband. So Gauri Deshpande wishes to wait for him first as a 'tardy lover' and then would walk the seven steps with him, which suggests by implication a union with Death in marriage, like a Hindu bride. In the second, she wishes to look back as and when she walks with him. So Death is imagined as a friend, a brother, and also a lover.

In the third part, Death is imagined as winter, which follows the summer and takes the living unawares. She asks a baffling question 'what do we the living know about you the death?' In the last section, she feels restless and is impatient to meet death as a blue kitty longing for the arm of the husband. Gauri Deshpande has given a memorable treatment to the theme of Death. The poet personifies Death. It is her lover to be welcomed.

But I want to see him coming

Scan his face joyously

Find there what I want to

Await him impatiently

As I would a tardy lover.

(*Between Births*, 'Death' 1).

These lines powerfully enact the experience of waiting. This waiting can be explicated in various ways: as that of a beloved for a lover or of a devotee for the God. Paradoxically enough, the collection *Between Births* opens with a poem on 'Death'. But this paradox too can be taken as preparation for her second poem in the Collection, 'A Child Waking'. Because in 'Death', she cannot

Leave this child sleeping lulled by its own heart beat?

Can I not dwell upon the tear on its cheek,

Must I keep at this pace so fleet? ('Death' 1).

She has given a detailed treatment to death in the very first poem "Death". For its attempt at concretization of death and the poet's varied responses to it, the poem can't be left out in a study of theme of death in modern poetry. She believes death to be relieving force and an inevitable reality. Man is slipping on this deathward slope of life; and

We know not release from frantic effort

Until we touch the sure ground of death ('Death' 1).

It is also her husband with whom Gauri would walk "Seven steps that/Make him my ally". But the poet wants to enjoy life also 'to hear where a bird calls' and shows reluctance to 'leave the child sleeping'. The fleeting of time irritates her, "Must I keep at this pace so fleet?" 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.

This is the way to end the duality and the poet is anxious to meet death.

How long must I walk

These long and windsome streets

Before I meet you.

Once she had fled gazing in death's face but now she returns:

Return to beg for the sanctuary

Not of love, only of your arms.

This is more or less a confessional statement. There is no inner tension but only a passive acceptance of death that marks the end of the poem. The poet personifies death. It is her lover to be welcomed. But the poet wants to enjoy life also – 'to hear where a bird calls' and shows reluctance to 'leave the child sleeping'. The fleeting of time irritates her: "must I keep at this pace so fleet?" When the poet comes face to face with death, it turns out to be a benevolent presence: The poem has evoked adverse criticism.

In fact, Gauri Deshpande has not revealed a consistent attitude towards death. Having declared death to be a Reliever, Lover, Friend and Brother, she presents it as stranger in her poem, "The Habit", and expresses her horror at the mere thought of death. When the poet wept on the death of a puppy dog, she was advised not to do so for she would get used to it in time. It is a routine work. A passive acceptance of death marks the end of the poem.

The puppy dog died

And I cried my heart out.

This is not really a conviction but rather a conjecture. Monika Varma opines that

The Indian woman poet is surely to be little different—because the Indian woman is after all a different entity and can, therefore, be more than sighs and thighs, and surely we can expect her to express herself in words and sentiments other than pushing up Yellow daisies (3).

'The Habit' is another important poem on death. The poet who wept on the death of a puppy dog was advised not to do so. As she grew up she got used to it. But when death changed its orbit and rushed towards her, she was taken aback. Thus she says in the poem 'Habit' about death as a stranger and delineates horror at the reflection of death.

Now when I see him crossing a street.

To me, coming swiftly

how am I going to get used to him,

it's the first time

and I've had no time.

Forgetfulness becomes a 'habit' with the poetess. The poem 'The air feels' seems to be depicting her nostalgia for the past movements of life. It is in all dying and living that she wishes to get solace. The visit of the guest may fill her with wonderful sensations in life but as the clouds heap and heap upon the west, she lies 'empty, barren and bereft'. She is haunted with the memory of her lover who leaves her never to return. The note of interrogation at the end of the line displays the degree of attachment that she has developed during all these years. The difference between the two moments; when the lover is present and when he is not, is beautifully expressed in "The Air feels",

The air feels and though you were near

And yet I know that you are not.

Is it that I have forgotten.

How the air feels

When you are near?

Another poem relevant for our study, "In Memoriam" has been divided into three parts. In part I 'Autumn Equinox', she tries to capture the moments of joy enjoyed in the past. There is a conscious use of pun on the word 'lie' which is meaningful in both the contexts. This pun on the word 'lie' has been carried to the second part 'Easter' also with an awareness of slight change in the atmosphere from Autumn Equinox to Easter. It is change from the 'night wasn't

colder than day' to the 'night that was hotter than noon'. In the third part, 'A Day of No Particular Significance', there is an effort to learn, and 'relearn' the enigma of existence through a gradual process of renunciation, deprivation and hope and second death. Second Death is death in-life awareness of the poetess in the absence of her lover. It seems to be the prevailing mood of the poetess in "Lost Love".

Renunciation –Deprivation- hope

and the second death

(Without April, one hopes).

Even I must learn this sometime.

Not only life, even love is a function of time. "In Departure Time 2.30 A.M", she is not as much disturbed from the fact of Departure as she grieves the fact that her lover assumes love to be only a 'function of Time'. She takes much time to settle down unlike the lover of Pasternak's poem 'Parting' who is unable to reconcile that his beloved has parted company with him. The absence of her partner makes her feel old.

I grieve that you should assume

Love is only a function of time

('Departure Time 2-30 A.M'. 15).

'In December' is a poem in which the lover is imagined as Lord Shiva, the much desired and unattainable lover in the Hindu mythology. In another poem 'To Shiva', Gauri Deshpande invokes lord Shiva, 'Death of Death'. In these poems, her lover is like Lord Shiva, unattainable although much desired.

To the feet of God

I'd be canonized;

Or if you were indeed him,

My lord Shiva.

The tension between desire and vision forms the core of Gauri Deshpande's poetry 'Between Births' but seems to give and add another dimension to her poetry in the same collection by becoming demonstratively vague. It indicates that two distinct moods of the poetess are operating in collusion. It is synoptic of the tension coiled within her.

Mamta Kalia's verse in *Tribute to Papa* (1970) and *Poems* (1978), on the other hand, have a refreshingly astringent quality. She can talk about love, marriage, family life and society with irony and wit. Mamta Kalia is a poet of feminine desires,

hopes, fears and loneliness. She is essentially a poet of love. In almost every poem there is a reference to the body, which she both likes and dislikes in turns. She writes to demolish the conservative and tradition-bound values of our society. She may rightly be called the poet of the body. In Mamta's poetry one comes across the intensity of passions. Her poetry demonstrates distaste for the Abstract and a preference for the elemental.

In her short poem, "Positive thinking", an attempt is made to forget the death pangs with the help of modern amenities and luxuries. The poem attempts to externalize the loneliness and agony of the social and primal disappointments.

Let us forget your death and mine
 We have so much to remember:
 A comfortable home
 Your air-conditioned office
 Our quarter-dozen children
 Your bank-balance
 The Race-course nearly
 Your yoga exercises
 My fortnightly manicure
 And all those social engagements
 Who cares for primal disappointments?

The poem throws light on the futility of modern life, with its sick hurry and divided aims. 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".

The unique feature of these poetesses' writings on death is their final attitude of Survival. In the words of Ayyappa Paniker, they are the inheritors of a legacy that enjoins upon man to "cast off fear of death – live a full life" and are descendants of Bhishma, who while he himself lay dying, taught Yudhisthir 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

('Before Time Outlives Us').

In these poets, we have no detailed studies or close and living encounters with death. Their response to the theme widely differs from their early predecessors. In their realistic outlook, death is despiritualized, demythicized and to an extent desentimentalized. They have not composed any eulogizing elegies or indulged in highly sentimental mourning. Death has been portrayed both as a benevolent and a malevolent force, but there is no elation or panic. The overall mood is the acceptance of death as a fact of life and both the poets are trying to place death in relation to life.

Dr. O. P. Bhatnagar regrets the lack of anything more than mere stereotyped images of death in Indian poetry in English and asks: "Are not there mass death by violence, adulteration, social tortures, ritual killing of self-destruction?" An important aspect of their treatment of death 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 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 touched upon in Indian-English poetry. Women have been given attention for their unique deaths in Sati, female-feticide, infanticide and dowry-death. Desire of self-destruction also finds expression though very rarely. Thus, the poets have brought greater immediacy and urgency to a hackneyed theme of death.

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