

Death not proud as the pall moving on: A comparative study of the notion of death in two sonnets from Donne and two of Rumi's *Ghazals*

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Abstract

'Death', can be taken to be a central theme in most religions or religious sects around the world and historically it has been studied from different perspectives by different figures. Literature, is one of the fields in which this theme has been drawn on with much frequency as well. As a result, various literary works are at hand which are of different or heterogeneous nature due to the religious outlook they are nourished by or the moment they are penned at; that is the very socio-historical and philosophical-ideological context in which they are produced. To be precise, the present study, putting the theme of "Death" in center, aims at providing a comparative study of two pairs of poems from two different poets of different religious backgrounds and literary traditions: John Donne and Rumi. What the study intends to highlight is the fact that despite their different religious beliefs and outlooks, the two poets have something in common and that is how they try to come up with the anxiety of "Death" in the poems put into study here: Donne's *Hymn to God and My God, In My sickness*; Rumi's *Ghazal 911* and *Ghazal 2039*.

Keywords: death, religion, earthy life, death anxiety

Introduction

"Death", as a life-long complexity for human being, with all questions, anxieties and tensions it has created for humanity, has turned out to be one of the main fears of life for most people. Through centuries, different religions or religious figures and sects have tried to approach it from different standpoints relying on their own principles and teachings so as to bring resolution to the above-mentioned complexities and pacifying the tumultuous minds. However, the unsolved matters and unanswered questions revolving around the issue of "Death" are still baffling people and the emerging death anxiety more or less strains human psyche regardless of their age or religious beliefs. The word *Thanatophobia* is a related term used in the field of psychology and literature. *Thanatophobia* comes from the word "Thanatos", the personification of death according to Greek mythology. It has been derived from Greek word "Thanatos" meaning phobia of death: "persistent and extreme fear of death or dying without any logical explanation" (Singh and Roy 32).

[1] As asserted by some critics in the way of explaining the cause of such a psychological reaction, *Thanatophobia* is defined as a feeling of dread, apprehension or solicitude (anxiety) when one thinks of the process of dying, or ceasing to 'be' (Kaur, Banerjee and Rani 78) [2].

Taking into account the above-mentioned facts, it is not hard to infer why theme of "Death", or "Death Anxiety", has turned out to find a central place in the field of literature. As a matter of fact, through centuries numerous writers have tried to provide acceptable answers to the uprising questions revolving around the notion of "Death" so as to bring resolution to puzzled minds relying on their own religions or religious thought: what has resulted in the formation of a great body of literature each one dealing with "Death" differently. However, the present study intends to highlight the fact that despite the existing differences or the different approaches adopted by various works of literature,

produced by different writers in the light of different religious beliefs, works of literature produced in the case have something in common and can be studied comparatively focusing on how they try to bring resolution to the matter of "Death Anxiety". To be more specific, this study focuses on two different literary figures of different religions from two different ages: John Donne from English Baroque Age of Literature and Rumi from the Persian Literature of Gnosticism. Actually, despite the existing historical differences affecting the production of a work of art or literature, different "race", "milieu", "moment" and "dominant faculty" (Bressler 40) [3] as well as religion, which might make the study historically irrelevant at the first glance some existing similarities can turn out to be the basis of this comparison: the fact that both Rumi and Donne have been considered as major religious figures or scholars (philosophers) of their time; thus their works to be taken as the manifestation or representative of the Islamic and Christian philosophical or gnostic thoughts of their age: Post- Renaissance and Post- Mongol Islamic Era both characterized with radical changes and the religious controversies. Precisely, the spirit of age has made both Rumi and Donne look at "Death" in a new light because no more at their time the semi-stable religious foundations characterizing previous phases in the history of Christianity and Islam existed. Precisely speaking, at the age of Donne "traditional knowledge, beliefs, rules, rituals and territories were shaken by the upheavals in religion [as] Christianity had no longer existed in a single centrally organized form": "the Catholic Church undertook reforms" (Lyons 11) [4]; what despite various ideological and philosophical controversies resulted into a kind of search for "identity" for individuals (12) for the first time in the history of Christianity: personal attempts to make sense of unanswerable religious matters through a kind of self-made philosophy or Gnosticism. Relatedly, Rumi's age was also

an age of religious controversies as the Islamic world was baffled by the Mongol invaders and not only radical fatalist ideas, had emerged among various Muslim groups, taking that massacre and bloodshed as the “the scourge of God” because of their act of committing great sins (May 32) ^[5], but also all older religious and philosophical points of stability were shaken to their bases and what seemed to be taken for granted or as resolved for centuries were questioned again as a result of the new tumultuous situation. What Rumi did, as a Muslim Sufi Scholar and Gnostic can be taken as somehow parallel to Donne, as through his religious discourse he had to bring resolution to all those new emerging debates: at least for himself at personal level and then for his followers.

As mentioned above, both Donne and Rumi needed to build new strong philosophical bases in their attempt to destabilize every atom of religious thought and conduct. That is not then hard to infer why, going through their work, one can vividly trace controversies or philosophical conflicts dealing with basic religious matters in general and some problematic philosophical issues like “Death” in specific. To go on this study two of John Donne’s sonnets *Death be not Proud*, and *Hymn to God, My God, In My sickness*, from his *Holly Sonnets* – which can be claimed to reflect in the best way his life-long religious controversies as well as his attempts in the way of developing a system of Gnosticism capable of justifying the matter of “Death” – are put into comparison with two of Rumi’s *ghazals* (sonnets) that are historically considered as the clincher to his book of sonnets *Ghazaliyat-e Shams*, one belonging to a few days before the end of his life and one to just moments before his own death. What is going to be done in the discussion part is explicating the poem in terms of their literariness or literary devices to find how by looking through specific historical-philosophical lenses the two figures approach the matter of “Death”. Otherwise speaking, their poems are taken as discursive rooms where Donne and Rumi rely on any possible religious, philosophical, literary and lingual tools in their attempt to bring resolution to complicated unresolved questions about “Death”. Thus, the explication of these poems, by analogy, can be taken as equal to a journey through the history of Islamic and Christian theology and philosophy on the turning wheels of the poetic discourses of Donne and Rumi; journeys at progress toward the shrine of reassurance where religious controversies are not let in.

Discussion

In *Death be not Proud*, and *Hymn to God, My God, In My sickness*, Donne is trying to speak about the matter of “Death”, his fears and his longing for assurance and redemption through adopting definite literary themes, images and devices that make for the creation of a kind of story (Suzhet); what by analogy can be taken as a parable, an exemplum or the story of a Muslim’s struggle to “die before death”, based on what the holy prophet Mohammad has introduced as what a true Muslim must try to do; what later turns out to be one of the main assumptions of Sufism and one of the driving themes in Rumi’s *Ghazaliyat-e Shams*: highlighted to a high degree in two of his sonnets that historically are considered the clincher or conclusion to the book, one belonging to a few days before the end of his life and one to just moments before his death.

But, what does it mean to “die before death”? To find the answer, one must go to the deepest layer of the Islamic

theology and how life of a faithful man is considered as a pilgrimage to God: to go through different phases, various controversies, to deal with what causes him to go astray and finally to grasp the true cognitive tools which would link him to his God. This is in fact, the same thing Christianity teaches to its true followers and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* can be said to be the best example or better to say the most outstanding religious work of the post-reformation English literature revolving around the issue. Yet there exists differences between the two religions at some points and Islam does not consider man sinful because of Adam and Eve’s fault like Christianity and highlights the fact that man is born pure and if he is able to keep this purity during the pilgrimage he will have no problem in finding his way to his God. From the Islamic point of view the most successful pilgrim is the one who can come up with the fear of “Death” before the end of his life or in other words, the one who is able to move toward it with full consent and free from any doubts as he must finally come to the idea that it is not the end; it is just the point of transition and at the final moment he is to pass the port beyond which no more conflicts exist. The two sonnets of Donne, mentioned above, can be analyzed in such a light to a great extent as they can be claimed to represent moments in his pilgrimage: moments of conflicts and pains and the portrayal of the final gains. In other words, like Rumi, Donne shares the full record of his pilgrimage with the reader and these sonnets are what encapsulate his progress as a pilgrim who is able to kill the fear of “Death” before dying.

It can be inferred that, by the time of writing the first Sonnet, *Death be not Proud*, Donne is really in fear of “Death”, and needs to get rid of the existing doubts by justifying it based on his own logic and his own reading of religion – the self-made Gnosticism mentioned above. To do so, he attacks his fear in its heart: he chooses apostrophe, addresses “Death” directly and in order to empower himself tries to look at it through the eyes of contempt. In this way, the idea of the immortality of the soul aids him and makes him able to envision the fact that like its counterparts, sleep and rest, “Death” will pass and man will wake up eternally; “Death” is only a poor and powerless agent and when its mission is done – through the possibilities provided by fate, chance, kings and desperate men – it will bring man even pleasure since he will get rid of the bones – bodily pains and limitations; what before the real “Death” even hallucination through opium or other drugs could provide for one. That is why, in Donne’s viewpoint, “Death” must not be proud. The two final lines reflect a sense of new emerging confidence in Donne after going through those justifications and he is now ready to announce that state in a paradoxical style: “One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die!” (Robbins 542) ^[6]; what makes the paradox very strong or outstanding is the very essence of the existing binary opposition between “Life” and “Death” and how man has to deal with it at every moment of his pilgrimage.

The way Donne introduces “Death” as a short passing sleep, might remind one of the religious analogy that “Sleep is a brother to Death”: what is portrayed in Christian theology as well as in Islamic thought, reflected in different *Ahadith* or religious sayings by the Prophet Mohammad and his disciples, e.g. the saying “we are all sleep. Just when we die, we wake up”. This idea is in fact what Rumi tries to express

in *Ghazal* 911¹ which is said to have been written a few days before his death. Yet, the strategies used by the two poets are different. Rumi does not address "Death" directly. His poetic craft is based on a different imagery: He is to imagine the time when he is dead and people are carrying his pall or coffin. He addresses those people who are in fear of "Death", and in form of a sermon tries to reveal it to them that they must not wail his death by the sight of his corpse. He says this dead body is only the sign that his soul is ready for a congregation with God. He likens grave to a curtain or better to say an interval between the earthly life and the people living eternally in paradise. He then empowers the structure of this *Ghazal* by some other beautiful imageries: the image of sun set and sun rise, the image of growth and finally the image of the well with an allusion to the story of the Prophet Yusuf or Joseph. Through these images in fact, he intends to address those people who fear "Death" and are not mature enough to act as true pilgrims to their God. Rumi gives hints to them: "Death" is only like sun set. The next day again sun would rise and man's soul which is as shiny as sun does not die by physical death. In fact man's body in grave is like a seed planted by God. It only finds a fertile soil to grow after death and it is only by that time that man can go beyond the limitation of the seed – the body – imprisoning him during earthly life and avoiding him to reach full growth. The "well" image is in fact another parallel for grave and Rumi wants to assert that earthly life is like a well for a true believer in God and in the same way as what happened to Joseph, God would take out his true believers from the well of the vanity and despair of the worldly life. Actually, God does the job by taking him to a new world in which he is able to go beyond limitations because he is blessed with the power to speak the language of truth. He goes beyond the sleep- like hallucination created by the limitation of the language – the cognitive tools – of this world and wakes up after a short while in the next one to celebrate his new language joyfully. Rumi ends this *Ghazal* in this way.

Donne's *Hymn to God, My God, In My sickness*, might be regarded as a complementary to his *Death be not Proud*; what metaphorically can be taken as the depiction of the final stages of his pilgrimage. The deathbed scene and sickness theme is a proof to this fact. It can be put this way that now Donne who is assured of the weakness of "Death", after conquering it in *Death be not Proud*, stands in the place of a true believer can praise his God in form of a hymn. Actually, he has found the true route and has the map. That is why he provides the reader with the map imagery. In his viewpoint, his body is like a flat map on bed and physicians who are like cosmographers would finally find the fact that he has entered the strait of fever and is near the end of his life in the southwest. Yet what is highlighted by Donne at this point is the issue of flatness and that such a map – his body that is approaching physical death – is in reality the source of comfort as east and west finally meet each other in such a map: the end of physical life in west is equal to the beginning of another in a new east. In this sense, all places on such a map like Jerusalem, Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar are connected to each other through waters – and only seem disjointed in appearance. There is only one destination for the pilgrim who travels on this map and the waves would finally take him to his God. Donne then concludes that he is the one who has been successful in getting aware of the secret of that unity. So he is now

hopeful enough to wait for God's redemption as he is now both Adam and Jesus: if he is sinful because of Adam's sin, he is also the one purified by Christ's blood. To put another way, Donne has tried to get rid of sins and to move toward redemption of his God by devoting himself to him and becoming a preacher of him in his church. That is why he is full of hope and is certain about God's redemption in the final lines of the poem and prays to him for that.

Rumi's *Ghazal* 2039, seems to be filled with the same kind of hope and certainty. Rumi who is now sick like Donne is preparing for death. He seems to be addressing a person beside his deathbed and asks him to leave him alone if he does not want to be infected by his malady. Rumi then reveals to this person that this is the malady of love which has put him in bed. He adds that his beloved has gotten a heart as hard as granite, tortures him much and that in the way to this beloved he has faced many difficulties. But this beloved is the king of beauty, so he has to be loyal and bear all the hardships if he wants to win his attention. Rumi tells that person beside his deathbed that no one can cure the malady caused by that beloved and adds that last night he has "dreamt a sage in the alley of love", who have asked him to join him. What Rumi is talking about as love is in fact the love of God. He is much obsessed by that love and considers himself to be like a lovesick person tortured by his beloved. The only remedy he knows for this sickness is what would be gained by moving toward God. In such a journey many things would block the way and if he wants to go on, he must enable himself by banishing the dragon or better to say the devil by the brilliance of the love of God which is like an emerald; as portrayed in stories or mythologies, the green reflection from emerald was thought to have the power to repel dragons or satanic forces. At the final lines, Rumi announces that he is possessed by such a love and he cannot listen to the person beside him and his philosophical words about life, death and the hope for a remedy because he is already packed and ready to travel to his God. Thus, he ironically addresses that person and makes him understand that if he is interested in the complex matters of this world and is wise enough to understand them, he can be busy with them and can rely on what scientists and philosophers – like Bū Ali or Aveccina – have taught about those matter through their words or lectures to people like Bū 'Ala: a metaphor for simpletons or naïve people.

Conclusion

What was done here was in fact an effort to study the way Donne and Rumi approach the notion of "Death" based on their religious viewpoints and their own specific world pictures; nourished by the spirit of their age and the fruit of their personal attempt to bring resolution to what they had found as religiously controversial. As a matter of fact, both of them are pilgrims on their way to their God and their poetry has turned out to be records of their efforts and how they have tried to come up with what would block their way philosophically and spiritually. Going through such a comparative study it can be concluded that regardless of their different religious assumptions and the different approaches they take on their pilgrimage they are both successful in defeating "Death" at the end not only by making their souls able to go beyond the limitations of earthly life, but also by grasping the language of truth and speaking to the readers about it by their poetry: what gives

them immortality. Can Death be proud as the pall moving on?

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