

The Spiritual Idealisation of Death in the Post-Covid Times Through the Selected Works of Keats, Andre Gide's Novel *Strait Is the Gate* and J.M. Synge's Play *Riders to the Sea*

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Abstract: Freud, in his 1918 work "Reflections on War and Death," observed, "We cannot, indeed, imagine our own death; whenever we try to do so, we find that we survive ourselves as spectators." This paper argues that a life spiritually inclined towards redemption accepts death without any aesthetic or moral constraints. The theme of death has played a prominent role in the writings of Keats, Gide's novel *Strait is the Gate* and Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*. In the aforementioned works, I will try to investigate the following questions-How do these writers maintain a naturalist philosophy of life and a spiritual philosophy of death? How does a reconciliation with human mortality differ in terms of conviction? Is there anything called 'absence of death'? If so, then why did Keats visualise his death in his literary works? How did the character of Alissa from Gide's novel represent 'Death' as a steady, unavoidable reality and, later on, embrace it as a fulfilling experience? How the character, Maurya, described her life with the shades of 'grey' but accepted death as the ultimate keystone in the play *Riders to the Sea*. Through capturing the whole thanatological spectrum depicted by the aforementioned writers, this paper aims to establish the fundamental connection between death, the quest of living with a mental crisis (especially post-covid) and, finally, study the manner in which death helps in strengthening the psycho-cultural connections between the natural grief and the community to which it belongs through a spiritual idealisation of death.

Keywords: Death, Spiritual, Ideal, Grief, Psycho-Cultural Connection

Death, in the pre-pandemic world, has been a collapse of time, a scattering that has happened in one's life, which not only explains the seven stages of grief but also identifies the emotional voice of a person- the tearful sight and the matured self. Grief is an inseparable element when we talk about

death, and we don't know where the grief might take us. Several scholars have argued that the grief of "holding on tight" and the sensible logic of "letting go" has been a painful experience for many. The dilemma of suffering and the attachment to the sufferer makes the whole concept of death a complicated theme. Previous studies examined death as a grave concept, a sordid experience where internal thoughts, sufferings, and guilt torture an individual self. However, the question is, what are we grieving for, the lost body or the liberated soul? Are we grieving because our expectations from the dead person are shattered? Are we grieving because we cannot accept the sudden departure of a dead person? Are we grieving because we suddenly started feeling isolated from the world and united by the grief? We have created a world where we laughed, cried and shared pains. Nevertheless, we need to realise that Life and Death have been a continuous cycle of seasons, and Keats, in his poem, "To Autumn", has beautifully alluded to the philosophy of life and death.

Several studies have shown that death is a difficult thing to digest. Nevertheless, we need to realise that it is not the concept of death which is painful. It is the misconception that death is painful. The complex emotional and intellectual reactions to the idea and the reality of death and dying are painful. Our mind is full of sore thoughts when it comes to death, but if I analyse the works of John Keats, Andre Gide, John Middleton Synge, and many other writers with a similar mindset, we will see that every death is beautiful and it brings a new brim of hope. My aim is not to categorise death as good, bad, non-religious or depressing—my motto is to establish that just like no grief is painless, it is subjective. Similarly, no death is ominous. In this paper, I want to analyse grief and death from a wider perspective—first, what are we grieving about? and second, whom are we grieving for—the one who is dead and will soon take a rebirth for a better life or are we grieving for a body that had no identity? From a spiritual angle, a soul leaves for the heavenly abode and not the body, so are we mourning for a human body that was having an existential crisis in this soul-conscious world? The unaccomplished desires and the incomplete conversations blame the paucity of time, but we need to think—who is to be blamed seriously in reality? Is it not us? We feel it is too early or too depressing

to talk about death or grief. We postpone those feelings with “we will see when it happens,” but when it happens, we look for distractions to suppress our grief and blame death easily.

When we talk about the philosophy of death, we need to trace back to the death philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Death, to Kierkegaard, was not just an end. It was a beautiful enigma. He praises the remembrance of the dead as the purest, freest and most unselfish act of love. For Kierkegaard, death is an invaluable aid for understanding life; ‘No thinker grasps life as death does’, and only death can provide, as Charles Taylor puts it, “the privileged site from which the meaning of life can be grasped, a vantage point, beyond the confusion and dispersal of living” (Stokes and Buben 68). Death is, for Kierkegaard, a deeply instructive and indeed upbuilding concept—provided, paradoxically, that we do not waste time thinking about what death is and what comes after it. Death is ‘the schoolmaster of earnestness’, but instead of teaching us about itself, it teaches us about who and what we are and which questions we don’t have time to ask. In the 21st century, especially post-covid, people are scared to talk about death. They suffer from death denial syndrome because of ‘epistemic foolhardiness’ (Stokes and Buben 68). The absence of compelling evidence to believe that intellectual knowledge about death requires courage and might help in solving the ‘existential dimension of doubt’ is a necessary factor to combat the central challenge of our time. Scholars like Climacus, however, differentiate between his death and other’s death. But Muench argues, if an articulate and highly educated ‘idler’ with ample time to investigate such matters has failed to understand death, can readers be sure they have understood it themselves? (Stokes and Buben 68). Climacus realised his doubt and exclaimed, “My dying is by no means something in general; for others, my dying is some such thing. Nor am I for myself some such thing in general; perhaps for others, I am some such thing in general. But if the task is to become subjective, then every subject becomes for himself exactly the opposite of some such thing in general” (Stokes and Buben 68). Kierkegaard, however, believed that death should not be exceptional for anyone, be it the self or the others in general, because when we contemplate individual mortality, they suddenly point to an irreducible, ineffable particularity about ourselves that is threatened by death. There should not be

any seismic shift in the vision about one's death. There should be no difference between seeing the subject of the thought "I will die" as an abstract token and seeing it as me; the object of my self-regarding concern and affective identification should not be demarcated from others. Such non-deductive immediacy is characteristic of how, for Kierkegaard, we truly see ourselves in imagined presentations of our possible futures.

Kierkegaard's philosophy tells us to be prepared for death. It never asks us to constantly think about death, as Merold Westphal notes—what does thinking about death in every moment look like? It surely cannot mean, as Merold Westphal notes, that at all moments, death is the thematic object of my consciousness, as if "whenever offered a penny for my thoughts, I could answer, I am thinking about my death and immortality" (Westphal 109-10). Edward F. Mooney agrees—were death an obsessive and explicit focus that always floods one's awareness' then such a thought would 'ruin' life. Instead of 'dwelling' on death, Mooney takes Climacus to recommend "having the thought of death [...] with requisite salience and intensity, at the ready every moment" (Mooney 135). The thought of death, then, individuates us in ways that cannot be easily expressed yet, which are utterly decisive for subjectivity. Climacus insists that he has not understood what it means to die. In the 21st century, we all are so confused, and our doubts have turned negative.

The theme of death lacks compelling evidence that provokes subjective deepening. Death is a reasonable exchange for bringing balance to an ostensibly grateful universe, but a reluctant acceptance of the inevitability of death is seen as a problem by many individuals. If we analyse the poem "When I have fears that I may cease to Be" by John Keats, we will notice that in this poem, Keats was scared of death, but he was never afraid to die. The pain of separating from his brother, the trauma of separating himself from his lover, Fanny and the unaccomplished desire to prove his literary calibre before the world compelled him to worry about death. Keats was never afraid to die, and he was not ready to die so early. Keats wanted to be remembered posthumously because of his words and his poetry, but he was unsure of his greatness. His literary farsightedness can be read in the following lines:

“And when I feel, fair creature of an hour
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love—then on the shore
Of the wide world, I stand alone and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.” (9-14)

These lines took us back to the time when Covid-19 took away many innocent lives. Many people had so many dreams to achieve and so many promises to fulfil; some had emotions invested, and some had EMIs pending. Some wanted to enjoy with their family and enjoy their marriage, but COVID-19 shattered all dreams. These lines show how beautifully Keats explains the uncertainty of life and shatters the concept of the future. Keats wanted the readers to embrace the present and not waste too much time planning for the future because there is no future, at least not a planned one. He thought he could live an adorable life with his family and Fanny, but nothing worked out. As a reader, we postpone a lot of things because we believe that we have a lot of time, but in reality, we have no time at all. Therefore, Keats teaches us to accept every opportunity provided by life. It's better to accept fate than not try at all. At least there will be no regret. In another poem, *Ode to the Nightingale*, Keats tries to find his solace in a beautiful nightingale. But he also accepts that everything beautiful cannot be immortal. This can be associated with his love for Fanny Brawne, Keats' nightingale. Keats longed for Fanny's presence in his life. Being a passionate lover, he desperately wanted Fanny to love him, but that day never arrived. Like an aimless wanderer and hopeless lover, he waited until his last day just to accept that nothing lasts forever, neither his love for Fanny nor his desire to earn literary glory, “Tis not through envy of thy happy lot; But being too happy in thine happiness” (5-6).

These lines reflect Keats' selfless love for Fanny, he was happy in 'her' happiness. Keats is the epitome of a Petrarchan lover who believes in loving one woman, his Fanny, even though he knows she left him with a deep sense of loss and made him forcibly accept a seeming reassurance that 'everything' inevitably fades. The beautiful struggle between leaving everything on time and not

being able to accept the final call for death makes us lose the inevitable victory between Imaginary and Reality. It is difficult for us to bid adieu to someone we love immensely, some leave us intentionally, and some leave us because of destiny, but ultimately, we suffer because we cannot disregard attachment. In spiritual history, 'attachment' is considered one of the vices, but human psychology fails to accept this reality. We cannot accept the separation from our loved ones, and unfortunately, that starts our anxiety. Covid-19 taught us nothing good or beautiful can last forever. We want to remember the times of lockdown as a vision or a dream. But all of us have to rethink the final question that Keats asks in this poem, "Do I wake or sleep?" (Keats 80). The typical human nature to remain asleep when we need to be conscious and finally resist the inevitability of death as a 'waking dream' needs to be redefined sooner.

Death can be studied as a deep sense of duty and debt. In Andre Gide's novel, *Strait is the Gate*, the character of Alissa portrays the definition of self-sacrificial and spiritual acceptance of death. When Alissa talks about learning the piano or reading a book in a foreign language, she says what she likes is the "slight difficulty that lies in the pursuit of their meaning and feeling the unconscious pride of overcoming this difficulty, and of overcoming it more and more successfully, adds to my intellectual pleasure a certain spiritual containment, which it seems to me I cannot do without" (Gide 56). Alissa loved Jerome, but she believed in the power of spirituality. Spirituality, just like the earth, has the power of gravity. It helps us to remain grounded. Alissa is attached to Jerome, but her attachment for Jerome indicates a very different pleasure "I no longer get any joy out of that part of life that has to be lived without him. My virtue is all only to please him" (Gide 58). She was detached from the consciousness of the body by considering all humans, including Jerome, a soul, to remain in her 'flying state'. This state of Alissa is called the meditative idealisation of original virtues, where she is willing to eschew her love for Jerome but also sacrifices her love for her sister by considering her a better match for Jerome. Some readers presented Alissa as selfish, whereas others presented her as the goddess of sacrifice, but I read the character of Alissa very differently. Alissa had been embracing pain since her childhood. She had to sacrifice every little thing

in life. When Jerome entered her life, she felt loved and wanted, for the first time in her life. She wanted to spend time with Jerome, but at the same time, she didn't want to possess him. The moment she realised that it would be impossible for her to survive without Jerome, she pushed him away. The divine love and sustenance that God has been offering Alissa automatically radiated all around, thereby helping her to create and survive in the divine land of *Satyuga*, once again upon the earth. Gide's title comes from the book of St Matthew, "Enter ye in at the strait gate—for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth into life, and few there be that find it" (Gide 3). The passage makes a strong impact on Jerome but perhaps makes an even stronger and contrary one on Alissa. Jerome accepted Alissa, and he was aware of her spiritual beliefs, but it was difficult for him to love Alissa from a distance. He wanted a perfect love story, but Alissa's virtuous resistance to love affected him psychologically. Alissa, on the other hand, preferred a calm life, closed off rather than opened up. Jerome wanted to travel the world with his only world, Alissa, but she was too scared to visualise the boundless experiences of life with Jerome. Her spiritual inclination constantly reminds her that she is an incorporeal self-effulgent light- her soul is immortal, and her purpose in life should be to spread the divine points of light. In this world, the life and death cycle has been just another costume in a drama to her. Alissa wanted to play her part in the drama and leave the old world, which was on the verge of destruction. Her emotional turmoil since her mother left compelled her to accept the principle of 'me and me alone'. She wanted to fly away from this mortal body and reach her original abode of peace. Alissa never wanted Jerome to confiscate himself in her spiritually inclined, claustrophobic world, and therefore, she wanted him to live a happy life with her sister. She wanted to connect with the Almighty and rise to the level of deity-hood, being worship-worthy, pure, completely vice-less and righteous with the inculcation of 16 degrees of purity.

As Alissa says, quoting another religious philosopher, Pascal, "we do not feel our bonds as long as we follow willingly him who leads; but as soon as we begin to resist and to draw away, then indeed we suffer" (Gide 72). This means that Alissa willingly sacrificed her love for Jerome, but she

did not sacrifice herself; in other words, she chose to become her own shadow instead of Jerome's. Sartre, in his essay, *Being and Nothingness*, exclaims, "Thus we are perpetually *threatened* by the annihilation of our actual choice and perpetually threatened with choosing ourselves-and consequently with becoming-other than we are," similarly, Andre Gide puts it in *Journals* (Gide 86). "The thought of death pursues me with a strange insistence. Every time I make a gesture, how many times already? I compute, how many times more? And full of despair I feel the turn of the year rushing towards me" (Gide 88). Alissa is caught in a religious problem of self-consistent and human affection in places with Pascal and Kierkegaard, both figures fascinated by renunciation. Jerome is a man of sensuality. He considers Alissa to be the best chapter of his life; even after her death, he has lived with her thoughts. He exclaims, "And indeed I felt happy with her, so perfectly happy, that the one desire in my mind was that it should differ in nothing from hers, and already I wished for nothing beyond her smile, and to walk with her thus, hand in hand, along a sun-warmed flower-bordered path" (Gide 68). He compares Alissa's beauty with the beautiful world of nature and treats her as the only calm of this universe, "Fear, care, the slightest stir of emotion even, evaporated in her smile, melted away in the delightful intimacy, like the mist in the perfect blueness of the sky" (Gide 67). Nobody could love Alissa the way Jerome loved her, and nobody could sacrifice her happiness for Jerome the way Alissa did. This love story resembles Camus' remarks in *Summer in Algiers*:

When I have been away from this country for some time, I imagine its dusks as promises of happiness. On the hills looking down over the town, there are paths among the mastic-trees and olive-trees. And it is towards them that my heart then turns. I can see sheaves of black birds rising up against the green horizon. In the sky, suddenly emptied of its sun, something releases its hold. A whole flock of red cloud stretches up until it melts into the air. (Gide 95)

The Epicurean dilemma, 'Earnestness is that you think death and that you are thinking it as your lot, and that you are then doing what death is indeed unable to do—namely, that you are and death also is' (Stokes and Buben 68) must be replaced with Kierkegaardian insight. The doubt as an existential crisis about the radical scepticism of death compels us to investigate the earnestness, which, if not

solved, might also result in an individual crisis. We need to understand that *Earnestness* is not simply living each moment as if it's your last, but the more complex attitude of 'the living of each day as if it were the last and also the first in a long life'. "To fill the gap between intellectual courage and epistemic foolhardiness, we need to believe that 'if death is night, then life is day...'" (Stokes and Buben 68). This thought introduces us to Maurya, the sorrowful protagonist in Synge's one-act play, *Riders to the Sea*. Maurya, an epitome of love and a helpless mother, lost all her boys in the hands of the destructive sea. Bartley, her last son, left her for the sea despite repeated signals from fate. Maurya knew she wouldn't be able to see her son anymore, so she tried to stop him. Death comes to Maurya with a formal invitation, and every time, she has to accept it, though unwillingly. She never denied the intricate relationship between human will and predestination. Maurya resembled the great traditional protagonists in her heroic power of endurance and spiritual transcendence over her suffering and other crises in life.

Pain, a melancholic term entrenched with emotions, is a qualitative concept. It should not be boundless. In *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya adopts the principle of stoicism after the death of Bartley. She declares with a challenge, "There's no harm the sea can do to me" (Synge 57). Maurya knew the philosophy of Karma, and with her supernatural vision, she could visualise that life on earth had come to the extreme point of degradation and was poised for major destruction. She never denied death, but she was unable to accept the perpetual battle between the life-giver and the destroyer, between the mother and the destructive sea. The colour 'grey' symbolises the death of Maurya's death as well—the death of her innocence, the death of her happiness, the death of her hopes and desires. Maurya has been emancipated from the everlasting cycle of suffering and bereavement. She had reached a certain point in her life where 'no grief' along with 'no one's grief' could affect her in any way. Maurya has been compelled to withdraw her sympathy from the sufferings of mankind—"I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening" (Synge 56). The spiritual transition from misery to a profound tragic transcendence helped her to become a self-sovereign spiritual authority. This mesmerising spiritual transformation portrays Maurya as a mastermind alliance that radiates a

wave of positive spiritual vibrations across the globe and presents death as the ultimate super-sensuous joy, peace and bliss.

It is evident that the soul's journey is repetitive and follows the cycle of *birth, death, and rebirth*. This conclusion is supported by the example of the sacrificing soul of Alissa, the intense longing for fame and love that Keats' soul yearned for, and the melancholic soul of Maurya, who breaks down every day, constantly reminded of the dreariness of her life. The texts gift us with protagonists who continue to accept life according to the repetition of the cycle of *birth, death and rebirth*. Death is a part of life. It's not an exception to life- the soul takes the body to explore, enjoy and experience. Alissa made us realise that without the soul, the body is useless. Death, to many, is still a cultural illusion of taming. Many people believe in the paradox of mortality- perpetual denial and conquering death. Maurya pushed us to research the accurate ways of interrogating death as an important cultural and historical period that shaped the attitude towards death and dying in different typical ways. Keats, by placing death within the lexical, emotional, and intellectual corpus of the reader, instigated us to analyse seriously: What is scary—Is it the concept of death or the loneliness that surrounds us after losing a near one? This paper, with the help of the specific characters who believed in the power of spirituality, aims to dispel the inner darkness to apprehend the real truth about death. With an urgent need for a paradigm shift in our thought patterns, I feel this paper will help us lead a life from self-transformation to world transformation in a proactive way. The seismic shift in the thought pattern- from impure to pure, from negative to positive and from evil to good will help us to explore the thanatological spectrum of the world more consciously.

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