

## MUSINGS

# Death, Grief, and Mourning: Some Chaotic Thoughts

FAYEZA HASANAT

We always talk about life. And then when people die, we talk about their deaths in terms of life—a life they will live for eternity in all incomprehensible sense of peace and prosperity. Only the dead knows where the dead goes, and because we are left behind to live a life without them, we try to understand their demise by interpreting it as a departure—from one place to another; and hence, a movement. Movement is life. We give life to the dead through emotion, logic, and ethics (of religion, morality, society, or philosophy). And by giving death a life in our own way, we 'handle' death. We do not talk about death. Death—the most public moment of one's last connection with the earth—becomes a private matter. It becomes private because grief is thought to be a private matter. But mourning, on the other hand is public. Mourning is a public safeguarding of the ideology of the private (grief). In mourning, the negation of death becomes an affirmative sign.

The poetics of mourning is generally constructed out of three issues, namely, loss, commemoration, and ethics. Loss is the truth of the inexpressible absence that demands to be expressed in words; following loss comes a period of mourning, when personal feelings and expressions of loss are intertwined with the communal and religious demands of mourning rituals. Commemoration marks the loss by giving the dead a sign or a gift through an act of language (elegies, dirges, and the likes of it) or work of art (a tombstone, or a monument) and thus gives a private loss a public character.

Julia Kristeva presents her theory of loss and mourning in terms of melancholia and abjection. Writing or language is concerned with our need to connect with others, and our inability to make proper and real connection; in other words, it is determined by our ability to communicate love or the absence of it. Grief is non-

communicable and the grieving subject finds a lack of meaning in every word they utter. Grief takes the grieving subject out of the semiotic world, out of meaning. In *The Black Sun*, Kristeva talks about the debilitating pain of depression and melancholia that a grieving subject goes through. The living body of the grieving subject becomes the mortifying body—that of a living-dead—unable to connect with others and living the life of what is left behind. "I live a living death," writes Kristeva, "my flesh is wounded . . . time has been erased or bloated, absorbed



into sorrow . . . On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being a witness to the meaningless of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings." Kristeva defines a text as a duality that exists between a mark and a sign. The grieving subject becomes entrapped in that duality and faces the difficulty to read the mark of death as a sign of lack.

Lacan's theories of lack inundate in them the poetics of mourning and loss. Between the craving for the mirror stage and the jouissance, is hidden the mark and

the sign of death, loss, mourning, and commemoration. In Lacan, the child's cry is the lack of subjectivity—the mourning for 'not-yet-being,' and the adult's cry in the final stage is that of and for language—the cry of death and the urge to exist in and through language; the cry for the fear of death. And once death is met, that cry is transferred into the laments and sorrows of the grieving subject, who struggles to process the loss of the loved ones in language.

The ideology of loss is subjective, or an expression of the loss experienced by the Self. As I said earlier, because we as living beings only know and interpret all signs in context of our lived life, we interpret death more as a departure than a cessation. We are not thinking of the dead when we think of their death; we are thinking of us, as us. And by doing so, by our unwillingness to see the otherness of the dead (as not among us and does not need to be among us) we are, in a way, killing the dead. We are reducing their otherness into nihilism.

In death, one ceases to exist in corporeal presence and continues to exist in signs and semiology, consciousness and memory. The living subject who lives and remembers the dead thus becomes both the living and the dead. And it becomes the responsibility of us as the living subject—the self—to allow the other (the dead subject) to live in us. I am thinking of Derrida and his elegy on Paul de Man. Derrida says that when a friend dies, they live in the body of the mourner, taking on a being in us. "This being in us of the other," Derrida writes in his *Memories for Paul de Man*, "in bereaved memory, can be neither the so called resurrection of the other himself (the other is dead and nothing can save him from this death, nor can anyone save us from it), nor the simple inclusion of a narcissistic fantasy in a subjectivity that is closed upon itself. . . .

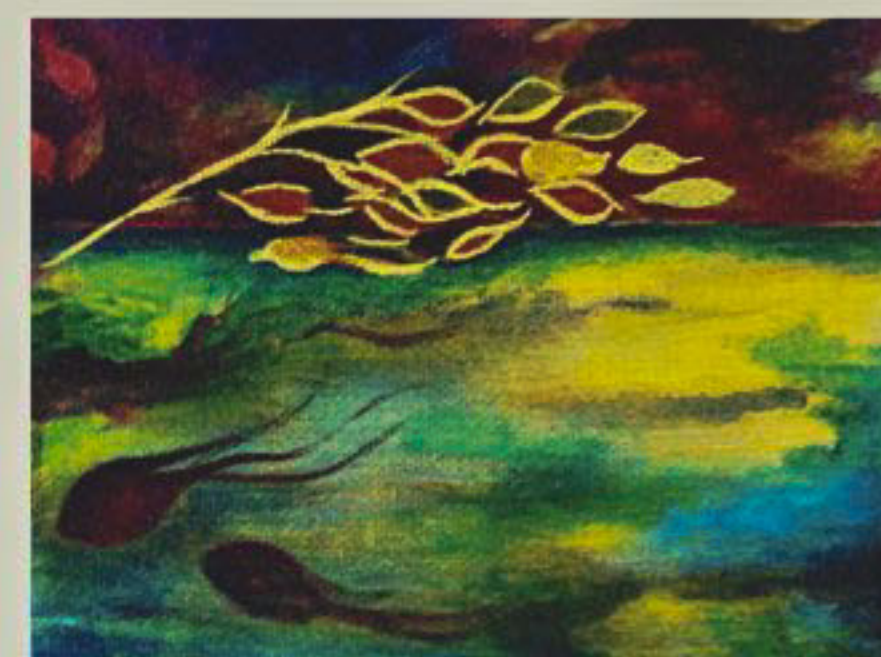
The being in us in bereaved memory becomes the coming of the other." The other, being in us, can neither be outside us, nor inside us. When Death comes to the other, it comes to us through the other. The friend no longer exists except in us, and we are no longer ourselves. The other's being in us thus splits us. Through grief and mourning, the "I" ceases to be itself and becomes the other. Derrida calls this the gift of death. The other gives death to the subject. Death becomes a responsibility because it cannot be transferred (without experiencing death). "Because I cannot take death away from the other who can no more take it from me in return, it remains for everyone to take his death upon himself," says Derrida, in *The Gift of Death*.

Needless to say, Derrida's ethics (or discourse) of death is directly influenced by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In Levinas, death is interpreted both as a menace and a gift. The menace is not defined in the knowledge of death; it is the imminence of death, the unforeseeable fact of death as something that exists beyond our horizon is what defines the menace of death. Death takes me without giving me the chance I have in a struggle. In death I am exposed to the absolute violence: the murder of the self. Death threatens me from beyond. But when I grieve and mourn the death of a friend or a closed one, I invite the other (dead) to possess me—my memory and my consciousness; I let the other be in me. And that is when Death brings me the gift of the other. If we are to become responsible mourners, we must prepare ourselves to face the menace and be willing to let the dead live inside us, like living organisms of memories.

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## POETRY

TAGORE

TRANSLATED BY  
FAKRUL ALAM

## Aachhe Dukhho, Aachhe Mrityu

There is sorrow—death too—separation's pangs scald as well—

Yet there is peace and joy; beyond the mortal, the Eternal dwells. In souls, life flows; the moon stars and sun shine on;

Spring lights up gardens and groves in varied hues; Waves meld with each other and then crest again.

Even as some flowers wither, in others buds form There is no ultimate loss, no end—no scars that forever remain.

In the universe's wholeness thus, the mind craves its place.

## Aamar Jabar Belay Pichhu Dake

As dawn's light peeps through clouds And I'm leaving, what calls me back?

On this rainy morning, forlorn birds

Crying out in forests deep call me back!

As if looking for someone, the overflowing river

Rushing forward in the shade calls me back

On the dawn of my departure, who is it

Lodged in my heart, that calls me back?

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# The Dead

SOHANA MANZOOR

(A translation of "Bhoot," by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay)

The grove of Shish Poramanik was renowned for nuts. It was right by the roadside and full of ancient trees. It was dark like the night even during day time.

Our primary school was not far away from this place. They called it Rakhil Master's school. In the middle of the yard, there was a mulberry tree and hence we called it the Mulberry School.

We had two teachers and one was Heeralal Chakravorty. He owned a shop of pots and pans and hence was called "the pot-selling master." What a teacher he was! The size of his canes was legendary. During the tiffin-break, the teachers used to take a nap. We would roam around as we wished—in the woods, groves, paddy fields and return after an hour or so. Sometimes we would find them still fast asleep and then resume our fun activities for an extended period of time.

That day it was no different. Our school was quite a distance away from the rail tracks. We went to see the rail tracks and the Matla Bridge and the teachers were sound asleep as we came back.

Naran said, "Shush, don't say anything. Let's go and have some of those nuts."

Everybody agreed. I said, "It's not easy, you know."

"We don't have to get up on the trees. There are lots underneath..."

"Really? Okay, let's go and see."

It was two at noon when we all entered the grove. The bright autumnal sun shone over our head. The grove was overrun with weeds and thorn bushes—resulting from the heavy monsoon rain. A narrow path ran through the woods. Thick tendrils hung from the trees. None of us ever covered the entire grove—it was huge—stretched from the road to the riverbank.

There were some guavas in the trees, but they were still not edible. I strolled toward the river. No sign of nuts; or rather I did not have the patience to look for them. So I separated from my

friends. The trees and weeds were really thick around this place. Few people frequented this side of the grove.

I thought I heard the sounds of a fox. The *Kullo* bird screamed from top of the tamarind trees. Suddenly, I felt uneasy; didn't they say that the ghosts abound by mid noon? The ghost was called Roshi and you have to kneel down so that he does not harm you?

Should I kneel down? The spirits would go away if there were any. It was mid-noon all right. And I was alone. But why in the world was the ghost called Roshi? It could have been Shyam, Kalo, or Nibaran too.

I turned around a curve and saw a dense bamboo forest and a thicket underneath. And while standing there I felt my heart had stopped beating. Sitting with her back to the trunk of an *aamra* tree was Boro Bagdini.

I took a careful look. It was Boro Bagdini all right. But didn't she die some time back?

Boro Bagdini used to live in our village. She had a small cottage near the place called banyan field. She had no family and she lived by herself. I knew she used to work at the house of the Paals. Then she caught fever and nobody had seen her in a while. Then about two months back, the corpse of a woman was found in the bamboo forests near the waterbodies. It was half-eaten by the foxes and wild dogs. Everybody thought it was Boro Bagdini as the woman was thin and dark like her.

And here was Boro Bagdini sitting under the *aamra* tree.

I broke into a run and sped away until I reached my mates. I was trembling all over and I could barely speak.

"Hey, what's it with you? Why are you shivering?"

I said, "I saw the dead."

"What dead? Where?"

"Boro Bagdini is sitting under the *aamra* tree inside the thicket. I just saw her near the riverbank."

"What? That's impossible."

"I saw her with my own eyes. It's Boro Bagdini."

"What's he saying? Let's go and see... he's lying, of course."

Then our leader Nimai Kolu said, "Hey, no. We can't go now. I'm sure our teachers have woken up by now. Remember the pot-selling master's cane? I won't go. You can go if you want to. And who knows if he's not lying..."

The boys stopped at the reminder of pot-selling master's cane. One and two, everybody started walking toward the school. I followed them too.

As we reached the school we saw that both the teachers were up. The pot-selling master was walking to-and-fro front of the empty classroom. He raised

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his voice as he saw us, "And so finally you're done with play, eh?"

We could say, "And you're done with sleep?" But who would dare to ask that?

We were all terrified of him. As he entered the classroom he called,

"Ratna, where have you been?"

I was trembling like a sacrificial goat.



There was Boro Bagdini on one hand, and here was the pot-selling master. Still I decided to use the only weapon I had. I said, "Sir, they all know why we're late... We had been to the grove of Sharda Poramanik... and we saw the ghost of Boro Bagdini."

Amazement and fear played out on the face of the pot-selling master. He said, "What... what do you mean by ghost?"

"You know ghost... ghosts that..." "I know what a ghost is, you little monkey. Where did you see it? What are you talking about?"

I told him in detail and my mates also supported my story by describing how breathless and afraid I was when I had returned from my excursion. Pot-selling master called out to the other teacher, "Did you hear what the boys just said?"

Master Rakhil was preparing to smoke when he asked, "What was that?"

"Ratna says he saw a ghost in Sharda Poramanik's garden."

"Who'd Sharda Poramanik?"

"Srish Poramanik's Father. It's their grove you know."

I had to narrate again and Master Rakhil, who believed in all kinds of superstition, nodded and said, "Of

course. It was a terrible death. She would turn into a ghost."

But the pot-selling master was not convinced. "But why would a ghost sit like that under a tree? And in the middle of the day-time too!"

"So what? Is there any rule that a ghost cannot sit under a tree?"

A chaos arose and a decision was made to go into the grove to find out the truth of the matter. All the boys accompanied the teachers and I led the procession.

I took them to that dense thicket and to the *aamra* tree.

And what we saw was this:

A torn, soiled and fetid quilt was spread out under the tree. On one side there was a pot of water which was half-filled. Stones and skins of the *aamra* fruits were scattered around the place. Some were fresh and some from a few days ago. There were also a pile of chewed tamarind and *chalta*. On the quilt lay the shriveled and emaciated figure of Boro Bagdi. She was dead; died not long ago it seemed.

The mystery was never solved.

We went out of the copse in a procession and informed the authorities. The *chawkidar* and the *dafaadar* came to see the body of the dead woman. Who could say why Boro Bagdini had left her cottage to die in this jungle? Some said she had gone crazy while some other suspected that she was possessed by the spirits.

However, the real reason of Boro Bagdini's death was ill-nourishment and perhaps the malaria of the autumn. There was nobody to even give her water at the end.

Who would? Nobody knew that she was dying in that thicket.

The mystery behind Boro Bagdini's death in the wilderness was never solved.

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