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DEATH AS PORTRAYED RESPECTIVELY BY ABDUL GHANI KHAN AND EMILY DICKINSON: A COMPARATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article studies the theme of death in the works of the two poets Ghani Khan and Emily Dickinson for whom death is the most resonant, mysterious, moving, and fascinating experience in human finitude. A comparative analysis of a selection of their works, carried out within a qualitative mode of inquiry that deploys the thematic analysis model of Braun and Clarke (2006), asserting that their poems endow the idea of death with a range of symbolic implications. They either personalize it, symbolize it, or directly elaborate on death in an optimistic way without forgetting about the sheer truth about its exterminatory impact on all living entities. Despite the fact that the American poet Emily Dickinson and the Pashto poet Abdul Ghani Khan belong to two different backgrounds, cultures, and eras their poetry has many points of similarity that curtail the distance of time and space between them.

Key Words: Ghani Khan, Emily Dickinson, Death, Immortality, Thematic analysis.

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Introduction

Death – predetermined, unavoidable, and inevitable still seems callous to most of us because it strips us of our beloved ones. It is a mysterious truth that triggers fear with its sudden advance to end the cycle of human life. Death has been an important subject not only in religion and philosophy but also in literature. Frank and Judith McMahon (1986) stated that “we may see death or come close to it, read about it, but we may have never died. Thus we face the ultimate unknown and the fact that our society refuses to admit that death is a natural process” (413). Death has been reflected in all genres of literature, but it has been meditated, portrayed, and responded intensively, emotionally, and lyrically in poetry. Death has elicited varied and deep emotions from poets; it is a savior for some from travails, suffering, and pains of life. However, some look upon it as a ripper that tears apart the close relations and intimate worldly connections.

Poets are born geniuses since they share universal themes in their poetry that surpass the limits of space and time. They reside in the hearts of people as they represent the inner feelings of the heart that appeals to the souls universally. While Poets use few words to express their views regarding the subject, they open for the readers, beyond boundaries, hundreds of avenues of their personal experience and perception to interpret and appreciate it. Even though English poet Emily Dickinson and Pashto poet Ghani Khan belong to different backgrounds, cultures, times, and languages their poetry has many points of similarity that curtails the distance of time and space between them.

Emily Dickinson (born in 1830 and died in 1886 in Amherst, Massachusetts) lived an isolated and obscure life. Critics have often, defined Emily Dickinson as one of the influential and eminent poets of American 19th-century literature. Biographical scholars have found interest in her religious commitment or the question of her master’s identity /the mystery of her lover or both; while literary critics have concentrated more on metaphysical or

linguistics ambiguities of her art. Gilbert and Susan (2020) state that “as a poet [Dickinson] worked from specific to general, concrete to universal. She became preoccupied with essence; the accidents did not concern her” (584). Being a sensitive poet she has pictured the tiny ecstasies set in motion by the changes in life’s incidents. She writes frankly about her speculation on her state of consciousness, and her insights into the mysteries of God, love, immortality, and death. Death- the most resonant, mysterious, moving, and fascinating of all possible poetic themes is the center of her energy which proliferates her more than five hundred poems. Emily Dickinson because of her unique treatment of death stands supreme amongst American poets. George and Barbara Perkins (1999) consider Dickinson “incomparable because of her originality” and that “her poems shed the unmistakable light of greatness” (972). Preoccupied with the idea of death, Dickinson tells her friend Abiah Root about her impression of death “it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth” (L11). Although she affirms that she can’t imagine her death scene when she will close her eyes in death yet she has written about this free agent that transcends the boundaries to separate the body from the soul. Nothing could curb Dickinson in penning down her views of death that cover two volumes of her poetic works, she “recurred to it more frequently than to any other” (Frisbie, 298). In Emily’s poetry, the prominence of the death theme is the too unusual degree, “in the large majority of Emily Dickinson’s poems, from the least impressive to the most, there are intimations of Death” (Chase, 230). While George Frisbie Whicher notes death as the most frequently recurring theme than any other (298), Charles R. (1960) opines that “intimation of death and immortality challenged Dickinson’s poetic powers” (284).

Emily Dickinson's preoccupation with death also involves her religious and spiritual values. Windy Martin (2002) sees death as a problem for Dickinson, “a riddle she could never solve, but which she always tried to explore” (5). The best personifications of death one find in Emily’s two

poems,” “Because I could not Stop for him”, and “Death is the Supple Suitor”. Yvor Winters opines that the subject of the poem is “the realization of the proximity of death- a departure from life and a journey towards eternity” (17). In “Death is the Supple Suitor”, Emily transports death into a more homily metaphor because she knows that it is “an uncomfortable lacuna that could in no way be bridged” (Larrabee, 116).

On the other hand, eminent Pashto poet Ghani Khan uniquely treated death in many of his poems. Ghani Khan (1914-1996) well-educated Pashto language poet, painter, and sculptor has written poetry in his style, following the call of his inner self and soul, and seemed impressed by no one. He believed in the freedom of thought and expression taking more inspiration from his conscience rather than his intellect based on his personal experiences in life. Ghani Khan’s poetry has been analysed from various literary and philosophical perspectives including the comparative analysis of romantic strains in his poetry with major romantic poets like William Wordsworth (Rehman & Ahmad, 2016) and John Keats (Babar, 2005). Not only the modern life and its complexity (Iqbal, Awan, Ullah, & Ali, 2014), religion and its pseudo representative inspired him to write but the human heart filled with love emotions in search of beauty (Bacha & Sheema, 2010), got his pages printed with pictorial quality of his poetic diction. Khan Sardaraz and Aasia Nusrat in their study carried out the cognitive semantic analysis of the concepts of life and death in Ghani Khan’s poetry by applying Conceptual metaphor theory. They opine that Ghani Khan used day today’s experiential deeds to structure the complex concept of life and death with slight cultural deviation in the poetic language.

Abdul Ghani Khan strives for an eternal existence through his art. His major interaction with society has given him ample space to deliberate and write about diverse aspects of life. Although death is not the major theme of his poetry yet he writes about the concept optimistically without forgetting

about the sheer truth of its existence as a terminator of all living entities, he writes, “Do not convince me, O friend / Death is not the end of life.” His words reflect his idiosyncratic approach to life and death. His philosophic thoughts with rich lyricism and mysticism see no boundaries to exploring the psychological, sensual, and religious aspects of life and death. Exploration of the theme of death gave Ghani a panoramic view of vital issues such as religion, God, nature, love, and immortality. If Emily’s poems offer all of her diverse mystical preoccupations with death and immortality, Ghani Khan in his poem presents death as an objective fact unveiling diverse aspects of death that connects the creation with the creator. For both the poets, death has a range of symbolic implications. They either personalize it, symbolize it, or directly talk about its power to end the cherished life or the crises they have lived through. They have mentioned death in one way or another revealing in their literary works a natural reaction to their lives that shaped their attitude.

Examining comparative elements that can be located in their poetry and other minor themes that are incorporated in the poems to enhance the theme of death is the major endeavour of this study. This study originates in a fascination with the poetry of Ghani Khan—a legendary philosopher-poet who has deep insight into the matters of life and society. Once reading his poetry, I came across his poems with the title *Marg* “Death” and a few others with the same title and a poem without a title but with death as a major theme that triggered me to study further to comprehend the phenomenon of death not only from Ghani Khan’s perspective but by comparing his perception of the concept with Emily Dickinson’s perception of the real nature of death who is well known for her poetic obsession with the theme of death. To achieve the objective three poems by Emily Dickinson and three of Ghani Khan have been selected for thematic analysis in this research study. Three poems of Emily are “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”, “All But Death Can Be Adjusted”, and “Death is a Supple Suiter” and poems with the title “Marg (Death)”, “Margy”, and “Marga Sabar Vakra (Death be patient yet awhile)” by Ghani

Khan. Both are separated by a lengthy period of time, still, it is hoped that individually their poems offer a sincere attempt and a parallel ground to understand the true nature of death.

Research Methodology

Thematic analysis has been used to conduct the comparative analysis in this study. In 2006 Braun and Clarke illustrated the step-by-step process of conducting thematic analysis in an article. They defined thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes data set in (rich) detail” (2006).

There are 6 phases of Thematic Analysis:

1. Familiarizing with the data
 2. Coding
 3. Generating initial themes
 4. Reviewing themes
 5. Defining and naming themes
 6. Writing up
1. **Familiarization** During the first phase, the researcher has read and re-read poems of both poets to become familiar with the content and taken notes to mark preliminary ideas for codes that described the content.
 2. **Coding:** A code is a description, not an interpretation of what is being said to identify the important and relevant features of the data to answer the question. During this phase, data has been organized into the meaningful five sections for the later stages of analysis.
 3. **Generating initial themes:** This phase involved active interpretation of the codes to identify significant broader patterns of meaning. This stage helped visualize the interesting relationship between the approaches of both the poets to review the viability of the theme of death.

4. **Reviewing themes During** During this phase the subthemes/notions have been reviewed and refined to assure that they are coherent and distinctive to answer the research question and to add significance to the analysis of the poems.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** During this phase, descriptive and engaging names have been assigned to define the essence that each subtheme/idea is about. It involved a detailed analysis of the theme to work out the focus of the topic.
6. **Writing up:** This final phase involved weaving the final draft based on the description and analysis of the data extracts about the selected topic demonstrating the findings to validate the quality of the research.

Results and Discussions

The subject of death, including her own death, leaves its impact on Emily Dickinson's thoughts and gives its tint to the majority of her poems. Living next to a cemetery for about fifteen years of her life made her wonder about death's incessant presence and its inevitability (Kean, 2005). Dickinson's disease paves the way to accept her approaching death physically and psychologically as a natural and true life-ending fact. Emily Dickinson's dealing with the various facets of death is much similar to Pashto language poet Abdul Ghani Khan. For Ghani Khan, poetry was not the only source of creating a piece of art with some definite meaning, but a melody that distills an amazing sense of ordinary things. We find this common in both poets they create new definitions of "death" with its existing connotations and suggest the endless possibility of making surprising senses with the help of images, metaphors, and similes. If Emily enquires about death in the company of a charioteer and explores that death is the inescapable fate of all mortals, Ghani Khan is ready to renounce the world to face the truth (*Nuh puh thuli murg sthomaan yum/ Nu rathlunki na yaregum*), "I do not feel fatigued because of the death which had passed away/Or the one which is coming.". Ghani was a seeker of the truth and in probing the mystery of death he dares define death

within the limits of human knowledge. Therefore, we can draw a neat comparison of Ghani Khan's inquisition to Emily Dickinson's mystical probing of death mysteries.

Emily Dickinson and Ghani Khan's Spiritual and Religious Perception of Death

The religious and philosophical implications of death in the poems of Ghani Khan and Emily Dickinson are deeper. They are not horrified at the very idea of death rather they present it as an objective reality that can be explored, described, and assessed. Both the poets have remade every philosophy according to their spiritual approach to poetry. They use various images and metaphors to fathom the mystery of death in an attempt to understand its spiritual reality. We can say that Emily's preoccupation with death results not only from her life experiences that she has witnessed the death of her family, friends, and mentor, but also from the uncertainties that she holds about the Christian concept of the afterlife and the survival of the soul after death. After God, she gives high spiritual status to death. In "All but Death can be Adjusted", she portrays death as a predetermined fate that is fixed for all humans and living beings and nobody can change it except God. She seems aware of death's existence as a terminator of life that remains an everlasting constant in the world of perpetual change. According to her perception death is an immortal agent who never ceases to exist while the human-made world is meant to fade and die, "Death — unto itself — Exception —/ Is exempt from Change." Her mystical experience enables her to see the deathlessness of death. In fact, she realizes that in the perishable world all the living bodies decompose, kingdoms fall, and dogmas and beliefs change, but death as a free agent with its divine nature remains evergreen and all-powerful. Richard and Janaro (1993) explain Death as unavoidable inflexible destiny that God manages on a fated date and time and "humans have no control in determining their own fate" (393). Ghani's opinion and

belief are no more different from Dickinson's when he says (*Kah de der puh laila masth shi/ Kho akher bah da murg yaar shi*) "If one becomes very excited because of his or her beloved/ He will encounter his death." He believes that no matter how much one gets engaged and is absorbed in the enchanting undertakings of the brave heart in this world, death-like an eternal companion will prove his friendship on a fated day.

In the first stanza of "Because I Couldn't Stop for Death", death appears accompanying immortality, an indication of an eternal life that awaits man after death. In Christian philosophy, Jesus is regarded as the bridegroom who will only marry pure women who live a righteous life. However, Dickinson's doubt about the immortality of the soul is evident in the poem that she does not hold any conversation with her suitor, death. Additionally, she feels cold in her gown which indicates that her concept of life after death is somehow not very pleasant (Dickinson & Howe, 2004). James Reeves (1963) considers the poem "an essay in death-in-life" whereby Emily triumphs over death. Like everything tangible in a receding landscape of "Because I could not stop for Death", in the poem "Death as a Supple Suiter" with the expedition of gallant suiter the "truth unknown" becomes the destination of the bride (soul). One can say that for Emily, death does not cause a complete loss in ending physical life but it reunites the soul with her mates. In this union "death wins at last" not by destroying a world for the self but by replacing one world with another which is although unknown but true. If Emily portrays death as quiet and untouchable that conquers every being and transport them to "truth unknown", Ghani says (*Kho murg de pardah-posh krhi da Aadam zawaal lah hoshah wrak*) "Death veils you and carries you away from thoughts of humans' decline". He knows once the curtain of death is thrown over life it will take away the human consciousness that proliferates his heart with the mortal worldly fears of decline. He believes in eternity and considers death a witness of one's being and His supremacy (*Murg bs yo gawaah zumah da zhund stha da jalaal*) "Death is one witness of my life and Your

Greatness". He reveals the philosophically meaningful relationship between man, his body and soul, and God. The influence of spirituality is evident in Ghani's poems because he believes like Emily in the immortality, power, positivity, and goodness that death carries with itself to liberate man from the fret and furies of this world to the world free of them.

Death as a Wedlock

Dickinson has observed death from close in the forms of seasonal changes, plants, animals, and humans with their cycles of life and decay. Her ability to view death in other imaginary forms is praiseworthy in her poem 'Death is the Supple Suitor'. Emily's firm belief in death is depicted through the personification and actions of death. She imagines death as a lover and then groom in this poem who finally wins over the beloved in a destined manner and woos her. Death's nature is unknown but his process is natural that starts with gradual degeneration of the body. For Ghani Khan, death is (*Murg yawa waa'dah da sparli shuwi da khazan sarah/ Murg haghah netah che janan keshwa da janan sarah*), "Death is a promise agreed upon by spring with the autumn/Death is the date appointed by the lover to the beloved." These verses show impressive similarities between Ghani's perception of death with Emily's metaphorical and literal progression of death. Both know that death takes all like autumn takes what spring bestows upon us (Ghani) and death's "dim approach" is stealthy and he woos a person through certain "pallid innuendoes" (Emily) like the aging process, sickness, etc. Man is not obvious of his constant state of dying and sooner or later it arrives with "bugles and bisected coach" (Emily) to do us part. The term 'bisected coach' in Emily's poem may refer to the dual role and responsibility of the death: one of the groom when he transports his bride to his spiritual realm, and another of an agent who terminates the life activities on earth. Hence his carriage is part wedding chariot and part funeral hearse. Ghani also defines death in his poem *Marg* "Death" as an unbreakable promise of a lover with a beloved to be one for eternity but here the beloved is eternal life. He says (*Murg putah*

nikah da makaan da laamakaan sarah) “Death is the secret marriage of the temporal with the eternal”. He believes that death is the doorway and is an indissoluble bond between the life and hereafter, and it is the only reason that imbues one with the purpose of life. He believes that one realizes the meaning of life only when one encounters death (*Kah murg nu wu, dunyaa ke sok bah su poheduh puh saa*) “If there was no death, who would have known life.” If Ghani defines death as “secret covenant”, Emily sees its approach like a gallant lover who never ceases making efforts to win over his beloved.

On Nature of Death

In Dickinson’s world, the presence of God may be questioned, but the presence of death is without any doubt. She presents death not as a frightening experience, but as a familiar life companion. For her death is a king, an emperor whose insinuating universal power can be felt, seen, heard, touched, and smelled in nature and human life. In two poems death is described as a human with the ability to drive and show kindness. Crosthwaite (1983) considers the poem (Because I could not Stop for Death) a record of her encounter with the reality of death that consequently is a discovery of the life remaining. The concept of an afterlife is indicated by the description of the driver that he was patient enough to wait for her and to watch her finish her activities. Emily’s vision about death is that it is in no hurry but rather waits for one till the destined time and lets one accomplish the purpose in life before taking one to eternal abode. On the other hand, Ghani describes death in a romanticized way, where his expectation allows him to think that death can wait for the poet to finish his activities. In the poem, Ghani Khan does not deny the inevitability of death but he asks him to be patient as he is not prepared to say (*Marga sabar vakra lg oor ma pa wajood k shta*) “death be patient yet a while / fire still within me burns”. It is not the case that Ghani wishes immortality but he actually loathes aimless life and death without a cause that’s is why he does not seem ready to die (*Stha da margah nah yaregumah pashthun yum/ kho me thush zhundun aw khushi murg thah qaar*

shi) “I am not afraid of your Death (because) I am Pashtun/ But, I do hate empty life and futile death”. It is not only Ghani khan who is not ready to die but the case is the same with everyone in the world. Emily could not stop for death since she was busy with other activities of life but she then willingly gives up her leisure and labor for death’s sake. She had no time to gaze at death, but this uninvited suiter comes to end the worldly life and begin the eternal (Faur, 2012). Death is a mystery for them because its plans are always hidden of coming and catching anyone anytime, yet Ghani does not offer its embrace until the “music and feelings” die in him and he is turned into a “pliant clay”. Here we see a difference in the approach of both the poets if Emily is ready to keep aside her leisure and labor Ghani is not ready to stop any of his beloved activities rather he asks death to wait for him. The representation also indicates that both believed in the patience in death’s nature that’s why one asks him to wait and the other refers to his gentlemanly behavior as being patient.

Death as a Journey

In “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” Dickinson's belief in life after death is evident from the beginning of the poem when the speaker starts the journey as a ghost and death carries her to the grave to have existed in the new form of eternity (Leiter, 2007). The speaker explains the transition from death to eternal life through the journey in the carriage toward eternity (Nasaru, Katili, & Podungge, 2013). The cruel and terrible image of death or the terror of death is lessened through the character of the genteel driver who “kindly” accompanies the lady on her journey to immortality (Tate, 1938). Her belief in the immortality of the soul has been objectified by the presence of immortality in the carriage. Theodore C. Hoepfner (1957) also considers appropriate the use of the image of the carriage and driver in the poem as on one’s death “soul journeys to heaven (eternity)” (19) and it also renders her perception of immortality and death. Together with death and immortality, the speaker visits

different settings of “school children”, “setting sun”, and “gazing grain” to activate the reader’s perception of the life cycle of human beings (start, youth, end) to witness its transition from stages of life to the death that symbolizes a beginning of a journey of new life. The timelessness of eternal life is described through the world of living beings and how the speaker passes the setting sun instead of the setting sun passing by. The stop that the carriage occupants make at the grave makes her discover a new place- a house (tomb) wherein the physical body will eternally reside. Death brings her to rest in the house which makes the image of death more comfortable. The end of the journey implies that her soul will reside eternally in the afterlife forever, there is no going back because life continues even after physical death (Charteris-Black, 2016). On the other hand, Ghani like Emily is not much different in depicting the workings of death on humans and his ability to lull everyone to sleep whoever joins him on his journey to the eternal world, (*su lakha ba nor oduh wi/ Che rawaan da murg puh laar shi*) “Millions of others would be asleep/ That is going on the way of death”. For him, the path of death is a path that millions would be journeying on to take rest in eternal peace. Ghani to make death naturally common and an acceptable matter defines it with comprehensible phenomena. He knows it as a predetermined end but to make the process of death ordinary and beautiful he invites people to see and accept it as one of the unchanging destinations where everyone’s journey ends with or without his will.

Ghani and Emily’s Handling of the Theme of Death

The Poet’s use of tones helps readers understand the meaning of the poem since it effectively describes the poet’s attitude towards the subject of the poem. Although death is a sad event Ghani Khan and Dickinson presents it as a normal and adventurous process. Emily and Ghani Khan’s use of light-hearted tone in their selected poems is an indication of the fact that without questioning its solemnity and seriousness they accept death as a natural

process. If Dickinson describes death as a gentleman and a suiter full of civility, resilience, and patience, eliminating the negative aspects that it is associated with (Gerhardt, 2006), Ghani Khan describes himself welcoming death “mounted on a horse holding a flower in the hand” (*Gul ba ma laas ky vi/ ou la baa ass vi*). Instead of fearing death Ghani chooses to face it openheartedly to give it a warm embrace according to Pashtun culture. The poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," describes her process of death and entry into new eternal life by using a strong metaphor of carriage and a calm tone (Dickinson & Howe, 2004). Although in her poems the complex and absurd nature of death may be presented in a mild tone as an immortal entity, a suiter, a lover, a genteel coachman yet it remained the great unknown mystery for her and she did not offer a final view of death (Al Sharary, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Death, because of its complex nature cannot be realized by a single image or metaphor, so various images and metaphors are used by both the poets to process and comprehend death. Both examined death from varied angles, but the striking similarity between the two is that they depicted death with the endearment of romantic attraction. Both did not approach death traditionally, rather without challenging the exceptional nature of death they attributed some mysticism to the end of life. Despite the similarities between the themes of Ghani and Dickinson’s poetry, there are differences between their portrayal and poetic identification of death where Dickinson shows death as a realistic, but mysterious life-ending force, while Ghani presents it as God’s love and great mercy for man and final relaxing end for all humans.

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