

Death and Disease in Rabindranath Tagore's works: *Still the Music Will Play On*



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ABSTRACT: Death is an enigma that creates a sense of finality, and catharsis in the human mind. Death and disease have always had a strange fascination for creative minds. Epidemics and Pandemics have swept through the world and humanity has faced tragic en masse encounters with death since times immemorial. Art has effectively depicted the trauma, anguish, and devastation felt by mankind in this whole process. Literature has acted its role and has served as a great medium for sharing the pain of the bereaved humanity. Tagore, a herculean figure in the firmament of Indian Literature, could not remain untouched by the concept of death and disease. It reflects in his creative pieces that although he accepted death and disease as the parts of life, he could not help being caught in a philosophic pondering over the insignificance of human life against the potent power of disease and death.

KEYWORDS: death, disease, resilience, Tagore, pain, literature

INTRODUCTION

Death is as much a part of life as disease is and therefore needs to be accepted by humanity. "Still the music will play on, and time pass, days go by, as usual" this line taken from Tagore's poem "Jokhon porbe na mor payer chinho ei bate" (When My steps tread this path no more) famous for its lyrics and published in the magazine "Probashi", in Shantiniketan, on 5th April 1916, reflects his nostalgic acceptance of death. A request is made in it not to waste time in thinking about what has gone, as nothing will change and it reflects Tagore's philosophy at his later age.

The human tryst with death and devastation caused by pandemics and epidemics is as old as the hills; writers all over the world and over the centuries have repeatedly explored it in prose and verse, underlining not just its terrifying power but also the resilience of the human mind in confronting it. Literature finds its credibility in reality, and reality informs literary creativity one way or the other. Literature may not explain away the ways and means of strategically combating the pandemic situations as is visualized in the way modern science or naturopathy does in the present scenario worldwide, but it has a tendency to become a platform whereby sharing our common humanistic concerns we can extend consolation and empathy. This in itself succeeds in bringing the whole of humanity closer through the sharing of the insights of people from various quarters. These pandemics and epidemics have swept through the world in the past too, but thanks to the lightning speed of Information Technology today the awareness, warnings, and medical devices are quick to get circulated and millions of lives can be saved.

It was not so in past and so we are told that billions of people succumbed to these epidemics. The literature is replete with the tales of deaths and diseases, dealt with in one form or the other. Devastation and loss caused by the outbreaks of diseases like Influenza, cholera, and smallpox were felt by a multitude in India. These pandemics scarred many families which were seriously impacted and lost their members. In many cases, the whole generation was impaired by these epidemics. Writers of the contemporary ages could not remain unscathed by these destructions and their pain gets shared through their creative art – their stories, poems, novels.

Tagore's life and his rendezvous with pain

Tagore suffered his share of pain and anguish in his lifetime. He belonged to a big family of 14 children and he was the youngest. Growing up with his nephew and nieces, he was deprived of his mother's care owing to her frail health; she died when he was barely sixteen years old. Then at the age of twenty-four his sister-in-law, Kadambini Devi, committed suicide. Tagore (2012) writes, "The acquaintance which I made with Death at the age of Twenty-four was a permanent one, and its blow has continued to add itself to each succeeding bereavement in an ever-lengthening chain of tears." (p. 389)

In his quest for the meaning of death, Tagore rarely succumbed to the temptation of denying its dread by imagining it. The attempt to find meaning in death is part of our universal heritage, as old as human consciousness of mortality. Where Tagore gives this

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search his imprint is in the insistence that death has meaning because of the existence of life. "Death has given me the correct perspective from which to perceive the world in the fullness of its beauty..." (p.390)

The acceptance of death as a liberator from the prison of flesh and worldly existence, "That we were not prisoners forever within a solid stone wall of life was the thought which unconsciously kept coming uppermost in rushes of gladness." (p. 390) evolved the mature artist in him. Walt Whitman in his poem *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, brings out a similar acceptance and understanding of death being an essential part of a maturing of a poet. It must have eased the pain of the great man at the times of many personal tragedies for him which he endured in his lifetime; his wife, Mrinalini Devi, died in 1902, his second daughter Rani, 12 years old, died in 1903. 1904 brought the death of a teacher Satish Chandra Ray who was like a son to him. In the early part of 1905, Tagore's father passed away. 1907 brought the severest blow when Sami Tagore's six-year-old son died of cholera. It was inevitable that Tagore will sustain the idea of death and disease in almost all his creations with a profound understanding and inimical acceptance.

The relevance of Tagore's play- *Dak Ghar* in present times

His celebrated play *Post Office* (*Dak Ghar*) finds interpretations in a hundred ways and is viewed as an exemplary beacon to visualize life and death. Acharjee probes into the relevance of the play in the current situation that has prevailed in the entire world. Interestingly, she revisits play as having contemporary undertones of a child being quarantined in his house. His empathy is with the working-class people around him working untiringly for their sustenance, and also hidden in there is his longing to be amongst them. The central theme of the play is an acceptance of death by the child, Amol. He waits for the letter from King's Post Office, from where letters are written to all. Even small young children like Amol receiving 'nice little letters,' is a philosophic acceptance of death for all at any stage. Mortality is a glaring truth of life.

Tagore's stories and Death

Tagore has the theme of death and disease occupying a liminal position in many of his short stories. Disease and Death, being two stark realities of life, cause pain to all who are directly involved. Kurani, the orphaned girl sheltered by Patal in his short story *The Wedding Garland* has lost her entire family owing to the famine. When she leaves Patal's home, Jatin finds her again in the Medical Camp set up to treat the plague patients. Her death leaves Patal filled with remorse and pain. In his short story *Folly*, Harinath's young widowed daughter dies with a snakebite, the narrator's motherless daughter, Shashi, too dies just a day before her wedding because of cholera. In many stories by Tagore, we find young widows, their husbands presumably having died at a very young age because of one or the other disease. In *Post Office*, we come across affliction again, in *The Haldar Family*, Bangshi, Banwari's younger brother dies because of poor health in the city.

Death, the deliverer, also figures frequently in Tagore's stories. In his *The Ghat Story* we see a large number of widows, young and old, trying to live their monotonous lives in the proximity of religion. Kusum, a young widow embraces death as a self-inflicted penalty for peeping through the gloom of widowhood for a ray of light on her dark sky. In *Inheritance*, Jagannath, the miserly grandfather, has seen his wife and then his young daughter-in-law die without providing the proper medical help. He proceeds on to kill young Nitai to ensure as per the popular belief that this young death will invite the presence of Yaksha (a nature spirit that is an embodiment of wealth and fertility) to keep vigil over his hidden wealth and keep it in his family. Ironically, Nitai turns out to be his only grandson. Similarly, Kadambri, a young widow in *The Living and the Dead*, realizes through her temporary death-like stage that her life is but a shadow of a living presence with no one, not even she, being able to recognize the fact she is a living person, she commits suicide to prove that she is living. Chandra, the unfortunate wife of a poor daily wager, Chiddam, in *Punishment* also embraces death to punish her husband for his failing to see his wife as a person and considering her a possession to be used or thrown as befits the occasion.

The Postmaster also hints at the disease and illness along with the pain of rejection. It is a story of an employee of the British government from Calcutta who is sent to the countryside to set up a post office. Trying to stay in an altogether different and lonely place, he develops there a close relationship with an orphan girl whom he begins to teach how to read. But he falls ill there, and he is nursed back to health by this girl. Acknowledging to himself, the loneliness of his circumstances, and realizing that he will be unable to go on, he quits his job to return to Calcutta. He senses vaguely but is unable to fathom the depth of the pain he inflicts on the orphan girl when he declines her offer to take her along.

Death is used by Tagore to highlight the maladies of society. In his story *Profit and Loss*, in bringing up the social evil of the bridal dowry, he presents the heartlessness and callousness of money-minded humanity. A father marries his daughter into a rich family without being able to arrange money for the dowry. The daughter is treated shabbily in her new family home. The father, trying to arrange the dowry as a dismal and futile effort to buy his daughter's dignity back, plunges his family into poverty. The daughter falls ill and dies almost immediately; her mother-in-law quickly arranges a new marriage for her son with an even higher dowry price. The story brings out death and disease as a liberator for this young bride from the shame of watching her impoverished father being treated with disdain in her husband's home.

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Tagore seems to merge the modern science and the sentimentality of the death in *Skeleton*, a mysterious supernatural tale. Death is shown in the dramatic form here in form of a ghost of a young woman. This ghost comes to tell a boy about her story of falling deeply in love with a doctor, poisoning him on being scorned by him, and finally consuming poison to die. Her death results in her return as a ghost and finding her skeleton hanging in the boy's house to be used to teach him and his brothers the practical aspects of Human Anatomy.

Disease in form of epidemic finds a mention in his story *Broken Ties*, more famous by its Bengali name *Chaturanga* (1916), Satish's atheist and compassionate Uncle, a family rebel, convert his home into an infirmary for the poor Muslim weavers when Calcutta is scourged by plague. He acts in opposition to his entire society, but while nursing the patients, succumbs to the disease.

Tagore's Poems and the philosophy of Death

Not only is the theme of disease and death recurrent in Tagore's stories, but it also pervades implicitly in much of his poetry. Reba Som finds delight in translating the pulsating verses of Tagore's songs. Her translation of his song titled 'Weariness' captures the writer's parlance with death and pain in advanced age.

Forgive me my weariness O Lord
Should I ever lag behind
For this heart that this day trembles so
And for this pain, forgive me, forgive me, O Lord
For this weakness, forgive me O Lord

Tagore, in these lines of his famous poem 'Maran Milan', his other poem on death, conveys the human sentiments of spiritual understanding of the concept of death in these lines:

Why must you always come like a thief, Death,
Death, always silently, at night's end,
Leaving only tears? Come to me festively,...

The mention of the epidemic of smallpox is made in his celebrated song 'Puratan Britya' (the old servant), a narrative poem regaling a heart-touching tale of a Bengali zamindar (landlord) served by a loyal servant who is frequently scolded, abused, and even turned out of the house by the landlord and his family. But Keshta, the manservant, refuses to leave his master's side and despite his master's unwillingness to take him to Brindaban, accompanies him there in place of Nibaran, another servant, preferred by the master. The irony occurs when the master is infected with small-pox there, and all his companions desert him except Keshta, who nurses him back from the close contact with death. The gift of this selfless service is that Keshta catches the infection and dies there only. Death is seen here as the test of loyalty.

In his Poem *Death*, Tagore presents death personified as a lover, as a bridegroom coming to take the bride, the body away in the evening of the age, "When the flowers droop in the evening and cattle come back to their stalls, you stealthily come to my side and speak words that I do not understand", the groom even wonders, "Will there be no proud ceremony for our wedding?" and invites the groom to

Come with your conch-shells sounding, come in the sleepless night,
Dress me with a crimson mantle, grasp my hand and take me
Let your chariot be ready at my door with your horses neighing impatiently.
Raise my veil and look at me proudly,
O Death, my Death.

CONCLUSION

Death and disease are, ostensibly, a part and parcel of human existence and have to be accepted with the same approbation as is birth. Hindu Epic, *Mahabharata*, a long and much-quoted *Bhagwad Gita*, a sermon by Lord Krishna to Arjuna, gives a tangible philosophy on life and death.

Some come to the spiritual life because of suffering, some to understand life; some come through a desire to achieve life's purpose, and some come who are men and women of wisdom. Unwavering in devotion, always united with me, the man or woman of wisdom surpasses all the others. (Vedic Feed)

Death is inevitable and is just a change over from material existence to spiritual existence, whereas disease as suffering becomes a medium to reach the other side of existence.

This dilemma of spacing between life and death is brought up in the Kafkaesque story by Tagore, *The Living and the Dead*. Kadambini, the main character in is a widow who dies suddenly and, just a few hours later, comes back to life just when her body is about to be lit on the pyre. She exists in a liminal space between life and death, obviously present as a person, yet believed by all

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around her to be a ghost. It's a tormenting existence, and her second death at the end of the story proves an ironic confirmation that she was indeed alive the whole time.

All through his adult life, both in his prose writings and in his poetry, death, and disease had been a recurrent motif of his meditations. Yet the positive note remains the dominant one for Tagore for he seems to believe in the infinity of death. Emily Dickinson's poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, says that death comes unannounced and confidently to claim its victims, but no one can anticipate it, neither should anyone try to probe it because it is not final. Tagore welcomes Death and writes in his famous poem *Gitanjali* that "Death thy servant is at my door. He has crossed the unknown sea and brought thy call to my home." (LXXXVI). Death is not to be feared but is to be accepted as the reality of life. Death is not the negation of life, but it is the gateway through which life constantly renews itself. (Latha, 2019). As Tagore says, 'Still the music plays on,' the life goes on, changed and different, but it goes on for those who live with the so-called, New Normal, (The New Normal) a term much in use in COVID-19 days to reassign the way of living, acceptance of the life with its new manifestations, and also finding the strength to face it.

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This is to declare that this paper is an original work and no part has been taken from any other work without permission.

Furthermore, this is also to declare that the paper has not been published anywhere in any publication and is not under consideration for publication or presentation anywhere by any journal.

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