

Kahlil Gibran's Approach to Death in *The Prophet*

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Abstract: *Death is a phenomenon common to all living beings and it is such a fact that causes depression and anxiety to everyone. The sense of death creates dilemma and fills mind with nihilism. But the concept of death differs from individual to individual, culture to culture and society to society and it has become a subject in theology, philosophy, anthropology and literature. Each field of knowledge has its distinctive approach to death. Some existentialist philosophers look upon death as the end of complete existence where as some treat it as the continuation of life. Theology asserts that death is a portal of eternity and new life while mysticism treats death as the end of separation from God as well as the union with God. According to existential theory, death creates anxiety and it causes separation from life and its offerings while mysticism asserts that it brings ecstasy through divine love. Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), a Lebanese-American artist, poet and philosopher, treats death in his book *The Prophet* from the mystic point of view. This paper, through a comparative approach, attempts to illustrate how Kahlil Gibran subjectively unveils the mystery of death in the section 'On Death' and establishes the rationale that death does not mean the end of existence but a transition of life from time-bound transience to timeless permanence.*

Keywords: Death; Existentialism; Mysticism; Disappearance; Eternity

Kahlil Gibran's masterpiece *The Prophet* is an inspirational fiction written in simple poetic verse. Almustafa is the protagonist of the book who comes to the land of Orphalese as a foreigner and lives among them for twelve years observing their life and speaking to them the word of God. On the day of his departure, elders and priests of Orphalese solicit him to give them advice and suggestion regarding life. He speaks about twenty six areas of everyday life such as love, marriage, religion, beauty, crime and punishment etc. *The Prophet* basically contains twenty six sections on various subjects and 'On Death' is an important section. This section consists of sixteen lines of irregular length and the poetic mechanisms employed in the verses are visual imagery, symbols and paradoxes but paradox is the most powerful rhetoric expressing the view that things are not same as we see them. Generally, death is real and common to all living beings. It means the end of physical existence but it also creates a dilemma whether it refers to the end of physical existence only or the end of complete existence. Our close study of Kahlil Gibran's section 'On Death' in *The Prophet* reveals that he has encoded in some images and symbols, the craftsmanship of the mystics, his concept of the origin and meaning of life and the ultimate goal of human existence. In this short text, he develops a poetic rationale and establishes the proposition that death does not mean the end of an absolute existence

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or nirvana but a continuity of life. He also offers a solution to the existential dilemma that every man confronts regarding his or her existence. The main objective here is to decipher out his philosophy of death and show similarity and dissimilarity with other doctrines through analytical approach.

Life and death are very closely entwined and they are like two sides of the same coin. Demystification of one side is absolutely impossible without addressing the other. If death means the disappearance of physical existence, life means the active and visible presence of physical existence. In the opening line, "How shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?" (Gibran, 23) Gibran, through the protagonist, raises the issues of life and death concurrently. By this rhetorical question he means that one can know the secret of death by looking into the mystery of one's life. Then, he makes a paradoxical statement, "For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one" (Gibran, 23). What he means by this paradox is that death emerges from life which has an endless existence. So, death merges into life again and disappears like the way a river, an offshoot of a sea, dissolves into the sea and the river and the sea both get single existence. Gibran's use of two visual images, 'river' and 'sea' and their union connote twofold meanings: the oneness of life and death and the union between man and God. It further implies that the beginning of life is not from nothingness to itself but from something to itself. Gibran's metaphysical concept of human existence is analogous to the Sufistic idea of existence. In Sufism "being human is a visual existence but like every other thing, it is a transfiguration of Divine Radiance. The existence of life in this world is not from itself to itself but from something to itself. The direction of the relationship between God and individual is also from God to individual in teleological view" (Tasdelen, 2013).

Gibran's dual aspect of life also echoes in *the Holy Quran* which is the fundamental basis of Sufism. There are a lot of verses in the Holy Quran testifying that life is not from nothing to itself but from the Creator to itself. The theory of creation of Allah is clearly stated in the verse, "It is He Who gives life and causes death. And when He decides upon a thing He says to it only; 'Be!' and it is" (Ghafir: 68). The above verse denotes that Allah exists first and He has created everything out of nothing and has entrusted every living being with the power of vitality and viability. Another verse more specifically clarifies the origin of human existence, "Proclaim! (or Read) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created man out of leech-like clot" (96: 1:2). So, the initial existence of man as indicated in the verse is clot, a composite of sperm and ovum. The divine theory of creation is also evident in the Holy Bible as averse states, "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2: 7, KJV). Thus, Kahlil Gibran's concept of human existence as encoded in the geographical imagery of river and sea is analogous to the mystic and divine teleology of creation.

Transcendental knowledge is acquired through intuition and meditation and expressed through signs, symbols or visual imagery. Gibran's mystic cognition of death is also expressed in encoded images and symbols and it becomes apparent to him that death is

not the end of total existence. He divides life into two phases- life before death and after death. So, he looks upon death as a portal to eternity. He says, "And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring./ Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity" (Gibran, 23). The use of the phrase, the gate to eternity, signifies his idea concretely that death is a transition of life from the time- bound to the timeless. The use of 'seeds' and 'spring' here is also symbolic. He means that after physical death soul wakes up to the life of eternity.

Gibran's concept of death resembles existential philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). He also treats death as a portal to endless existence and continuation of endless life. Soren Kierkegaard states that, "Death is neither the end of everything, not a simple story lost, in truth only endless life! And death contains more hope than life" (Kierkegaard, 2010, p.18). He explains death with Christian theology and states that, "--- because for the Christian, even death is a passing way to life" (Kierkegaard, 2010, p.26). *The Holy Bible*, the basis of Christian theology, also contains many verses that focus on death. A verse states, "Dust returns to the ground and spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes, 12:7. NIV). The paradoxical verse means that human body which is made of earthly elements is perishable but soul is imperishable. So, the soul returns to God, the former abode of soul. *The Bible* further emphasizes on the continuation of life after death. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he dies, he shall live" (John, 11: 25). Kahlil Gibran raises another rhetorical question that exposes not only his concept of death but also epitomizes the ultimate state of human existence. He asks, "And what is to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?" (Gibran, 23) He means that when breathing stops, soul becomes free from perishable body and seeks union with God. Death here is treated as a period of short sleep and after resurrection death itself shall perish and the blessed shall live in the mansions of God, Gibran's God unencumbered.

Existential philosophy creates a kind of vortex of dilemma about ultimate existence of human life and Gibran pulls life out of this nihilistic vortex and places it in the land of optimism. The fundamental perception of existentialism is that the sense of non-existence creates a sense of nothingness resulting in depression and anxiety. Heidegger in *Existence and Time* (2011) defines death as, "Being not alive anymore, not existing in the world is witnessed by others, and people are of a differentiation. They describe being not alive, not existing as death" (253). So, he treats death as the complete end of human existence and states the effect of death. He further asserts, "Existence itself notices into non-existence and this fact of non-existence causes stress" (253). Kierkegaard also echoes similar view, "The meaninglessness of existence fills with anxiety and despair, a sense of hopelessness and deep depression. There is no one who does not have anxiety in the face of his existence"(Socrates to Sartre, p.322). Existential philosophy offers prescription from its own perspective to overcome the pangs of anxiety created by the sense of nothingness. Frederick Nietzsche offers solution to this existential problem allegorically in his book *The Joyful Wisdom* (1882). The mad man announces to the jeering crowd that

God is dead. “We have killed him—you and I! We are all his murderer (Socrates to Sartre, p.324). He means that by killing faith in God man will eliminate their childlike dependence on God and man will become independent, joyous and superman. As a result, anxiety will automatically disappear. Kierkegaard, the forerunner of existential philosophy, offers a suggestion diametrically opposed to that of Nietzsche. He states, “Man does not know that the way to overcome despair to choose despair, to sink so deep into despair that you give up all the satisfactions and comforts of life, you lose all commitment to family, friends, community, you surrender reason and belief in the truth of science and philosophy, and all moral principles. When all these are lost, with nothing left, you will be in total crisis, at the edge of the abyss and you will be prepared for faith in God, you will choose God, and make a leap of faith to God. Only absolute faith and the leap to God can overcome the meaninglessness of your existence” (Socrates to Sartre, p.324). So, to Nietzsche losing faith in God is a way to overcome the scary sense of nothingness and despair whereas to Kierkegaard restoration of Orthodox Christianity is the best way to do that. But Gibran adopts Kierkegaard’s theistic approach to resolve this psychological crisis. He states, “Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honor” (Gibran, p. 23). Here, death is compared to a king and the dying person to a shepherd. By this analogy Gibran means that the fear felt by the shepherd is not traumatic but sublime. So, death does not create fear but a noble feeling in the mind of the dying person as it comes to take him to the ‘Omnipotent King’ of the universe. So, to Gibran, fear of death is not a fear at all but a feeling of glory as he further asserts, “Is the sheered not joyous beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king?” (Gibran, 23).

Science brings three vital organs such as brain, heart and lung and their functions under consideration in case of determining death of an individual. Modern science has developed two approaches to death- (1) cardiopulmonary approach and (2) whole brain approach. The proponents of cardiopulmonary approach affirms that, “a human body that is breathing and maintaining circulation is alive regardless of whether continuation of these function requires external support” (Shewmon 2011, potts 20001). This approach emphasizes on heartbeat, breathing and blood circulation and defines death as *irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions*. On the other hand, the whole brain approach puts emphasis on the function of brain in case of determining the biological death of a person. The proponents of whole brain approach divide brain into two parts- (a) the higher brain consisting of cerebrum, the vehicle of conscious awareness and cerebellum, involved in coordination and voluntary muscle movements; (b) The lower brain or brainstem that includes medulla controlling spontaneous respiration and circulation and define that human death is the irreversible cessation of functioning of the entire brain including the brainstem. So, death is the collapse of integrated body functioning. According to the organism definition, “Death is the irreversible loss of the function of the organism as a whole. (Becker, 1975, Bernat, Culver and Gert, 1981)” The latest theory of UDDA, The Uniform Determination Death Act, synthesizes both approaches and defines death as, “An

individual who has sustained either (1) irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions or (2) irreversible cessation of all function of the brainstem, is dead. (President Commission, 1981)" It is evident that the above approaches focus on the nature of biological death only and say nothing regarding spiritual phenomenon. But Gibran's rhetorical question, "and what is to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?"(Gibran, p.23) Gibran shows three stages of death, (1) cessation of cardiopulmonary function (2) departure of soul from body and (3) the union of soul with God. Therefore, Gibran shows his disagreement to the clinical approach to death and takes the mystic route to establish his idea of the eternal existence of life.

Gibran clarifies his philosophy of death with images and symbols like a genuine Sufi and his idea closely resembles that of Sufism of Islam. Gibran raises further question regarding death, "For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and melt into the sun?" (Gibran, p.23) The question implies two facts-disappearance and reunion. The term 'melting' connotes the end of physical existence like a piece of ice or candle dissolving into greater reservoir from which it emerges as well as the union with greater existence. Mullana Jalal Uddin Rumi, the greatest Sufi of Islam, also looks upon death not as the end of existence but as an end of separation and union with God. Rumi describes the pangs of suffering with reed in the first line of *Mathnawi*. Tahirul Mellevi gives in his couplet as follow; "*Kez neyistan tam era bubrideen d /Ez nefiremen merd Uzen nalideend*". [My lament since they cut me from my reed bed made me men and women moan.] "Since human left the origin of its existence and came to the world and experienced pain, words coming out of the heart make listeners regret greatly" (volume1. P.54). According to the verse, life on earth is separated from God, the absolute existence. Besides, life on earth is imprisoned and death liberates man from this imprisonment and ends the long separation. Sufis think that the night of death is the wedding night and a union between lover and God through love like Gibran's melting into the sun. *The Holy Quran*, the foundation of Sufism, also testifies that death is not an end of existence but a return to its original abode. "It is He Who gives life and causes death, and to Him you (all) shall return" (Yunus, Chapter 10:56).

Finally, the exhortation of Almustafa to the people of Orphalese regarding death is an allegorical message of Gibran to all people. To Gibran, death is neither an end of complete existence nor is the separation from life and its offerings but the continuity of life with infinite existence. It neither creates existential anxiety nor pushes life on the edge of void and nothingness. Rather, death liberates the soul from mortal frame that is consumed by earth and the soul, a part of God, gets a new existence and a new beginning in the divine world. Death itself vanishes forever and the soul enjoys ecstasy as Gibran concludes, "And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance" (Gibran, p.23).

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