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Portraying Death in ‘a Melted Pallet’: Revisiting Select Poems of Syam

Sudhakar

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Abstract:

Death has always had a looming presence in literature, as it had inspired generations of writers to perceive it in multiple ways. Syam Sudhakar who is based in Kerala is one such contemporary Indian poet who approaches this thematic concern of death in his own unique way. Drawing from a rich cultural backdrop, Sudhakar's English collection *Drenched by the Sun*, is made up of a motley group of poems which would be difficult to put under a single category. Yet it is his preoccupation with death, dying and afterlife which binds his poems together. Hence, this paper takes select poems from his English collection and sheds a critical light to the thematic concern which is an inescapable reality of life.

Keywords: contemporary English poetry, magical realism, death.

In the world of contemporary Indian poetry, Syam Sudhakar has been hailed as a proponent of magic realism. This is an apt description of his English collection *Drenched by the Sun*, which blends the real with the fantastical as his poetry creates a unique world of magic where children play with eyes for marbles and spiders write suicide notes. Based in Kerala, Syam Sudhakar is an Indian poet, translator and an academician. Though he writes primarily in Malayalam, his English collection *Drenched by the Sun* published in 2013 introduced his unique world to a larger audience. Sudhakar's poetry is a blend of the commonplace with the magical drawing upon mythology, folklore and rich cultural heritage of his native place. He explains—‘I have grown up with ghost stories and colourful folktales. All of them find a space in my work, which is my way of connecting with my roots’ (as told to Parshathy J. Nath, *The Hindu*). Sudhakar finds inspiration in the natural landscape which he celebrates in his one-of-a-kind imagery which can be seen as a hall mark of his poetry.

Sudhakar started writing at a young age and his world is definitely one which goes beyond the natural to the unreal. At first glance his poetry may seem as a form of escapist writing as his words rarely touches upon the political and social issues which plague the contemporary times. One would even question what made the poet create an entire world at such a young age which is so far removed from what one would consider real. Many of his poems reflect this sense of detachment from the immediate physical location into the imaginary and fantasy. The poems frequently sink into dream like sequence which find little resonance to reality—'faint colours/ spread at the feet/of a man,/ forming a map' (Marble Stones,54).

However, a closer look at his poems reveals a very real fact of life in the form of death which pervades most of his poems. Death is a fundamental truth as well as a mystery of human existence. This idea of death is multifaceted in his work and though it blends in with the magical elements, it can be seen as the one thing which keeps his poetry grounded in reality. In an article by Anamika Chakraborty, Sudhakar has mentioned how it was the untimely death of his family member which got him thinking about this strange thing called death and triggered his poetic journey. Perhaps this is the reason why he takes a headlong plunge into the question of death which finds multiple representations and reflections in his poetry. While death is a natural part of reality there is a space beyond dying which cannot be explained in tangible terms. Here, Sudhakar's penchant for the uncanny proves to be advantageous as he charts out myriad ways to look at this cosmic law. Like the way the uncanny is made part of everyday life, death is not seen as an end but rather has an all-pervading presence. Yet this presence surprisingly does not seem ominous at all. Various aspects of death figure in Sudhakar's poetry like the idea of suicide, dead ancestors, dead bodies in a morgue and coffins being desecrated by grave-diggers. While these aspects of death are part of the real world, Sudhakar blends in the 'unseen and the unknown' elements of death in his poetry; for instance, the soul climbing up the rope which makes the readers privy to the thoughts of a dead body.

Certainly, death has remained a preoccupation for many writers throughout history especially when it comes to Indian poetry and Indian philosophy. While death is inevitable it is still a mystery which literature has tried to imagine and provide us with a way to conceive it. Various literary forms have offered insights into the question of mortality. Death has been seen as an unwanted companion, a harbinger of darkness while some writers see death as a lover and some

even present it as a moment of peace—‘no more sailing from harbor/ with this my weather-beaten boat./The days are long passed when my spirit/ Was to be tossed on waves./ And now I am eager to die into/ The deathless’(Tagore, Gitanjali). Amidst these varied approaches, Sudhakar finds a sense of balance in his poetry between life and death.

Death becomes a space to ponder on the question of human condition as it is an undeniably crucial part of existence. A reading of his poems reveals that death is seen as a natural part and an extension of life. Death is accepted neither with remorse or regret but is omnipresent whose existence can only be accepted which Sudhakar’s poetry does wholeheartedly. This approach to death also places Sudhakar within the tradition of Indian philosophical discourse where death is not seen as an end but rather a new beginning which holds its own set of promises. This school of thought accepts death as a cyclical rather than a linear journey. In the Indian context, death is also seen as an experience that is transcendental. This vedic notion of death is often reflected in the poems of Ramanujan who alludes to—‘themes of reincarnation (*samsara*) and of the world as food (*annamayan jagat*)’ (93). Similarly, the themes of death and decay have remained a predominating theme in the poems of Kamala Das. One of her poems titled ‘Suicide’ centers on the shift of the death of the body to death of the soul—‘Bereft of soul/ My body shall be bare/ Bereft of body/ My soul shall be bare’(The Suicide). Amongst, contemporary Indian English poets we can find this preoccupation with death in the works of Tabish Khair who talks about erasure that accompanies death—‘All you need/ Is a terrible deed -/ Then you bury the dead,/ And forget’ (Homily). Hence, it is clear that the traditional cycle of life and death has remained a preoccupation of many writers within the genre of Indian English poetry.

Sudhakar’s poetry is very much a part of this discourse in Indian English writing as reflected in his thematic concern of death as being beyond the world of mourning. Yet, it is the presentation of the afterlife in *Drenched by the Sun* which shows that though his themes are identical, he treats them in his own individual way. His poetry is no longer just a mere echo of the Indian philosophical discourse concerning death. In his world of magic realism, death/ dying is still full of life and desire, rooted to the everydayness. This varied approach to death in most of the forty one poems which make up the collection of *Drenched by the Sun* reflects the poet’s preoccupation with death as well as his ingenuity. He writes—“a man climbs the back steps /of my house/ carrying death on his shoulders” (From the mire, 27). Likewise in his magical world

there—"goes the procession of death/ through the ribs of dry leaves" (Kaaladeepakam, 23). There is a presence of death even in the oddest of places and times—"while going for an ice-cream/ saw another girl's happiness/ peeping at us, took her too,/ went to the cemetery"(Shooting star, 32). These are examples of how the poet has a penchant for drawing on the strong presence of death even in his world of commonplace and magic. But there are select poems of Sudhakar which largely center on death, the act of dying or the process that brings about death like 'All the Lucky Ones', 'Dampness', 'I wait', 'Digging', 'Wax', 'Happiness and Sorrow: A Crisis', 'The Animal', and 'Lady spider's suicide note'.

His poem titled, 'All the Lucky Ones' centers around the idea of suicide. This poem blends the mundane with the magical. Every time the narrator attempts to commit suicide, he is disturbed by the most commonplace things which borders on the comical—

'the milkmaid calling

The postman climbing the stairs

Janu bursting in to clean

The thief sneaking behind the dark well

The unexpected black-out

The late tedious trains

The ever-ready-to help room boy

The traffic police calculating the precise future of speed,

Their unending signs.'(63)

While these lines capture the image of the hustle and bustle of everyday Indian life, the wish for death remains just around the corner. While dying is an individual experience death/dying becomes a site of critique of social issues. Sudhakar occasionally delves in a subtle form of commentary on the socio-political scenario. As the country rushes towards becoming a developed nation, the poor and the marginalized have become the first casualties of the new India. In a country where the government is supposed to represent all citizens, the farmers have remained

in the periphery of most developmental projects. Agriculture remains the worst affected section in India as economic reforms continue to fail in this sector. The farmers are riddled with debt as cost of cultivation increases and market returns continue to decline while government policies remain inadequate. Hence, the idea of suicide manifests as a political commentary in this poem as the narrator describes his envy of the ‘lucky ones [who] succeed’—‘a farmer/a school kid/a family/a nation’ (63). At a time when the media is flooded with the news of farmers taking their own lives, the death of this common man can be seen as a larger reflection of the death of a ‘nation’. And it is telling that this death is deliberate which makes a commentary on the larger governmental apathy.

Every suicide is followed by the question why, and the third stanza of the poem shifts to this question—‘Yesterday there was a documentary/ on the various reasons for suicide’ (63). In our contemporary times, the role of media and journalism has come under critical light as sensible reporting has given way to sensationalism. Death as presented in media has become a spectacle which has made violent deaths a commonplace activity. While the question of mortality remains looming the masses are witness to various images of death. Sudhakar in his characteristic style talks about the satellites ‘panting’ to complete the impossible task of delving into the human mind to capture its secrets as to why one would wish for death. Unlike video reports which dissect every possible subject, this is a question that remains unanswered in the poem. However, this is in direct contrast to how the narrator portrays himself as a being as transparent as glass with a wish to be—‘a black sea-turtle’ (64). The poem leaves the reader with a number of unanswered questions— who are the lucky ones—the ones who succeed in killing themselves or the ones who don’t?

Likewise, ‘Lady spider’s suicide note’ is another poem which centers on the idea of suicide. While the thematic concern of this poem remains the same as ‘All the lucky ones’ the contrast in approach to the same idea shows how it is difficult to compartmentalize Sudhakar’s poetry to fit into any fixed category. This poem brings in a different dimension and meaning to the idea of suicide. Death is also a moment of transformation and when death happens it can change the direction of the individuals related to the dead. This poem examines this question of how one death can irreparably influence the lives of the ones left behind. At a time when both existence and suicide is considered pointless, there is also an innate need in all beings for a meaningful and noble death and ‘Lady spider’s suicide note’ is a reflection of this desire. The speaker of the poem is a

female spider who decides to commit suicide on learning that mating will lead to the death of her partner. While scientific research shows that this is common in the animal kingdom, this poem presents this same scientific fact in poignant manner. 'Lady spider's suicide note' centers on idea of the rejection of a domestic space and any future offspring. It celebrates love as being selfless—'Let me do this/For me you should live./For me you should not become a father' (58). Here, death/dying becomes an extension and a reflection of this self-sacrificing love.

The presence of all pervading death in Sudhakar's poetry is best exemplified in 'Wax', where a wax candle is abruptly extinguished. Light and darkness is contrasted as life and death collide in this poem. As the candle is put out it ushers in darkness and it is 'frozen stiff' resembling a dead body. It is significant that when the candle is blown out the wax has not melted completely—'who is it/ that left just two legs' (43), perhaps the candle still had the capacity to give some more light and had some more life in it. The suddenness of death is reflected in the lines—'when of a sudden/ everything melted down/ while wrapping a dhoti around' (43). It is notable that light/life is extinguished when someone is doing something as mundane as getting dressed. No individual is truly prepared for death and when it does come it is as sudden as a candle which is blown out—'everything in a moment/ vanished' (43). Yet, death is not the final end as the moment of closure is deferred in the lines—'what remains/ two stumps below the knees/ go!/ go and hide somewhere/ before that too melts away' (43). Though the poem captures the arbitrariness of life and death in general, it also evokes a need to live on beyond death.

This idea of light/ candle signifying life is carried forward in the poem titled 'I wait'. But here, the narrator is not waiting for life or death instead this poem reflects a strange kind of longing—'for over a year now/ I've been trying to kill him' (22). This poem combines death with eroticism as the lines abound with sensual images reflecting the narrative voice of a female awaiting a lover. While lines like—'his veins will writhe on the floor/like a lizard's tail' (21) seem grotesque at the outset, there is an undercurrent of craving alongside death which is heightened by the image of the 'butterfly'. Butterfly which is often seen as a symbol of hope and renewal is no longer a positive image in the poem as all hope of a union is lost—'one moment has just gone by/what remains/ is the time/ it would take to kill a butterfly'(21). At this moment when all hope has vanished the lover magically appears and the disturbing breath and phallic image of the dagger heightens the subtle desire of the narrator. However, the illusory nature of this is revealed when

the readers realize that the candle is lit at noon and is soon blown out by the lover. K.Satchinandan in his foreword to the collection *Drenched by the Sun* mentions that this poem presents—‘an elusive enemy who refuses to appear in the candle light of the waiting foe’ (12), it appears that this elusive enemy is the narrator herself and her agonized desire. When a death occurs it is followed by another agonizing equivalent which is the death of the memory and remains in the minds of the ones left behind. This poem captures this process of forgetting and mourning. The poem ends with a desolate image of the narrator awaiting death of desire which appears perpetual—

“for over a year now

I’ve been trying to kill him.

Tomorrow

At the same time,

Beside a lighted candle

I’ll wait.”(22)

This combination of death with erotic desire is expressed in ‘Digging’ as well. ‘Digging’ captures the frenzy of the grave diggers who is enticed by the dead body of a woman. As the removal of each layer of soil reveals different body parts—‘legs/cheeks/thighs/navel’ (24), to the excited diggers there is a rush of carnal desire. The lines that follow describe the heady intoxication brought about by this act only to culminate in the final revelation of a eunuch. The entire poem which was fraught with sexual tension and ‘invigorating toddy’ ends with a sudden desexualization when faced with ‘the barren eyes of a eunuch’ (24). The use of the word barren not only expresses infertility but also refers to a larger lifelessness that is mirrored even in the living. The grave diggers head to collect their wages in disappointment. The ruthless act of a desecration of a grave ends with a reflection on the futility of effort and disillusionment. Perhaps the most striking image in this poem is the way the body of the dead is presented. There is no element of revulsion associated with this act of digging the dead. Rather it has been given a tone of love-making which celebrates the beauty of the body not covered in soil and stones but—“all floating in joy” (24).

Likewise, 'Dampness' reveals the thoughts of a dead body lying in the mortuary awaiting the final rite. Similar to the poem 'Wax', which reflects on the momentary nature of life, 'Dampness', shows how life can come to an abrupt end. Sudhakar is a wordsmith who describes the suddenness of death in these lines—'someone's timepiece/ cried aloud/ to drain the fuel/ of my sleep'(53). The poet makes us privy to the thoughts of the body whose coldness is accentuated by presence of only a thin sheet covering him. This strange witness to one's own dead body would have led to an inexhaustible moment of questions. It plays on the reader's imagination of what dying would be like—the sense of darkness and infinity. But in Sudhakar's world, there is only a sense of calm acceptance of this act which is untainted by any form of remorse. This moment of peace remains unbroken even as the dead wonders—'where my flesh will dissolve away?'(53) The expected void and fear of death is no longer present.

Sudhakar often probes into the moment of afterlife and while his poetry abounds in the images death, dead and dying, 'Happiness and Sorrow: A Crisis' is a philosophical reflection on this question of afterlife. K. Satchidanandan compares this poem to –'a fable or a parable from the bible where the soul gets caught between heaven and hell' (12). Though Sudhakar seldom dwells on the question of moral choices, this poem reveals a strange kind of dilemma as the soul climbs up the rope and is faced with two doors—blue and green, each representing heaven and hell. It is heartening to see that in Sudhakar's version of afterlife, the soul has a choice as reflected in the title of the poem, but this choice is not an easy one. This moment of choice reveals a second death as—'the knot of crisis/ tightened again'(46). This simple reference to death as a moment of crisis is fraught with images of suffocation. The narrator wants to choose heaven but a crisis ensues and the soul is hurled down—'I fell on the other side/ it was day'(46) bringing an abrupt end to an otherwise grand encounter.

As a reading of the poems have highlighted, Sudhakar's poetry is replete with images of death and it has remained a central thematic concern of the entire collection of *Drenched by the Sun*. In his poems, sometimes he is a silent observer, sometimes he is a subjective narrator and together he recreates a world with sensitivity and subtle humour where death is an everyday reality. There can be no homogenous method to perceive death. This complexity is captured in the various literary expressions of the vision of death in the poems discussed here. Sudhakar's poetry reveals a potential to provide a refreshing and insightful way of interrogating a complex yet unavoidable

reality. Death is a variegated encounter and Sudhakar invites his readers to experience it beyond the clichéd image of horror.

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