

Venturing Through the Paradoxical Perceptions of Life and Death: Outlook in a Folktale

Abstract

The paper attempts to unravel the essence of the philosophy of life and the concept of death as depicted in a folktale *The Limit* by the reverend Vijaydan Detha and translated in English by Chriti A. Merrill in *Chouboli and Other Stories Volume II*.

Keywords: Life, Eternity, Death, Existence, Nature, Knowledge and The Perception of Happiness And Sadness.

Introduction

Vijaydan Detha (1926-2013) remains a perennial fragrance of Rajasthan's Oral Traditions. He has accomplished the herculean task to collect more than a thousand oral folk narratives and reform them with his intellectual literary fervour. His fourteen volume masterpiece *Baatan ri Phulwadi* remains a precious treasure of his valuable contribution to the world of literature. Detha's works have inspired both the silver screen and theatre performances as they are enriched with ever relevant themes and profound spiritual impact. *The Limit* is a tale from his vast collections that delves into the perplexities of human mind over the conceptions of existence, life, happiness quotient, death and aftermath.

Aim of the Study

The study applies an interdisciplinary approach within the sphere of English Literature and aims to explore the philosophical vision of oral traditions.

The Limit

In our desire for eternal life we pray our eternity of our habit and comfort forgetting that immortality is in repeatedly transcending the definite forms of life in order to pursue the infinite truth of knowledge. (Tagore 78)

These enlightening lines by Rabindranath Tagore coalesce with Vijaydan Detha's folktale 'The Limit' that rove's through the eternal questions about the dubiety of life and certainty of death. It is the story of a wealthy and generous seth (merchant) who had all the happiness in life – a splendid-loving family, a virtuous wife and abundant riches. Even the king of the state asked for his benevolence when the royal treasury ran low.

Indeed to have a raja in one's debt was a chance in a lakh! ... The seth felt true pride in his wealth... What greater happiness could there be on earth...it seemed as if... At his whim the breeze blew...and at his whim the sun and the moon rose in turn... As his chariot parted the crowds... their loud cheers – Jaya! Jaya! – rent the sky... they had more faith in his charity than in the raja's or even Bhagwan himself... what will happen to this world after I am gone? (Detha 33-34)

Such can be an illusion of one's existence and prosperity that even the acts of nature seem to dance over one's fantasy. The seth was caught in the very familiar illusion of the immortality of existence and the very idea that how the people would survive when he would be no more bothered him. But his wife who is the spokesperson of the author tries to elucidate her husband's specious vision by saying,

A man's life and death doesn't make any difference to the world. Who knows how many have already slipped into the mouth of Kal without a trace? Rajas and emperors, sages and seers have all come and departed in their time. No one's death has ever brought anything to a halt... Life lacks luster when clouded with such illusions...Lakhs of men die every day. Is nature going to pay her tributes to everyone? Forget nature, even one's progeny perform the obligatory condolence rites and then forget... Life goes on. Yes, when you die everything ends... (34-35).

The central theme in this expression is one of the most explored spiritual conceptions by men in the search of discovering the essence of



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existence. The thoughtful perception of the of the seth's wife is reminiscent of P. B. Shelly's masterpiece – Ode to Ozymandias that poetically draws the idea that even the mightiest powers/influences often disillusion their instincts with the fact that their might will conquer death but all is equaled in death and life moves on mocking this incompetency of men,

*I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of
stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the
sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless
things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that
fed;
... Nothing beside remains...
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

(Shelley 5)

This came as a terrible realization for the seth that life will go on as comfortably and the nature's phenomena will continue with the familiar ease even after his death. It was nearly disturbing to exist in the absence of this illusion. His wife's knowledge of the Shastra's and his money all is but a lump of dirt – the very fact felt like a thunder to his intellect. This interpretation can be further explored in these lines by Shakespeare, where Hamlet's soliloquy which suggests death as a country from where no traveller returns;

*...the dread of something after death –
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns – puzzles the will, And
makes us rather bear those ills...
Thus conscience does make cowards o us
all...*

(Hamlet 3.1.79-84)

The sethani had inherited the incessant admiration for knowledge from her parents and so she brought with her in dowry the Vedas, the Puranas, the Upanishads... the Ramayana and other such sacred tomes. Whenever she had a free moment she'd immerse herself in her reading... in-laws were very pleased to have a bahu the very image of Goddess Saraswati... (Detha 36).

The narration portrays Sethani as a strong woman of wisdom thus promoting the virtue of knowledge for all, irrespective of gender. The mention of ancient Hindu documents of philosophy and religion in the tale applauds the beacons of great knowledge/philosophy our ancestors lighted and discovered. The Seth and Sethani since the days of their youth had decided to wage their lives in search of their individual passion – trade and knowledge respectively, in search of that spiritual limit that always remained distant amidst constant will to pursue more. To quote this unquenched wisdom for one's passion from Geetanjali,

My desires are many and my cry is pitiful...

*There are times when I languidly linger and
times when*

*I awaken in hurry in search of my goal; but
cruelly thou hidest thyself from before me...*

(Tagore, Geetanjali 30)

It's only when you do not have a certain virtue or possession you realize it's worth, surplus of anything always deteriorates it's desirability. Although Detha maintains the view that in terms of knowledge the relation is inverse; the more we explore the world of knowledge the scarcer we feel. The path of knowledge is bound in no distance; it is best expressed in the iconic conclusion of the poem Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening by Robert Frost,

*These woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Venturing through the meaning of existence the troubled seth further asks his wife, '... if I realized for the first time in my life that even with all this wealth and property I'm not happy, then what are other men living for? How do they find meaning in their lives? ... No food to eat, no clothes to wear, no house to live in... it's better to die than to always have your palm outstretched for begging (Detha 38)

The sethani with all the wisdom gives the most convincing reply to query that has universal relevance as the wealthy/fortunate often fall for such misconceptions that the abundance of wealth is what makes life beautiful. The sethani says,

Each one's perception of happiness and sadness is different, depending on his worldview, and the people he is with... Everyone takes pride in his own way of thinking. Everyone is satisfied with himself... Go try wringing any poor miserable person's neck and see! Tell me if doesn't strangle you back they have a far greater desire to live than we do... they are no less satisfied by the thought that everyone leaves this earth empty-handed... if the poor didn't keep this thought in mind, there'd be no limit to their misery. (39)

In her opinion knowledge, truth, wealth, devotion and family all are the illusionary concepts created by men to seek their superfluous happiness. All the birds, animals and flies lead a more natural life than humans, 'they don't create these mirages of happiness' (40). This idea of the evolution of 'knowledge' can be further understood in the analysis by F. Nietzsche,

Knowledge works as a tool of power...The meaning of "knowledge": here, as in the case of good or beautiful... In order for a particular species to maintain itself and increase its power, its conception of reality must comprehend enough of the calculable and constant for it to base a scheme of behavior on it... in other words: the measure of the desire for knowledge depends upon the measure to which the will to power grows in a species...

It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives, and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it

would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm. (Brown 337-338)

Thus, the theme highlighted in this story further develops into complete salvation, even knowledge limits itself as a medium that humans aspire to acquire their pursuit of life, happiness and grandeur. The sethani convinces that beasts and birds lead a more intellectually-superior life than the disillusioned human race but the seth is adamant over the eminence of men over other living creatures. He says; ...what can compare to being man? Whether you are a cripple or a leper, a human is a human. A thousand times better than a beast... I am not ready to be anything but human... I give away all this charity just so I'll be born a man in my next birth too... (Detha 40). The above idea can be better understood in the light of the given extract,

Only the human animal is conscious to death. Other animals are given the instincts to protect them from what would do them harm, but we learn to cope with impending death without the protection of built in defenses. According to Becker, knowing we will die the entire time we are alive is "the most unequal struggle any animal has to go through. (Brown 598)

Thus, the tale also serves as an anecdote with elaborate spiritual exchanges between two souls at unrest. Sethani tries her best to bring to the notice of her husband that this is all sheer ignorance of man which he is so proud off, but all in vain. Immersed in that sublime wisdom does she suddenly decide to end her life journey and self-poison's herself. The juncture reminds of a fine expression from Gitanjali,

*I have had my invitation to this world's festival,
And thus my life has been blessed...*

*It was my part at this feast to play upon my
instrument, and I have done all I could.*

*Now, I ask, has the time come at last when I
may go in ...*

(Tagore Gitanjali 32)

The sethani was no more and in shock did her husband realize the mortality of life; she was alive with all her six senses a moment ago and now the body was no more than a heap of sand. The elaborate last rites of his wife; the funeral pyre – ghee- coconut-sandalwood and the flames, the final customs at the Ganga River, the grand farewell feast on the third day and the offerings to the poor and the Brahmins marked adieu to his beloved.

There is a glimpse of the Hindu tradition and customs in this detail narration. To the seth's acquaintance – Nature carried on as before. And who can accompany the dead?' (Detha 41). This eternal truth is explicitly manifested in this extract from Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Grey,

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault...

The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn or animated bust

Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,

Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid

Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;

*Hands, that the rod of empire might have
sway'd,*

Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre...

(Gray 11-12)

The seth in deep melancholy pondered over what his said; nobody could control what happened in this life. He thought; 'So he too would have to die some day? ...After that?... Now he had no interest in living, but he knew that in this great cycle of birth and death he couldn't take another birth unless it was a man's ...And not just any man, but this very form!' (Detha C. II 42).

As Francis Bacon observes, MEN fear death, as children fear to go into the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other. Certainly, the contemplation of death, as the wages of sin, and passage to another world, is holy and religious; but the fear of it, as a tribute due unto nature, is weak. (Bacon 101)

According to the Hindu Mythology every soul is incurred upon eighty four lakh yonees (forms of life) which it must live before salvation. And for the seth, 'Of all the eighty four forms of life a being could assume, a human manifestation was surely the best!' (32) and with all that ceaseless wealth it was a bliss.

Hence, to bring the misery to end the seth called upon the most learned pundits to tell him about the form he will be bestowed in his next birth and on looking through his Horoscope they informed him that, 'he would be born as a gutter flea in this very haveli.' (44). This revelation came as the worst nightmare to him, he was tortured by the very thought and fleas felt swarming all over him. But gradually the thought faded away and he spent most of his time relishing/ absorbing the nature – the sun, moon, sky, rains, flowers and bird songs etc.

He wanted to drink up every last drop of the rasa of human life. Bliss was to be found in creation not wealth! (46) This adoration for nature harmonizes with R.W. Emerson's observations in his essay Nature,

But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches... To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again... (Emerson 9, 15)

Then one day, the horrific thought of being a flea gripped him anew and tormented with that he suffered a heart stroke. He called out all his sons and daughter in laws and ordered, "I'm not a guest in this world much longer. Wash the gutter well with Ganga water. As soon as I stop breathing, look in the gutter. If you see a flea, crush it as soon as you can. I don't even want to live the life of a flea for even a moment." (Detha 47)

The seth died the very next minute and his middle son approached the gutter and saw the flea creeping. He prepared to crush it when the joon (life-form) shouted, "Arey! Are you crazy? I'm perfectly happy here! I'm enjoying myself just fine!" (47) The son halted and offered that he would have this gutter

covered in gold and fill it with Ganga's Holywater with flower essence. With the final supernatural element Detha draws the core of the narrative which is to traverse The Limit of life force that is universal and sempiternal irrespective of the physical, material, biological and other related differences between living beings.

Gamboling in the mud the flea replied, "Dhat! How can Ganga water compare to this lovely muck? Even the mention of flower essence makes me want to vomit! What do you know of the joy of this joon? Leave me look after my own affairs and keep your advice to yourself. Go do the last rites for your father. Don't worry about me. You can't imagine my happiness. Just look after yourself that is enough."
(47)

Conclusion

These concluding lines portray the enlivened vision of the protagonist by a practical approach that completely vindicates the plot of this tale. As every form of creation inherit its love for its existence, beauty and joy.

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