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THINKING ABOUT DEATH: AN EXPLORATION OF ITS FOUNDATIONS IN SUFISM

Davood SPARHAM

Associate Professor, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

Email: merajedanesh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Death is such a deep and mysterious concept that has always been occupying the human mind. In any era of history, different nations have given different responses to what death is and why it exists according to their social, religious and political conditions, and they have approached it distinctly. As it can be seen in many mystical works, thinking of mortality is of great importance in Sufism, whether these thoughts are rooted in thanatophobia or, conversely, in welcoming death as a way to perfection. In this library research, the structures of mortality and thinking of death in Sufism are investigated from a sociological and cognitive perspective through deliberation on the concept of death and its typology in Sufism. The study of theories by scholars such as Durkheim, Rank and Freud and their comparison with Sufism intellectual foundation indicates that the concepts such as immortal double and immortality of unconscious mind have greatly contributed to the course of death and finitude thoughts in mysticism and Sufism.

Keywords: Free Death, Compulsory Death, Thanatophobia, Finitude

INTRODUCTION

Every person has faced the unsolved question of what death is; the unanswered question which all human fears have roots in. If we look at the history of humanity from a death awareness perspective, all we can see is nothing but a reflection of fear of death and an attempt to mitigate or escape it. War, the experience of annihilation and the sense of teleological thinking resulting from immediate possibility of death are the most important factors in creation of the unconscious question of what death is; therefore, the manner of every nation after close experience of death forms one of their ways of dealing with the fear of death. Humans' main motive for recognizing death was fear of death which Schopenhauer considered it the mainspring of philosophy and teleological cause of religion. Fear of death is emotional in nature, but it is humans' drive to reflect upon death (Moatamedi, 1994).

Freud assumed that there are two fundamental drivers in each and every human, cell or creature: the love of life and the passion of death. Based on his theory, passion of death is intrinsic, undefeated by condition and external forces are ineffective in its creation. He recognized two main tendencies in human: desire for living and desire for destruction; he believed that the instinct of life, liveliness or the power of love is moving in the direction of integration. But the aim of the passion of death is disturbing, or better to say, tearing down the integration. Interestingly, human can choose only one of these two choices: direct the passion for death either to oneself or to others (Fromm, 2011:63, 164). Yalom believes that there are four important teleological affairs in psychotherapy: death, freedom, seclusion and

meaninglessness. The way humans deal with these affairs forms their internal conflicts (Yalom, 2011).

Life can be considered as sleeping while death is awakening after that sleeping. It should be noted that personality and individuality belongs not to awareness of awakening but to the very sleeping; hence, death seems like finitude to human. Therefore, death should not be seen as transition to a new, unfamiliar condition but as returning to our main state, i.e. the substantial state of being which life is a short absence from. Our real, substantial state of being, as far as we can explore, is nothing but desire, the same desire for knowing oneself. Therefore, if death deprives us of wisdom, it is just transiting us to a primary state involving lack of recognition which is not yet the mere unconscious state but something beyond wherein the confliction between subjectivity and objectivity is eliminated; Since the things to be recognized are practically the same as what are recognized and, ironically, the main requisite of any kind of recognition is absent (Schopenhauer, 2006: 115-116).

The study of death is the study of various nations' response to questions raised by alienation of death and realized through religion, philosophy and art. "Here, both religious faith and fully secular attitudes agree on valuing the magnificence of death. The enlightening intervention of science is incapacitated in the secret of life and death. Every living creature should accept death. Regardless of religious perspectives, whether it is promising a reward or threatening to punish according to what is doomed by final judgment in the resurrection, philosophy is unable to reflect upon which human will get involved in while confronting death." (Gadamer, 2006:443).

Historically, Sufism has been the longest and most important Persian response to what death is and why it exists among various eras of Persian thought. Some believes that Sufism indicates the decadence of Persian elaborate thoughts. In accepting this accusation, it would be said that ancient Persian thoughts, meaning pre-Islamic era and before Mongols invasion of Iran, were not capable of responding to the question of death after the aforesaid historical events. Since factors aggravating fear such as war, instability, chaos and insecurity has not been eliminated, permanent presence of grounds for thinking of death has led to the extension of Sufism thought until present. Then again, fear of death even in its sublime forms meaning religion, art and literature leads to an intellectual weakness which valorize escaping from fear of death more than intellectual improvement.

As respects, how has been the question of death posed in Sufism? Human is an actuality confined to the period between two points: life and death; irrespective of different responses by religions and philosophy about their nature, the states beyond these two points are secret. There is a common belief that we begin our existence upon birth and it would come to an end at the point of death; death is an inevitable while impersonal event; it is an end distinct from living process. Assume that painful experiences of historical events such as war bring about the multiplicity of experience of death in various aspects. Meanwhile, death event captures each and every moment of living course and if it continues it can cause the consecutive experience of death shifts from an instant event to a gradual one replacing the living course. Meaning that death in dying process replaces life in living process. Obviously, such an attitude shift intensifies the fear of death so that further more accountable responses will be required to the persistent question of death. Freud believed that unconscious mind does not recognize death and consider itself as eternal; "what we call unconscious mind- i.e. the deepest layers of



mind composed of instinctive impulses- does not recognize any negative verdict and does not know what negation means. In other words, various kinds of contradiction are consistent in unconscious mind. Hence, unconscious mind does not know what its own death means, since the content of death is necessarily negative. As a result, there is no intrinsic element within us which can react to the belief of death. It may be said that this is the very key to heroism. Rational reasons for heroism have roots in the belief that survival of the person cannot be as valuable as some general, abstract ideals.” (Freud, 2006:170). Therefore, a religious or mythical response ensuring human’s eternity without creating intense, conscious experience of death can easily overcome the fear of death; but intense experience of death in its various aspects creates a deep gap in unconscious belief of eternity and conscious experience of destruction and dominance of death on living course. In fact, death shifts from a final event to an incident process and its fear changes to an intellectual-behavioral drive. In the following, we are going to investigate the backgrounds of believing in death in Sufism through semiotics and using philosophy, sociology and psychoanalysis.

Principles of thinking about death in Sufism

There is an abundant literature on principles of mysticism culture. Recognizing the basic thoughts about death largely depends on the way the sources deal with the question of death. Like any other school, Sufism has grown in an environment under the influence of other thoughts and religions. Although Sufism has been loyal to its main source including Quran and Sunnah and impacted on all these religions, there are signs of influences from other thoughts.

Quran and Sunnah

The preferred viewpoint is that mysticism has its main roots in Quran and Sunna, for this reason, various aspects of thinking about death are required to be studied from Quran and Sunna perspective; but this study would certainly be within the scope of specific sufistic impressions and interpretations of holy texts. Considering death as a transition step is the most important indicator of religious thinking around belief in death. In this way, death is a step among perfection steps included in the sphere of being; the same being which has been ensured through believing in eternity of souls.

All this dying is not the death of the physical form: this body is an instrument for my spirit.

Oh, there is many a raw (imperfect) one whose blood was shed seemingly, but whose living soul escaped from one side. (Maulana, 2015: book V:184)

Another reflection on fear of death in Sufism is realized through the desire for divine revelation. Therefore, the love of the eliminator causes the fear of death become a joy. "The passion for death is originated from mystics’ beliefs about the hereafter and the love they feel for The Excellence. Since Sufi loves God, he is eager for death." (Akhlaghi, 2011:17). The passion for death is taken from Ayat (Verses), such as in Sura Al-Juma (Friday), verse 9:

“Say, "O you who are Jews, if you claim that you are allies of Allah, excluding the [other] people, then wish for death, if you should be truthful.”¹

In which, the wish for death is attributed to God’s lovers and Aulia Allah (those who are close to God).



¹Sahih International translation of Holy Quran

Nevertheless, with a closer look, this valorization of the killer is only a defensive mechanism to overcome fear of death. "there is Qisas for every person killed is in the world, or Diyah is obligatory upon the killer and in the religious law, there is also Qisas for love and Diyah as well and both of them are obligatory upon the victim" (Meibodi, 1959, vol. 1: following the verse 180 of Surah al-Baqarah). The fact that Sufis previously considered the experience of death more as being killed is a clear manifestation of the influence exerted by historical ruling conditions which we can see its representation in Persian love poems. In fact, the fear of death is the main ground of thinking about death in Sufism which is eliminated by covering the face of the killer with holiness or love mask: "Oh, God! Neither comes blood from your victim, nor smoke from who burned (for you), because your victim is happy to be killed by you and who burned is pleased with burning." (Ansari, 2013, p. 54)

Other religious cultures

The influence of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and etc, is discussed in the search of the backgrounds of Sufism. However, it is evident that mystical thinking is independent of each of these positions, however, common points of thinking about death in these religions or affecting Sufi thought can be examined.

Christianity

The image of a personal God and belief in sin at the beginning of the creation are some issues effective on Sufism. Fear of death as a result of belief in sin can have roots in Christianity, since in Islam it is believed that human is not born sinfully; on the other hand, awareness (consciousness) is introduced as the penalty of primary sin in Christian teachings, wherein the awareness of death is of utmost importance. "Reflection upon death as the penalty of sin and a passage to other world is a pious matter; but fear of death as praising nature is the result of weakness. Nevertheless, there is sometimes there is sometimes a mixture of superstitious in religious teachings" (Bacon, 2006:83). In second and third chapters of holy Bible, there is a teaching that says the death is introduced in the world as the result of sin. First parents were able to live eternally, but since they didn't respect God's command, they were punished by death. God had put the life tree in the Garden of Eden for the purpose that they continually ate from it and never dies. (Genesis 2: 9) But since Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God told them: because you are from soil and you will return to the soil (Genesis 3:19). Although they did not immediately die materially, but the law of death included them as a result of the curse of God

Hinduism

The Indian doctrine of the finitude (Nirvana) can be traced in Sufism; and on the other hand, the levels of the evolution of the soul (inanimate, plants, animal, human) are similar to those of Indian thought.

Judaism

Depiction of Jehovah as a distinguished and personal God in Jewish religious culture has played a major role in forming the belief in God in other heavenly religions.

According to the book of genesis, death is a kind of punishment in Judaism which God has imposed upon human due to his disobedience. "And since God saw that man's wickedness was abundant on the earth and every fancy in his heart is continually evil, God regretted that He had made man on earth and dejected." (Genesis 6: 6).



Although Torah is considered as the way of saying yes to the Lord and the dream of reintroducing paradise on earth for Israelites, there is no covenant throughout the book that if the people are obedient, the reality of death will be eliminated. Therefore, they will remain the offspring of Adam; though Adam caused death be imposed by God on mankind due to his disobedience, if human beings commit no disobedience, death will not be taken from him. That is why the expression of "Adam's child" is almost always used in situations confirming the weaknesses and finitude of humanity. (Hosseini, 2001, pp. 170-171) On the book of Deuteronomy, it is argued that if the fate of all humans is death and there does not exist any life after this world, then what is the purpose of God for all these orders? It is replied that if we respect divine commands, God will make our generations eternal. "Jehovah has commanded us to respect our responsibilities to our God, so that he will always be compassionate and keep us alive, as it has been today." (Deuteronomy 6, pp. 23-25)

Culture and religion in pre-Islamic Persia

The manifestation of mortality in cultural forms requires a rich cultural understanding that inevitably has its roots in pre-Islamic Iran; thinking of death in pre-Islamic thoughts has had a direct impact on mystical thinking.

Socio-psychological backgrounds (death sociology)

The specific backgrounds for the formation of Sufi thought indicate that this thought has been a reaction to specific political and social conditions and its maturity was due to satisfying psychological needs. The study of these backgrounds is effective in the study of morphology and the causes of its continuity; the principles of beliefs, intellectual systems, and the special system of Sufism, in addition to many philosophical and theological ideas that entered into this school through theoretical mysticism are full of signs of thinking about death. This fact would be clarified through the study of the principles of Sufism through semiotics.

The image of God in Sufism

The desire for truth is the double of quest for power, and this source of power in the Sufism is revealed on the face of God. On the other hand, the undeniable similarity of God in Sufism with the ruling kings will play a major role in clarifying the social context of this belief in power. Most of these ascetics who are afraid of God and tears on their unfulfilled sins have not been thieves or wicked; therefore, it is inevitably assumed that God is depicted in contrast to what a healthy mind can imagine and/or what can be shown through teachings of Qur'an. They have created Allah based on savage, cruel and ruthless kings of their history. All peoples in the world evaluate God's court based on their government apparatus, since the governing system of each nation is the realization of their ethics and rationale (Dashti, 1975).

Death and love duality in the intellectual culture of Sufism

According to Freud, all human behaviors are the result of a complex game between the instinct of death and the instinct of life, and tension and stretch. In one of his last writings, beyond the pleasure principle, he depicted the unconscious structure based on two Greek myths: the instinct of life or Eros which serves the purpose of bonding and evolution and organic unification which sexual behaviors are its objective reflection; the instinct of death or of Tanathos which serves to decompose, break, and destroy, and is realized through aggressive behaviors (Freud, 1984). Love and death would be two sides of a coin in such way of thinking; on the other hand, the Sufis' perception of love has many overlaps with Freud's theory in spite of different natures.



Individuality and the concept of finitude

The humans' perception of their dying is shaped through his perception of himself as a creature independent of nature and understanding of time. In other words, understanding the death is equal to understanding of the mortal ego. One of the important issues in Sufism is the veryunderstatement of the perception of the mortal ego presence and the attempt to dissolve it in an immortal being. This issue which is referred to as the notion of finitude is one of the key positions for understanding the concept of finitude in Sufism; in fact, Sufis raise the issue of finitude to pose the desire for destroying mortal ego, and thus merely remove the individuality, that is, the problem description of death.

On the other hand, believing in a time so much away which is referred to as transformation of things marginalize the linear course of death and reduces its fear. "According to Mawlana, human existence is exposed to continuous birth and death from the beginning to the end of being. For Mawlana, death is something realized in the being in every moment. In mystical ontology, universal manifestations are considered as manifestations of names of God and divine manifestations of the absolute being. Absolute grace is resulted from the eternal universe and beyond the realm of uninterrupted being and flows in the body of the universe. The continuity and unity in this flow will cause us not realize the continuous death and inexistence in the being. "(Abbasi Dakani, 1998: 153)

Every moment the world is renewed, and we are unaware of its being renewed whilst it remains (the same in appearance).

Life is ever arriving anew, like the stream, though in the body it has the semblance of continuity.

(Maulana, 2015: Book I, p. 146)

"Death comes from within, and no one is able to overcome it. The quest for eternity in the heart of death is an elixir found by the mystics to turn the low value being (metaphorically, copper) into a valuable thing (i.e. gold) with the help of almighty's love(Abbasi Dakani, 1998: 145). In mysticism, finitude is the achievement of Sufi to perfection and liberation from the sensible world. Most mystics, like Mawlana believe in a divine reincarnation; the seeker go through the way of spiritual journey to finitude enjoying the power of love, and when he achieves finitude, he maintains the essence of his soul and becomes the Mirror of God's manifestation. Indeed, immortal human's joining with God is in some way a relief to the pain of human immortality (Moatamedi, 1994, p. 145).

The issue of soul

The Belief in an intangible structure that can be realized only through signs and effects is the common feature of Sufism and psychoanalytic science. The conception of the soul as an intangible being reining the body is the prominent point in thinking about death in Sufism; while the problem of death is formed through explanation of self and its structure in psychoanalysis. Comparing these two structures outlines a reasonable basis for finding similarities between Sufi thought and psychoanalytic findings.

Sufistic suicide

Another key concept among Sufis is the free death or voluntary death; voluntary death is, in fact, an expression that involves controlling the soul and requires negation of physical pleasures. "According to Sufis, such a death that causes the seeker get free from Ego is nothing



but a rebirth. Since the essential of voluntary death is to overcome the self and its intentions, it occurs before the natural death and results in transition from knowledge of certainty stage to the position of perception and positive knowledge; this death and rebirth belongs to those who observe the divine kingdom in this world. “(Ashtiani, 1992, p. 778, as cited in Akhlaghi, 2013, p. 17)

The intentional death or optional death is another aspect of Sufism that can be compared with suicide. French sociologist, Emile Durkheim defines suicide as "any death that is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act committed by the victim; a victim who should have been aware of the result" (Durkheim, 2000). Death before death in Sufism means killing the concupiscence and the most visible expression of infinity desire. These two deaths are common in the concept of consciousness; the purpose of most suicides is to avoid psychological pains, to stop thinking and reach a sense of security; in fact, the suicide person escapes from the context of problem which is life, instead of solving problems. Sufi, in the search for an answer to the problem of death transcends his mortal, existential realm and removes the problem description of his own death by resolving in an absolute, immortal existence.

I will become dead; I will commit myself to the water: to die before death is to be safe from torment.”

(Mawlana, 2014, Book IV:, p. 113)

The Sufis consider four stages for a death called self-immolation, which are distinguished by four colors:

- Red death: self-denial
- White death: hunger and thirst
- Green death: being satisfied with clothing germane to Sufis and patch on the old wraps
- Black death: Tolerance for the people's harassment

The Sufis' believe in suffering reflected in all above cases is the most important cause of suicide. A suicide person suffers from something which others are considered to be its cause and life to be its context, and as they cannot imagine the problem to be solved, they will commit suicide, just like turning off the lights to ignore the painful scene. Sufistic death, like suicide, is associated with a kind of fear of death's unfamiliarity, a fear that arouses from awareness of its own death which is specific to human beings for that very reason. There is no creature except human enjoying the power of choice and death and leaping forward to it:

No creature has the choice for death, but you have this choice (among all creatures) in the world

(Shabestari, 2004, p. 60)

Consciousness attends existence and death is contrary to consciousness. For this reason, it is not possible to know death by dying. An attempt to perceive the essence and quality of death during life is one of the signs of fear of death that is interpreted as ascension in the intellectual culture of Sufism: "The ascension is that the spirit of the seeker gets out of his body while he is awake and healthy, and the circumstances that will be revealed to him after his death, will be revealed to him before his death" (Abbasi Dakani, 1998, p. 139). In fact, the analysis of death provides the possibility of passing it, and the leap to immortality. In contrast to natural death, intentional death is considered passing from the fear of inexistence and getting close to the realm of being. Is it possible to consider finitude as a form of suicide deliberately carried out to



escape from the fear of destruction, and from the short worldly life that has taken the color of sincerity and also as a response to the desire for immortality and the immortality of the unconscious?

Otto Rank's theory of meeting with self and the double

One of the most important followers of Freud's instinct of death theory is his disciple Otto Rank's double theory. Unlike Freud, he did not consider behavioral impulses to be the result of sexual desires, but the manifestations of fear of death. Dividing our existence into two areas of mortal and immortal is one of the most basic forms of dealing with death which extends into religious, artistic and other cultures.

The double is the representation of me (Ego) which can take on different forms: shadow, reflection, portrait, etc., which is found in primary animism as narcissistic development ensuring immortality Guarantees. "The double in its primitive form is the shadow, representing both the living and the dead and thus it is protected from damage as actual self, even though the death of actual self does not affect the shadow" (Rank, 2006: 206). In fact, the double is an immortal self whose belief entails a spiritual duality in the individual. The very spiritual duality and division into two mortal and immortal parts is also seen in Sufism; here the purpose of the meeting with this spiritual double is to answer the question of death. This divine ego or personal angle appears to the philosopher as a beautiful and spiritual old man who indoctrinates wisdom and appears in the dreams and revelations of mystics in the figure of the beloved who perfects the mystic love and affection (Pour Namdarian, 1996, pp. 45-46).

Thinking about death in Sufism

In the first period of literary thinking (Khorasani's style), death is considered a part of nature; the nature which has not yet been separated from man to be set against it. Therefore, the acceptance of death in this thought is accompanied with submission, though this submission is not against human's nature at that period. It does not involve compulsion since death is the end of life, not its destruction.

We are all born along with death, this is our fate and we are submitted

(Ferdowsi, 2011, vol. 1:318)

This acceptance of death in the process of living does not disturb the process of living; but when living becomes a process of dying, the inevitability of death affects the attitude of poets to life:

If the fate of our stature is to be drown, what is the difference to be whether tall or short

(Ganjavi, 2009, p. 380)

When it is inevitable to cross this passage, there is no difference for the arch of living to be elevated or humble

(Hafiz, 1993, p. 80)

There has been no change in the power and nature of death, but what has happened that caused the glorious surrender of Ferdowsi to death to result in the disappointedly submission of the Nezami and Hafiz? The foundation of the mystical poetry is consciousness and at the top of all kinds of consciousness is the awareness of death; therefore, mystical poetry represents the death-oriented thoughts of Sufism, and the most important semantic meaning of the Sufi language is the very death-consciousness. Language means the consciousness of the temporal aspect of meanings and implications, so the language is being conscious of the death of things. Two interconnected forces that make man are language and death-consciousness (Ahmadi,



1997). In this regard, the mutual impact of Sufism's language and thoughts' of its death-conscious followers in two areas of the linguistic representation of thinking about death and belief in death can be examined in the works of Sufism.

CONCLUSION

In the study of death in Sufism, we concluded that the emergence of such an idea has largely been the result of existing political and historical conditions; from a sociological viewpoint, such thinking has been intensified more than ever due to some social failures, so that death and belief in death have become one of the main pillars of Sufism. Religious beliefs, whether Islamic thought derived from verses, hadiths, and narratives, or other intellectual principles of other religions have been influential in forming such a process. Also, looking at psychological theories about death and fear of death suggests that the correspondence of psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, self and double with the way individuals react and the collective reflections forms regarding death and the effects of these theories on the way death is confronted is worth to be considered.

Comments:

Death's various dimensions:

Intrapersonal dimension: the inner experience of personal mortality, meaning that the unconscious which considers itself to be eternal contradicts with the partial experience of destruction in some existential parts of a person confirming the importance of the question of death 2. Interpersonal death: the experience of losing an important person and its resulting process of mourning creating a near-death experience. 3. Non-personal death: The deaths of those which, although not accompanied with mourning, raise the question of death such as observing the announcement of an unknown person's death or walking in a cemetery. (see Moatamedi 1994 and 1989 for more information).



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