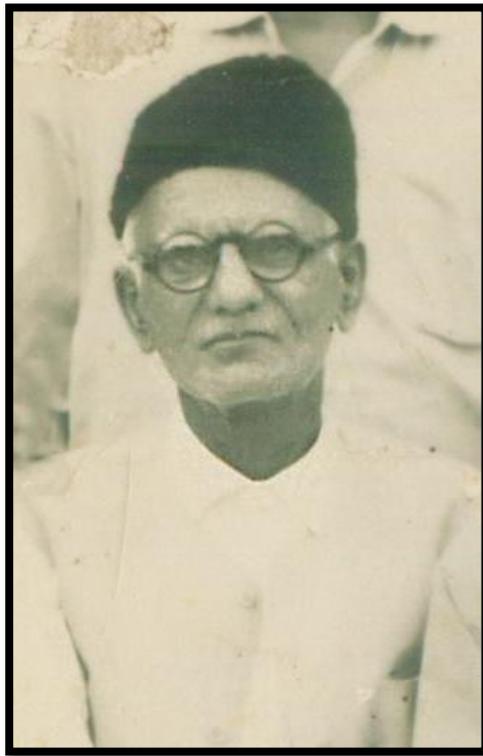

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Reflections on Mortality in the Poetry of Abdul Karim Gadai

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Abdul Karim Gadai (1901-1978)

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Abstract

Abdul Karim Gadai was one of the complex poets of Sindh. Various threads of man's social, political, spiritual and personal life are drawn together in his verses. He masterfully penetrates many of the complexities of human life, among which, his views on mortality are solid enough to engage both the mind and the heart. As a human being, Gadai appears to be himself spooked by the apparition of death, something he is unable to get past. Reviewing his verses brings out the rich imagery employed by him to portray death. While it sketches a horrible picture of death – conjuring up a nightmarish phantom of destruction in our minds, at the same time, it too presents it as a great leveler. In fact, Gadai's subsequent views on death are manifestly influenced by the socialistic values penetrating every breadth of his thought. Per se, Abdul Karim Gadai seems to be less interested in reflecting philosophically or celestially upon the question of mortality or immortality. Accordingly therefore, immortality preoccupies him next to nothing. The poet's sole concern is terrestrial existence, and the latter's eventual inexistence. Gadai goes on the searing attack on man for his absurdity of drowning himself in the gush of materialism, as a result, turning a blind eye to one of the most crude truths, death. This paper presents a brief review of the Poet's reflections on mortality.

Keywords: Gadai, Death, Mortality and Immortality.

Introduction:

Abdul Karim Gadai's poetry encompasses a wide range of themes relating to the diverse aspects of life. Notwithstanding the life of penury he lived without respite, his intellectual horizon was never circumscribed. Almost all of the dimensions of life – social, political, romantic, spiritual, and cultural are expressed in it. As Soomro states in his article, as we proceed with his poetry, entirely new problems of human life are revealed to us where we are forced to wonder as to whether such issues do exist! He wrote not only on the major problems facing people but also on those most delicate and the minutest in nature (106). Likewise, in his write-up, Chhalgari points out many dimensions concerning human beings having been addressed in Gadai's poetry (88). As for metaphysics, the question of mortality or in other words, death constitutes distinctive subject matter in his magnum opus. The subject over which thousands of poets, writers, philosophers and scientists have since time immemorial scratched their heads also finds a special place with Gadai Sahab. An attempt has been made in this paper to look through Gadai Sahab's reflection on death by means of his verses picked out using purposive sampling.

Gadai Sahab was born during the British imperial Rule in India in one of the hinterlands of under-developed Sindh province marked by the prevalence of tribalism and landlordism. The

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tribal-feudal ethos operating under the full-fledged patronage of the colonial masters made it grimly hard for the farming classes to make both ends meet. The incidence of tenancy-at-will was grossly eye-opening across Sindh including Thul, the city, Gadai lived in. As a consequence, exploitation was rampant compounded further by grinding poverty. Essentially related to farming, Gadai Sahab's family survived on the breadline.

Gadai thoroughly shared the feelings of the vulnerable peasants and other poor strata whose necks remained on the chopping block of Jagirdars (landlords) and formidable Sindhi waderas round the year. He witnessed with his own eyes the oppression of Zamindars and unmitigated sufferings of the poor. Not only did these eye-witness events go on to shape his political thought, but they influenced his metaphysical perspective also. His face-to-face confrontation with the harsh reality translated into bitter resentment against the state as well as against the Nature. Whatever life might be, to him, at least, it were not sunshine and rainbows. As a matter of fact, a closer reading of his poetic texts reveals his vociferous protest against God. Being a poet of delicate sensibilities, Gadai failed to come to terms with the Nature oblivious to the horrors of human suffering. He was compelled by miseries and vicissitudes of life to ponder over the question of existence. This led to his coming to reconcile himself to the finitude of being, the mortality of human life. It is worth adding here that his views about death are inseparable from his overall worldview including his political ideas. It is therefore necessary to build a holistic understanding in order for us to gain a deeper perspective into his concept of mortality. In one of his verses mortality is referred to as:

هي نه هت ڪنهن ڪي بقا، مهمان سڀ شاه و گدا،
قدرت جو هي دستور آ، آخر فنا، آخر فنا!

English Translation:

*Nothing has permanence here.
For a moment or two, everyone – be a master or a beggar exists!
This is the dictate of the Nature
That Death is inevitable!*

Death has always been a widely discussed motif in the literary books as well as in the religious scriptures due to its centrality to the very human existence. Finding out the secret about immortality and defying death has remained the centerpiece of many myths and ancient folklore. Death is the crude truth none likes to speak about; while being besotted with the lure of life (Gavin 237). People are given to sidestepping any talk on it despite the fact that no one has ever

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been able to do anything about it when held in its savage clutches. None can claim to escape death or delay it a second or extend his or her lifespan when the moment of death arrives. The very word, death, strikes both fear and curiosity into people's hearts. It is natural for human beings to be frightened out of their lives at the thought of their mortality and what surrounds death: pain of dying, perishability of one's very existence, loss of pleasures and colors of this world, eternal separation from the loved ones, macabre rituals of funeral, and non-existence. It is these fears that people's longing for immortality originates from. However, their panic about death or hopes for afterlife entirely depends on their worldview including their religious orientations, and ideas about life, etc.

The Themes of Death and Immortality in Poetic and Philosophical Texts:

The poetic and philosophical texts involving the contemplation of the mysteries of life and death cluster in plenty. As stated in the foregoing paragraph, the sages engaged in chewing the subject of death over right from the beginning. Death was something of the central concern in the Middle Ages; it was significantly characteristic of the production of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries literature, whereas in the Modern era has been triggered a revolt against the pre-renaissance ideas. Today's modern man has sought to get himself off the hook on the question of death, instead of striding out to openly discuss it. The book Ethics, for instance, in the complete works of Spinoza states that a free man should think of nothing less than death because wisdom in the modern era lies in contemplations about life, not death (Shariatinia 92).

Plato is usually regarded as a philosopher concerned with the pursuit of the other worldly ideals and a moral code to conduct oneself. However, death as a theme substantially permeates his thought. His works such as Apology, Gorgias, Crito and Phaedo carry his views on death and dying. He comprehensively discusses not only death but also the process of dying (Gavin 241). Death is not a cessation of life. Instead, it is the process of being on the threshold of a new life. All the fears of death may be discarded. Thus, with Socrates, Plato believes in the immortality of soul.

Epicurus from his distinguished Epicurean school was a materialist philosopher to whom the ultimate standard of truth was pleasure and pain whereas the only test of knowledge was sensation. His physics was borrowed from the atomism of Democritus. He believed that there was a vacuum; nothing exists except for atoms and void. Fear and ignorance of human beings were the factors in the genesis of the religions. To him, soul was composed of the „finer kind of atoms“ resembling air, fire, vapor and a fourth element that was nameless. When the body that holds atoms of soul, ceases to function, soul atoms are scattered. (Turner 177-180). As Aditi Mitra writes, death means dissolution of atoms, so to the Epicurean school, immortality is impossible. The fright of death, Epicurus argues, stems from a mere illusion of thought. The

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ghostly specter of death haunts us because we mistakenly imagine it striking us (98). According to Francis Bacon (7), “Men fear Death, as children fear to go in the dark and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other.”

“Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not, and when death has come, we are not.”

In the famous epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh seeks a flight from death embarking thereupon on the quest for immortality whereas Odysseus (by Homer) declines Calypso's offer of immortality. Nietzsche talks us out of any thinking on death; rather he talks us into life as he considers thoughts about life more desirable than thoughts about death (Shariatinia 92). In his *Philosophy of Death*, Luper provides a comprehensive overview of death phenomenon. He touches such issues as what death is, what life is, and how death is dreadful, etc.

Martin Heidegger, a most influential German philosopher in the continental tradition, whose main interest was ontology, addressed not only the question of immortality, but also the nature of death. According to Heidegger, knowledge about death paves the way for the understanding of Existence and that knowledge of Existence, in turn, will result in knowing the universe. Heidegger saw death as intrinsic to humanity (Zohreh 93).

The Theme of death is a most central concern in the poems of Emily Dickinson. Nearly one third of her poetry centers around death. Death is portrayed in multifarious ways by her – courtly lover, savage assassin, free agent in nature etc. She accepts death as a physical fact. She has dramatized the events surrounding death bringing out in her poetry the tension or conflict that such a particular event leaves on human beings. Her preoccupation with death, which we find recurrently infiltrating into her every other poem is partly due to her revolt against Puritanism. She holds the view that death was greatest of the losses for human beings (Roy 167).

The most fascinating views about mortality come from Hawthorne. Nathaniel Hawthorne was an American novelist and short-story writer noted for his portrayal of dark characters and dark romanticism. Fairbanks observes, the themes of suffering and death intimately pervade his works. To him death reflects itself as something integral to human beings coming along with redemption from all evils and sufferings. Man's futile attempts to avoid the inevitability of death were utterly unnatural, and in actuality, negated and clashed with the Nature's design of death necessity ordained in view of the potential vitiation in human beings. “I desire not an earthly immortality. Were man to live longer on the earth, the spiritual would die out of him. The spark of ethereal fire would be choked by the material, the sensual” (59).

Abdul Karim Gadai on Mortality

Gadai Sahab was essentially a political poet in a sense that major part of his works pertain to such themes as state, government, subjects, oppression, exploitation, socio-economic justice, freedom, and most of all, disillusionment with the state of Pakistan and its institutions. Nonetheless, the metaphysical side of his poetry largely carrying his views on mysticism and death and unpredictability of being is substantial enough to amply repay our time and attention. In point of fact, readers will not be able to get down to the nitty-gritty of his impression as to mortality without holistically following his train of thought on world, state and society. His encounter with the crude reality and fragility of life left an inefaceable scar upon his mind that is subsequently reflected in his poetry.

Gadai captures all the poignancy of ironies, tapestries and tragedies of life. By not losing sight of destructibility of the human existence, he mocks people failing to see through the paradoxes and absurdities of the world. Even though it is painful to enter the state of consciousness about the nature of the world we live in, and the nature of the life we live, remaining in the dark about reality or deliberately turning one's back on it is sheer self-deception. Not obsessed with the overblown activity of life, Gadai is not blind to the inevitability of death. He always feels its nearness; always sees the angel of death roaring in the background.

He says (134):

دلڪش دينا جو منظر ٿو پاڻ ڏي چڪي پيو،
هر ڪو تڏهن "گدائي" ٿو موت کان لڪي پيو!

English Translation:

*People are pulled towards the lure of the world.
That's why everyone is seen trying to run away from death!*

We become so invested in the worldly enticements that we wishfully let the only biggest truth of our lives that we are fated to meet one day recede into the background. According to Gadai, we are here today and gone tomorrow. But thanks to our fanatical immersion in the material pursuits, we are constantly running away from death. The frailty of human nature leaves people succumbed to the lure of fame, power, and money, of which they grow so fond over the course of living that it horrifies them to conceive their being consigned to the total nothingness of the kingdom of death. As Zohreh similarly notes (92), “*Modern man has drowned in welfare, which was born in this era; therefore, death was a threat that welfare could deprive man.*”

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Accordingly, Gadai asks (134):

جا شئي هجي يقيني، تنهن کان هي عار ڇو آ؟
 لرزي تو جسم سارو، دل بيقرار ڇو آ؟
 ساري بدن ۾ ڏڪڻي، پوءِ بار بار ڇو آ؟
 فاني دنيا سان ايڏو، پنهنجو پيار ڇو آ؟

Translation: English

Something that is inevitable – why to fight shy of!

Why do we shiver at its thought?

Why is our heart given to restlessness?

Why does our body go into convulsions?

Why are we so crazy about the mortal world?

In Gadai's poetry, we find death ingeniously personified as a huntsman, a predator, a monster, a free agent, and an annihilator. It is also depicted as a great leveller who razes all the discriminations of wealth, status and race to the ground. Death comes up with different names in his verses. Gadai compares life to a balloon popped in a twinkling of an eye. Human existence is equated with a water bubble that bursts shortly after it forms. It is a gust of passing wind blowing and stilling in a trice. Therefore, it is absolutely pointless for one to be puffed up with vanity. Why to be so conceited when dust claims dust? Gadai brings home to people the vanity of human ambitions in the face of death in the following words (133):

انسان جي حياتي جهوڻو فقط هوا جو،
 پاڻيءَ جي ڦوڙڙي کي، باقي غرور ڇاجو؟

Translation: English

A gust of passing wind is thy life!

A water bubble thou art, flattered by vanity!

At another place, he says (339):

جهوڻو هوا جو دوستو! آهي اسان جي زندگي
 هڪدم گذر جي واسطي، ڪيڏي ڪيون ٿا گندگي!

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English Translation:

*For a life of a moment's saga!
we create such a mess!*

For a moment's nightmarish journey, people have made an inferno out of lives of each other bringing the world to chaos and disorder. Gadai condemns man for his proclivity for gratifying his devilish instincts. It may be highlighted that Gadai does not attempt at moralizing about dos and don'ts. Nor does he bid to thrust his own perspective upon people. Gadai was not a moralist or a puritan. According to A.K Mughal, Gadai was secular in his outlook, and inclined towards humanism (188). From the reading of his verses nowhere does any reference appear hinting at the religious attitude towards death held or propagated by the poet. All Gadai denounces is man's willful ignorance of paying no heed to the intimations of his own mortality being given by death around him, while inflicting wrong upon his fellows. The oppressor, be that a zamindar or a sarmayedar, etc., forgets while preying on the weak that he himself is being stalked by the most merciless predator, Death. The powerful as well as the powerless, all are a helpless prey to death. Exactly the same meaning has been conveyed by Gadai Sahab through the following Sindhi verses: (133):

دنيا شڪار گاه آ، ۽ موت آشڪاري،
محلات ۽ منهن ۾ ان جو شڪار جاري،
مالڪ هجي يا نوڪر، مزدور يا ڪه هاري،
ڪمدار يا وڏيرو ديه دار يا بڪاري!

At another place, he calls death an ogre who devours his preys mercilessly. All follow one another to the ultimate destination, grave. All paths of glory eventually lead but to the grave. (133).

ڪو دهر ڪو سوپرو، لقمون ٿئي قضا جو،
اڻ ٿر اصل کان نالو آهي انهيءَ بلا جو!

English Translation:

*By and by everyone is swooped on by the hovering death.
Mortality is the name of this monster!*

At still another place the poet says (137):

سارو جهان هي سريسر،
آهي "گدائي" دم گذار!

English Translation:

The entire life is a string of moments!

Glicksberg in his article provides an accurate rundown on the insurmountable conundrum of human existence in the following words (117):

"They are terrified by the vision of nothingness; the kingdom of death reduces all their aspirations and activities to meaninglessness. If death threatens, then every ideal they cherish is stripped of content, and every affirmation they make is infected with absurdity. Out of this primal and ultimate anxiety is born the conviction that nothing matters. Because death stands menacingly in the background, overshadowing every lived moment of time, fate seems not only precarious and inexplicable, but utterly absurd. And if that is so, then how can man affirm his being and live his life?"

Gadai's philosophy about life is reflected in his express nonchalance about the worries and aspirations of his own as visible in many of his poems, notwithstanding the deprivation he suffered together with his family all along his life. As somewhere he himself says, *"Life is a play. Let us live it playfully."* The only angst and pain articulated from start to finish in his works concerns his people, the wretched of Sindh. For Late Gadai personally, life was too short and too uncertain to worry about. All one can do is to make most of its fleeting moments by living with and sharing happiness. Gadai's attitude towards it is that of the running gag. It logically follows from the transience and instability of being that it is virtually futile to be drowned in greed for fame and riches. People's penchant for accumulating, hoarding, cheating, behaving dishonestly, or exploiting others was a fraud they were in fact committing onto themselves. Interestingly, if we scratch beneath the surface, we will be able to see a Gadai, a human being, unremittingly devoured by the fears about his own nemesis. Gadai Sahab, a poet marooned in the

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human predicament where reality clashes with hopes, and paradoxically, resignation clashes with reality, not knowing as to whether to jettison hope or reality, reinforces Albert Camus' *Absurdity* in him – the conflict between consciousness and the deafening silence of the nature – as well as the frustration of a human being with naked reality. His resulting overtones to mortality and futility of living embody the confrontation triggered among the opposites in his own life.

A cemetery is all but a lesson having been lost on people. Gadai sees a grave and graveyard as teaching a lesson to the living. The pin-drop silence that engulfs the city of the dead serves as an exemplar for people lost in the barren wilderness of modern life to lend an ear to the whispers of the dead. The criticism of the modern man caught up in the whirling vortex of materialism – the theme we find common to the literary genres of many of the poets – run predominantly through Gadai's poetry. He says (339):

نادان، هي قبرستان نه آ، آ زندگي جو ٻيو ورق،
هي "مان وراڻ جو شهر"، ڏئي ٿو هي عبرت جو سبق!

English Translation:

*O my naïve fellow, don't call it a cemetery!
It is another page of life!
This – the city of silence – is but a lesson!*

Men, though born empty-handed in the similar fashion, are discriminated on the basis of wealth and social status. The high and the low and the rich and the poor, etc. leave behind all of the treasures and riches they hold so dear and flaunt, as death makes no distinction of wealth and class. It treats them all equally; it strips them of their souls in the like manner. Money and status provide them no bulwark against it. No medicine, however expensively purchased, can cure them of death; no antidote exists to this savage. According to Gadai (338):

دنيا اندر سڀ ڪجهه هيو، پر هاڻ ڪجهه به ڪين آ،
دولت نڪو ڪو دڊبو، گهوڙو نه زرڻن زرڻن آ!

English Translation:

In the world their abundance knew no bounds!

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*But today they have not a speck of anything,
Neither wealth, nor grandeur!*

Conclusion:

An attempt was made in this research paper to evaluate the contemplations of Gadai Sahab on mortality lying scattered in his poetic works with a view to appreciating the diversity of thought as reflected in his poems. Over the course of our analysis, the findings came to light that the poet held more or less a conventional conception of death, albeit sans any pronounced reference to the dogmatic religious belief of immortality or afterlife. However, we did find some fascinating glimpses of terror and human fears vis-à-vis death from his poetry; in addition, we came to see death portrayed by various names by Gadai.

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