

The Concept of Death in John Donne's Poetry and The Holy Quran: A Comparative Study

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Abstract—This study is a comparative descriptive investigation of the representation of death in the Holy Quran and the poetry of the English poet John Donne. It focuses on the concept of death as a real and ultimate truth. The study considers death as a thematic contemplation that every Man is worried about. Death in the Holy Quran and Donne's poetry has been previously studied from different individual viewpoints, but none has adopted it comparatively from a thematic perspective. This study also adopts many echelons of the religious themes presented by these works in the treatment of death such as the truth of death, submission and forgiveness, and resurrection in both Islamic and Christian religions. The study signifies the similarities and differences in the discussion and analysis part. It concludes that despite the cultural, religious beliefs, and time and place differences, the Holy Quran and Donne's poetry share some thematic and religious factors that lead towards religious perception of death including evidences of the reality of death, mortality of people, and the resurrection after death.

Index Terms—comparative study, death, John Donne, poetry, the Holy Quran

I. INTRODUCTION

Death is a confusing and mysterious truth and a profound personal matter for all persons in the universe. Death has been considered as the natural phenomenon of the human life cycle. It is known as the common end of all creatures, so it also fears people because it is an ending that takes our loved and valuable ones away from us. Because death is unacceptable yet inevitable, death has been greatly questioned. Literature and the Holy books have been attempting to answer some questions about death and its impact on all human beings and their lives. Death is shown as the hidden promise of starting new life in some religions, while it can be considered as the real end and a destruction of bodies.

This study compares the poetic lines of describing death in the English literary tradition, especially that of John Donne (1572- 1631 CE) poetry on one hand, and the Holy Quran verses on the other. The study also examines the representation of death in Islam based on analyzing some Holy Quranic verses that tackle the topic of death as a religious theme.

This analysis provides beneficial information on the concept of death in Eastern and Western cultures. The study enhances the reader's understanding of death poems and the Holy Quran verses. Particularly, English readers would gain more knowledge of how the Holy Quran presents the concepts of death based on the Islamic view point, especially in the Eastern culture. On the other hand, the study enriches the Arabic libraries by analyzing Donne's understanding of death concept in the Western culture and literature. This study is a descriptive analytical study that compares the poetry of John Donne and the Holy Quran qualitatively. The study compares between them underneath the standpoint of the literary research. The data are taken from the collected poems and the Holy Quranic Verses that share the same ideas. Data analysis process was applied by data content analysis method of the selected poems and verses using important religious principles. Descriptive analysis is used to demonstrate the meanings, images, themes, and conceptions based on comparative analysis to provide the stylistic and thematic similarities and differences between the selected poems and the Holy Verses from different chapters. The study will rely on Talal Itani's translation of the Holy Quran which was published in 2015. This book was accepted to be true to the originality of the Holy Quran. John Donne's Poems are selected primarily from "John Donne Poems" book which was published in 2012 by The World's Poetry archive.

This study addressed the following questions:

- 1- How is death presented in the Holy Quran and John Donne's poetry?
- 2- What are the main religious and spiritual themes mentioned in the Holy Quran and Donne's poetry?
- 3- To what extent do we believe that Donne's poetry and the Holy Quran answer many questions about death?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Death has been presented in different human religions and thoughts since ancient times. In the Islamic conceptions, death is not shown as the absolute end of life or a real annihilation of all creatures. It is the beginning of another life that becomes after death. Death is a common natural phenomenon that can be suddenly happened to all people around the world. The Holy Quran states that death catches up people wherever they are, as quoted in Al-Nisa chapter, verse 78:

Wherever you may be, death will catch up with you,
even if you were in fortified towers. When a good fortune
comes their way, they say, "This is from Allah." But
when a misfortune befalls them, they say, "This is from
you." Say, "All is from Allah." So what is the
matter with these people, that they hardly understand a thing?
(Atani, 2015, p. 31)

This verse shows the Islamic belief that death can be as the destiny of all people wherever they live or move. It is the power of finishing any human's mortal life.

Khalifa (1973) comments on this Quranic verse that "All human beings are going to move from this mortal life into another eternal life after their death". (p. 8) [Our Translation]. He states that all people will face their destiny in which death is considered as one of their Godly plans. The verse also concludes that all good and evil things are made by Allah and each individual should believe in his ability and power of creating everything. Moreover, death is meant the separation of the body and the soul. It is the transformation from the former life to the next one, the spirit descends to the sky to dwell there through eternity. This is what AmatulHafeez Alvi (2021) emphasizes in a comparative study between John Donne and the Arabic poet Abul-Alaa Al-Ma'arri. Alvi states that Islamic belief "confirms death, life in the grave and life in the hereafter either in Paradise Jannah or Hell Jahannam according to the deeds and degree of piety (Iman)" (p. 21).

Islam teaches that the most fundamental objective of this life and Man's creation is to worship Allah only. Islam also teaches that life on Earth is "nothing but a probation for us and to determine each person's eventual domicile, be it Hell (Jahannam) or Heaven (Jannah) which will be eternal and everlasting" (Alvi et al., 2021, p.21). The eternal life of Man after death is immortal and temporally constant, Men can enjoy their existence in Heaven (Jannah) expressing that their condition as a bliss from Allah due to their good deeds during their mortal lives on Earth.

In literature, some poets tackled many questions about the reality and truth of the concept of death around the world. The English poet John Donne is considered as the Metaphysical poet who presents different myths, images, and conceptions about death. While Metaphysical poetry is first mentioned by the literary English critic and poet Samuel Jackson in his book "Lives of The Most Eminent English Poets". Metaphysical poetry refers to some common characteristics of a group of poems. It shares similar styles, images, paradoxes, and myths, it is highly intellectualized, uses strange imagery and extremely complicated thoughts. AlBadri (2021) argues that Metaphysical poetry "often discusses religious topics and concerns, which represent a significant aspect of spiritual poetry. It is perhaps that the most known aspect is that Metaphysical poetry involved large doses of wit. Although the poets were examining real questions about the existence of God or whether a human would possibly perceive the world" (p.304). The poets took those questions with humor. Metaphysical poetry examines the relationship between logical and rational concepts on the one hand and imagination or intuition on the other. Metaphysical poets have ambiguous structures and styles due to their knowledge and intellect. AlBadri (2021) states that "the poets of metaphysical poetry were a known group, who used the mentioned features and characteristics, they were educated men, and to show their education was their entire endeavor. As they neither duplicated nature nor life, neither copied matter nor presented aspects of intellect" (P. 304). This form of poetry was also used to expressing individual concerns, personal imaginations, imageries, and logical arguments. The English poet John Donne is regarded as the founder of Metaphysical poetry. Death has been a constant idea for him that he profoundly wrote a poem without indicating to it. Donne has passed through many tragedies in his life. He lost four of his family members in front of him including his father, uncles, and brothers. He has observed different religious concepts in the church of England, especially during the Queen Elizabeth age. He went through financial crises and health issues and got ill and alienated often.

These conditions played a real role in shaping his philosophy about life and death. Donne started to conclude the idea of death through his poems mystically and untraditionally. He looked for the pragmatic concepts and ideas of death, he deeply believed in the second life after death, so he was not afraid of death and invited people to live happily and hopefully. Fomeshi (2013) argues that "Death Be Not Proud" is a sonnet that varies significantly from typical sonnets. It is not one of love and romance; it can be said that Donne is romanticizing the idea of death" (P.78). So, this sonnet reflects his understanding of death as a dying creature and controlled by God. Sugg (2007) refers to "Donne's almost scientific curiosity about the process by which the human soul will be liberated, re-embodied, and taken into the eternal, crystalline purity and bliss of that heaven which, for many Christians, was the real world, and real life (p. 192). This notion is profoundly depicted in his sermons, elegies, love songs, and sonnets. Fomehshi (2013) examines the concept of death in Donne's poetry in comparison with that of the Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri from a comparative perspective. The findings of the study present that both John Donne and Sohrab Sepehri consider death as a notion of their poetic creation due to similar factors, such as "the depression and cynicism of spirit; and regarding life as a cheap possession. Both poets witnessed turbulent period in the history of England and Iran" (Alvi et al., 2021, p.24). Life and death are

This is a deep sense of real belief that all creatures are fated by death. Likewise, the Holy Quran emphasizes the same idea related to the reality of death. It is an ultimate reality related to the human's soul in his/her final stage of life, as shown in Al-Emran chapter, verse (185):

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ۖ وَإِنَّمَا تُوَفَّرُونَ أَجُورَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ ۖ
فَمَنْ زُحْزِحَ عَنِ النَّارِ وَأُدْخِلَ الْجَنَّةَ فَقَدْ فَازَ ۚ وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ
الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْغُرُورِ

Every soul will have a taste of death, and
you will receive your recompense on the Day
of Resurrection. Whoever is swayed from the
Fire, and admitted to Paradise, has won. The
life of this world is merely enjoyment of delusion.

(Itani, 2015, p. 26)

Metaphorically said, every soul will experience death and it will be formed as an end to Men's sins. It realizes that such a life is not worth to be lived. Al-Qurtobi (1964) interprets this verse as it has the idea of "glorifying God, he will not die. Everything will taste and feel death even angels and jinn. The Almighty God will remain alive alone" (p. 297). This verse reforms as a Godly condolence to all people for keeping all souls dead at the last day of this mortal life. In another place, John Donne addresses the reality of death in his "The Paradox" as all people die using a metaphor for claiming that there is a relationship between love and death. He expresses that both love and death are spiritual and emotional feelings that all people touch and feel. He states that love also can be killed and finished by death.

We die but once, and who loved last did I

He that saith, twice, doth lie

The central idea of the poem is religion. Donne sees his creator as a central to his world, and he has no real reason to escape the divine concepts in his world. The poem seems to be physically attracted, but it is spiritual unity as a form of combining religion into people's lives. One of his best concepts expressed through this poem is seeing death as the end of all Men's sins. Donne also considers loving someone as much a religious experience rather than a physical action.

At any loves but he;

I cannot say I loved, for who can say

He was kill'd yesterday

Love with excess of heat, more young than old,

Death kills with too much cold;

We die but once, and who loved last did die,

Donne comments that death "Would not have him merely seize me, and only declare me to be dead, but win me and overcome me" (Gosse, 1899, p.191). He states that dying without first having been seduced by one's own death and flirted with it is an opportunity to experience its beauty and pleasure. Donne claims that soul should enjoy the first meeting between it and death:

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,

And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Donne is against the stream in showing pleasure with the moment of death coming. He states that death brings pleasure and rest. This rest is prepared to the "best men" to remain in tranquility and peace forever after death. A similar theme is presented in the Holy Quran in chapter Al-Waqi'a, verse (88-91):

فَأَمَّا إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ فَرَوْحٌ وَرَيْحَانٌ وَجَنَّةُ نَعِيمٍ
فَسَلَامٌ لَكَ مِنْ أَصْحَابِ الْيَمِينِ

But if he is one of those brought near,

Then happiness, and flowers, and Garden

of Delights.

And if he is one of those on the Right.

Then, "Peace upon you," from those on the

Right. (Itani, 2015, p. 208)

Based on this Holy verse, it is very clear that people who are "near" as shown in the verse, in which the word "near" refers to the people who do good deeds and they are good believers in God and working to their eternal life after death by avoiding sins committing during their lives. These people will feel pleasure and tranquility as if they are in a "Garden of delights". His/her soul will be delivered peacefully without feeling of any pains. These good believers are promised to be in Heaven (Jannah) after death. They have been described by the word "Right" which refers to the good people who do good deeds, and they will be awarded by Heaven after death.

As for the unbelievers of God they will regret after death as The Holy Quran states. Death is a milestone and the first preparation for Heaven or Hell. The unbelievers of God will feel the pains of death and their souls will be delivered hardly. The Holy Quran pairs primarily the punishment in the Hell (Jahannam) after death with being unbeliever of the existence of God. These unbeliever and sinful souls will feel the harshness of death unless they repent to God before

they die. Based on the Islamic belief which is derived from The Holy Quran, repentance is the temporary opportunity of people to return to the right belief and admitting the existence of God firstly. Repentance is used in both Donne's poetry and The Holy Quran verses. It is shown as the chance to get rid of sins and renouncing religion in both religions Islam and Christianity. The Holy Quran explains the importance of repentance before death in chapter Al-Nisa, verse (146):

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَأَصْلَحُوا وَاعْتَصَمُوا بِاللَّهِ وَأَخْلَصُوا
دِينَهُمْ لِلَّهِ فَأُولَئِكَ مَعَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَسَوْفَ يُؤْتِ اللَّهُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ
أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

Except those who repent, and reform, and hold fast
to Allah, and dedicate their religion to Allah alone.
These are with the believers; and Allah will give the
believers a great reward.

(Itani, 2015, p. 35)

This verse shows the significance of repentance before death and how it can be the only way to gain the Heaven (Jannah). Repentance is Godly blessed, especially when the unbeliever repents before his/her death even for a short time. In the Islamic reflection, repentance overcomes the sins when Man feels the existence of God. One of the most fundamental principles of the religious repentance in Islam is to admit God through the idea of Divine monotheism that confesses the existence of God and he is the only creator of Men, Earth, planets, animals, Nature, and even the small pieces on the Earth's surface. In this way repentance can also facilitate the way of the human's death and soul leaving away from the body. Repentance is also considered as a key of gaining Heaven and being blessed. In The Holy Quran returning to God through Tawba (Repentance) means avoiding sins and doing good deeds. These repentant people will be in the Heaven at the Resurrection Day at the last day of this mortal life as shown in Maryam chapter, verse (60):

إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَآمَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَأُولَئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا

Except for those who repent, and believe, and act righteously.
These will enter Paradise, and will not be wronged in the least.

(Itani, 2015, p. 113)

This claim is also presented in other verses along the all chapters of The Holy Quran. In other place, pairing the entering of Heaven after death with repentance and doing good deeds during Man's life. This is clearly shown in Al-Tahreem chapter, verse (8):

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا تَوْبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَوْبَةً نَصُوحًا عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يُكَفِّرَ
عَنكُم سَيِّئَاتِكُمْ وَيُدْخِلَكُم جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ يَوْمَ لَا
يُخْزِي اللَّهُ النَّبِيَّ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ نُورُهُمْ يَسْعَىٰ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ
وَبِأَيْمَانِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا أَتْمِمْ لَنَا نُورَنَا وَاغْفِرْ لَنَا إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

O you who believe! Repent to Allah with
sincere repentance. Perhaps your Lord will
remit your sins, and admit you into gardens
beneath which rivers flow, on the Day when
Allah will not disappoint the Prophet and
those who believed with him. Their light
streaming before them, and to their right,
they will say, "Our Lord, complete our light
for us, and forgive us; You are capable of all
things. (Itani, 2015, p. 218)

There is an obvious invitation to all people who commit sins and deny the existence of God to repent and return through a "sincere repentance". This means that who intends to return to God, he/she should begin by believing in God's power and existence. According to this verse, those who believe in these religious principles will gain the Heaven (Jannah). God promises these repentant people by (Jannah) as an award after death due to their belief in God and his existence, power, capability, and forgiveness.

Similarly, Donne depicts many images of how God forgives people and how they gain the Heaven (Jannah). In "A Hymn to God the Father", Donne asks forgiveness from God. He portrays his situation as being sinful Man who feels his God's mercy:

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

This repentant speaker repeats his asking of God to forgive him. This speaker blames himself to be sinful. The repetition of the idea of forgiveness is shown in the first and third lines of the poem. The speaker moves to confess that he is regretful person who deplores his sins "And do run still, though still I do deplore?", this emphasizes the essential principle of repentance in both Islamic and Christian religions. In both religions to be repentant, Man should believe in

his God's existence first and his power upon everything. The only donor of forgiveness is God, so he decides the final path of Man in his eternal life after death. In the second stanza, the speaker continues his asking of forgiving him on his sin. The speaker wonders if his God forgives him or not "Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun", he believes in his God's mercy and compassion.

In the last stanza, the speaker admits his great sin. His sin is fear, the speaker concludes that he is afraid that God will not forgive his sins before his death. He refers to his wondering that he dies sinful. This means he will not gain the Heaven promised by God to all people who do good deeds in their lives.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I fear no more.

The speaker presents his situation to be dead before his God forgives him. He is afraid of dying on the "shore" before his forgiveness. In the last four stanzas, the speaker asks God if his son Jesus will be able to shine on him "now" as he has done "therefore" or until now, "But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son".

Jesus's presence is a symbol of his God's complete forgiveness. By the presence of Jesus, the speaker states that he does not fear anymore. With Jesus there to reassure and develop him, his sins are no longer committed. He is completely forgiven.

Relating glorious men and prophets in both Christianity and Islam to the idea of forgiveness before death is spiritually significant. Their presence gives a feeling of tranquility and pleasure, as shown in the previous poem by Donne. In the Islamic perception, The Holy Quran presents a similar feeling of the presence of prophet Mohammad as symbol of tranquility and peace when he leaves Macca with his friend Abu Baker Al-Sideeq escaping from people who plan to kill them in Al-Tawba chapter, verse (40):

إِلَّا تَنْصُرُوهُ فَقَدْ نَصَرَهُ اللَّهُ إِذْ أَخْرَجَهُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا ثَانِي اثْنَيْنِ
إِذْ هُمَا فِي الْغَارِ إِذْ يَقُولُ لِصَاحِبِهِ لَا تَحْزَنْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَنَا فَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ
سَكِينَتَهُ عَلَيْهِ وَأَيَّدَهُ بِجُنُودٍ لَمْ تَرَوْهَا وَجَعَلَ كَلِمَةَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا السُّفْلَى ۗ
وَكَلِمَةُ اللَّهِ هِيَ الْعُلْيَا ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

If you do not help him, Allah has already
helped him, when those who disbelieved expelled him,
and he was the second of two in the cave. He said to his
friend, "Do not worry, Allah is with us." And Allah made
His tranquility descend upon him, and supported
him with forces you did not see, and made the
word of those who disbelieved the lowest,
while the Word of Allah is the Highest. Allah
is Mighty and Wise.

(Itani, 2015, p. 68)

The prophet's presence refers to the feeling of victory and peace in the whole verse. It is similar to the presence of Jesus as a symbol of tranquility and forgiveness in Christianity. The Holy Quran also states that prophet Mohammad will die as all people through different verses of the Holy Book. Prophet Mohammad is presented as dead and ordinary person physically, but spiritually he is presented as religious and the man of virtues sent from God. He will also die as all ordinary people. This statement is clearly explained in Az-Zumr Chapter, verse (30-31):

إِنَّكَ مَيِّتٌ وَإِنَّهُمْ مَيِّتُونَ ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عِنْدَ رَبِّكُمْ تَخْتَصِمُونَ

You will die, and they will die
Then, on the Day of Resurrection, you will
be quarrelling before your Lord
(Itani, 2015, p.176)

This verse asserts the reality of death as being a real truth of all people around the world. Death finishes all Men's lives including prophets, noble men, and glorious people. The previous verse also asserts the idea of resurrection after death followed by eternal life in Heaven (Jannah) or Hell (Jahannam). This is what Donne also asserts in his Holy Sonnet "Batter my Heart, Three-Person'd God, for you". The speaker emphasizes on the idea of resurrection and the God's power to revive all people after death "That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend/Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new".

Resurrection is a deep belief for both who believe in God and his power to revive people after death in the Islamic and Christian religions. While people are committing sins during their lives, repentance is the Godly opportunity to the sinful people to avoid entering the Hell (Jahannam) by returning to God and doing good deeds.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through reading the Holy Quran and John Donne's poetry, the concept of life and death is deeply described and discussed in most of the Holy Verses and the poems. Their approach to death was not archetypal approach based on fearing death in most verses and poems. They delved deeper in the philosophic and spiritual features of death and declared it as an agent that returns creatures back to God, and that is exactly the perception of death in a metaphysical view. The Holy Quran verses and Donne's poetry of death are presented as not emotional flow or inadvertent sentimental expressions, but they are full-fledged verses in which the ideas and words are proficiently presented and the language has been selected and controlled to generate spiritual concepts and themes of the concept of death. The stylistic and thematic structures that the study has investigated are presented as religious constructions of thought, which is treated by using different figures of speech, such as personifications, imageries, metaphors, symbolism, and allusion that have basically tackled the logical expressions in discussing the concept of death. These literary devices used to convey the meaning of death as an ultimate truth based on explaining death as a religious theme in both The Holy Quran and Donne's poetry.

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