

The Poetics and Politics of Mourning

Pramod K. Nayar

In the age of publicized mourning and the appropriation of death for grand and often seedy spectacles, the interest in ways of dying has found repeated sparking points. Yet we see how some deaths find no resonance, almost as though there is no need to mourn them, being disposable lives and ungrievable deaths.

In his 'In Memory of Ernst Toller', one of the finest voices in modern poetry, W.H. Auden would write:

It is their to-morrow hangs over the earth of the living
And all that we wish for our friends; but existence is believing
We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving.

Mourning and memories are, in the current season, uppermost in media coverage and the larger narrative unconscious.

In a thoughtful provocation – which is essentially an invitation to respond – Shuddhabrata Sengupta notes how the clamour for 'Justice for Sushant Singh Rajput' has permeated the media (<https://thewire.in/media/media-and-suicide-sushant-singh-rajput-and-kalikh-pul-four-years-and-two-worlds-apart>). In contrast, he observes, a suicide from four years ago, Kalikho Pul's, the former Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, with a suicide note indicting judges, has not seen this kind of attention. Sengupta speaks despairingly of the "culture of Indian television is cold enough to take a call and make decisions based on the cosmetics of suicide and the fine art of making the necessary distinctions between TRP-raising suicides and TRP-lowering suicides".

Sengupta's piece is about the politics of mourning. Why and how do some deaths become worthy, if that is the word, of a massive social project of mourning? Sengupta is pointing to a truism, that 'one does not count the dead in the same way from one corner of the globe to the other', as Jacques Derrida would argue in his response to 9/11 (*Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. 2003. Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. University of Chicago Press).

We do not count it the same way from one corner of the country to another either.

Community (of) mourning

Grief is private and mourning is collective work.

Communities are formed around mourning. Where grief is private, mourning is a collective process, even a ceremony. In countries such as Serbia, Rwanda, Vietnam that have seen

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massacres and genocides on unprecedented scales, mourning the deaths of individuals and families has often become a means of affirming the identity of the community as a whole. The Holocaust's continuing contribution to Jewish identity is perhaps the modern world's most famous instance of mourning and memory producing a collective belonging, with generation after generation 'bearing witness' to the events.

In these cases, to adapt Judith Butler (*Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso 2004)

One mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.

Thus, communities that mourn are seeing someone's death as a *loss*, and this loss is transformative.

But what if mourning is territorial and provincial? What if we see some deaths, such as SSR's, as a national loss, and that of others, such the Bhotmange family's (the Khairlanji massacre) as a local problem? If, as Auden says, mourning and who we grieve for defines us, what does it say about a nation or community when some deaths remain unmourned? Is it that we experience collective loss only when certain *kinds* of people die?

Mourning as an inter-ethnic community, writes Diana Kontsevaia in her study of mass graves and collective mourning, would establish interethnic collective memory that creates long-term peace (<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol21/iss1/3/>). If she is right, and we have some evidence from the cases cited above, national identities could be forged around the commonality of loss. So when Sengupta points to an unevenness in structures and even the possibility of mourning, what does it say about our choices of subjects to mourn collectively? Is it worrying that massacres of specific communities, castes, linguistic groups are not deemed worthy of a collective mourning by the media and the public of a nation in general?

So we have forgotten to mourn some, and chosen to make mourning a national project in other cases. With no disrespect to any recent dead, it is a matter to be thought about. Whose deaths are grievable?

Unsuccessful *versus* successful mourning

From Freud onwards mourning and melancholia have held a special status for psychoanalysis – which distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful mourning. In successful mourning there occurs the incorporation of the memory of someone's loss into consciousness. It means, therefore, that the mourned one is a part of the mourner's psyche and does not exist outside this psyche.

In unsuccessful mourning (Freud would call this ‘melancholia’) the mourned is retained as external to the mourner, radically different, never assimilated. This is in a sense failed mourning.

In the politics of mourning, we make, as we can see from the fever pitch at which everyone is laying claims to the dead, the mourning about *ourselves*, the mourners. We absorb the dead into *our* cultural rhetorics, *our* discourses of victimhood, justice, or whatever we wish to employ at that time. The dead loses her/his singularity because we have absorbed him or her into our languages of mourning. *And we then move on*, until the next death.

Now, the problem remains that each death is unique. But, several such deaths become a series (Tsenduru, Khairlanji, honour-killings). So then, do we mourn individual instances of deaths or do we compare every death to another? Should we erase the death of one individual (every individual has but one death) in favour of a series of deaths?

A provisional answer to this conundrum would be that we mourn the *contexts* in which the series of deaths appear: racism (producing deaths from Emmett Till to George Floyd), casteism (Tsenduru to Khairlanji), to name just two. That is, we sidestep the issue of singularity or commonality of death by examining the contexts that make such deaths possible (even forgiven, terrifyingly) on a regular basis, a structure that produces death for certain kinds of people. By opting for successful mourning – inconsolable, unending – of those killed in certain kinds of contexts, we do not erase the individuals. Rather we say, their deaths came about because of certain contexts in which their lives were not deemed grievable. We retain their singularity and yet we embed them in mournable contexts.

Mourning: An Interpretive Act

The meaning of a life is interpreted in the wake of the death. Mourning in today’s necro-media is the task of re-reading a life, posthumously. All mourning revolves around the poetics and politics of the interpretive act. A character-sketch is built up. The plot, complete with timeline and a cause-effect sequence, of the now-dead person’s life is sketched. Conversations that s/he would have had reconstructed from fragments.

Death means we leave something behind when we stop living. There is a link between the corpus and the corpse, a trace: it can be a piece of paper, photographs, material objects. And people. Mourning entails bestowing these with some value by the mourners. And yet, by definition, we cannot determine how what we leave behind will be appropriated.

Death itself, as noted, is appropriated. What is left behind, similarly, is also appropriated. Suicide notes, material evidence, bank loans, transactions of various kinds, the detritus of life is something whose later movement we cannot govern. The object biography of a life lived is beyond that life. As we produce the stuff of life – papers, documents, houses, etc – they are already posthumous:

they will continue after our death, in the hands and breaths of people that we do not expect. Something we write, for example, a message, a poem, a letter, is already posted to the beyond (a *post-hume*, to adapt the wordplay from the French literary terrorist cited earlier) of our life. It continues beyond a lifetime, as Auden would say:

The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

Now, think of the ways in which the detectives, the media and the family retrieve from phone records, credit card bills, messages, FB posts, Instagram pictures, the meaning of a life. These were sent out, when alive, by one who is no longer alive when the interpretation commences. All traces of life are, in the words of the poet, a 'letter to the world/which never wrote to me'. The interpretations they make of these are entirely uncontrollable. Every message and letter sent is appropriated by the living after the death of the sender: everything s/he sent was always already posthumous. In the process of living we build the traces that those coming after us will read and make sense of. There is *no* authorial control over the consumption texts we produce when living. In Stephen Greenblatt's words we wonder what it "means to desire to leave behind a life-story that can be told and re-told"? (<https://www.folger.edu/events/stephen-greenblatt-shakespeare-s-life-stories>)

Contemporary mourning is, in the age of necro-media, primarily the retelling the story of a Rajput, an Aarushi, a Nirbhaya via a reading of the traces of their lives. In the words of a Shakespeare scholar, one could say that mourning is 'the possibility of life after death, not in terms of the spiritual but in terms of the *narratives* that one leaves behind, in the stories, enunciated and heard by others, that perpetuate, after a fashion, one's life'. This is narrative re-animation of the dead – photographs, public discussions of the material left behind, revisiting the personal for 'clues' – and mourning as spectacle is precisely this today. (<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/sisa/article/view/190827>).

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We recognize the mortality we all live with. How that mortality will be read, its stages measured, classified and coded, we do not know. How will the readers that follow construct a plot from the drama of our lives once we are dead?

We live with the assumption that, of those we live with, one death will precede the other's. The last word on this belongs to the same philosopher:

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To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die. One of us, each says to himself, the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other and so will carry the other within him a while longer, his eyes following without seeing, (*The Work of Mourning*. 2001. Jacques Derrida)

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