

A SOCIALIZATION OF GRIEF: AN AUTO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

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Although man is a mortal being, as the maxim states, fundamentally, emotionally man is afraid of death. The fact that death is the greatest shock is deeply rooted in human consciousness. The fears, hopes, and orientations people have towards it are not instinctive, but rather are learned through the process of socialization. Every culture has a coherent system of beliefs whose explanations and reactions to death are so thoroughly ingrained that they are believed to be right by its members. Like all cultures the Assamese Muslims inhabiting the state of Assam also exhibit gender stereotyping of grief as both men and women are saddled with certain stereotypes. This study provides an auto-anthropological insight into the role of gender as an important influence on the death socialization and the involvement in various rituals related to death among the Assamese Muslims of Machkhowa situated in Guwahati city in the state of Assam.

*And into the gate they shall enter,
And in that house they shall dwell,
Where there shall be no cloud nor sun,
No darkness nor dazzling,
But one equal light,
No noise nor silence,
But one equal music,
No fears nor hopes,
But one equal possession,
No foes nor friend,
But one equal communion and identity,
No ends nor beginnings ,
But one equal eternity*

(John Donne, 1627/28)

Introduction

Although man is a mortal being, as the maxim states, fundamentally, emotionally man is afraid of death. The fact that death is the greatest shock is deeply rooted in human consciousness. The fears, hopes, and orientations people have towards it are not instinctive, but rather are learned through the process of socialization. Every culture has a coherent system of beliefs whose explanations and reactions to death are thoroughly ingrained, that they are believed to be right by its members.

Like all cultures, the Assamese Muslims inhabiting the state of Assam also exhibit gender stereotyping of grief as both men and women are saddled with

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certain stereotypes. Men are expected to be tough, confident, and rational and in control, not only of themselves but of situations as well, while women, who have been socialized to be more open with their feelings tend to be intuitive mourners. Death and the events surrounding it are understood differently depending on a child's age and developmental stage. When someone dies; they will not experience or express their reactions in the same way. A child's responses will depend on the knowledge and skills available to them at the time of the loss where the process of socialization will play a vital role.

This study provides an auto-anthropological insight into the role of gender as an important influence on the death socialization and the involvement in various rituals related to death among the Assamese Muslims of Machkhowa situated in Guwahati city in the state of Assam, India. A brief description of the community and setting is given below.

I belong to the Assamese Muslim community of Machkhowa area in the city of Guwahati. Although the basic values of the Assamese Muslims are Islamic, they share some Hindu customs and practices, which are contradictory to Islamic conventions. While intermarriage with Hindus is rare, many Assamese Muslims identify more strongly with other Assamese who are Hindu than with other Muslims. Their identity is inexorably connected with the *Asamiya* language and the region of Assam. The Assamese Muslims are well integrated with the rest of Assamese society. They have many cultural traits in common with Assamese Hindus and are less orthodox than other Indian Muslims. Assamese Muslims combine many Islamic and Hindu customs. Assamese Muslim families are patriarchal and patrilineal. Women are allowed to inherit one-eighth of their father's property. The kinship terminology is similar to the Hindu. Avoidance relations between father-in-law and daughter-in-law and between husband's elder brother and younger brother's wife are practiced among both Muslims and Hindus. Marriage among Assamese Muslims entails two separate events: the ring ceremony, which is followed by the actual marriage. The marriage ceremony is finalized with the reciting of verses from the Quran by a Muslim cleric. Components of the Hindu caste system are present among Assamese Muslims. They are divided into a three-tier system: the Sayyids, who hold the highest status and claim to be descendants of the Prophet Mohammed; the Sheikhs, composed of the local peoples, who are second in social status; the Marias, who hold the third social slot and are the descendants of the Muslim soldiers captured in the Muslim invasion of 1532 AD. The vast majority of Assamese Muslims are Sunni of the Hanafi juridical rite; however, they observe many local Hindu rites that put them at odds with Islamic practice. For example, many are attracted to the Vaishnavite philosophy preached in Assam by the sixteenth-century philosopher Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva. Assam has a long history of cultural co-existence and communal harmony and Muslims in the state have made immense contribution to the various fields. In the history of Assam,

Muslims played an important role. Even today, Assamese Muslims are an integral part of the society of Assam.

According to one of the beliefs regarding the naming of this place as Machkhowa, now one of the busiest place in Guwahati city, was known as Gorgaon Patti during the Ahom regime because there was a belief that people belonging to the Muslim community fled from Sibsagar and other areas of upper Assam to escape the atrocities meted out by the Burmese invaders and settled here. During the British rule, Gorgaon Patti came to be known as Majsuwa, meaning the centre or central place of erstwhile Guwahati. Eventually the name Majsuwa was wrongly pronounced as Machkhowa by the traders who came from Rajasthan and ever since it came to be known as Machkhowa. At present Machkhowa has become one of the most densely populated areas of Guwahati and a home to a cosmopolitan population forming a mosaic of human communities belonging to varied races and religions. Nevertheless the Assamese Muslims still remain a majority here.

The Socialization of Grief

As a child I was oblivious to death. My first experience of death was when my uncle expired some thirty years back. My parents took me to my uncle's place for what I thought was a social visit. I was quite happy to visit my favourite uncle quite unaware of the fact that my parents were in a pensive mood. I have vague memories of far too many people at my uncle's place on that particular sunny afternoon. I noticed all the elders were busy making some arrangements and children (me and all my cousins) were asked to remain quiet. Being mischievous kids we started roaming around the rooms. In one room we saw something covered in white cloth and people around crying, and wailing, and some sitting quietly. I vaguely remember some elderly relatives forbidding us to enter the room by saying "kids don't enter this room".

By evening I was a little confused to not find my ever-loving and jolly uncle even though I met many of my lesser favourite relatives. I asked my mother his whereabouts. I was confused to hear that he was no more and he would never be meeting me as he had gone to Allah's house. I kept on pestering her with my innumerable questions about how, and why he went to God's house and why we could also not go and meet him there. Thereafter, during subsequent visits to my uncle's place I would search for him everywhere in the house, believing that he was playing hide and seek with me. It took me some years to understand that my uncle had embraced death.

Around that time I heard my parents telling my grandmother that my great grandmother was no more. Once again we all went to her place. As we travelled, seeing my father in a very serious mood and my grandmother and mother talking very less and every conversation accompanied by sobs, confused me. I was thinking that my *Aijan*, as we addressed her, would embrace me and my sister when we

reach her place. But that day her house was engulfed with wailings, and weepings. By then, I realised that on death something happens to a person who had been moving about and talking and performing his or her regular activities and they sleep in a room, covered with a piece of white cloth and with people surrounding the body with grim faces. All relatives and cousins assemble, but the atmosphere would be opposite to the times when we all came together during festivities.

My parents and grandmother told me again and again that the person who is no more goes to God's house and will never come back. Today, neighbourhood children Uzma and her little brother are well aware of the fact that facing a sudden loss can be scary and disorienting for they lost their father in a tragic road accident. Uzma was just nine and her brother six. As she saw her mother weeping endlessly, she could feel the void created in their lives. She was shocked with grief and doubt as relatives hugged and wept at their misfortune. Her little brother was feeling a little lost amongst the crowd and could not really understand why he, not his sister or mother, had to accompany the people who carried his father's body wrapped in a piece of white cloth to someplace where his father was supposed to rest for ever. During the service he was even more confused to see his father being buried because he was told that his father would now be in God's house. For many more years he thought that God's house was underground and full of darkness so it must be scary. Again, many times, in a child's mind the death of a near one may evoke feelings of guilt and remorse. Tanvee as a child asked why her grandmother was not going to God's house. Her grandmother put her on her lap and lovingly told her that she did not want to leave her and go to God's house. Just a few days later she expired and little Tanvee was told that she has gone to God's house and would never come. The only thing that kept coming to her mind as a child was the thought that maybe she was responsible for her death.

When news of the sudden demise of my mother's friend came, some years back, everyone especially my mother was in a state of shock. It took several hours for her to reach her friend's maternal residence within the same neighbourhood. I accompanied her and we were all waiting for her mortal remains which were on the way from Shillong in the state of Meghalaya. As the body was laid down on the bed that was kept ready, the already emotionally charged atmosphere presented a picture of grief and remorse. All throughout, her aged mother was holding her hand and endlessly talking to her, her grown up daughters were holding each other with the older one trying to pacify the younger one who was in tears and her husband was busy making arrangements with the other male relatives for the funeral. Amidst this situation, I vividly remember a little girl of four who had come with her mother to pay their last respects to their relative. The moment the girl saw the dead body she uttered the name of an uncle who expired a month back several times. This little child, unaware of death, was trying to relate the two death incidents as she experienced, the same grim and solemn environment with mourning, weeping and wailing.

By the time my aunt died due to a prolonged illness, I became a little aware of the fact that once a person goes to God's house there is no return. Out of sheer fear of God and his power to call a person to his abode permanently I also started weeping with all others in mourning. The grieving process involves learning to adopt and adjust to changed situations. This more than often involves certain behavioural changes and adoption of new activities. Karishma, my neighbour, who is now a young lawyer, lost her parents within a span of seven years. She did not feel her father's death because she was only a year old. She only got to know her father through the framed photograph that her mother hung on the wall. At the age of seven or eight her mother expired after a prolonged illness. Her maternal aunt (with whom she later stayed) said that when her mother's dead body was brought from the hospital all that Karishma said was "*Ma-u photo hoi gol*", meaning "Mother has also become a photograph". Perhaps as a child she related death to a photograph which remained in the person's absence. Soon after, she changed from a talkative child to a loner, and could be seen seeking solace in religious texts.

I often used to ponder if the person was being punished for some wrong doing. I was told that we all came from God's house so we had to go to His house on God's will. Till then I had seen the occurrences of death only among elderly persons but my cousin's death in an accident when she was only 13 years was a great shock. I was confused and disturbed as I had never thought young people would go to God's house. I thought going to God's house was only the elderly people's prerogative. Now I was even more scared as I visualised God as someone who could injure and hurt children and take them away. My fear made way for many more queries and after much pestering, my grandmother somehow pacified me that God takes away people who are virtuous and good at a very early age so my adorable cousin was now in God's house. Now my inquisitive mind wanted to find answers to: If the chosen one goes to God's house why the weeping and mourning? Does it mean that if we are mischievous and not well-behaved we get to stay for a longer time with our near and dear ones? Is it okay if I dream of playing with my cousin who was no more? To all these, my grandmother very lovingly told me that when I grow up I will understand all about life and death.

The following account exhibits the same emotional responses to grief situation. Tanvee and Namira were eleven and four years respectively when their sixteen year old cousin expired in a tragic road accident. This was the second time that Tanvee was coming to terms with death in the family (at the age of six her grandmother expired) and being just a couple of years younger she could relate to the personal loss and void in the family. On that fateful day as relatives and cousins embarked on the journey to Barpeta the weather was very stormy. The children were much confused and disturbed as nobody had told them about Neha's demise and they came to know about it when they overheard the elders discussing it. Throughout the entire journey all the elders were in a grim and pensive mood, and

to reach the place amidst all the melancholy worsened matters for the children. They could not believe that their cousin was now lying still, her body covered with a white cloth and surrounded by many known and unknown faces. Everything was alien for them. Their cousin Neha's home was always synonymous with joyful banter and fun filled moments. This sudden turn of events brought up many questions in their tender minds. For Tanvee, her cousin's death was an all together new experience she could not come to terms with the fact that someone who was so young and close to her was now lying still, she was too shocked to weep. It was only the next day when her uncles were carrying the dead body to perform the last burial rites that she cried her heart out. It took quite a long time for Tanvee and Namira to come to terms with the fact that their cousin was no more.

After a period of five years their neighbour expired leaving behind his wife and two minor children. By that time Tanvee had accepted the harsh truth that everyone has to die one day – this time, she could control her emotions and act like an adult. Both sisters observed that whenever death occurs, men were found busy with the funeral preparations while the women were open in expressing grief. Women were likely to weep and mourn the loss while men tried to suppress their emotions as far as practicable. Tanvee, now a postgraduate student, questions why men do not cry; Is it because they can control their emotions, and women are emotionally weak? Namira, who is now in High School, on the contrary, opines that that men are emotionally weak, they get into a shock and so they cannot respond well, whereas women feel the situation and therefore they cry.

Sometimes, hiding a parent's death from children leads to extreme stress and behavioural changes like aggression. My niece Jasmeen father expired in a road accident when she was a toddler but his demise was always kept a secret from her. As she grew, she realised that a father figure was missing from her life. She was repeatedly informed by her mother that her father was working in some far off place and would come to visit her very soon. At nine, she accidentally overheard about her father's demise from a friend of her mother. She went into a state of shock. She was old enough to understand that meeting her father will always be unfulfilled, all her hopes were shattered. As a witness to this very uncomfortable situation, I had seen her throwing tantrums and accusing her mother of keeping her in the dark. She was inconsolable for quite some time. I had very often anticipated such an outcome and on my prior visits to their place had advised her mother to tell her daughter the truth about her father in a subtle manner. But perhaps as a young widow she did not want her daughter to come to terms with the harsh realities of life at such a tender age. At present mother and daughter (in her adolescent years) have accepted their fate as God's will.

A Self-Exploration of Grief

With the passage of time the mysteries shrouded in relation to death become less blurred. As a teenager I was well aware of the fact that death can occur to any

person or living being irrespective of age, sex, place and time. Thereafter as an attempt to shun the harsh realities of death, I completely avoided visiting homes where deaths occurred. These attempts to disassociate during moments of grief lasted for quite a few years.

We are all mortal beings and so one should never be afraid to face reality, was what my parents and grandmother used to say to pacify me. It took a very long time for me to accept this fact. Eventually the gender stereotyping in moments of grief became quite noticeable. I often overheard my uncles and other male members telling young boys not to cry and mourn like women because as real men they should be always tough, confident, and rational and should be able to handle such stressful situations. Crying amongst men was many times considered a sign of weakness. But interestingly, those who were considered the weaker sex, i.e., women, had the liberty to cry and mourn in grief situations.

However, this male-female expression of grief is often debated and debatable in nature. I always felt that expressions and reactions in grief situations could never be related to the gender of a person. Many a times I have seen role reversals of persons in grief situations, but that can never compartmentalise a person as a weakling or a stronger counterpart as the case maybe. My views were brushed off as uncalled for and insignificant in the patriarchal society that I belong to. When I insisted that females also should have the liberty to be present at the funeral services there was much ridicule. In present times however many of my neighbours and relatives if not fully supportive of my idea at least try to give a second thought to it.

That I too was an instrumental mourner, I realised, with my grandmother's sudden demise in 2002. I was very close to her and the shock I experienced upon her death was immense. Initially for around 10 days, I could not cry. I was busy making arrangements for the funeral. Prior to her demise I never even went too close to a dead body but now I was helping the other women in giving her a final bath before her body would be wrapped with a piece of white cloth and taken to the burial ground. Only after the initial rituals were over I felt the huge void in our family and could not stop my tears. Now when I reflect I realised I was the older of the two girls in the family, and therefore, I might have instilled a sense of responsibility and duty towards helping my father in the absence of a male child.

The men carrying and accompanying the dead body on its final journey to the graveyard and the women weeping and bidding adieu to their dear one is a scene in every Muslim household of my neighbourhood when death struck and also the well-accepted norm people adhered to. Same was the case with my grandmother, but not being able to accompany her on her last journey on this earth made me remorseful.

As the people carrying her lifeless body disappeared from our sight there arose a sudden feeling of emptiness coupled with a desire to rebel against this gender stereotyping of grief situations. This was perhaps due to the fact that as a child I

used to accompany my father and cousins to the graveyard and he made us familiar with the graves of our near ones. With the passage of time to be more specific after the attainment of puberty I was not allowed to go there even though my cousins who were boys had the liberty to go and pray there at any convenient time. The explanation that allowing adult females to visit the graveyard will destroy the sanctity of the place was even more disgusting. They have also opined that females are too emotional so may break down when they see the graves of their near ones. There had been many instances of persuading the authorities even citing examples of places in India and abroad where females do visit graveyards to pay their respects to the near ones but to no avail.

A couple years back I went to the graveyard with my sister thinking that with changing times opinions also might have changed. But we were disappointed as we were directed to pray from the inner gate which leads to the graves.

By now we realised the fact that once a person embraces eternal sleep there is no return, we had only tried to visit the graves of our near ones to feel that even though out of sight there exists an emotional bond. Psychologically we would feel their presence. Almost all my younger female informants expressed that prohibiting females to enter graveyards and pray for the departed relatives was absolutely unreasonable. They are of the opinion that females can also maintain the sanctity of such a sacred place by adhering to the prescribed norms like dress code etc. The elderly people of both sexes however want a tradition to be as pristine as before and so are apprehensive of the repercussions of changing this age-old system.

Concluding Remarks

Looking back I feel that each incident at different stages of my growing up years had been a part of the socialisation process and an experience in itself. The same can be said about my informants who had dealt with death of their siblings, spouses or near ones exhibiting emotions from utter disbelief to anger to subtle acceptance. In this era of post-modernism there is a need to change the mindset of male dominated Assamese Muslim society especially of those who are at the helm of affairs. Women have fought for what is their right but I believe that there should be no stereotyping of expression, participation and decision making in grief situations and it should be a prerogative cutting across genders. This auto-anthropological account on the transcending gender stereotypes of grief among the Assamese Muslims can well be summed up in the following verse.

*Is it
A prelude to acceptance,
A curtain raiser to self assurance
An uncanny understanding
A pseudo-optimistic attitude to life*

Moments of utter despair...
Moments of incapability
And yet a flicker of hope
The wind, the wind...
Against the frail burning light
Fear not for there's time for everything
Time for the winds of change
Time for the light to spread.
Where resides equality
In joy, grief and pain - paving the way for...
A Metamorphosis of thoughts and expressions.

(Penned by Author)

Reference

Donne, J. (1627/28), XXVI Sermons. Quoted from Alford, H. (1839). *The Works of John Donne*. London: John W. Parker.