From Supersensitivity To Desensitization: Traversing Grief, Loss and Fear of Death in Yusuf Al-Sibai's *The Water Carrier is Dead* and Yasunari Kawabata's *The Master of Funerals*

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Abstract

The literary pieces that this paper aims to analyze, Yusuf Al-Sibai's novel *The Water-Carrier is Dead* (1959) and Yasunari Kawabata's autobiographical short story *The Master of Funerals* (1922), both have male characters traversing intractable grief, loss and fear of death as their protagonists. Despite significant differences in social, cultural and religious backgrounds, the two novelists share one concept – the problematisation of coping with undesirable emotions subsequent to death and significant losses. Each one of the two works is a poignant tale suffused with grief and bereavement and each focuses on the dilemma of a bereaved male protagonist suffering considerable loss(s). The principal concern of this paper is to offer an analysis of the two bereaved protagonists' attempts to traverse grief, loss and fear of death in their particular circumstances as depicted in the two pieces under consideration. The two central characters, Shousha and Kawabata, will be compared and contrasted in terms of how they traverse and even master their difficult emotions and reach desensitization to death. Other questions concerning their disposition, their negative attitude towards death and inability to forget traumatic memories and control undesirable emotional responses will be raised and answered in order to emphasize the difficulties the two protagonists meet during their traversal (the journey from supersensitivity to desensitization).

Keywords: Fear of death- loss- traversing grief- supersensitivity-desensitization.

(ISSN : 2536 - 9555)

من الحساسية المفرطة إلى اللاشعور : تجاوز الحزن والفقدان والخوف من الموت في "السقا مات" ليوسف السباعي و"سيد الجنائز" لكاواباتا ياسوناري

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أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي المساعد- قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها والترجمة الفورية- كلية الدراسات الإنسانية- جامعة الأزهر

الملخص

يهدف البحث إلى تحليل رواية "السقا مات" (١٩٥٩) ليوسف السباعي والقصة القصيرة "سيد الجنائز" (١٩٢٢) لكاواباتا ياسوناري. يعاني البطل في كلا العملين الأدبيين من مشاعر الحزن والفقدان ورهبة الموت. على الرغم من الاختلافات الاجتماعية والثقافية والعقائدية إلا أن كلا الكاتبين يتشاركا في تناول إشكالية الموت وتجربة البطلين في اجتياز المشاعر وردود الأفعال غير المقبولة الناتجة عن تجربة الفقدان. يتناول كل من العملين الأدبيين شخصية محورية وهي شخصية البطل الذي يعاني مرارة الفقدان ويتجرع مشاعر الخوف الشديد من الموت. يهدف البحث إلى تحليل شخصيتي البطلين ومحاولة كلا منهما اجتياز المشاعر المؤلمة والمخاوف التي تسيطر عليهما وذلك من خلال مقارنة شخصية البطلين وكيفية تخطي واجتياز هذه المشاعر حتى الوصول إلى مرحلة اللاشعور تجاه الموت. يطرح البحث ويجيب على العديد من الأسئلة المتعلقة برؤية كلا من بطلي العملين الأدبيين شوشه وكاواباتا للحياة وفهمهما الخاطئ للموت وعدم القدرة على نسيان وتخطي الذكريات المؤلمة والتحكم في مشاعر الحزن والألم وذلك بغرض إلقاء الضوء على العقبات والصعوبات التي واجهتهما خلال رحلة الاجتياز من مرحلة الحساسية المفرطة تجاه الموت إلى مرحلة اللاشعور.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رهبة الموت- الفقدان- تجاوز الأحزان- الحساسية المفرطة- اللاشعور.

The Water Carrier is Dead is set in Cairo and *The Master of Funerals* is set in Settsu Province in Japan, thereby showing differences in culture, religion and convictions. However, the two protagonists of the respective pieces, Shousha and Kawabata, share the same dilemma of supersensitivity to death manifested in an all-consuming sense of grief coupled with a persistent fear of death. The traumatic experiences of losing immediate family member(s) have changed their characters and shaped their disposition. Past traumas have rendered them introverted, lonely and reticent and unlocked irrational fear of death. In both works, the two protagonists embark on a journey towards controlling and mastering their negative emotional responses and the disturbing feelings of grief and constant anxiety. Traversing difficult emotions on the part of the two central characters is made attainable through desensitization. The achievement of desensitization in both works is made possible at the end when each one of them decides to handle death as a profession. The decision taken by the two protagonists to actively participate in several funerals as "masters" or professional mourners has enabled them to overcome their fears and traverse the well of grief.

Both the Egyptian and the Japanese protagonist's stance is made very explicit from the early beginning of the two works. Both are reeling from the agony of losing immediate family member(s) and neither of them is able to process his grief and cope with an overwhelming sense of loss. They are wrestling with the lingering, crushing sadness that comes with grief and neither of them is very open about his struggle and

(ISSN : 2536 - 9555)

this explains the reason why they are not able to adapt to the hurt and adjust to the losses. Shousha is destined to face intractable grief in the most unexpected way with the sudden and untimely death of his wife while giving birth to their only son. His aspiration for a happy family ends almost the moment he embraces fatherhood and the dream of starting a family never comes true. The situation is even aggravated by the fact that he becomes responsible for attending to a motherless newborn and a blind old woman adrift in grief (his mother-in-law). Even after nine years, he is still disturbed by the randomness of death and thus unable to adjust himself to his painful emotions. The pain and loss he endures are manifest in what Al-Sibai describes as "absentmindedness, speechlessness and other signs of sadness" (*The Water Carrier is Dead 99*)[I]. Kawabata who is pummeled by the death of his immediate family is equally inconsolable. "Throughout his life," Donald Keene affirms, "Kawabata seems to have been immersed in, drawn to, and preoccupied with death, loss, and grief." Caused by "suffering the losses of all of his close family members" (26). In more details David C. Stahl illustrates, "his father died when he was only two, and his mother died the next year. He moved in with his grandparents, but his grandmother died in 1906 when he was seven … the boy and his grandfather were left alone in the world. [His] elder sister died in 1909 and his grandfather passed away five years later" (141).

The Problem

Both are left scarred by their losses which have rendered them solitary introverted characters maimed by their family history, moulded by unspeakable traumatic past and most importantly very reticent about it. The two protagonists are inundated with overwhelming grief and share the same

reluctance to speak about the past. They prefer to suffer in silence and do not feel the need to express and talk about what they face, how they respond and how they feel. This means that they both deprive themselves of the relief of speaking with others and being comforted by them. The unequivocal disquieting habitual silence which characterizes and defines the two bereaved protagonists and which others find mysterious, annoying and awkward is a trauma response. In other words, their reticence and unwillingness to express themselves and communicate with others in the aftermath of their losses is nothing but a response to the trauma they have experienced.

Shousha, though neither cold nor unfeeling, is an extreme introvert who prefers to maintain his traumatic experience hidden and silenced. After his wife's death, he has fallen into a depression that has been aggravated by self-induced separation from family and society. He distances himself and avoids interaction with others not because he finds silence comfortable, but because he is mentally depressed and does not want to expose himself to the trauma of recalling trauma. The widower who is still nursing the deep emotional scars of loss is essentially withdrawn from society and finds neither solace nor distraction in the pleasant routine of his vocation as a water carrier. His marked speechlessness and frowning face distance and distinguish him from his coworkers. While the other water carriers would be "laughing and singing", as Al-Sibai argues, "Shousha would proceed to the water tap with a frown on his face and fill his waterskins one after the other without saying a word" (19).

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Even at home, there is just no talking and this creates conflicting needs between the father and the son. Sayed, the nine-year-old son, is always eager to talk and could not resign himself to the fact that his father is taciturn and unapproachable. Whenever he tries to prise his father out of his unbending reserve and to engage him in an intimate conversation, he finds himself faced with a wall of silence which he is not able to break. Despite the fact that reticence and inscrutability are the part that Sayed resents in his father's character, the father's stunning silence creates a cloud of tension and his scowling face is particularly annoying and uncomfortable. Whenever he observes his father's sullen face, he wonders "had it not been for his frown and silence, he would have been the best father" (Al-Sibai 19, 24, 30). Sayed craves communication with his father and needs a listening ear, but he is disappointed in him and frustrated by his unresponsiveness. The son could not cope with, let alone accept his father's incommunicative disposition. He himself complains that "he could not stand his silence," needs "to make small talk [and] to have a lively give and take." However, instead of a little chat or an intimate conversation, he gets nothing but "silence" or laconic replies coupled with the same "big frown as if [he] were buying words" (*The Water Carrier is Dead* 30).

Even with an adult empathic listener like Shehatta, Shousha rejects the drive to communicate and shows extreme reluctance to engage in intimate conversation in order to avoid delving into his innermost emotions and showing his vulnerability. The extroverted guest tries in vain to interact with his introverted host. Shehatta describes him as "a sort of person who used his words sparingly and bridled his tongue"

(152). Whenever they go together to a café to "smoke water pipe" and play a "backgammon game," Shousha does not utter a word and maintains the same cold reserve. Al-Sibai opines "the two contestants were of two different types; one was a silent player who did not bridle his tongue and the other could not restrain his lips" (149). Shousha, the pretty silent player, "was throwing the die in silence and playing in silence" while Shehatta, the lively, garrulous and loquacious one, "was talking incessantly" (149) and filling every moment with a constant barrage of noise.

Likewise, the Japanese protagonist is an extreme introvert whose exposure to silence at early age following his parents' death has devastating consequences. It is worthy to note that while Shousha, with the death of his wife, has a small family consisting of his son and his mother-in-law, Kawabata, with the death of his parents, becomes completely orphaned without family to speak of or to. At his grandfather's house, silence reigns, "utter muteness permeates the cold bedroom" and the two, as Roy Starrs states, "were relatively speechless" (17). The grandson has a deep yearning for interacting and conversing with the only companion he has, but his intense longing for verbal interaction is unfulfilled. The silent old man "was nearly blind" and "his ears troubled him" (*The Master of Funerals* 83). He, thus, has no capacity to engage in any interpersonal communication. In order to connect with him, the grandson either, keenly "stared at his aged face" or "held his thin and shriveled face" (83). Such a silent interaction is unfortunately the only form of communication he is able to make.

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The situation has even aggravated with the death of the grandfather which has reduced the protagonist's opportunities to engage in any interaction. The habitual silence, which has been imposed on him, has become the norm. He himself becomes disinclined to talk and interact with others, given to awkward silence and concealment and relapses into grim taciturnity which capsizes his disposition and attitude. While Shousha gives laconic replies and unengaging answers, Kawabata is more adamant in his decision not to respond and interact.

Silence is the only answer he gives to every enquiry, statement and comment made by those around him. This creates communication gap and reduces interaction to the minimum. When a female cousin "blamed" him for leaving his grandfather's room in his last moments, he "listened to her words in silence." Though "her words wounded [him] so deeply," he was silent because, he himself argues, he "did not like to explain himself" (*The Master of Funerals* 83-84). It seems that he has made a resolution that he would not argue for himself and would restrain himself from talking about his traumatic experience because, like the Egyptian protagonist, he is unwilling to expose himself to the pain of recalling difficult and uncomfortable memories. Even when he "was greeted not with "Thank you for coming," but with "Welcome home" at the homes of his two closest relatives," he "chose not to respond" (77). The orphaned child seems extremely sensitive to his relatives' courtesy because it instills the feeling that he is a guest, a stranger not a resident or an immediate family member. Finally, whenever he suffers the indignity of being described as "the master of funerals" and a "mortician" by his young cousin and his wife, he feels

"sensitive to such words" which leave him "dumbfounded and stuck in silence" (79). Though the embarrassing comments provoke his anger and mentally harass him because they function as a strong reminder of the deaths of his immediate family, he remains silent.

Both bereaved characters are depicted as essentially turned inward as their traumatic experiences have left them lonely and withdrawn and their loneliness is excruciatingly painful. Shousha does not find himself in the grip of solitude, but chooses it by an act of will. After the sudden death of his wife, he retreats inward and nothing could rouse him from his self-imposed loneliness. Kawabata experiences loneliness at a very early stage in his life with the death of his parents which leaves him lonely and forsaken. The loneliness the Egyptian protagonist endures is deliberately chosen, but the one the Japanese feels is imposed on him and he is forced into it against his will.

Every night, Shousha flees humanity in his private chamber like a cave dweller who seeks refuge from life and people in the belief that he would escape emotional connection and avoid becoming involved with others. The bereaved widower prefers to sequester and confine himself in his room incommunicado as if he were a prisoner in his own home. The idea that he is physically, emotionally and mentally isolated and contained in a trap or a prison cell is reinforced by the iron bars fixed on the window. The solid iron bars which secure the window have turned the room into a tiny cell where he used to lock himself "every day from evening to dawn and did not leave except for ablution and prayer."

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Shousha would “look at the sky through the strong-wrought bars in silence, despondency and absentmindedness … as if he were asking it about something he lost or about an insoluble dilemma that exhausted him” (Al-Sibai 99, 297). He is exploring the sky in search of the meaning of life and death. He is contemplating and pondering the inevitability of death – his greatest fear and worst enemy – mortality and the reason for human existence. The more he thinks about death, the more he feels sad, empty and terrified of it and he could not overcome this because he is still unable to endure the tragic weight of the fact that his young wife died so suddenly and unexpectedly. As a consequence, he is still intrigued by many thoughts, ruminations and questions that have no definite answers like “Why did she die despite the fact that she was neither old nor sick?” … and “Why should she die and leave [him], her newborn baby and her mother alone?” ” (297).

Shousha could fairly be described as a *willing loner* who keeps his own company, craves the solitude of his bedroom and prefers to spend the night in complete undisturbed isolation away from his family and the rest of the world. Meanwhile, Yasunari is an *unwilling loner* who finds himself in the grip of solitude immediately after the death of his parents which leaves him desolate and bereft. The fact that the three-year-old orphan has to quit his primary residence and is relocated to his grandfather’s house entails that his only companion is a bedridden old man who constantly pesters him with his old age and health problems. The company of the blind grandfather is not very pleasing; it is in fact completely draining and reinforces the void in his life. Despite the fact that he lives in close proximity to his grandfather and interacts

with him daily, he remains utterly alone grappling with disconnection.

Because he dreads being lonely, craves companionship and longs to be with other people, the lonely orphan spends endless hours outdoors either in a friend's house or in the open air. John McDougil asserts:

> The room was cold and damp, and there was no vitality, no smell of life … In order to get rid of this overwhelming atmosphere, he would lie on the field during the day, sit on the hill, or go to the river … In the evening, he went to the home of his partner and felt the warmth of the family, he could not give up the warmth of those happy homes that went deep into his bones. For this kind of warmth, he had a strong nostalgia and longing. He wanted to lie in the arms of his parents, and let them love and spoil him, but it was impossible. (151)

There is definitely no warmth in the grandfather's bedroom, it is chilly and the grandson feels physically and emotionally cold and empty inside. It is worthy to note that while the bars in Shousha's bedroom are a metaphor for his chosen isolation and disconnection, the coldness here suggests the child's feeling of loneliness and lack of connection with others which he tries to escape and his yearning for companionship. Every day, he escapes his grandfather's freezing home and pursues emotional warmth and social affiliation at his friend's family house. He feels the need to have "family" around him to keep him company, talk to him and listen to him. He enjoys staying

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with them because he needs their interaction and attention, and their warm company distracts him from the inner pain of feeling lonely. Both the friend's family home and the open air are his resort of comfort which grant him a respite.

It should be emphasized that while the deaths of his parents deprive him of normal family life, the death of the grandfather, his only close relative, deprives him of even this sad and monotonous atmosphere and reinforces his feeling of utter desolation. Given that he has no "family" now, he feels more withdrawn, forsaken and desolate. "On the day of the funeral," as he himself explicitly explains, "for the first time I had a quiet moment to myself, a vague sense that I was forsaken grew in my heart" (*The Master of Funerals* 84). "From this on," McDougil states, "he was purely accompanied by abundant loneliness … endured waves of loneliness and sorrow … The chill of life added to his fear, confusion and helplessness" (152). The lonesomeness of living with no family is terrifying and the pain that he is teeming with is unbearable. Even a year later, when an anonymous female cousin is reminiscing about the grandfather's death, he is struck by a wave of loneliness that he could no longer escape. He states, "When I listened to my cousin's words, the loneliness that had stayed at a distance suddenly sank deep inside me. It was the feeling that I was all alone" (Kawabata 83-84).

In addition to their reticence and their loneliness, the two protagonists, despite the differences in age, share the same fear of death and the same inability to overcome it. This fear which is intuitively a sign or symptom of personal weakness and vulnerability is made explicit from the very beginning of the two literary pieces. They are scared of death

not because it is the unknown and not because of its inevitability, but because it has deprived them of their loved ones without warning. Both the Egyptian and the Japanese protagonists are seen in several situations which affirm their intense feelings of dread, panic and apprehension. Their persistent fear, which they both admit, consumes their thoughts and is so severe that it interferes with and affects their daily life. The death anxiety they endure is triggered whenever they are exposed to specific people, events, experiences and even places which remind them of the death of a loved one and, as a result, they try to avoid and flee these fearful objects and situations as much as possible. Shousha's fear is triggered by his encounter with Shehatta and by his visit to the professional mourners' café and Yasunari's death anxiety is triggered by the rapeseed oil, the family altar and the light in the altar.

It is through the first interaction between Shousha and Shehatta about the latter's vocation as a professional mourner that one is made certain of Shousha's emotional fragility, feebleness and extreme sensitivity to the idea of death and its ramifications. Alert to the two facts that his infamous job as a mortician is normally regarded by many as a real chore and that his host is already tortured by his haunting fears, Shehatta resorts to manoeuvring. In response to Shousha's serious question, he quips, "I am a deliveryman … I deliver the departed to his final destination. It is not a round trip. The one I escort to that place never comes back ... I leave him there and come back" (179). Such a reply, though camouflaged and wrapped in facetious remarks that are meant to elicit laughter,

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acts as a trigger for all the dread and fears that Shousha has been desperately trying to hide and fills him with breathless horror, disgust and revulsion. While "Shehatta was giggling," the novelist explicitly states, "Shousha did not laugh [and] his face was immediately obscured by a fog of grief, distress and horror" (179). In an attempt to mitigate the intimidating effect this information has on his host, awaken him from what he regards as mere illusions and correct his misconceptions about death, Shehatta persistently, albeit wittingly, tries to show him that there is no great discrepancy between the job he has taken as a "boy mortician" and any other job including even "belly dancing" (179). In an explanatory tone that is not lacking in wit and humour and, of course, intended to be funny, Shehatta jokingly suggests that there is no much substantial difference between "a funeral procession" and a "wedding procession" since in both cases, the two (i.e., the groom and the departed) proceed to their inevitable destiny (178). It is exactly at this point of their conversation that the chasm in the two men's attitudes towards death becomes more pronounced and lamentably irreconcilable. Shousha's deep-seated fear of death and his resentment of it render him stubbornly reluctant to accept or tolerate Shehatta's personal convictions and appraisal of the idea of death. The fearlessness and blithe indifference Shehatta shows while talking about death not only disturb, but also offend him. Shousha is stubbornly unwilling to accept what he regards as Shehatta's frivolous conduct and nonsensical argument. Acknowledging such unwillingness, he explicitly admits that he "was not ready to accept the man's trifling talk" (179).

Disappointingly, the shocking interaction is more harmful than helpful. It has a detrimental impact on Shousha's

disposition and, more regrettably, his relationship with his guest. Instead of dispelling Shousha's fears, the nonchalant attitude Shehatta is adopting while talking about death rather intensifies such fears and Shousha finds himself terrified of his guest. He begins to perceive him as the incarnation of death, the thing he fears and abhors most. The situation worsens when his overwhelming fear of Shehatta as a literal embodiment of death prevails throughout the whole household and like a contagious disease or an "infection" it "spread to his young son" (Al-Sibai 180).

Shousha, the gracious and cordial host who is friendly and considerate to his homeless guest and shows him warm and generous hospitality by giving him food and shelter becomes little more than cold and reserved. Shehatta, the personable guest, who was most welcomed once, has turned into an unwanted guest because, the novelist explains, he "was filling Shousha with sadness and pessimism" (180) and his presence under the same roof with him becomes a heavy burden he could hardly tolerate. Shousha thereby considers Shehatta's "intention to reside in the same room with him" as a "catastrophe" that he "could not avoid" (180). As a result of associating Shehatta with death, he suddenly finds himself "fearing and resenting Shehatta the man he had welcomed and enjoyed his company *before* he smelled the odor of death, funerals and graves out of him" (emphasis mine). Fear and disgust are the only emotions Shousha is now feeling towards Shehatta and he begins to regard his relationship with "the man of the dead" (180) as an unbearable burden and a source of immense anxiety and stress.

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Under the influence of his fears of Shehatta as the embodiment of death, Shousha finds great difficulty accepting his invitation to go together and enjoy the evening at the "funerals' café". Instead of taking such a nice invitation as a friendly gesture of Shehatta, Shousha finds himself in a real quandary and the decision to go to the café seems much like a very difficult mission. Because he is possessed and even enslaved by an extreme sense of apprehension, illusions and mistaken convictions, the very thought of accompanying Shehatta in that short errand frightens and scares him. Though going to a café is a social lubricant that aims at unwinding the stress of a long working day, on the part of Shousha, it is an unpleasant duty. This explains the reason why on his way to the café, he, as Al-Sibai affirms, seems "so gloomy and absent-minded as if he himself were preceding a funeral" (181).

At the café, Shehatta is happily immersed in the cheerful atmosphere while Shousha is quite the opposite. He feels haunted with a horrible fear coupled with trepidation. Just the idea of being present amongst a constellation of morticians, undertakers, pallbearers, and the like, or in his own words "the *affandiah* who are being prepared to perform funeral processions" (182) is a strain he could hardly bear. Shousha's illusive idea or the horrible mental image he has about the café and the things he would see and hear there is a typical rendition of his worst fears. In reality, the café is (a place) immersed in "hustle and bustle" where lots of lively activities are going on. "It was filled with the laughing, noisy attendees and resonating laughter in addition to the sounds of the backgammon pieces and the voices of joking and funny insults" (182). Despite this, Shousha feels so upset and

nervous that he is not able to see "the amiable, friendly gathering and the rapture and fun" they have (182) and he perceives the place and the whole atmosphere as rather fraught. Because he has a very peculiar idea about the café, he imagines it as "a dull, gloomy, dusty and depressing place where silence was prevailing, ghosts were roaming and caskets and tombstones were being placed [and] the only words heard were those of moaning, wailing and screaming" (182). This means that the overwhelming sense of fear and apprehension that takes hold of him is not only intense and stressful, but also crippling, for it clouds his perception and renders him blind to the reality.

The Japanese protagonist's emotional weakness, vulnerability and supersensitivity to death and its concomitants are made manifest during the funeral service of his father. The shocking and unexpected response of the three-year-old child; his impatience and irritability during the funeral rites are clear signs of his fear of death and subsequent aversion to it. The recently orphaned child is petrified and becomes immediately enveloped in a cloud of fear and intimidation. Distraught with an overwhelming sense of panic and anxiety over the sudden death of his beloved father, he becomes quite frantic and responds anxiously to the rapeseed oil in particular. The smell of the oil frightens and makes him so uncontrollably anxious that he collapses into tantrum. He acknowledges "I cried and fussed on the day of my father's funeral. I told them "Don't strike the bell on the altar," "Put out the light," and "Throw the oil from the vessel out in the garden" " (*The Master of Funerals* 81). It is worthy to note

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that while the child – in a sudden fit of pique – emphatically denounces both the sound of the bell and the sight of the lit lamp, he is so infuriated by the oil in particular that he himself "threw it form the clay bowl into the garden" (81). The very act of throwing the oil is a clear manifestation of the apparent fear and unease that are taking hold of him and the impossibility of controlling such immediate responses.

Though neither the child is food neophobic nor is the oil smelly or stinky, its smell elicits not only his disgust and revulsion, but also – and more importantly – negative sensations and powerful unpleasant emotional responses. Quade Robinson suggests "the orphan became highly sensitized to the odor and even a whiff of it was enough to trigger anxiety" (34). The rationale behind this is the fact that the protagonist perceives the oil as an emblem of his father's death in particular and the idea of death in general. Gary James Matson describes the oil as "an emblematic object [which] symbolizes death in the most concrete of ways" (52-53). This explains the reason why the stark fear and revulsion that seize him during the service take the form of rejection and a strong desire to distance himself from the fuel.

Having a family altar as a final resting place for the "cremains of departed family members", Wendy Jacobson states, "is especially common amongst Japanese families," and is quite familiar in Buddhist homes. Despite this, the protagonist perceives his family altar as the scariest place in the house that has witnessed and is still provoking his earliest and most frightening memories. Every token of the place like the sliding partition, the grandmother's posthumous name, though he himself "scrawled it on the door" (82), and the bright light inside the room serve as strong and constant

reminders of his grandmother's death and – in corollary – provoke the utmost fears inside him. The place causes the protagonist most discomfort, percolates intense anxiety and induces a depressive state as if it were a haunted room. The novelist portrays his own apprehensive attitude when he reminisces "I stole glances at the bright family altar in its special room. Over and over when my grandfather was unaware, I opened the sliding door a tiny crack, then closed it again" (82). The terrified infant "stole glances" because of the terrible sense of dread which fills him and makes him too nervous and scared to look at the altar.

The special room of the "family altar" feels unsettling, inspires uneasiness and activates his flight response. The death of his grandmother and by implication the very existence of her cremains in the altar awaken inside him an aversion or a personal phobia (agoraphobia to be precise) that crawls inside him and controls his whole body and soul every time he happens to be near the altar. "Apprehension and abhorrence", as the omniscient author admits, are exactly "the first real feelings [he] had for the family altar" (81). Hate, Beatrice Tudorache explains, "is just one of manifestations of fear" and is "primarily defined as a secondary emotion that arises from fear." It is no surprise then that all the haunting fears, which the child harbors, have turned the altar into the most hated and loathsome place in the house. The protagonist highlights his bitter hatred of it when he explicitly states, "I remember I hated opening the sliding partition all the way and approaching the altar" (82). The altar room is perceived as an ominous place that has a menacing and threatening

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atmosphere attached to it and these fears, which might seem to be childish, are not unnecessary. Unlike Shousha's fear of the café, the fear and sense of dread that are filling his inside are well-grounded and do not stem from his imagination. They rather stem from the fact that the room is the place in the house where ashes of the departed are kept, so for the child, it is has a natural atmosphere of horror.

The situation is even compounded by the fact that his attempt to avoid the whole place by fleeing from the house and going out to the mountains in the sun proves futile and does not give him the cathartic release he desperately aspires to obtain. Contrary to what he expects and instead of helping him feel calmer and boosting his mood, the sunlight acts as a trigger that reinvigorates and reinforces all his negative emotions. He absolutely despises the bright radiance of the sun whenever it "drops below the horizon" simply because it is a strong reminder of the light in the family altar and, hence, a fear evoking stimuli. The author lamentably concedes, "Whenever I look at the subdued radiance of the sun as it bathes the mountaintops after dropping just below the horizon, I think of the light in the family altar as it looked to me when I was eight years old" (82). It is very important to note that by personifying the light in the altar, turning it into the *doer* in the sentence and making it "look to" the child, the author makes it seem more ominous and dominating and affirms the menacing and threatening effect it has on the protagonist. His exposure to both the light in the altar and the light of the sun oppresses and affects him in negative and inconvenient ways and brings his worst memories and darkest emotions back to life. The light of the sun which is usually associated with knowledge, awareness and reality is, in the protagonist's case,

associated with the knowledge and reality of death which he could not grasp and attempts to evade and avoid facing, but in vain. Hence, the impossibility of escaping the sun and its light stands for the inevitability of death and the impossibility of escaping it.

Emotional numbness or the absence of emotions which is defined by Sara Lindberg as a "state of being in which you are not feeling or expressing emotions" is exactly the response they both exhibit following the untimely death of Shousha's wife and that of Yasunari's sister. The wife dies at the very same instant his child is born and what is supposed to be a moment of jubilation turns into tribulation. The Japanese protagonist's loss is not less grievous; his sister dies suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of sixteen with no word of farewell and the situation further aggravates by the fact that she is estranged from him and dies far away at "a relative's house" where "she was raised … from the time he was "four or five" (82).

Both protagonists are unprepared for the shock and show no outward sign of grieving or expression of emotion. Both are haunted by their traumatic losses and experience emotional numbness with grief; they feel emotionally blank, empty and detached from their emotions and those around them. They experience a disconcerting absence of emotion, but this does not mean that they are unfeeling; they retreat to this impassive response because the loss, which is shocking and beyond belief, deprives them of the chance of processing their emotions. Finally their emotionless response is not something they are ignorant of. They are self-conscious of

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feeling nothing and Shousha, in particular, is enabled to explain the rationale behind his numbness.

The sudden death of Shousha's wife while giving birth to their only son leaves him dazed and disbelieving. Upon hearing the sad news, he seems in complete shock and experiences difficulty thinking as if his mind needs more time to process the information, accept it and rationalize the loss. His initial reaction is one of bewilderment and stupefaction. The early demise of the wife is like a thunderbolt that has hit his world and left him reeling in shock. Because it has never occurred to him that he would lose her so untimely and with no warning, the death incident is not only traumatic, but also unimaginable and unbelievable. In his only intimate conversation with his son that takes place nine year after the loss, he expressly informs him that he was then unable to imagine, let alone acknowledge it. He argues, "She has ascended to heaven but her ascendance was just like the falling of the sky on the earth or the occurrence of the doomsday. One can imagine that anything might happen except that she would ascend and leave us in our loneliness. It was an incident that my mind could not fathom" (Al-Sibai 305). The situation is compounded by the fact that his inability to accept and adjust to the idea is not a temporary or short-lived immediate response, but a permanent state of disbelief. This sensation of disbelief is made explicit when he refrains from using words like *death* and *died* and uses other words like "ascendance" and "ascended" instead.

The novelist makes Shousha's stunned reaction more manifest by comparing it with the emotionally intense reaction of the grieving mother. Each one of the grieving characters feels the loss and responds to it differently. The mother is

perceived as a demonstrative griever; she "fell apart, cried, subbed and screamed." Shousha, by contrast, is seen as a numb griever; he seems absolutely imperturbable and in a state of deep "unconsciousness" or "coma" as he himself states (305). He is emotionally unavailable and feels numb and empty.

While the old woman drowns in a swirl of emotions, Shousha, though surround by overt displays of anguish, reacts without any outward sign of distress because the death incident is not yet real to him. Exposing these emotionally contrastive responses and how the mother is bitterly keening while he feels nothing and is emotionally flat and detached, he informs his son "her mother began to wail on that day as if she were a wounded dog barking. But I did not wail or yell for I was … in a coma … I was walking, moving and acting without consciousness or awareness" (306). He is watching the woman frantically and hysterically crying and remains silent; he neither cries nor screams. Amid the deafening and heartbreaking display of uncontrolled grief (her weeping and wailing) he appears calm and feels dead inside as if he were a cold, unresponsive emotional cripple. Even when his blank emotional state and inability to cry worry his friends and neighbours and they urge him to "cry" to release his sorrow and grief, "shedding tears was difficult" because he was "too shocked to be conscious" (306).

Crying, as a form of catharsis and a natural expression of painful emotion is a release valve that he desperately needs, but definitely does not have. He is in a state of consternation and no cathartic means is available to help him overcome the

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shock. It seems that he needs more time to recognize grief and then accept it.

Likewise, the bereaved sibling, who is already clobbered with the deaths and significant loss of his parents, does not seem overtly perturbed by the news of his sister's death. In such a situation that would be accompanied with a strong emotional response, the nine-year-old protagonist is a typical numb griever; he feels nothing and does not experience any outward manifestation of grief. In the aftermath of such a shock, and for "three hours," he experiences a terrible hollow absence of any feelings and finds himself emotionally and mentally numb. His mental numbness takes the form of a state of vacillation, indecision and inability to deliver the dreadful news to his grandfather. He explicitly complains, "When word of my sister's death came … I could not bear to tell my grandfather. I hid the message for two or three hours before finally deciding to read it for him" (*The Master of Funerals* 83).

Instead of feeling sad and acting accordingly, he exhibits no pain. He is insulated from the feeling of grief as if he had frozen or lost emotions. He seems emotionally detached and unbothered and literally feels nothing. In this situation, exactly like the Egyptian widower, he is self-conscious and quiet cognizant of how he thinks, acts and feels; his apparent indifference, callous disregard and lack of overt grief. This awareness is reflected in his ability to describe perfectly in words his flat emotional state. The honesty and simplicity with which the surviving sibling uncovers his feelings – or more properly his lack of feelings – and which are void of sentimentalization are unique. He admits, "My grandfather urged me, "Grieve. Grieve for your sister's

death!" I searched my heart, but I was confused, not knowing how to surrender my soul to grief' (83). The grandson's response is aberrant, peculiar and incongruous with what the grandfather expects. The feeble old man is perplexed and surprised to find his grandson feeling nothing and unable to access his emotions in the rawest stage of grief and he expects him to show a flood of feelings like sadness, anger and other signs of grief, but that does not happen. Even when he tries to guide him to a specific way to feel and respond or to what he perceives as the "correct" way of mourning and asks him to "Grieve" for his sister's death, the grandson remains the dry-eyed one in the room. He shows no outward signs of grief and experiences lost emotions or what psychologists call reduced emotional reactivity.

It should be emphasized however that, like Shousha, he is conscious of his numbness reaction, but unlike Shousha he is certainly not aware of the reason for his inability to grieve. The shock he feels in the wake of the sudden and untimely demise of his only sibling at the age of sixteen is the one obvious explanation for his uncharacteristic response. In other words, the sudden loss that leaves him feeling shocked and confused is the reason behind his reduced emotional responsiveness and diminished affect display.

Despite the significant differences in age and social background of the two protagonists, the way they respond to the two subsequent death incidents in their lives; the unexpected death of Shehatta and the death of the old grandfather, is the same. Escape, which takes place not one, but three times and which takes the form of running away like

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scared children to another room in each house or to the outdoors, is the coping mechanism that both adopt in order to detach themselves physically and emotionally from their difficult and painful situations. Each one of them adopts the same childish and humiliating response; running away and seeking refuge in other places; another room in the house, in the outdoors, and even in the cemetery because neither of them is emotionally strong enough to encounter the difficulty of the situation and endure the subsequent ramifications and the difficult emotions.

The two protagonists share the same initial response as each one of them "scurries" into another room in the house. The only differences between the two experiences are in the timing and in the motives. Shousha's escape takes place *after* the death is discovered; he runs away when he discovers that Shehatta is already dead while Kawabata's escape happens *before* the death occurs; he runs away when he finds that death is no more than a few steps away and the grandfather is in his death throes. The former could not bear to stay beside the deceased man's corpse because of the specific phobia he suffers and the latter could not bear to stay beside the old man who is on the threshold of death and witness his agony and pain. In brief, Shousha's escape is triggered by fear while that of Kawabata is triggered by the grief and sense of pity he feels. This means that the Egyptian protagonist is panicked while the Japanese one is pained.

Shousha's dashing into another room in the house with the aim of keeping a safe physical distance between him and the corpse of the recently dead man is his most immediate response after discovering Shehatta's death. The overwhelming sense of fear and trepidations, which floods

him when he witnesses and touches Shehatta's lifeless body, sends him scurrying into his mother-in-law's room in the immediate aftermath of discovering the unexpected departure of the professional mourner. The novelist relates, "Shehatta's body felt abnormally cold. Shousha touched his forehead … the man was not breathing and what was before him was just a body [corpse] with no soul, breath or life. Shousha was panic-stricken. The first thing he did was dashing into Um Amna's room" (235). Under the effect of overwhelming apprehension coloured with anxiety, discomfort and insecurity, Shousha feels helpless, pathetic and weak. "For the" horrible "moment" of realization when he finds the professional mourner, "the one who ridicules death, dead," he "remained scared, disoriented and dumbfounded" (235). He loses his rational thought and the ability to think clearly and act normally. The whole situation, which is too frightening for him to apprehend and handle, causes the extreme stress response which he unexpectedly shows when he flees to the old woman's room.

Though he is in his mid-thirties, he runs away like a scared child because he regards the dead body as a potential threat and his presence in the same room is painful and uncomfortable. Approaching and touching the cold corpse which is as cold as marble is a fear-eliciting experience that provokes his irrational fear of death and things associated with it (e.g., necrophobia). According to Kendra Cherry, "The word necrophobia comes from the Greek *nekro* ("corpse") and *phobos* ("fear") and it is defined as:

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> A specific type of phobia that involves a fear of dead things and things that are associated with death. A person with this type of phobia may be afraid of dead bodies as well as things as coffins, tombstones, and graveyards … While those who have necrophobia may recognize that the source of their fear poses no real threat, they still experience fear when they see, or sometimes even think about, corpses or other things associated with death.

Shousha's necrophobia – his persistent and excessive fear of death things – is triggered when he touches the body and finds it cold. The coldness of Shehatta's corpse, which is a clear indication of his demise, makes him shudder and then compels him to flee into the other room.

In the same way and instead of being present at the bedside of his dying grandfather to say a final goodbye and share the remaining time when his last loved one is nearing death and his journey on earth is coming to an end, the Japanese protagonist dashes into another room in the house. The most compelling reasons for his unexpected response are both the anticipatory grief and the pity he feels for the man while watching him struggle with death. Yasunari's heart aches with pity for the old man and the agonizing pain he is suffering and his presence at the same room is a heavy emotional burden he could not bear. Though at his grandfather's advanced age, this moment is quite expected and death is a likely outcome, the grandson is too vulnerable and overwhelmed to stay beside his grandfather's deathbed, watch his agonal respiration and hear his death rattle. He himself explains, "When he took a breath, phlegm stopped up his

windpipe. He clawed at his chest … I could not stand to watch his agony, so I fled to another room for the next hour" (83).

Witnessing the old man die slowly is a horrendous situation that he could not withstand. Stepping outside the room and keeping a physical distance between him and his grandfather, though an agonizing decision, is the only solution to evade dealing with such anxiety-provoking situation. This explains the reason why he "was silent" and "did not give a word of explanation," as he himself admits, when an old female cousin, showing surprise at the way he "reacted," upbraided and "reprimanded" him for "showing such a lack of feeling for his closest living relative" (83). The act of escape that is perceived by the old woman as emotional detachment and diminished ability to empathize with the agony of the grandfather functions as a coping mechanism that alleviates the stress and overwhelming grief and pity he experiences.

The second escape occurs in the two works on the day of the funerals at crucial moments. While the attendants are preparing Shehatta's corpse for burial and while the bereaved grandson is receiving the funeral guests, the two chief mourners flee the houses to the outdoors not to other rooms there.

Despite the fact that he is expected to be the first one to attend and participate in the process of preparing the body for burial, Shousha "felt initially afraid of [even] entering into the room of the deceased and *touching* his body" (238; emphasis added). He feels anxious and stressed about being in close contact with the corpse. He is particularly petrified of the specific practices and procedures which have to be taken like

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washing and shrouding the dead body and which he awfulizes and finds too frightening to witness, let alone administer. For this reason, the moment he gets inside, he cowers at the sight of the corpse while "two out of the three attendants were bathing and wrapping it" and he frantically "ran away" (238). The phobia that suddenly grips his heart compels him to flee the whole house, not only the room where the body lays, to the alley. Fleeing to the alley is certainly a form of escaping behavior or a coping mechanism that enables him to avoid facing and dealing with the frightful situation.

On the day of the funeral, the epistaxis the grandson "suddenly developed," (84) and which he considers a physical sign of the stress and anxiety he feels, forces him to leave the house and flee to the garden. He states, "When I felt the blood start running down my nostrils, I quickly grabbed by nose with the end of my kimono sash and dashed out barefoot across the flagstones in the garden. I lay face up in the shadow of the tree on a large stone … waiting for my nosebleed to stop" (84). Matson suggests that "he ran away" because of the "sense of embarrassment coupled with the fear of appearing frail" (63). It should be emphasized, however, that the grandfather's death bequeaths a myriad of intense difficult emotions of grief, helplessness, loneliness and despair and the nosebleed is a signal of his emotional state. He himself argues, "That nosebleed made me aware of how pained I was" (84). The sorrow and sadness, he feels, manifest themselves in that physical symptom and it is particularly the resulting sense of grief – not embarrassment – that causes his running away to the garden.

The third and most humiliating escape occurs during the funerals at the most unexpected places – the cemetery and the

mountain crematory – and still for the same reasons. The Egyptian protagonist runs out of the grave and the Japanese one races to the mountaintop. Witnessing the open grave is quiet terrifying but "hitting" a skull inside the grave itself is the trigger that provokes Shousha's frightful response. Likewise, Kawabata's presence in the crematory and witnessing the cremation of his grandfather's body is quiet agonizing but "picking up the small bones" out of the fire is beyond heartbreaking and triggers the same unexpected response.

In the cemetery and during the burial, Shousha loses all the courage he has and becomes consumed with the same fearful thoughts and feelings. The protagonist's necrophobia or what Al-Sibai calls "original fear of cemeteries and the deceased" is revived and "the goosebumps ran over his body" exactly at the moment when "he was watching the grave open its mouth wide and its dark depth was ready to receive the coming guest" (241). It might be suggested here that the fear some people experience upon going to cemeteries is quite normal since cemeteries represent their painful losses and recall traumatic memories. However, the fact remains that Shousha's phobia is quite unique for it is not only all-consuming and debilitating, but also invincible. Unlike any other fear, it causes him extreme anxiety, significant stress and most importantly adverse physical reaction.

In addition to his presence in the cemetery, the sight of the grave and watching it open its mouth wide to devour Shehatta's body is an agonizing and terrifying experience that he finds difficult to endure. The situation even aggravates

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inside the grave itself when he "descended" into it to place the corpse and "found" himself surrounded by the grim nature of the place. "In the pitch dark, his eyes could not see a thing, he felt a severe cold wind attack over his face and a smell of rotten flesh reached his nostrils" (241). It is impossible in such a horrifying and gloomy atmosphere that reeks with the smell of death to calm himself down or overcome his fearful thoughts. The moment his foot "was hit by a skull of a deceased," he "collapsed completely and his nerve failed him, he ran out of the grave and burst out crying bitterly" (242). Hitting the anonymous skull triggers him and causes his extreme fear reaction. Running out of the grave before burying the body, though childish, shameful and humiliating, is the only alternative since it offers disconnection and distraction from his emotional distress and spares him the agony of dealing with his greatest fear.

The "next morning" when the Japanese grandson "went" with a group of relatives and fellow villagers to pick up the grandfather's ashes from a mountain crematorium and during the "ceremonial gathering of ashes" (the cremation service), the second nosebleed forces him to make a dash for the mountain. He reminisces, "As we picked up the bones out of the fire, my nose began to bleed again. I threw down the bamboo fire chopsticks. Mumbling just a word or two, I loosened my sash, held my nose, and dashed up the mountain. I ran to the top" (84-85). He hastily retreats from the mountain crematory to the safety of the mountaintop where silence and stillness reign supreme to distance and sequester himself from the sorrowful and anxiety-provoking task of collecting and picking up the bones and ashes of his grandfather. The situation is beyond heartbreaking, for he could not endure the

hardest and most agonizing experience he ever has to deal with.

Searching for a solution

Mastering their negative emotions and their hypersensitive response is not a luxury because both are quite aware of the burdensome and disruptive nature of their painful emotions and how these emotions negatively impact them, add to their distress and undermine their resilience. Escaping (running away) and leaving their beloved ones behind at crucial times is humiliating, embarrassing and scandalous. It is, thus, high time to take a step toward making changes to their coping behaviour and adopting a different approach while dealing with their emotions and the stressors that cause them. Neither the Japanese protagonist nor the Egyptian one is willing to remain at the mercy of his emotional response and, consequently, both commit themselves to facing and confronting the stressful situations not avoiding them. Both become firmly convinced that encountering their fears and grief would provide them with the ammunition needed to defeat and overcome them. Hence the decision each one of them makes to participate in a stranger's funeral as *professional mourners* is understandable and justifiable.

In search of achieving full emotional mastery, constructing a sense of calm and a different perception of the event and in avoidance of becoming overwhelmed and annihilated by their uncomfortable emotions and all the worries and anxieties associated with them, the two protagonists decide to involve themselves in two funerals of strangers. Shousha's participation in the funeral of someone

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he does not know and Kawabata's involvement in the funeral of a distant relative of the family of his cousin's-in-laws are the first step in a long journey toward obtaining complete emotional control and responding in an appropriate and mature manner.

In analyzing and evaluating the two protagonists' experiences, one finds that they have more than one point of similarity; the rather personal motivation, the determination and persistence both protagonists have while taking the decision to take active parts in these activities, the effect and influence of their previous experiences on their decisions and finally the incomplete success they both achieve at the end of these activities.

Shousha's necrophobia is an embarrassing and terrifying experience that makes him stressful and out of control. Suggesting the most common coping mechanism adopted by people with necrophobia, Megan Turner affirms that "extreme measures are undertaken to avoid any situation where they might encounter the fear source that triggers the fear response." The fictitious phobic is, therefore, expected to avoid dealing with corpses, funerals and cemeteries. Nonetheless, he chooses to cope with his fear differently in a way that does not conform to the norm. Against all expectations, he decides to put himself in direct contact with source of his fear in order to confront and overcome his deep anxiety and terror. He resolves to face and deal with the stressful situation not to avoid it because at this point, he is convinced that exposing himself to the fear sources that repeatedly trigger his fear response is a prerequisite that would make his anxieties feel more manageable. The suggestion impulsively made by Helal Khalafallah, Shehatta's fellow

worker, that Shousha could replace the late Shehatta as a boy mortician and participate in the awaited funeral as an attendant when he simply suggests, "Why don't you come with us" (246) is what confirms his resolve. Helal's spontaneous offer provides an optimal "opportunity" for Shousha to counter and conquer the old terror. The protagonist, the novelist explicitly points out, "considered it as another *opportunity* to get into a fight against death and his fear of it. He lost the first round and here he had the *opportunity* for a second, third and fourth round. He has time on his side and he is, no doubt, a winner ... There is no better *chance to defeat death* than this" (246, emphasis mine). Armed with this unshakeable confidence, Shousha is firmly convinced that he would disarm the situation.

One should take into consideration the fact that it is only at the very beginning of the funeral that Shousha manages to maintain a relatively outward calm and resolution and give the impression of being in control. Upon his arrival at the house of the deceased, he appears fairly unperturbed. The novelist testifies to his protagonist's unprecedented ability to perform an attitude of outward calm and remain collected and unruffled in the face of such a situation of undue pressure and stress. Al-Sibai states, "He stood observing the mourners and the preparations for the funeral. The strangeness of the situation left him no chance to think of the deceased, lament, grieve or pity him. He was stagnant and stolid" (250). At such a turbulent time, Shousha feels nothing, is emotionally uninvolved and experiences remarkable equanimity simply because the unfamiliarity of the situation spares his feelings

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and does not allow him to think about the deceased, grieve or even have sympathy for him/her.

Unfortunately, the newly obtained sense of calmness and inner equilibrium he maintains during the funeral arrangements are short-lived. In a very short space of time these qualities of phlegm and self-control are destroyed and replaced by a sudden feeling of intense anxiety and fear followed by feelings of sadness that unfortunately reach a peak within a few minutes. The wails of grief followed by the appearance of the "white" silk pall escalate the scene to a high level of grief and anxiety and function as the trigger that puts an end to his self-control, demolishes his composure and rekindles his negative emotional responses (fear and grief). Al-Sibai illustrates:

> The screams pierced through the air … he felt a tremor of apprehension running through him and making him shiver like a wet sparrow in the rain. The casket appeared, wrapped in a white silk pall indicating that the deceased is a young woman. The moment his eyes fell on the pall, the man completely collapsed … and burst out crying bitterly. (251)

The moment the women gather outside the house and begin to wail, fear inevitably erupts and upon the appearance of the casket, he experiences a sudden grief burst. This means that he is now prey to two types of triggers which are not completely incidental: the sound of the wailing acts as an extreme and uncontrolled fear trigger which springs suddenly and makes him so apprehensive that he begins to shudder in horror as if he were a helpless bird perched and pelted with raindrops. The sight of the white pall serves as an inevitable grief trigger

which is equally difficult to control. It is a strong reminder of his loss (the death of his wife), and consequently, prompts difficult and searing emotions of gnawing grief and sorrow. The colour of the pall, which is a sign that the deceased is a young woman like his late spouse, takes him back to heartbreaking memories and reminds him of his loss. The situation is even compounded when Shousha, overcome with grief, breaks down into a crying fit and unfortunately the "second round" of the fight against his old terror "ended with another defeat" (251).

Despite the fact that it is a normal grief response, Shousha feels disappointed for more than one reason. On one hand, he has initially considered himself a "winner" and thought he could overcome his old terror and even nursed hopes of managing and mastering it. On the other, his grief burst is inopportune; its timing is far from ideal as it has happened in public and in a situation where he was not supposed to cry or show emotions. This is not the only blow for he has to face and endure the shame of submitting to an irresistible fit of tears. However, it should be affirmed that, in comparison with his emotional response during the previous funeral, this one is not a complete failure simply because at least he has not submitted to the urge to flee or run away to escape and detach himself from his uncomfortable feelings.

Shousha's initial convictions that he is a "winner" are based on personal perspectives and are not given any justification that goes beyond his phlegm and highly exaggerated self-appraisal. Nonetheless, the confidence the Japanese protagonist has in himself and in his ability to master

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and control his emotions (grief and sadness) and avoid the shameful flight response are based on a substantiated reason that he himself gives.

The absence of personal relationship between him and the deceased bolsters his confidence. The very fact that he is a total stranger (to the person who died) is perceived as a guarantee that, at such an emotional time, he would be less vulnerable to experiencing emotional responses and consequently would feel less anxious and more at ease. The protagonist is firmly convinced that having no personal connection is deeply influential and has a double impact on his perceptions and decisions. On the one hand, the absence of personal relationship is an important driving force behind his invulnerability. He himself reasons out his being unacquainted with the deceased and impossibility of feeling any grief. "I had never met [the person] whose funeral I would attend," he infers, "there was no way I could feel any personal grief (80). On the other, he finds a direct correlation between such absence and his unprecedented willingness and eagerness to go to the cemetery, attend the funeral, participate and be involved in the burial rituals. He argues, "The more distant my connection with the deceased, the more I felt moved to go to the cemetery … to burn incense and press my palms together in devotions" (80). He is thus given a feeling of invulnerability and a determination to attend the burial service as a master of funerals. He believes that he is equipped with all the tools needed to achieve complete emotional mastery and, therefore, excited about the belief that he could control his emotions and overcome the situation with ease. The chance avails itself when his cousin, though "didn't even know the family that was holding the funeral" or the "location

of the cemetery asked [him] to go in his stead to that funeral" (79).

Like Shousha, it is only at the beginning of the funeral that the Japanese protagonist is allowed to feel quite relaxed and impassive and to respond with no emotion. He initially manages to masquerade as an expert or a professional who has sufficient knowledge of the rituals and ready to apply it in such an emotionally taxing situation without experiencing any emotional stress. Immediately upon his arrival at the cemetery and with a high level of mastery, he disposes of mundane matters and begins to lead the chanting – the Buddhist funeral prayer – with a total absence of emotionality. He states, "at the cemetery, I rid myself of worldly thoughts and quietly prayed for the repose of the dead" (80). He is performing his role as a master of funerals professionally and seemingly unaffected.

It is unfortunate that such an impressively quiet demeanour lasts only for the short duration of the prayer and maintaining it throughout the ceremony is quite impossible. The "master" who is then calm and in control is destined to experience inevitable painful emotions (sadness and grief) triggered by something seemingly insignificant; the smell of the burned incense. James Stuart describes incense as "one of the most symbolically important objects burnt during a Buddhist funeral ceremony [that] helps purify both the surroundings and the individuals at the funeral." On the top of that, burning it is a very familiar ritual to the protagonist. However, it here functions as a strong grief trigger that arouses an overwhelming sense of sadness, sorrow and despair and intensifies feelings of loss and loneliness. Like the white

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pall, the incense serves as a powerful key to unlock hidden emotions. The burned incense reeks of despair and anguish and provokes a plethora of painful emotions, instead of provoking tranquility and inner peace because it functions as a sudden reminder of the protagonist's subsequent losses. Grief therefore is the predominant feeling at that heightened time.

The protagonist is not surprised by the intensity of his emotions. He is able to identify the grief trigger and understand why it makes him experience these emotions. He states, "When the incense was burned, it inspired me to consider the lives and deaths of people who were close to me. And in repose of contemplation my heart grew heavy" (80). It is not possible to isolate the smell and the feelings, neither is it possible to control them. The situation is gradually becoming too overwhelming and out of control and the protagonist, who is there to master the service not to grieve, feels sadness and compassion for all his departed family members. All his sad memories are crowding in his head so intensively and the sadness he feels within expresses and manifests itself in the physical posture; the way he presses palms together in devotion to these sad memories as he himself affirms, "I pressed my palms together in devotion to these memories. So it was that my decorous behavior at the funeral was never feigned; rather it was a manifestation of the capacity for sadness I had within myself" (80). The master of the funeral is more visibly upset than those closest to the deceased. It is quite apparent for all the attendees that he is the only one displaying grief and even seems, as he himself affirms, "more genuinely pious than the others who had relationship to the deceased" (80). He is in fact nursing his own grief as if he

were in the early stages of the grieving process simply because he is mourning those he has lost.

Like Shousha's former experience, and for the same reason, this one is not without success and the attempt to be in control does not end in failure. The mortician manages to endure grief patiently without feeling the need for a momentary reprieve. As a result, he does not disappear into another place, run or seek refuge in any form of escapism.

It might be suggested that the two protagonists are extremely optimistic and diluted with a pollyannaish attitude which leaves them relatively disappointed at the end. Nonetheless, it should be noted that escape or the flight response is the touchstone of these two experiences; managing to prevent the likelihood of this embarrassing response is a prodigious feat that was once far beyond their capability and they successfully accomplished. Added to this is the fact that their primary objective is not avoiding the uncomfortable emotions rather it is obtaining both control over such emotions and the capability of handling them.

The success the two men have achieved, though incomplete, is the catalyst behind the upheaval in their worlds and the unexpected transformation in their approach. Their ability to endure the difficult situation without escape has rendered them more persistent and willing to proceed with their journey and hastened their decision to participate in other funerals as *professional mourners*.

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The Solution

The decision, which is the dramatic hinge in the two works, changes the two protagonists' disposition forever. Both pursue the new vocation and embrace their roles with gusto and neither of them hesitates or rethinks of the bizarre choice or even thinks how it would affect him or how it would be interpreted. In both works, the resolution exposes them to rejection, repugnance and stigmatization. Both are berated by people around them and both remain indifferent and unconstrained by other people's opinions and conventions. Neither of them is responsive or even seems attentive to these views. Shousha's new vocation, though totally different from his vocation as a water carrier, suits him perfectly and the questions and comments raised about it have garnered the most nonchalant response. The people of the alley start whispering and suggest that he "was drowned in funeral processions" because "he was running after pennies," "became fond of grief" or "lost his mind" (257). Meanwhile, he shows apparent indifference and unconcern. Likewise, the comment made by Kawabata's cousin on his frequent exposure to death and bereaved families when he sarcastically "joked" and "described" him as a "master of funerals" and the one made by the young wife when she "wryly" called him "mortician," (79) have sparked no interest in him.

Shousha's decision to take part in the forthcoming funeral is very easy. He does not hesitate for a moment to join once more and engage in the whole process. His participation in this funeral, in particular, marks a turning point in his attitude towards death. For the first time, he is influenced by the action of the other professional mourners around him and stimulated by an unprecedented eagerness and newfound

determination to be involved in their activities. The novelist stipulates that his protagonist "found himself merging with them and running apace to the funeral procession" (257). The one who more than once ran away from the cemetery and left his beloved ones behind before interment is now seen dashing quickly with the other *affandiah* to escort the deceased to his final resting place.

The unexpected transformation in his attitude manifests itself in his eagerness to proceed to the procession, the newly obtained sense of belonging to the professional mourners and the mature reaction (the emotional steadiness) he develops while performing the assigned role. Upon his arrival at the grieving family house to remove the deceased, the situation is emotionally charged. Every minuscule detail of the situation is exacerbated by grief and emotional distress; "The marquee crowded with mourners, the high-pitched screams resounding in the street, the empty casket ready for receiving the deceased, the undertaker, the corpse washer and the hustle and bustle" (220). He is, thus, exposed to enormous emotional toll: the scene is abundant with people, things and voices which by default could function as strong triggers of fear and grief. The undertaker, the corpse washer, the open casket and the searing cries are more than enough to evoke a myriad of uncomfortable emotions.

Notwithstanding this, his reaction to this challenging and stressful situation ensures a tangible and believable emotional transformation in his character. He handles the situation very professionally and seems so collected that he is not acting out of fear or irrational fight or flight. He manages

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to keep his feelings under great control, cultivates a sense of inner peace and exhibits a steady demeanour. The author asserts this emotional transition succinctly as he states that in comparison with the "previous round," Shousha "found himself calmer and less sensitive" (257). Such emotional reaction is certainly unique to the protagonist – it is very uncommon for a person like Shousha to contain his emotions, have such unflappable disposition and retain a matured mastery over his emotional state.

Because the encounter, though brief, provides him with strength and invulnerability, the act of participation in this funeral is highly satisfactory. The protagonist is very pleased with this radically different experience which has strengthened his resilience and rendered him immune to emotionality. He takes pride in the fact that "participating in that funeral," which he considers "another round of struggle between him and his fear of death," as he himself affirms, "increased his resistance and strengthened his stolidity" (257). Shousha's transformation is complete, his emotional maturity is manifest in his ability to manage those same emotions which have overwhelmed and defeated him more than once and to feel a sense of calm and ease under pressure.

The Japanese protagonist is similarly a high achiever. Upon his arrival at the house of the deceased, he finds the household reeling from the recent death of the elderly matriarch as the body of the deceased is put on display. However, he does not lose his composure and maintains a calm outlook. Painful emotions are inseparable from the situation as grief is permeating the scene and feelings of sadness are ubiquitous. All the family members are in a highly vulnerable and emotional state: they seem grieve-stricken and

seized by pangs of sadness after they see the lifeless body of their beloved one lying in the coffin. The protagonist himself deftly conveys such emotional duress and how the features of the family's patriarch flush with pain and his daughters shed copious tears. He observes, "When I gazed at the patriarch's despondent appearance and the granddaughters' red eyes, I could see their grief" (78). Despite being placed in such a difficult situation that overflows with raw emotions of grief and anxiety and witnessing firsthand the deep pain of loss, he remains unflappable and displays neither empathy nor compassion. Stated in another way, he does not manifest any personal feelings congruous with the situation. His plain description of not being able to experience any personal emotion is made quite clear when he emphasizes, "My heart did not mourn for the late woman; I could not grieve her death" (78).

While conducting the main funeral rituals, he appears confident, relaxed and in control. It is worthy to note that in addition to the obvious display of grief, the scene is pregnant with things and scents that could function as strong trauma triggers like the open casket, the family altar and most threatening of all the burned incense which has provoked his fears and grief respectively in two previous occasions. Amidst this perturbing atmosphere, the master of the funeral who is subjected to significant pressures and, thus, more likely to suffer from stress, is performing the assigned role with efficiency and ease and does not show any discomfort about handling death and death-related practices. The professional rather than emotional conduct he reveals is unquestionably an

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evidence of the smooth transition in his character and emotional maturity. He himself highlights this qualitative change when he makes a comparison between his own behaviour and that of his cousin, “I burned incense before the altar. I made a condolence call in mourning clothes, rosary and fan in hands. Compared to my cousin’s behavior, what I did appeared considerably more composed and appropriate for a funeral ceremony. I was comfortable performing my role” (78). Nothing could be more revelatory of the transition than his explicit description of being “comfortable” while administering and mastering the funeral and how the rituals appear not only “appropriate” but also “composed.”

The protagonist shows outstanding familiarity, or what Keene describes as “authoritative demeanor” (65), while dealing with the situation. He acts unemotionally and remains monotone throughout the ceremony as he finally becomes adept at mastering death-related rituals without emotional involvement or emotional display. This does not mean that he becomes unfeeling or insensitive. It rather means that while the family perceives death as loss, he conducts death from a different perspective and perceives it as duty or responsibility and consequently he is playing his role seriously and with dedication. He is quite cognizant of the plain fact that he is there to *master* the funeral not to grieve or share the family their bereavement. All this comes under the canopy of the newly obtained professionalism which requires autonomy, control and resilience.

Both the Egyptian protagonist and the Japanese one are emotionally transformed and both obtain a better understanding of the meaning of death. Gone are the feelings of fear, anxieties and grief and are replaced by a newfound

self-assurance, emotional control and deeper understanding of the situation. Both are enabled to alter their behaviours gradually due to a matured mastery over their emotional states. The emotional maturity and mastery they achieve have evolved over time from all that have happened to them throughout the two fictional works.

Noninvolvement, disconnection and indifference are the key features of the last experiences in the two literary pieces. Because both Shousha and Kawabata have been exposed to death so repeatedly, at the end they become immune to it and are finally capable of experiencing what psychologists call desensitization to death. Joanne Cantor defines desensitization as "a psychological process by which a response is repeatedly elicited in situations where the action tendency that arises out of the emotion proves to be irrelevant" (574). Put simplistically, Sarah Sheppard defines it as "the process by which repeated exposure lessens emotional responsiveness to a negative, aversive or positive stimulus." The two protagonists' frequent exposure to corpses, funerals and cemeteries affects or more precisely eliminates the likelihood of undesirable emotional responses and makes them more indifferent to death and desensitized to mourning and grief. They have dealt with death on a routine basis and such an abnormal experience has normalized death, made it a common occurrence and rendered them familiarized with it and accustomed to its emotional ramifications. In other words, they have lost the ability to empathize and become much less sensitive and more apathetic to the suffering of others. It is worthy to note that "not empathizing with someone who is

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grieving is a sign of desensitization" and the other signs, as stipulated by Sheppard include, "lack of grief, inability to mourn and apathy."

Because both protagonists adapt themselves to emotionally difficult situations and reach a compromise with past tormentors, they being to handle death in a different way: they lose the capacity for empathy and learn to accept death as a normal and inevitable part of life and existence. In their last encounter with death, they exhibit a desensitized emotional response (a callous indifference) which manifests itself in their noninvolvement, disconnection and apathy and which is not followed by remorse or regret.

At the grieving family house where Shousha arrives to remove the corpse, he is as usual surrounded by a manifest display of grieving and sadness. Everything and everyone associated with the funeral seem ready and well-prepared for the procession. The author explicitly asserts the fact that everything is clearly relevant "the canopy crowded with the mourners, the screams resounding throughout the street, the empty casket ready for the corpse, the sheep waiting for slaughter outside the house, the undertaker, the corpse washer and the hustle and bustle" (220-221). Meanwhile, the professional mourner remains surprisingly distracted and the reason is simply the fact that he is no longer disconcerted by death and its consequences. Shousha seems inattentive and unconcerned and his response is irrelevant to the poignant situation. He reacts in a way that shows how death and its emotional ramifications have no significance for him.

The stark indifference to all the manifestations of grief highlights his newly obtained nonchalant attitude. While waiting for the procession to move, he is definitely above and

immune and distinguishes himself by standing uninvolved, distracted and disconnected as if he were an observant not a participant. The distraction is best illustrated by his bizarre preoccupation with the wether or the "male sheep" that is prepared for slaughter and his weird concern over its "castration" and "weight." Al-Sibai gives a detailed description of the protagonist's inattentive disposition and how self-absorbed he is. He states, "Instead of participating in the ongoing supplication for the deceased and saying "We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return," Shousha was totally distracted by something far away from the situation" (221). The direct cause of his mental distraction is the sheep which he is gazing at while wondering whether it is castrated or not since it "looks fleshless and scrawny" (221). At the moment when family and friends gather and arrange themselves to escort the coffin, he is too lost in thought to hear what they are saying.

While this odd preoccupation is a sign of his disconnection and apathy, his preoccupation with the hot weather and the lengthy distance to the cemetery and regarding the heat and the distance as a burden or a real difficulty attest to his unquestionable noninvolvement. He shows no empathy or endurance even before participating in the procession and regards the whole situation as an annoyance or a real chore that he *has to* handle and accomplish.

He finds himself in a real predicament as he discovers to his dismay that the coffin would be taken in a walking funeral procession "from Masr El-qadima to Elmigawreen"

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and this means that the procession would embark on a two-and-a-half hour journey on foot in the scorching sun of the day. The way he reacts is irrelevant, shocking and uncharacteristic of him. For the first time in the novel, Shousha is seen as not only empathetic and dismissive, but also judgmental. Contrary to his introverted nature, and instead of showing compliance, he is critical of the deceased. He sharply criticizes the fact that the deceased would be buried a long distance away from his home place and the reasoning behind the choice he has made while still alive. He unfeelingly argues, "Since he knew that he would be buried in El-megawreen, why did he live in Masr El-qadima, why did not he live in Edarrassa, Elhussien, Elkakheen, Edarb lahmar or Egamalia. Has it been narrowed down to just these two places" (216). The professional mourner is, thus, convinced that he has more than one reason to bemoan the situation.

The discontentment he feels is shown throughout the long journey; at its early beginning, at the mosque and at the cemetery. As the tropical weather is very trying and there is no shelter from the blinding heat, he is understandably very tired and "complaining" about the "weather and the huge distance" (224). By the time the cortege reaches Esayda Zainab Mosque to perform the funeral prayer, he is becoming more exhausted and impatient as he recognizes that the cemetery is still far away. He feels the searing heat on his head as if he were stuck in the middle of the sun-drenched desert; he "was sweating profusely" and his "flushed face" was heavily beaded with "perspiration which he wiped away with his handkerchief" (224). As the heat of the sand is blistering his feet, he could not resist feeling jealous, disapproving and envious of the deceased because he "was

lying comfortably in the coffin" (224). Nothing could be more apathetic than such an inappropriate attitude. The time they finally reach the cemetery, he feels he could hardly breathe and his "swollen feet" are "aching" (225) from walking so far. The fatigue and the physical discomfort leave him no chance to have sympathy for the deceased or empathy for the bereaved family and their display of "sorrow and sadness" (226) at the time of burial. Instead of showing any sign of grief, he feels a great sigh of relief for releasing the heavy burden.

It is quite surprising that like Shousha, Kawabata finds it particularly difficult to go and partake in the last funeral and the reason is exactly the same; the vast distance and the heat. One is quite surprised that, like the Egyptian professional mourner, he shows the same "worry about the heat" (78). During the funeral itself, and also like the Egyptian protagonist, the Japanese one exhibits the same incongruous response: the former is absorbed in his thought about the wether and the latter is fully occupied with gazing at the attendees and playing go respectively.

At the grieving family house, his unwillingness to be engaged in the surrounding uncomfortable feelings is evident in all that he does. He is absorbed and preoccupied with something far away from the solemnity and sadness of the situation; people-watching. Though he goes to the funeral with his cousin to pay their respects or "offer [their] sympathy" (78) as he himself states and is thus expected to show emotional support and deference, the focus of this moment is not on honouring the deceased and comforting the family. He

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is sitting unobtrusively and begins to observe and study the small gathering around him and their interaction. During the time he spends in the room, he occupies himself with watching people around him; family, friends and mourners, and listening to their conversation. He is mutely focusing his intense gaze at "those attending" and scanning their faces (79).

Despite the fact that staring is rude and tactless as it makes people feel uncomfortable and embarrassed and, on the top of that, no one is looking back at him, the mortician is staring at everyone in the room. The reason for engaging himself in this absolutely inappropriate conduct is simply the fact that he feels bored and wants to waste time while "waiting" for the procession and "the coffin to be removed" (79) as he himself explains. He is conscious at the moment and realizes that he is persistently and intently staring at them and they are the target of his undiluted attention.

Moreover, while waiting for the funeral to move, he is mired in ennui and in reaction to the growing sense of weariness and boredom, he engages himself in a more awkward activity; playing Go as a pastime. Such a bizarre and disconnected behaviour is not only inappropriate and insensitive, but also disrespectful to the deceased, his family and friends around. However, he does not reproach himself for this despicable conduct and is not even ashamed of admitting it when he nonchalantly states, "I played go as I waited for the coffin to be brought out" (79). Playing go is the most horrible social faux pas one could ever witness in a funeral. Compared to staring into people's faces or even at the sheep, it is a much more shocking and appalling behaviour that could not be simply dismissed as social awkwardness or mere frivolity. It

makes him appear complete nonchalant, devalues his presence and erodes the courtesy he is supposed to show in such a situation. The mortician is expected, like anyone else, to navigate such a sad occasion, with respect and consideration. Contrary to what is expected of him, he maintains a callous behaviour which reflects a disregard for the grieving family and shows grave indifference to their emotional state and desensitization to death.

Conclusion

Though their contexts differ, both literary works share one principal concern which is traversing difficult emotions subsequent to death and significant losses. Both Shousha and Kawabata are analogous in more things than those superficial differences that divide them. They are united by the same traumatic experience; the same emotional response; supersensitivity to death resulting in uncontrollable and, of course, undesirable emotions, and the same need and determination to traverse the fear and grief that have haunted them and affected their disposition. They are partners in one specific dilemma and have been desperate for achieving emotional control, traversing their fears and grief and mastering their emotional responses. Both have been ashamed of their supersensitivity and childish responses to death and significant losses in their lives and have been determined to conquer their fear and overcome their grief. Most important of all and to everyone's surprise, they have managed to do that; to master their emotions and traverse the well of fear and grief by means of taking one peculiar decision that was beyond imagination; becoming professional mourners. This vocation

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has enabled them to handle death as a profession, not a personal experience, and hence achieve mastery and reach a state of what psychologists call "desensitization" to death. The consequences of their choice are more far-reaching than they have ever imagined. They are both offered the chance to process their grief, heal, accept death as a continuation of life and become desensitized to it. Of primary importance is the fact that they both have undergone the most notable metamorphosis from supersensitive bereaved characters into desensitized professional mourners or funeral masters.

Notes

(I) Unless otherwise noted all quotations from the Arabic novel *The Water Carrier is Dead* are my own translation.

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