

# R.S Thomas' *Death of a Peasant*: An Impetus to Triumph Agrarian Crisis

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**Abstract**—This paper is a reflection on how poetry can augment the agrarian interests of a society. The poem "Death of a Peasant" by R.S Thomas deals with the callous indifference of the society towards the plight of the farmers. Poetry can initiate an awareness of the condition of the farmers. Here is an attempt to discern how the charm and grace of poetry can manifest the triumph of agriculture and safeguard the farmers. An understanding of the hardships faced by the farmers is necessary to understand the hunger of this person who works hard to satiate our hunger. As Rabindranath Tagore envisaged we must evolve a living communication between the university students and the peasants rooted in the soil. The Sensitive experience of the life of a farmer represented in this poem has the capacity to influence a student's attitude and perception. The grim realities of the life and death of a peasant evokes in the reader a critical spirit. The awareness of the consequences of a distressed and oppressed agrarian society has the potential to pave way for constructive discussions and effective solutions. Poetry has the scope and power to intervene in this crucial struggle and advance the cause of the agrarian movement. The fight of the farmer is just not for his survival but for the impassionate and inconsiderate 'others' as well. By focusing attention on the poem "The Death of a Peasant" this paper attempts to analyze how exposure to such poems can be instrumental in resolving the agrarian predicament.

A passionate concern for the peasant is reiterated in the poems of R.S Thomas. The poem "Death of a Peasant" presents a bleak picture of the extreme poverty and miserable life of the peasant. Through his poems the readers get acquainted with the Welsh peasant who is synonymous with struggle and simplicity. The alienation and loneliness that overshadows the life and death of the peasant is narrated in R.S Thomas' poetry. His poetry has the capacity to influence the reader's attitude and perception. The opening lines of the poem Death of a Peasant is like a bolt out of the blue:

You remember Davies? He died, you know,  
With his face to the wall, as the manner is  
Of the poor peasant in his stone croft  
On the Welsh hills. I recall the room

The casual manner in which the death of the peasant is referred to illustrates the callous indifference to the plight of

the agrarian society. This blunt statement is a reflection of the social circumstances of that period. The peasant with his face to the wall conveys the image of a man who had lost his will to live and is withdrawing from life. The shame of his poverty and the guilt of his debts make him avert eye contact. The peasant was leading a very hard life in a limited space, his stone croft. This shows that the peasant was mostly confined to this small enclosed piece of land. The poet also points to the fact that the peasant's house did not have all the necessities required. The minimum income needed for subsistence is the right of this hard working man. Yet his floor did not even have a rug. The right to a dignified existence is guaranteed to each person born in this land. But how far are we as a society successful in transforming these words of our constitution into practice. The failure of the society in this regard affects the innocent farmer like the "smirched snow" on his death bed. The innocent bloom of the agrarian life is smirched with the dirt and disgrace by the passivity of the fellow human beings. The dead peasant is pictured as a lonely ewe that is about to lamb. The loneliness and pathetic feeling of helplessness drives home the misery of the situation.

"Lonely as a ewe that is sick to lamb"

The society has a collective responsibility to find a solution to save the farmer who is trapped in a deadly maze. To erase the pain plaguing the household of the farmers is a moral responsibility as well. Otherwise like the trapped wind tearing the curtain the struggle of the farmer will tear the roof of our society.

I remember also the trapped wind

Tearing the curtains

Awareness is the greatest force behind change. Lack of knowledge and information leads to apathy. This sort of indifference is more dangerous than the tyranny of a ruler. The economy of a country depends on its agricultural sector. A fair insight into the adversities faced by the farmers is necessary to understand the hunger of the person who feeds the world. As Albert Einstein says the world is a dangerous place not

because of those who do evil but because of those who look on and do nothing. Farmers committing suicide is a disgrace to any civilized community. Yet how many of the citizens of this country are aware or pay heed to their grievances. The contemporary attitude towards the farmers is analogous to that of the heartless meaningless words of comfort offered by the neighbours of the peasant in R.S Thomas' poem:

Of neighbours crossing the uneasy boards  
 To peer at Davies with gruff words  
 Of meaningless comfort, before they turned  
 Heartless away from the stale smell  
 Of death in league with those dank walls

There are many other litterateurs that voice the catastrophe of the life of the peasants. The poet Dr. Mary Annie in her poem titled "Farmer" portrays a realistic picture of the unfortunate condition of a farmer's family after he commits suicide. Nothing can take away the pain and heartbreak of the sight of your loved one hanging lifeless on the bough. Even in his death his wide open eyes seems to be worried about the land which is devoid of greenery. The question that should haunt the reader of this poem is why is his land empty? Why is his land devoid of the greenery? Towards the end of the poem "Farmer" the poet Dr. Mary Annie depicts the beginning of hope in the dead farmer's household:

Since no one came any more,  
 in spite of the wait,  
 all promises in vain,  
 she bore the spade,  
 dug the earth, started to sow  
 not as a widow, but as a farmer  
 who begins with ambition and hope.

In the above lines the widow of the dead farmer waited for the promised help from "them" but nobody turned up. The woman gathers courage and starts to dig the earth and sow as a farmer with a lot of ambition and hope. Only time can tell of the sacrifices that the new farmer will have to make. Until unless the policy makers take a more compassionate stand on the issues faced by the Indian farmers their future will still be dangling like the bodies of many a farmer who committed suicide.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, just after independence remarked that "everything can wait, but not agriculture." The green revolution ended the ship to mouth kind of existence. Let's bring in faces and not just the figures into our discussion lest we go back to that era of waiting for a ship to satiate our hunger. Rabindranath Tagore's vision of having a living communication between the university

students and the peasants rooted in the soil is pivotal at this juncture. Students are the harbingers of social change. There should be a purposeful inclusion of poetry that renders space for a discussion of issues like the agrarian crisis. Such discussions will further pave way to a perception which involves a determination to resolve this problem. It is the moral obligation of every university to ensure that tomorrow's policy makers are groomed with the right consciousness of the implications of the policies regarding farmers and agriculture. The policies must focus on making the farmer self-reliant.

Poetry is a strong mechanism to develop prudence in the readers. Through such poems that describe the plight of the farmers the students will have an understanding of the support and strength necessary to rebuild the life of a farmer. An informed discourse will have the power to rescue the farmers from being pawns in the hands of opportunistic politicians. The number of people who are abandoning farming is an alarming matter. How can one who is distant or oblivious or unobservant of the farmer's life conditions can be entrusted with the job of legislating laws and policies that affect the farmer. A certain amount of knowledge and familiarity with the farmer and agriculture is mandatory for all graduates. Experiencing the suffering of the farmers through poetry is a kind of understanding them from a closer angle. This understanding and awareness is more powerful than the quantitative or scientific analyzing. Science deals with the actual facts but literature can influence by reflecting the facts gracefully and sincerely. As the famous poet G. Shankarakurup laments in his poem "Oru Padhikante Pattu" (A Traveller's Song):

You never experienced the sweat and dust  
 of this world.  
 How would you these sad  
 stories of this world.

Changampuzha Krishan Pillai, the legendary Malayalam poet salutes the farmer who works hard under the scorching heat. Changampuzha is overwhelmed with affection towards the farmer and acknowledges the fact that mother earth will never feed us if the farmer chose to sit idle. Art and literature is linked to life.

The social reformer poet Kumaranasan's words "Mattuvinchattangale! Allenkilmattum, athukaleeningalethan!" (Reform, change the rules! Else those very rules will be your downfall!) alerts us that it is high time that the society change its way of handling the issues of the farmers. When they cultivate crops for us we must cultivate a spirit of appreciation and admiration for their toil in the minds of students. The academia should make use of the scope and power of poetry to intervene in this crucial struggle and advance the cause of the agrarian movement. The support and appreciation of the student community has the power to fire up their enthusiasm and keep up their struggle. This will also

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initiate the emergence of a farmer centric conscience. Inclusion of such farmer and agrarian centric poetry and other forms of art in the syllabus can aid the universities in rising to the challenges of social and ethical responsibility. The involvement of literature and art is decisive in the progress of a society. Exposure to poetry can convince the reader that there is a better way of leading this life. The grim realities of a farmer's life can alert the passive minds of the better possibilities to realize their reasonable demands.

#### REFERENCES

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