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GRIEVING THE DEAD: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MOURNING IN A PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Grieving, as a process is very personal and isolating. But, sociologically speaking, even an emotion as personal as grief has social ramifications. In fact, grief as a *social emotion* has a major function of allowing unhindered transition for the bereaved. The mourning process is accomplished with the role of the larger community and their social support, making it a normalised social activity. Every culture has socially-sanctioned methods of grieving, expressed through mourning rituals, durations and procedures involved. COVID-19, however, acquainted us with death in a manner unknown to human society for almost a century. Given the highly contagious nature of the virus, the infected were confined in strictly guarded ICUs and COVID wards. Many patients, who died while still being COVID-19 positive, were seen as potentially contagious. This meant that many of those dead-bodies were not handed over to families, rather disposed in bags with minimum contact possible. That, unfortunately, also meant that the socially sanctioned processes of mourning—observing certain restrictions of behaviour, performing certain rituals—that act as a medium for the living to sever ties with the dead and socially accept the change in their status, were rendered impossible. This echoes the possibility of what Sigmund Freud (1917) had seen as a potential reason of pathology- ‘ambivalence in the relationship with the deceased’. In the light of such sudden anomaly in the system, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of understanding alienation of the dead as well as of the bereaved marked by a certain virus.

Keywords: death, grieving, COVID-19, funeral rites

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1. Introduction

We have all known and experienced loss due to death at some point of our lives. Losing our near and dear ones pushes us into a state of despair that no words can aptly explain. Despite the emotional upheaval, however, we methodically perform the ritualised processes of mourning which may range from shaving one's head, refraining from cooking in one's family hearth, wearing a certain colour of clothing, etc. No matter how difficult it is to witness our loved ones being ceremoniously prepared to be buried or cremated, we participate in the step-by-step execution of the same as 'kin of the deceased'. Our grief does not simply remain personal; rather the expression of it becomes social and symbolic. And more often than not, our participation in the social process of grieving, and in the roles and responsibilities performed is determined by our relationship to the dead person. If we look at it structurally, death is not more personal than social. It is not merely the loss of the ones directly related by kinship to the deceased but is the alteration of an entire community's social composition. And grieving, much like the celebration of birth, marriage or other festivals has sociological relevance associated to the larger idea of the 'collective'.

Mourning, in its multiple forms, can be seen as a socially significant process of deconstructing the relationship of the living with the deceased, allowing them a socially-appropriate manner of adjusting their state of physical separation from the dead as well as aiding in the process of developing a new self-concept (for the grieving) in the light of the changes brought about by an individual's demise. In simple terms, it is a subtle form of acceptance for the bereaved that the cycle of life and death shall continue and so shall their lives with the altered social arrangement. In common parlance, mourning offers a 'closure' reminding the ones still alive about the continuance of life.

COVID-19, however, acquainted us with death in the most horrific and unexpected manner possible in the 21st century. Its multitude and intensity were far beyond our imagination or anticipation despite marvellous advancements in science and technology. Hospitals ran out of beds to accommodate patients; oxygen cylinders were scarce and many people breathed their last without even receiving proper medical attention. The most tragic reality, however, was the isolated nature of deaths for many people who tested positive for COVID inside COVID ICUs and isolation wards. Worse still, given the highly infectious nature of the virus, many

families could not even perform the last rites of these patients. Most of these ‘bodies’ were ‘disposed’ by special COVID volunteers, rarely in the presence of some family member, in Personal Protective Gears amidst the rush of finding a spot in overcrowded cremation and burial grounds. The role of the ‘social’ was relegated to the side-lines and deaths almost represented an individualised tragedy whereby the struggle was not the transition caused by death but access to a ‘resting ground’.

It was not merely a sudden removal of a person from her/his kin group and community; it was an *absolute* separation of the dead from the living. The shift, however, was not a gradual reflection of social change. It was neither expected, nor desired. An external force—the pandemic—coerced an alteration of the regular course of action associated with death. Undoubtedly, such a major social process being altered/tampered is bound to have certain unintended consequences. Although it is too early to try and theorise how communities/societies may have adjusted to the disaster of COVID-19 and its impact on death rituals, it cannot be shunned as insignificant. Studies on the long-term and deeper social implications caused by isolated deaths due to COVID-19 are yet to make themselves known in the academic discipline of sociology. However, with the extensive academic materials on death and dying already emphasising the significance of socially sanctioned mourning, this paper seeks to begin a discussion on how the unusual way of detaching the dead from the living during the pandemic requires greater attention.

Why are rituals important? What happens when a community fails to mourn the death of its member in the manner deemed acceptable? Especially for the ones who share close bonds with the dead, does the sudden separation (with neither personal nor social closure) effect their readjustment to ‘normal’ social life? Can the process of transition for the bereaved be seen as broken or simply altered? Moreover, given the taboo associated with the virus, can the altered form of transition for the living remain unaffected by the altered form of social support (with no physical proximity) or lack of it, altogether?

There are no simple answers to these questions and this paper, by no means, seeks to provide an absolute understanding of any of them. Nevertheless, as a social individual charting through a personal loss caused by COVID-19, the author seeks to locate grief at the intersection of the ‘personal’ and ‘public’ and question the invisible rupture caused by the

pandemic. But before trying to approach these difficult questions, let us begin with an understanding of how death, dying and associated rituals have been explained sociologically.

2. Death, Dying and Social Conventions

Sociological studies on death owe much of their understanding to anthropologists who conducted intensive and detailed observation of death rituals and theorised their significance in the larger continuance of the 'social'. From a structural-functionalist perspective, Radcliffe-Brown highlighted how rituals associated with death are 'collective expressions of feeling appropriate to the situation' (Cohen n.d.: 10). It is an association to the common sentiment, signalling individuals' commitment to the collective as well as to one another. The rituals perform a function: that of affirming 'the social bond' (Radcliffe-Brown 1968: 168).

Further, sociologist Emile Durkheim in his eminent work 'The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life' (1915), writing about the Aruntas of Australia and totemism reflected upon religion as a means of social organisation and symbolising collective identity. A major aspect of studying religion for Durkheim involved discussions of funeral rites amongst the aborigines which can be considered as foundational in developing a sociological study of death. To quote him, 'When someone dies, the group to which he belongs feels itself lessened and, to react against this loss, it assembles. Collective sentiments are renewed which then lead men to seek one another and to assemble together' (Durkheim 1915: 339). Being the founding father of Sociology, Durkheim's notion of the collective sentiment provided an impetus to understand death rituals far beyond their apparent functions.

Following Durkheim's initial contention, other sociologists like Peter Berger (1969), Talcott Parsons (1972) attempted to explain the social meanings associated with death although after Durkheim, sociologists in general ceased to place death in the core of their approach to understand society.

The most significant studies on death rituals, especially funeral rites, were conducted by Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and Robert Hertz (1960). Both Van Gennep and Hertz were students of Durkheim and wrote sociologically intriguing texts on how death and perceptions of death need to be viewed to explain rituals associated with it. Although these texts were translated into English from their original French version long after being written, they,

especially Van Gennep's work, continue to influence sociologists of the 21st century with same rigour.

Rituals of death, for Van Gennep, can be placed on the same plane as the ones performed during other significant periods in an individual's life: birth, social maturity, marriage or anything considered to be socially significant. For him, the life of an individual resembles a process whereby s/he goes through a series of transitions. Each transition is a challenge, a shift even leading to a possible crisis and society creates ceremonial responses to allow an individual the scope to handle these transitions. These are the 'rites of passage'. There is a standard pattern in all the rites of passages, three significant aspects in fact: separation, transition and incorporation. Ceremonies marking every life stage display these three aspects of separation, transition and incorporation, although the emphasis on any specific aspect differs in terms of the nature of transition that is taking place. As Cohen quotes Van Gennep's theory:

Rites of separation are important in death, transition in death, pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation, and incorporation in marriage. Separation means to relinquish a previous social status, a requisite for movement into a new social position in the social structure. To be born is to move from the world of the unborn to the society of the living. To die is to depart the world of the living, and to enter the home of the ancestors. To mourn is to detach as a wife, or husband, to become widow or widower (6)

The shift from one particular point to another is neither abrupt nor immediate, it happens gradually. In between the two stages lies the most contentious position—liminality. Being at the liminal stage renders one's position transitional—a grey space between the ordinary and extraordinary, of confusion between one's previous position and the future. In liminality, an individual experiences transformation, s/he may then shed their older social identity and mould into new personality. This stage of indecisiveness and confusion is brought to an end with the rite of incorporation which marks the completion of transition. Generally, regardless of whether the transition is about welcoming a new-born baby, of attaining social maturity,

marriage or death, the rites of incorporation involve ceremonial meals or even communal feasting whereby unification is symbolised, confirming the transformation. As Van Gennep (1966: 170) stated: ‘All are united to all, so that a complete and profound union is affected among the members of the group’.

Writing specifically about death rituals, Van Gennep (1966) states that the three elements of separation, transition and incorporation have very important symbolic meaning for the dead as well as the living. Unlike the other stages of transition, death marks a unique form of change. In it, the people who form a part of the dead person’s immediate group of mourners are also symbolically seen to form a cohort going through a transition. Obviously, separation brought about by death involves a physical segregation of the dead from the living. The space occupied by a dead person is specifically marked out, the body placed in a certain position, place or even direction. The corpse is clearly distinct from the ones still surviving. But separation does not simply happen for the ones who died. It is also experienced by the ones who mourn the dead. Mourning itself is a process of transition. And interestingly enough, for a brief period of time, the dead and the bereaved are placed in the same social group separate from the rest of the society. While the dead are seen as possibly transitioning into the world of the dead, the mourners are temporarily placed in the liminal stage before allowed to be back in the world of the living. This liminal stage is marked differently by different cultures, of course. In most cases it is marked by restrictions placed on the bereaved, temporarily suspending their social lives as members of a community. The transitional phase provides the mourners a scope to internalise the change caused by death of a loved one. The length of mourning, intensity of taboos placed on their behaviour and quality of social segregation depends on the closeness to the person who died. In our society, generally, the taboos range from three to forty days whereby normal social life is suspended, marking the bereaved as a separate group of individuals unable to carry out their social lives in a way others can. Here, the emphasis on the aspect ‘social life’ is noteworthy. Symbolically, as Van Gennep highlighted, an individual may die many times socially when s/he is in a process of transition, only to be reborn again with new roles and responsibilities (Cohen n.d.: 8). In terms of mourning, the completion of the various stages of grief—beginning with association with the corpse, performing crematory activities, separation from the larger community, changes in food habits, limiting social engagements, to even bodily modification like shaving of one’s

head—have socially significant functions in allowing an individual (or group of individuals) to attain rebirth again as member of a community. The person is no longer the older self and s/he acknowledges that in adopting new responsibilities as an erstwhile bereaved. The best example of this is the way in which widows (and widowers) in many societies adapt to their new roles through extreme changes in diet and lifestyle.

An important element of death rituals is the realization that death brings about both psychological and social changes in the bereaved. It is not enough to recognise that a person has died physically. The ties that s/he has with the community are too strong to be severed immediately with the perishing of the physical body. Acknowledgement of the person's complete removal in flesh-and-blood happens gradually. For Hertz, as Cohen cites, 'death ritual offers a respite, a breathing spell, time for the society and the individual to accommodate to a dramatic change' (n.d.: 9). Even Radcliffe Brown had emphasised the fact that rituals are more or less about the psychological functions they play in aiding individuals deal with the immediate effects of a person's demise. It is true that the social functions of rituals, with an emphasis on bringing back social order after a temporary disruption, have been categorically highlighted by most scholars who have written about funerals and death rites. The role of social conventions in restoring the 'social' cannot be underestimated. But there does exist a subtle indication of how the social is not ignoring the underlying psychological implications that either an individual or the group as a whole may have to deal with. Social readjustment, after all, is not merely a mechanical reorientation of social life. It is about adjustments that are equally emotionally challenging and technically novice. And social conventions associated to death are a reflection of this realisation.

As Hertz wrote: 'When a person dies, the society loses in him much more than a unit; it is stricken in the very principle of its life, in the faith it has in itself' (Hertz 1960: 7 cited in Cohen n.d.: 9). The rituals are nothing but a collective response to the loss of faith it faces. It is, in a way, looking at death straight in its eye and reaffirming itself. It is the will to survive, despite the shock. It marks a refusal to let the death of a physical body blot the continuance of social identity

Funeral rites, as Van Gennep reiterated, act as a passage preparing the bereaved to assume a new social status, marked by new responsibilities. Regeneration is complete when the

bereaved accept their new social personality and share the acknowledgement of the same with the rest of the community. This change is the law of the universe that requires symbolic re-enactment in the form of ceremonial rites. Adding on to Van Gennep's suggestions, anthropologists like Raymond Firth (1960) and Mandelbaum (1959) had also stated the larger socio-psychological necessity of performing funeral rites as a right way of achieving what can be called 'closure'. To cite their writings from Cohen's work:

Firth noted that many funeral rites were associated with "ideas of completeness of sequence in human affairs" analogous to ceremonies of farewell. Here society takes formal notice of the termination of social relations. (Firth, p. 317) Mandelbaum refers to the need to complete "the proper order of a person's career" (Mandelbaum, p. 197). This final stage must be celebrated just as other previous social transitions had been marked during the life of the individual. In a sense, the dead man's family and friends gather in collective reminiscence of earlier moments they had shared with the dead person. They engage in a summation of a man's lifetime, of his character, achievements, successes, less often of his shortcomings and failures. They assert that in death the individual continues to invite the respect and regard of his fellows (Cohen n.d.: 10).

Another important point to be taken into consideration here is that although most anthropological studies on death have been from a functionalist perspective, there are many intriguing ideas posed by the ones challenging the functionalist assumptions. The most prominent one is posed by an expert in classical literature, Holst-Warhaft (2000), who argues that grieving is not only about rejuvenating social order rather it can be such a powerful emotion that social order might be destabilised by its impact. The passion that grief enshrines can lead to political upheavals and revolts that can ultimately bring establishments to their knees. Grief as a social emotion can be equally political as example of Argentina's Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo has historically proven (Walter 2008: 319). Taking the political nature of grief into account, other scholars like Verdery (1999), Merriodale (2000) have also attempted to analyse how grief/mourning can act as political tool or a subtle yet powerful challenge to power, shaping social perceptions regarding history, state and culture (ibid.).

This paper is not intended at approaching the question of death from a political point of view. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight how the sociology of death and dying has come a long way from being an ignored area of research to an emerging area of study. Over the recent years, a significant number of studies have been conducted on grief and the experiences of bereavement (Hockey 1990, Littlewood 1992, Walter 1999, Dawson 2000). Much of the shortcomings in sociology of grief stems from the taboo associated with death, especially in European societies. It can also be observed that studies that had reference to death or funerals were based on non-European societies—the ‘other’. Death in modern, Western notions was still unexplored or ignored. Only recently, particularly after the 1960s, sociology began empirical studies at hospitals focusing at the care of people who were dying (Glaser and Strauss 1965, 1968; Sudnow 1967; Strauss 1970 cited in Nuffield 2004: 112).

Now, since most anthropological studies on funerals are based on simpler, non-modern societies, there are questions regarding their applicability in complex societies. It has also been assumed that as societies get more and more complex, funerals have increasingly started to become de-ritualised. As Cohen noted, scholars like Kimball believe that in modern societies ceremonies have declined and even when they are performed, their nature is much more individualised and private, unlike the ones in traditional societies that emphasise the role of the community (Kimball 1966: xvixvii cited in Cohen n.d.: 11). For others like Wallace, however, the assumed change is not really de-ritualisation but rather a subtle transformation in relation to the sacred. What has really become weaker is superstition and supernaturalism, not particularly rituals. As Cohen cited: ‘...belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out ... as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge and of the realization ... that supernatural belief is not necessary to the effective use of ritual’ (Wallace 1966: 265 cited in Cohen n.d.: 12).

Regardless of whatever transformation the nature of funeral rites may have assumed, it is still an overgeneralisation to deem them insignificant in modern societies. Funeral rites attain symbolic meanings and act as a means of expressing grief, longing and shock caused by the death of a loved one. Death, in itself, causes an unanticipated experience of loss. The funeral ceremony, which is rich in tradition and abounding in symbolism, aids in accepting the reality of death, bears witness to the life of the deceased, encourages the expression of grief in a manner consistent with cultural values, offers support to mourners, permits the acceptance of

faith and beliefs regarding life and death, and provides continuity and hope for the living. Not being able to perform them can be traumatic both at an individual and social level.

3. Unconventional Deaths, Unfulfilled Separation:

Historically, COVID-19 is not the first-time human civilisation experienced unconventional forms of death and severing of ties with the dead. Human history has witnessed deadly viruses spanning back to as early as 541 CE in the form of the Justinian plague, followed by many more like the bubonic plague or Black Death, small pox, etc. Anthropologically speaking, the Spanish influenza in 1918 that killed millions of people across the globe, with greater concentration in various parts of Europe, was the first pandemic to have received attention of social science research. The infamous Pfeiffer's bacillus which was believed to have caused the influenza was so infectious that there were blanket bans on almost all forms of public gatherings, including funerals towards the end of 1918. It was almost impossible for families to arrange burials for their loved ones in the traditional format. As Monica Schoch-Spana (2000) wrote:

At the climax of the Spanish flu pandemic, the numerous and rapid deaths overwhelmed undertakers and gravediggers (many of whom were ill) and exhausted supplies of caskets and burial plots. Corpses remained unburied at home as relatives searched for the virtually unobtainable: a willing mortician, an affordable yet 'decent' coffin, and a prepared grave... Emergency internment measures such as mass graves and families digging graves themselves undermined the prevailing sense of propriety. Bodies stranded at home and coffins accumulating at cemeteries provided powerful symbols of the country's inability to function normally during the fall of 1918 (cited in Davis 2015).

Indeed, it was not merely about the act of burial but the social meanings associated with a 'dignified' funeral. The inability to fulfil the proper social custom, in Schoch-Spana's words, led to a sense of severe disillusionment and adoption of desperate measures by family members of the deceased.

Another major example of humanitarian crisis from the recent times is the outbreak of Ebola virus (2014). In fact, in various parts of West Africa, traces of Ebola are still being found

although it is no longer considered to be an emergency. The figures of death caused by Ebola were extremely high-hitting and out of control. But more than the deaths, the struggle faced by the hardest-hit nations was dealing with the dead bodies. Unlike the Spanish flu or the plague where the dead bodies were at least handled by the families, Ebola's extremely contagious nature was believed to pass on via contact even after a person's death. Hence, burials were mostly done in protected setups and zipped up bags without any form of physical contact with the deceased. The disaster response of managing the dead bodies simply involved mechanical measures of 'disposing' the dead: 'These were developed mainly to deal with large natural disasters that leave many dead at once. What ended up happening is that rescue workers in hazmat gear would come and remove bodies for burial or cremation with little regard for standard burial practices in the region'. *

Traditionally, burial customs in West Africa involve family members of the deceased bidding farewell by washing the dead bodies, kissing them affectionately and symbolically letting them go. These acts, however, were significantly dangerous in terms of contracting the virus. The burial in zipped bags citing safety protocols felt rather unacceptable for the family members of the deceased. The communities could not trust the safe burial practices and in many places, people refused to cooperate with authorities. For them, it was not enough to simply 'dispose' bodies with no sense of ritual farewell or at least an acknowledgement of it. Again, much like the Spanish flu, the disillusionment was not particularly about the method of burial but the lack of a socially-acceptable procedure involving the individuals thereof. The extraordinary situation in which death occurred during either Ebola or Spanish flu was still logically accepted as externally imposed on a community. Deaths under extraordinary situations are not quite unknown—sudden deaths by accidents, etc. fall under the same category. But what happens after death, how the community acknowledges the death or processes the change in its composition through removal of a certain individual plays an important role. The emphasis of 'dignified burial' both in Spanish flu and due to the Ebola virus speaks volumes about the engagement of social emotions with the procedures involved with handling the dead.

* Taken from Simon Davis' article in *Vice* "How Bodies Were Buried During History's Worst Epidemics", on death and disposals during pandemics.

In accordance with the strong sentimental reactions of family members of Ebola victims, the World Health Organization along with other significant bodies like the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), medical anthropologists, religious groups and local NGOs, proposed more ‘socially sensitive’ protocols for burying the dead. As Simon Davis (2015) highlighted, the burial teams (constituting of ten members) were now given clear instructions:

Upon arrival at the house, the burial team supervisor should introduce himself or herself and other team members. A community leader or counsellor should be included in the discussion with the family...are supposed to express condolences for the family's loss, counsel the family about why special steps need to be taken to protect the family, [and] help them to understand the need for safe medical burial...also allow a family member to give any object that should be buried with the body...inform the family of exactly where the body will be taken, and...treat the body with respect.[†]

In case of the COVID-19 pandemic, patients who died while still being COVID-positive were carefully cremated or buried by teams of medical volunteers wearing PPE kits. In the first wave of the pandemic (2020), the burial/cremation was still not seen as a major social problem, although safety protocols were very strictly followed. The second wave of 2021, however, saw a massive surge of death rates making it almost impossible to accommodate dead bodies ceremoniously. Cremation and burial grounds across India saw long queues (sometimes lasting for over hours) to perform last rites. In many parts of the country, especially Delhi, the sight of dead bodies waiting to be methodically cremated by PPE-adorned volunteers, along with a family member equally dressed in PPE gear created the horrific sight of what can be only compared to mass graves. The dead might have belonged to different religious faiths and belief systems but in death they were united by a common factor: isolation. Regardless of whether a particular religious community believed in bathing and washing their dead before the last rites, every ‘diseased’ body was marked out by being

[†] *ibid*

wrapped in protective body bags. While the ones to be cremated simply had logs laid over bags to be burnt, the ones to be buried were laid under the ground with the bags in place. Death did not discriminate between the dead on the basis of religion.[‡]

4. Separation, Isolation and Incorporation: Is Mourning or Grieving Really Important?

This article has reflected upon how grieving and mourning as social emotions play an important role in reinstating order caused by the chaos of death. Van Gennep even beautifully compares death to any other significant life-stage whereby proper expression of emotions aid in smooth transition into change. Change is natural, it is bound to happen and death is no exception to that.

But, for the author, the question that still remains unanswered is—What if grieving itself remains incomplete? Sociologically, it is an easy assumption; possibly an individual or community that does not pass-over from the stage of liminality displays social pathology. That is the reason why social ceremonies have taken into account the probable deviations and attempted to accommodate them in the larger cultural values of a society. Grieving that does not stop after a designated time-period is labelled as ‘unhealthy’ and the person going through such unhealthy attachments is constantly reminded by social conventions to readapt into their community lives. Of course, as social beings, being labelled as ‘deviant’ from the collective conscious is not what anyone would consider desirable.

But, what about the socio-psychological repercussions of forced (or rushed) incorporation? Isn't one of the major social goals of having designated periods and forms of mourning (marking the liminality) an assurance that incorporation occurs as a logical next step? Also, isn't incorporation psychological along with socially symbolic?

In terms of COVID-19 deaths, not having an access to the dead bodies of one's family members or loved ones in a manner that has been traditionally passed down through generations can (and the author believes that it does) interfere not merely with social but psychological patterns and shift into an altered state. Grief, in psychology, is generally

[‡]One particularly disturbing moment for the author was witnessing the plight of a family in her neighbourhood, whereby the bereaved bid farewell to their mother from outside an ambulance. The medical volunteer simply opened the body bag's mouth enough to make her face visible to her family members. The helpless howling, the lack of contact with the dead and isolated grieving of the family members felt traumatic even for a spectator like the author.

explained through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stage model, that was first introduced in her book 'Death and Dying' (1969). The five stages—denial, anger, bargain, depression, acceptance—follow a definite pattern of movement and act as the medium of coming to terms with the change brought about by grief. And much like Freud's stages of psychosexual development, the inability to successfully pass from one stage completely can lead to pathology—unresolved trauma.

Here, we need to emphasise on the subtle overlap and co-existence of two processes—mourning and grieving. These terms are often used interchangeably. But from a psychosocial point of view, they both involve expressions of sorrow at slightly different planes of individual's existence. Mourning is social; as psychologists would term it, mourning is dictated by social conventions- rituals, overt expression of sadness and performance of required behavioural acts after a person's death (Mulemi 2017). Grieving, on the other hand, is more about the personal experience of loss and how an individual personally perceives or approaches it. Mourning is controlled by social sanctions of permissible time-periods while grieving, if not regulated, can last indefinitely. Mourning and grieving are both equally essential as psychosocial methods of adjusting to death. While mourning socially acknowledges change in the composition of a group, grieving through the processes of mourning is important to help an individual construct psychologically viable meanings of loss and impermanence. The extended role of other members of the community is of prime value at this juncture. It is group cohesiveness through the processes of 'social support' that plays an adaptive function of ensuring that beyond the socially conventional forms of dealing with loss (mourning), individuals in grief are reminded simultaneously of their social existence which is imperative for survival despite their personal emotional pain (Averill 1968). The transition in grief might be slow and invisible and it may not even be marked by clear-cut shift in behavioural expressions. Nevertheless, permissible amount of grieving along with permissible limits of mourning are significant in acceptance of altered roles/upheavals/dramatic shifts marked by death of loved ones.

This paper is not really about explaining what unresolved trauma could do, but the author seeks to contend that seeing a loved one being reduced to a mere 'body' begins the psychosocial trauma of isolation. Our social conventions have always made us believe that even after death, we will be acknowledged as a full-social individual whose bonds with the larger

community is severed over a process of mourning. When in death the body is reduced to simply an object to be discarded, a form of disillusionment hinders belief in the social conventions. The isolation, moreover, is not only of the individual who died. The fear of contracting the virus marred social conventions to such an extent that many people were left completely alone to mourn. Even an act like crying that has been social in events like death became significantly individualised.[§] Removal of the body for human communities briefly resembled the animal world whereby the removal itself became the prime concern. But then, the acknowledgement of change caused by death, the period of socially sanctioned mourning, is what marks human society apart from other species; the idea of ‘communal’ expression. Being left to tend to one’s personal loss, even in a highly modern and individualised society, still disrupts the time-tested social ways of ‘coping’ with it. Regardless of how isolated individuals tend to become in the modern world, events like marriage, funerals still reflect the essence and control of the social in our lives. This is reflected in the overbearing presence of caste, clan and other aspects of identity in marriage customs and funeral rites. Similarly, claiming that isolation of the dead and the bereaved by a virus is nothing influential in terms of its psycho-social implications is an oversimplification of the gravity of the situation.

Being stuck in a liminal state can mean different things to different people. For some, never seeing the actual process of preparing their loved ones’ bodies for the ‘final journey’ may mean failure of acknowledging the reality of the death. For another person, the overwhelming sight of body bags being cremated or buried and losing a loved one in that pile of number or statistics could have meant never really completely moving towards the pain of loss. As mentioned earlier, the length of mourning differs in terms of closeness of kinship to the dead. Not having a public acknowledgement through visible physical separation of the dead from the living might not allow a person to rationally experience the *shift* in one’s identity after someone’s death. Also, when public acknowledgement of death hasn’t happened, how could the public declaration of incorporation make sense?

The social expression of grieving cannot entirely be separated from the psychological experience of it. The limitations of (social) mourning directly impacts the ability of an

[§]Developing a ‘sociological imagination’ involves the recognition that the personal is not essentially distinct and unaffected by the larger social/political. Grieving, as already mentioned at the beginning, may seem personal but is actually social. When an individual is suddenly left to believe that his/her grief is merely personal, there is a possibility of experiencing alienation.

individual to (personally) grieve. The boundaries of loss, pain, letting-go and acceptance become very blurry. And if healthy grieving is society's way of enabling timely reintegration into community life for the bereaved, the lack of social acknowledgement of death (through socially sanctioned methods of separation of the dead) paving a way for personal expression of loss jumps a stage of healthy incorporation altogether. Perhaps, in a world marred by three devastating waves of COVID-19, a new analysis of grief marked by an overbearing 'lack of closure' for the living is necessary. Because, as a first-hand witness to such isolation, stigma and confusion, the author believes that the extraordinary loneliness caused by the extraordinary nature of COVID-deaths is not an individual but a social problem waiting to explode.

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