



Death as a Companion: A Critical Re-reading of Kabir in Contemporary Times

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Abstract: This research paper examines Kabir's idea of death through the study of selected Shabda from *The Bijak of Kabir* translated by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh. For Kabir, death is not just a physical event but a spiritual process that includes the annihilation of ego, desire, and false identity. Kabir critiques maya and emphasizes inner transformation as the true meaning of dying through sharp and often disturbing imagery. This study analyzes how Kabir redefines death as a state to be realized while living, where one dedicates one's life to God beyond greed and illusion. Through his poems, Kabir offers a radical perspective of reality that remains deeply relevant to the contemporary world.

Keywords: Kabir, death, spirituality, philosophy, maya, materialism, karma, jiva

About Kabir:

Kabir, also known as Sant Kabir or Kabir Das, was a prominent Indian poet-saint of the fifteenth century. He was born in Kashi (present-day Varanasi) in Uttar Pradesh, India. He was a devout believer of truth and righteousness and emphasized on walking a spiritual path centered on the devotion to God, equality, and universal love. Kabir strongly criticized the falsehood and impermanence of the material world and urged individuals to lead their lives with inner contentment, simplicity, and peace.

About The Bijak of Kabir:

In 1976, Linda Hess collaborated with Sukhdev Singh to translate his edition of compilation of Kabir's works in English. The *Bijak of Kabir* contains almost half of Kabir's poems from Sukhdev Singh's original *Bijak* along with an account of Kabir's life. The text comes with detailed notes that clarify the meanings, significance, and cultural or philosophical backgrounds of specific terms and expressions. They offer a deeper understanding of Kabir's thought and poetic vision.

Death as a Companion:

Linda Hess writes in *The Bijak of Kabir*, "Death is our reliable companion in Kabir." Death emerges as one of the central themes in Kabir's poems. While many philosophers have treated death as a metaphysical concept, Kabir presents it as a spiritual reality that draws us away from



the illusion of the material world. As death is one of the most uncomfortable truths of human life, we often try to ignore or deny it, yet Kabir repeatedly brings our attention back to it. Kabir deliberately weaves the theme of death throughout his poems to awaken his readers to the reality of life, to compel them to act in the present, to question what truly gives life meaning, and to recognize the difference between truth and illusion.

Shabda 14:

Oh Ram! The knot of confusion
won't loosen, so Death
keeps plucking you off.
Monks and yogis give up their pedigrees
but still brag of their lineage.
Knowers and heroes, poets, philanthropists,
people with all sorts of talents
can't break through
this state of mind.
They read hymns, legends and laws
but miss the experience.
How can iron turn to gold without touching the touchstone?
If you don't cross over alive,
how can you cross when you're dead?
Alive, you're not crossing!
Wherever you put your faith,
that's where you'll be at death."
Clever man! Whatever you've done,
wise or foolish, try to understand.
Kabir asks: what can you say about people
who don't see what they're staring at?

In this poem, Kabir speaks about the 'knot of confusion' that binds human beings. He says that people constantly remain trapped in illusion, believing themselves to be superior to others. We take pride in our lineage, achievements, and abilities, and build our identity around them. He



refers to yogis and monks who claim to have renounced worldly possessions, yet continue to take pride in their spiritual lineage and status.

Today we see many self-proclaimed intellectual experts—such as spiritual influencers or social media creators—who claim to possess knowledge or talent who fall into the same trap. Their pride and self-importance create confusion, making them believe they are somehow greater than others.

He further explains that just as metal can only be confirmed as gold when it is tested on a touchstone, similarly, a person's true worth is revealed through the test of life. The way one lives and the choices one makes ultimately lead to the inevitable conclusion of death. Our actions and values define who we truly are when we confront death. Therefore, Kabir urges his listeners to reflect on where they place their faith, how they spend their time, and what they dedicate their efforts to, because death is always present before us, even though we often ignore it. He emphasizes that only by understanding life deeply can one truly understand death.

Shabda 61:

When you die, what do you do with your body?

Once the breath stops
you have to put it away.

There are several ways to deal with spoiled flesh.

Some burn it,
some bury it in the ground.

Hindus prefer cremation,

Turks burial.

But in the end, one way or another,
both have to leave home.

Death spreads the karmic net
like a fisherman snaring fish.

What is a man without Ram?

A dung beetle in the road.

Kabir says, you'll be sorry later
when you go from this house
to that one.



We often mistake life as something that exists merely within our physical bodies, whereas in truth, life resides in our soul and in our karma. As human beings, we constantly find ways to preserve and care for our bodies—whether by consuming nourishing and enjoyable food or by enhancing our appearance with clothes and jewelry. Especially today when the world is obsessed with fitness and appearances, we often strive to look a certain way. We spend both time and money to enhance the beauty of our bodies.

Kabir highlights the futility of the human body. He points out that once the body stops breathing, it loses all its value and purpose. After death, the physical body becomes meaningless and lifeless. He goes on to describe the different ways in which human bodies are disposed of after death. He refers to cremation, as practiced by Hindus, and burial, as practiced by Turks (Muslims), and emphasizes that although the methods may differ, the outcome remains the same—the complete destruction of the body. Through this, he reminds us of the temporary nature of physical existence.

Kabir further states that without God, human existence holds no true meaning. Death, he says, is unavoidable and will eventually claim everyone. Therefore, Kabir urges individuals to remain aware of their karma, as their actions shape their spiritual reality. He encourages people to devote themselves to God and to live with humility, awareness, and righteousness. By accepting death as an unavoidable truth, one can live more consciously and meaningfully. Kabir advises his listeners to walk on the spiritual path, grounding themselves in faith, so that they can transcend illusion and understand the deeper purpose of life and death.

Shabda 72:

You go around

bent! bent! bent!!

Your ten doors are full of hell, you smell

like a fleet of scents,

your cracked eyes don't see the heart,

you haven't an ounce of sense.

Drunk with anger, hunger, sex,

you drown without water.

If you're burnt, the ashes mix with dust;

if you're buried, the maggots eat.



Otherwise you're food for pigs, dogs, crows.

Thus I praise the flesh.

Enchanted madman! You don't see or think ---

death isn't far from you.

Try a thousand ways, but still the body

ends up dust.

The fool doesn't have a thought as he sits in his house of sand.

But without the one Ram, says Kabir,

the cleverest too

are swamped.

Once again, Kabir points out the futility of trying to satisfy the endless demands of the human body. He uses the metaphor of a 'fleet of scents' to describe the body as the 'boat' of human existence—something we decorate, protect, and take pride in. However, he argues that this body is impure and filled with negativity, making it unfit to carry the jiva (life force) safely across the journey of existence. He highlights human weaknesses such as attachments, anger, hunger, and lust, suggesting that these qualities weigh us down and cause us to drown in ego and selfimportance rather than guiding us toward spiritual truth. This concept is especially relevant in today's times, where most people are extremely attached to the idea of instant gratification. We often spend hours on our devices, losing ourselves in the virtual world and drifting away from the reality of the spiritual world.

Once again in this poem, Kabir refers to the processes of cremation and burial to emphasize the body's temporary nature. He vividly describes how the body is reduced to ashes in cremation or consumed by maggots when buried, showing that its fate is ultimately decay and destruction. Addressing the reader as an 'enchanted madman,' he warns that death is inescapable, no matter what one does. He criticizes those who chase luxuries and material comforts, forgetting their impermanence. According to Kabir, such people fail to realize that only devotion to God and righteous karma endure beyond death. Without faith in God, even the most intelligent person will eventually reach a limit and be left without true refuge or meaning.

Shabda 73:

Puff, puff, puff! Why do you strut?



Have you forgotten how you lay
ten months with your face down?
As the bee circles honey, you buzz
around your money.
When you will die they will cart you away---
nobody likes to keep ghosts around.
A man's wife stays with him to the door,
his friends go a few steps more.
At the corpse-ground there's only
the stretcher. After that, swan,
you're on your own.
Burned, you'll turn to ashes.
Buried, you'll be clay.
Like a raw pot filled with water
your great body
caves in.
Not revelling in Ram, drunk
with delusion, you sink
in time's well.
Kabir says, man, you've trapped yourself
like a parrot on a pole.

In this poem, Kabir reflects on human pride in material possessions and questions the source of such ego. He criticizes man's constant pursuit of wealth and worldly success, suggesting that people focus on material gain instead of cultivating spiritual awareness and righteous karma. Through this, Kabir offers a reality check, reminding his listeners that money and possessions lose all value in the face of death. He urges people to recognize the temporary nature of material wealth and to understand that true worth lies beyond physical and worldly accumulation. Kabir illustrates this idea by referring to after-death rituals, where social customs limit how far loved ones can accompany the deceased. He explains that a wife can only accompany her husband until the door (as females were not allowed to be part of funerals), and friends and family can go only as far as the cremation or burial ground. Beyond that point, the



journey must be faced alone. Through this imagery, Kabir emphasizes that the relationships and possessions people take pride in cannot ultimately protect or accompany them in death. He warns that those who remain trapped in pride and delusion, without following the path of righteous karma, will fail to attain anything lasting or meaningful. Comparing such a person to a 'parrot on a pole,' he suggests they remain trapped in illusion/ maya, unaware that death—the inevitable hunter—can strike at any moment, regardless of wealth or status. This is a sharp reminder to everyone in today's time. We often call our world a competitive world, where running after money and success is glorified. It can especially be seen in the social media culture where one's identity is shaped by one's wealth and appearance.

Shabda 99:

Where are you going alone, my friend?

You don't get up, or fuss
about your house.

The body fed on sweets, milk and butter,
the form you adorned
has been tossed out.

The head where you carefully
tied the turban,
that jewel,
the crows are tearing open.

Your stiff bones burn
like a pile of wood,
your hair like a bunch of grass.

No friend comes along, and where
are the elephants you had tied?

You can't taste Maya's juice,
a cat called Death has pounced inside.

Even now you lounge in
as Yama's club falls on your head.



It is human nature to develop attachment to the things we own, beginning with our own bodies, which we nourish with rich food and adorn with fine clothes and jewelry. Kabir points out the futility of this attachment by stating that the very body ‘fed on sweets, milk and butter’ is eventually discarded after death. He uses disturbing and vivid imagery of the body being torn apart by crows and reduced to bones and ashes in fire to shake the reader and create detachment from maya. Maya, as Kabir suggests, is the veil of ignorance that blinds us to truth and binds us to the material world, making us falsely believe in the permanence and importance of the physical world.

Today, the nature of maya or attachments is slightly different. We are deeply attached to our image. In fact in today’s world, where forming a ‘false image’ is so easy with the help of AI, we often fail to distinguish between reality and delusion. People often strive to build a certain online image. A large number of social media followers has become a source of pride for many. Kabir explains that the path of death must be walked alone. No human relationship, no possession, and not even the body itself can accompany a person beyond death. Everything that one values and takes pride in must ultimately be left behind. Through this reminder, Kabir emphasizes the temporary nature of worldly attachments and the illusion of security they provide. By repeatedly stressing the nearness and certainty of death, he creates a sense of urgency, urging individuals to examine their lives, detach from illusion, and walk on the path of spiritual awareness and righteous karma before it is too late.

Conclusion:

Through these poems, Kabir exposes the ways in which human beings comfort themselves through temporary attachments such as wealth, beauty, and relationships. He repeatedly reminds us that when death arrives, all worldly possessions and connections must be left behind. By emphasizing the certainty of death, Kabir urges his listeners to reflect on what is truly meaningful and to avoid wasting their lives in the pursuit of things that hold no lasting value. Although people are aware of death as the ultimate truth, they continue to ignore or deny it, choosing instead to remain absorbed in illusion. In this context, Linda Hess observes in *The Bijak of Kabir*, “There is a line in the Mahabharata to the effect that, while seeing people dying on all sides and knowing that death is inevitable, everyone manages to believe that he will be the miraculous exception. The fear of death is at the root of our delusion.” (Hess and Singh



31). Kabir confronts this delusion directly by forcing his readers to acknowledge the reality of death. His use of disturbing imagery, such as bodies burning or being consumed by maggots and crows, serves as a rude awakening, compelling individuals to detach from illusion and face the truth. As Hess explains, "...by denying death we also deny life. Death gives our life its urgency, makes us honest." (Hess and Singh 29). By reminding us of death, Kabir creates a sense of urgency that encourages people to resolve their confusion, act with awareness, and live truthfully.

By forcing us to confront death directly, Kabir makes us acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that life is temporary and death can arrive at any moment. Kabir urges us to act consciously in the present, to reflect on our actions and priorities, and to pursue what is truly meaningful before the opportunity to do so is lost forever. By speaking about death, Kabir ultimately emphasizes the value of life. His reminders of mortality are not meant to create fear, but to awaken awareness and encourage conscious living. Kabir's teachings highlight that life is precious and limited, yet many people fail to live it meaningfully. Instead, they spend their lives chasing worldly approval, rarely questioning the true purpose of their existence. Kabir reminds us that death is always near, and that delaying spiritual awareness may lead to regret. He encourages individuals to live consciously, to recognize truth amidst illusion, and to distinguish between what is temporary and what is eternal. Ultimately, Kabir teaches that by accepting the reality of death, one can truly understand the value of life and focus on the pursuit of God and ultimate truth. Life can be difficult and confusing and hence Kabir's words work like a handbook to a tricky puzzle. Especially today, when we are too consumed in chasing luxuries and escaping into virtual reality we often forget to pause and reflect on our own life. Kabir's constant reminders about death are a reality check for the contemporary world, urging us to step back, reflect, and recognize what truly matters.

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