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Choose a **few poems** in English or in English translation which, **in your view**, reflect upon the **present day situation in the world**. Some suggestions are: Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach", W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming", Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et decorum est", T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", W.H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles", poems of Allama Iqbal, N.M. Rashid, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Pablo Neruda, Mahmoud Darwish, or any other poet you may consider relevant.

With reference to these poems, write an essay of about 1500 words that **reflects on the relevance and value of poetry in the present time**, while highlighting the **literary techniques used by the poets to create the picture of the world**.

Deadline: May 30, 2024 (Thursday) 11:55 PM

The world today is an expanse of situations and circumstances of significant magnitude and importance. Wars, calamities, global social movements, cries that plead to our humanity, all such matters which we remark "really matter". But my world, the situations in the present day to which I am limited to, are not full of these wars and larger-than-life matters. Naively, it may seem, the world that I see contains, not collective struggles of the human race against a common enemy, towards a common goal. Rather, the world that I see is a collection of frames, each picturing the individual struggles of human beings around me: the wars waged silently, the cries hushed by their own minds, the matters dismissed as those that "don't really matter".

I have suffered from clinical depression for the past two years. It should not come as a surprise that, with that in mind, the world I see is painted in blues and the genre of poetry I gravitate towards, is the one that paints it the same color. Sadness is a theme extensively explored in poetry. In fact, gloominess seems to be an essential trait attributed to both poets and poetry-enthusiasts in the modern day. With such vast literature on it present historically, it is not difficult to connect it to the world today. The tendency of human beings to feel sad and experience sadness is not bound by time or place. A most primal feeling, it has been felt throughout the ages and will continue to be, not making it unique to the present day situation in the world. But the reason why I still believe that melancholic poetry is relevant to the world today, is because of the unique manifestation of sadness that I see has now evolved in humans.

Generally, we link sadness to the loss of something or someone, the unfulfillment of a desire or a quest, the lack of a thing or ability to begin with, the dissatisfaction from the pursuit and acquiring of something inferior to make up for the vacancy of something superior and so on. All of these definitions of sadness fall under the notion of what a person really needs and wants is "missing". In these situations, even depression is justified. Losing a loved one to advanced stage cancer diagnosed only two months ago, slaving away in an office for years for a job that pays well instead of pursuing a career in painting that you are passionate about, taking extravagant vacations and collecting luxurious cars in an attempt to fill the void left by the lack of friends and family to share these things with, having no spiritual connection with God or a higher entity and constricting your entire meaning of being only to this life and the

few years we have living here; all of these constitute as socially-accepted, legitimate reasons of mourning.

But what of the un-understandable reasons? The situations in which, for no good reason, one can ever be expected to feel sad. Someone who is thriving in every materialistic, worldly aspect of life, as well as the immaterial, spiritual, other-worldly aspects of life. Someone who is at the pinnacle of their academics, is already in the process of beginning their career at the best firm in the field that they love, is spiritually content with their relationship with God, is surrounded by friends and family, has acquired the person they love, does not look for happiness in the hoarding of worldly goods, and has nothing missing, lost, or unfulfilling in their life publicly or privately. Someone who is showered with happiness in every aspect. And yet, continues to feel utterly and completely sad. These inexplicable manifestations of melancholy, the ones that transcend the traditional definitions of the word and experience, are the ones that I see in the world today.

I characterize this as the melancholic nature of happy things. A complicated, complex feeling that evades the outsider's understanding, but is distinct to, what I feel, most people in the world today. A difficult concept to explain in words (as is apparent in the last five paragraphs) it was unusual for me to discover that, despite its incredible uniqueness, it has been expressed in poetry as well, in a way that could never be expressed in other forms of literature.

The first poet that comes to mind who has explored this gloominess of happy things is Sylvia Plath. Her poem "*Tulips*"¹ is one that captures the inadvertent effect of bringing someone flowers. Typically considered a kind and thoughtful gesture by the one receiving this gift, Plath expresses her unusual feelings of anger and disgust towards these universal symbols of beauty. This isn't the only 'confusing' object-to-feeling phenomenon that Plath explores in her poem. She also likens her condition of being in a hospital bed and treated as a nameless, lifeless object, to a feeling of peacefulness, calmness, purity and freedom - usually unexpected of the situation. There is none like her in crafting extraordinary similes and metaphors from inanimate objects to create vivid portraits of real and crude human emotions, for example her helplessness at being forced to take in her surroundings "*like an eye between two white lids that will not shut*", or her heart as a "*bowl of red blooms*", or as health as a water from a warm sea from a country far away. With the tulips, she likens them to loud noise and dangerous animals and in expressing how they upset her, describes how they hurt her, discreetly, like the breathing of an awful baby. Plath's words are seen, touched, heard, tasted, smelled and felt in every way possible. In the verse "*The vivid tulips eat my oxygen*", the personification of the tulips at inconveniencing her very ability to stay alive is again a most creative and intense expression of feelings, that is starkly different from a typical individual in a similar situation. In my opinion, however, the most striking verse in the entire poem is this,

*"My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks."*

where the paradoxical nature of love being at once a source of strength but also a tether that forces a person in pain to continue struggling in pain if only to be there for their loved ones, is expressed in powerful imagery. In the midst of this agitation and unsettling situation, what should ease the pain, seems to only upset things more. This cruel irony, with all its elements

¹ Plath, Sylvia. "Tulips." Poetry Foundation. Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49013/tulips-56d22ab68fdd0>.

of internal conflict and the strong intensity of each emotion against each seemingly unimportant but significant object in this scenario, has been captured through Plath's irrepressible, raw and brilliant hand.

While describing what feels indescribable is common to this state of feeling nothingness even after having the most fulfilling experiences, people today are at least able to describe what something does *not* feel like. Poetry, with its depth and profundity, is a unique medium that is able to capture this expression under the umbrella of 'apophasis'. Apophasis, I discovered, means the speaking of something to stay away from it, and is used to categorize poetic expressions for things that are lost for words by describing them as not the things which we can explain with an abundance of words. An example of a well-known poem that falls under this category is Emily Dickinson's "*It was not Death, for I stood up*"². Here she explores an unnamed feeling of despair, helplessness and hopelessness unlike death or the gloominess of night, a cold, fierce harshness or a hot scorching pain; rather, she calls it none of these but some unusual combination of what *felt* like all these, and more. The lyrical nature of Dickinson's poem is characteristic of her works, and in the delicateness that it brings to her verses, she uses simple words to spin out the complex nature of unknown sadness as the sudden stillness of time and motion, and the halting of the Earth's own lively heart at the touch of autumn in her second last stanza.

The isolation and loneliness that comes with harboring such atypical feelings, and the inability to be understood by others around them is not surprising today as well. This lonely state of mind has been explored widely in literature, in the context of themes ranging from existential dread, trauma, sexuality, betrayal, romantic despair etc to a variety of others. A personal favorite of mine is Edgar Allen Poe's "*Alone*"³ which, in a solemn recounting of his childhood, describes how he always felt different from others and how the solitude that sprang from this, ached in his heart. The use of anaphora and the repetition of phrases like "As others" and "My" emphasizes the starkness between himself and the people around him, and the alliteration throughout the poem's verses intensifies the descriptions of the darkness of his mood, while creating a somber yet musical effect to his words. In particular, in relation to our theme of inexplicable sadness in moments of happiness, the verses that resonate most closely with it, he perfectly describes the cursed paradox of this state of being as:

*"As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken"*

However, most times, like most human feelings, the sadness during pleasant times comes as a mysterious and incomprehensible feeling, and in fact something that we often classify as not a feeling at all, but rather an inability to comprehend feelings at all; a state of loss of the grip on reality. Most people today will testify to dismissing their instincts of sadness and gloominess because it does not make sense for them to feel that way, and the reason for them feeling that way despite that as an indication of some underlying cause, that they are not able to understand. The confusion and proceeding mental paralysis that comes with introspection and the helpless attempts to make sense out of our own minds and conditions, the feeling of

² Dickinson, Emily. "It was not Death, for I stood up, (355)." Poetry Foundation. Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44085/it-was-not-death-for-i-stood-up-355>

³ Allan Poe, Edgar. "Alone." Poetry Foundation. Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46477/alone-56d2265f2667d>

being trapped within ourselves experiencing thoughts we do not fully understand ourselves, is a most difficult experience. And one that I see accompanies people all around me today.

Yet, it is in poetry, that poets are able to take our hands and walk us through these labyrinthine thoughts with their words. Another work of Dickinson's, "*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*"⁴ is one such example where uses multiple metaphors to narrate an introspective perspective into her grappling with the irrationality of her mind as it at once tries to make sense but also repeatedly get overwhelmed and numbed by her attempts to do so. Dickinson's unique use of metaphors heightens the occurrence of simple moments into significant events, for example "*And then a Plank in Reason, broke,*" accentuating the eeriness of the mysterious symbols, characteristic to the cryptic symbols in every person's own mind, as well as Dickinson's own writing.

While poetry is filled with countless examples of raw, real and skillfully explained descriptions of this complicated form of sadness, perhaps the quintessence of poetry is that it is the only medium that conveys a resolution to this feeling in a way that is understandable to the victims of this feeling. It is not uncommon for help to be available, but it is uncommon for help to really *help* today. Poetry communicates to us in a language that is universal and timeless. Instead of clear directive truths, it is unique in its way of enticing the mind into discovering these itself. In the same way, poetry also consoles us, comforts us and motivates us to find resolutions to the conflicts within ourselves. With the overstimulated and impersonalized lifestyle around us, it is increasingly difficult to make connections with anything, let alone be influenced, in a deeper, more profound sense by it. Unlike any other form of healing, poetry uses words to speak to us in a language that appeals to the basis of our nature, our feelings and our souls. The impact that a poetic verse has, even with its vagueness and indistinct analogies, is unlike any other impact a person today experiences.

John Keats' "*Ode on Melancholy*"⁵ is a poem I come back to again and again in times of sadness. In beautiful verses that portray the torturous nature of melancholy, Keats explores the different extents to which a person who is sad may try to lessen his sorrows and why he must not be so quick to resort to these measures. Through the allusions to Lethe, the river one drinks from to forget their sorrows, and the queen of the underworld, Persephone's poisonous grapes from which one kills himself to be rid of their pain, Keats empathizes with the intensity with which tragedy and grief can take root in a person. He personifies a fit of melancholy as "*Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud*" but likens this great event to something as fleeting as the blooming of a flower, and therefore temporary. With the image of an upset lover, whose hand one should hold and let them unburden themselves, Keats advises us to embrace this feeling too with patience and befriending. Perhaps the magnum opus of the entire poem condenses into its last stanza, where melancholy and sadness are presented as entities that co-exist with Joy, Pleasure, Beauty and Delight. And using that same analogy of these inherently ephemeral things that will be lost with time despite their great goodness, so will their sorrow.

By leveraging nature, rhyme and rhythm, symbolism and vivid imagery, Keats imparts an understanding of human nature and the universality of sorrow like no other. This poem not only recognizes and empathizes with the victims of the many kinds of melancholy, but also persuades them to take measures to alleviate themselves of it while embracing it. No physical

⁴ Dickinson, Emily. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain, (340)." Poetry Foundation. Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45706/i-felt-a-funeral-in-my-brain-340>

⁵ Keats, John. "Ode on Melancholy." Poetry Foundation. Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44478/ode-on-melancholy>

feat could accomplish the intensity with which this poem recognizes, personalizes, and resolves this theme like it has. And in my view, this poem is a masterpiece by both literary and philosophical standards, and truly an ode for all humans, especially individuals in the world today.

The astounding ability of poets to express the inexpressible transcends the list of poets mentioned in this essay. Poetry gives a voice to feelings that are difficult to put into words, for people for whom it has been made difficult to have a voice. It captures the nuances of suppressed, inexplicable, untraditional sadness that often goes unnoticed in the world. In my view, these intricacies of modern-age melancholic experiences that have been hidden too well and too deeply in the works and ways of our lives for too long, are like fossils that are carefully extracted by poets and preserved in their verses. The melancholic nature of happy things, these subtle hues of gloominess that taint incandescent moments, are a phenomenon so unique and complicated and complex to explain, but so simple and familiar and 'human' to experience that poetry truly is the only medium that, in my view, can ever even come close to truly putting it into expression. This is why, at least for bleeding hearts and silenced souls, poetry is a lifeline that they cannot let go of in the present world.

To conclude my essay, let me reinforce that delight and melancholy and their intertwining will continue to evolve and manifest in multiple ways as long as humanity persists, but if there is one avenue that we can always rely on to reflect the complexities of this relationship, it is in poetry and its eternal works:

*qaid-e-hayāt o band-e-gham asl meñ donoñ ek haiñ
maut se pahle aadmī gham se najāt paa.e kyuuñ ⁶*

*(prison of life and sorrow's chains in truth are just the same
then relief from pain, ere death, why should man obtain)*

∞

⁶ Mirza Ghalib, "Qaid-e-Hayaat o Band-e-Gam Asl Men Donon Ek Hain," Source: <https://www.rekhta.org/couplets/qaid-e-hayaat-o-band-e-gam-asl-men-donon-ek-hain-mirza-ghalib-couplets>.