Chapter 5

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Death has always been prominent as one of the main facets that comprise human self-understanding. The way that we think of ourselves as human has always been defined by the limits set by death. Responses to those limits may have changed over time, but the need to respond has always been a part of human history (Carr, 1999: 3).

Death is something that stands before us something impending. Death is a possibility – of – being which *Dasein* itself has to take over in every case. With death, *Dasein* stands before itself in its own most potentiality–for–Being. Its death itself is the possibility of no – longer Being–able–to–be–there (Carr, 1999: 147). Thrownness into death reveals itself to *Dasein* in a more primordial and impressive manner in that state–of–mind which we called “anxiety”.

It has been suggested that death is the ultimate philosophical topic, ultimate not just in the trivial sense of “last” (as in “the end of our lives”) but also in the sense that death, along with serious suffering, provokes even the most practical person to philosophical reflection (Solomon, 1999: 145).
Therefore, according to Heidegger, there is a sort of undercurrent of "anxiety", to all of life because of death. Deep down, we all know intuitively that life will not go on forever. And this creates anxiety, or a kind of death-saturated experience of the present. The mostly unconscious awareness tends to be expressed in a variety of unhealthy ways – stress-related illness, for example, or anger and depression at the realization that one is getting older. But once we realize that death is an event that is not to be "outstripped" (i.e. that death is inescapable) and accept that death is non-rational (i.e. we all die alone), we are able to take the limited nature of life as a unique challenge. The inevitability of death, says Heidegger, is like a wake-up call to us to develop a sense of meaning and value that is unique to us as individuals. For this reason, Heidegger calls death our "own most possibility-for-Being". (Carr, 1999: 145) He, together with Max Scheler is of the opinion that the awareness of death is an immanent, a prior structure of human consciousness (Borchert, 2006: 651).

In cultural practice we are very curious about what the condition of death is like. Myths, stories, beliefs about what happens after life ends abound in number and variety: tremendous contradictions characterize western belief about death, even in the same times and places. They include that death is the opposite of life; death is an end; death is a beginning; death is simply a change; the dead "pass away" from us; the dead walk among us; we will all die; we need to die (Harris, 1996: 1).
It is instructive that the legal distinction between ‘alive’ and ‘death’ is about rights-of-care, ownership, ‘personhood’: when one is dead, one no longer has any but residual rights: legally and medically, once a person is dead, they have ceased to exist. Death, now, is defined as the moment when a person ceases not only to be, but ceases to be a person (Harris, 1996: 2). Therefore, existence is the sum of being cogito ergo sum. Being is the stumbling block, because death is the sum of not being. If all consciousness is being, death is not conscious (Harris, 1996: 1).

According to Heidegger, if our birth is the event that forces the issue of our becoming a nature adult, a Dasein, in an already meaning-saturated world, then it is that other ‘event; death, that brings this issue to a climax. He contends, in agreement with other existentialists, that death is the most important “moment” in our lives. Death is what gives life its ultimacy, its passion, its desire to search for personally appropriate meaning (Carr, 1999: 145).

Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, like most existentialists, urge us to cultivate the awareness of death chiefly as a means of heightening our sense of life. The knowledge of death gives to life a sense of urgency that it would otherwise lack (Borchert, 2006: 653). Heidegger makes the additional claim, although here Sartre parted company with him, that the awareness of death confers upon man a sense of his own individuality. Dying, he says, is the one thing no one can do for you; each of us must
die alone. To shut out the consciousness of death is, therefore, to refuse one's individuality and to live inauthentically (Borchert, 2006: 653)

It is a truly conscious thing that phenomenologist, among others, place so much emphasis on death, particularly given the problem of experiencing being 'dead', if death is also the opposite of 'Being'. But 'dead' is a thing, and perhaps also a condition. We exclude death from existence because it appears to fail the test of consciousness: certainly, any consciousness it might have is not meaningfully conveyed. Scholars (ranging from Heidegger and Freud to contemporary thanatologists and religious theorists) typically deal with the problem of experience by broadening the experience of death beyond that of "Being dead": death is also the experience of dying, and experience of the death of others. It can also be the anticipation, awareness, and anxiety of one's own impending death (Harris, 1996: 1).

Phenomenological approaches to death share a variety of attributes. The focus of a phenomenological enquiry – experience – can address very well the chief religion, ethics, science and belief. Phenomenology purports to address the subjectivity and inter-subjective of experience (one's own and other's), and while Phenomenology does not, as a rule, consider experience that contradicts known facts, it is an approach that should sensitive to the vagaries of theory (Harris, 1996: 3).

Harris (1996) argues that a Phenomenology of death should consider the possibility of some kind of experience in light of these
representations, and should not privilege unduly those experiences that can be articulated or established by the usual ruler of evidence. The Phenomenology of death is different from other phenomenological enquiries: the subject is one which cannot be approached through conventional ontological representations. Death, in the absence of direct and communicable experience and death beyond the realm of the human is represented as if it were human experience. Our experiences of the deaths of others form an important part of our representations of death: this is clear from the literature that takes its assumptions from our observations of the deaths of others they stop ‘being’ responsive and lose their biologically ‘human’ form (Harris, 1996: 5).

In Being and Time (1962), Heidegger commences with the understanding that an opposition of ‘being’ and ‘death’ is necessary to the study of either. Dasein (being – there) is the essential condition for any authentic experience. There are two fundamental tenets of Heidegger’s Phenomenology of death:

(i) Death is seen as a limit (the fulfillment and simultaneous elimination of Dasein), and

(ii) We are “Beings – toward – death”. Heidegger used the concept of the limits of Dasein to approach (and limit) existence itself: Being – toward – death (but not being dead), and must adhere to strict rules about how the experience of others are used (Harris, 1996: 4)
A Phenomenology of death may arguably incorporate non-direct experiences, as long as they inhere in the experience itself. Certainly, it is impossible to entirely separate an experience from the layers of its innate meaning or interpretation of death (becoming or being) somewhat unique: such a fundamental part of our understandings of death (as an abstract or personal concept) is necessarily derived from pre-existing, and proxy, interpretation and experiences, because of the apparent impossibility conveying an experience of "being dead". Representations of “Being dead” recur in our culture; they are an important component in a phenomenological enquiry, which is enlightened by an understanding of how we represent proxy experiences when direct experiences are impossible (Harris; 1996: 6).

Death due to AIDS has become a very frequent phenomenon now. The introduction of ART (Antiretroviral Therapy) may control the opportunistic diseases up to some extent but the fear of death still exists and cannot be erased altogether. The detection of HIV still confirms a certain death sentence in spite of the availability of ART. A slight change in their physical health paves ways for doubt and fear. Today, AIDS has become the number one killer of young people in Manipur. 92 percent of the HIV positives in Manipur are young people below 40 years of age (Lisam, 2004: 3). AIDS has become a common household name in Manipur. The young people got infected and later died of AIDS. Most of their wives and children also become infected. Most of the women and children are dying and some have already died.
And most of these women are left to look after themselves and their children without any source of income. They are mostly left at the mercy of their relatives. Most of the women who remained at their in-laws' house had to bear the brunt of their negligence and hatred. And those who returned at their parental house were also equally suffering the burden of guilt and shame (the feeling of being a burden to their families always prick their conscience and bruise their self respect). It needs to be realized that according to MACS (Manipur AIDS Control Society) report, out of 4363 AIDS cases, 1175 are females and out of 625 deaths due to AIDS, 122 are females (1986 till March 2009). Most of the existing interventions in Manipur have focused on IDUs (intravenous drug users), with inadequate focus on services for women who are infected/ affected/ afflicted with HIV/AIDS.

In spite of the various measures for prevention and also care for people with HIV/AIDS, the atmosphere is shrouded with certain amount of fear and doubt. The fear experienced was found to be manifold as the stories unfold.

5.1. Fear

Everyone will die. Death is one thing which a person cannot escape or skip off. It is one bitter reality which a person is forced to accept. So long as death is taken as a natural rite or a far reality, it is bearable. But there is a community of people whose life is a collection of constant moments of fear. These are those people with HIV/AIDS. Death
is considered as the synonym with HIV/AIDS. The moment a person is detected to be HIV positive, the thought that comes to his mind is death. But unlike other chronic illnesses, AIDS has many baggage attached to it. It is not only the biological death of their physical body that they were scared of. They die a social death too. The latter death is what makes them die every moment of their lives. Looking at death as an event, as a moment, as merely “the end” belies the place of death in a life. Death is bound up with dying and being dead, which in turn are comprehensible only in terms of life and living of it. Death is seen as ending the aspirations, plans, and hopes that make up a life, whether these are grand or global, like Alexander’s ambition to control the world, or modest and limited to the living room sofa.

To understand death is to understand each and every death as the frustration of such desires, particular to the person, the family, the community and the culture. The idea of death as putting an end to life’s plan and projects should not be interpreted a simply self-interested as referring to my projects. Many of my plans and projects essentially involve other people, not just their connection with me, or their opinions of me or their affections for me but also their own plans and projects and, in general well-being (Solomon, 1999: 167). But perhaps the most human of our fears about death are our worries about other people. Our primary and most easily justified concerns about death involve our roles in families, in communities, in organizations, in projects, in groups, in causes where other people have come to depend on us. We also worry
about the adequacy of our lives, how our stories will be told when the narratives are completely out of our hands.

So, the key word that associates with death is 'fear'. There is constant fear in their psyche.

5.1.1. Fear of Death

Death terrorizes us, not because we take it as painful, but because we are unwilling to lose consciousness permanently (Borchert, 2006: 652). But death in general is accepted as something inevitable, something as the phase of the journey of life, even though it is the final phase. People may not turn out to be so sensitive about the subject because it is not a new thing. When it comes to death, we do not have choice. This makes it more acceptable. And it is very easy to discuss about death so long it is the death of others or death in general.

So, when talking generally on the topic of death, many of these women with AIDS shared their views indifferently. One such person was a 37-year-old Meitei widow, who said,

Death is a funny thing. It is not guaranteed that only the sickly ones die. The healthy ones are also most likely to die... maybe from accidents or others. I don't take it seriously.

She had seen death through her husband who died on her lap. He died after suffering much. After his death, she also became ill and was on the verge of death herself but she fought her way back to life. This survival of hers made her strong and indifferent, she said. She had
also seen many neighbours of hers who died without any illness. So she found the timing of a person's death very uncertain. And therefore, took death as a 'funny thing'.

People usually show a brave face so long as death remains a far-away reality. So, this 33-year-old Kuki woman shared a similar view as the above case. She said, "Everyone will die even the healthy people also die. I know that I'll die one day". She knew that she would die one day but according to her, it was not something which was new to anybody because everyone was born to die one day. What would happen to her (i.e. death) had happened to many people and also will happen to may people in the future. So, when death is taken in that perspective, there is nothing to be afraid of.

As long as they belonged to this category of the 'general' people, death was bearable. It was accepted as a phase of the whole journey of life. Therefore, this comment of a Mulsim woman, 33 years of age.

Death is sure for everyone. I'm not scared of death.

A 45-year-old Kuki woman added,

Human beings... we have to die one day. It occurs to me sometimes when I lay down to sleep, that we all are born to die. It is compulsory for everyone. There have been many people who have died before me, not out of this disease though. Some died in their sleep, and others... youngster, fathers, mothers, many rich people also die. Even my friends have passed away. Death is for everyone. There is nothing to be afraid of.
Regarding death, there are two distinct questions – what is death? Or, rather, what is my death to me? These two questions are concerning one’s own death and another concerning the death of others. Concerning other misfortunes in life – pain and poverty for instance – one can appeal (still problematically) to that often confused notion of empathy that is “putting oneself in other’s place”. One can imagine oneself with a similar injury, perhaps comparable with one suffered years ago. One can imagine, perhaps with some difficulty, what it would be like not to be able to afford medicine, decent food, a car, books, computer. But when the issue is death, it is not at all clear what this could possibly mean, “What would it be like to be dead?” Death is acceptable because it is reserved for everyone and is everybody’s destiny. But what happens when it comes to one’s own death? This is discussed in the next section as follows.

5.1.2. Fear of Being Dead

Men die. This happens everyday in the world. Death is a public event in the world, of which we take notices in obituaries; we pay the necessary social obsequies and are sometimes deeply touched emotionally. But so long as death remains a fact outside ourselves, we have not yet passed from the proposition “Men die” to the proposition “I am to die”. (Barret, 1961: 200)

Man can surmount all other heartbreaks, even the death of those he loves, but his own death puts an end to him. Hence, death is the
most personal and intimate of possibilities, since it is what I must suffer for myself; nobody else can die for me (Barret, 1961: 200. Elsewhere in the world, and throughout most of human history, death has been hard to deny, but the denial of death has been an unavoidable temptation (Solomon, 1999: 151). To deny death would be to mean to refuse to believe that "it" will happen to you. In its most mundane but pervasive strategy, to deny death is to focus on the hurly-burly of the everyday world and not ever look up to the horizon, to one's own mortal limit.

When inquired about one's death, those brave faces crumbled down into anxiety and fear, the smiles faded on being reminded of their 'destiny'. Death is very subjective. No one can die for others. This is one thing which we cannot trade or bargain or exchange with others or with something else. People in general, talk of death bravely. Not just the general death but even one's own death. A healthy person or a youngster can have the luxury of cracking jokes even at the expense of his own death because people at the prime of their youth and health often take for granted that death cannot touch them yet.

But for a person with AIDS, death is one thing which they prefer to ignore the most in return. They feel that they have reached the end or are nearer to the climax of the whole drama of life. Even at this final stage, some try to push aside the thought of being dead. There are many who avoid funerals. For instance, a 34-year-old Muslim woman
said, “I don’t want to go to funerals. Whenever I go, my first thought will be... I’ll also die like this one day”.

Funerals were instant reminder of their death. A Rongmei widow of 29 years of age also avoided funerals because, like she said, “I cry too much whenever I go to the funerals. Even if I’m just attending the funeral of one of the persons in the locality with whom I had no relation or social contact, I can’t help myself from crying. I never used to feel emotional like this before. I used to get headache from crying too much”.

A 32-year-old blind Kuki widow confided her fear for death. She shared,

When there is death in the locality, I feel sad. I feel that I’m also going to die soon. The ringing of funeral Church bells chills my spine. I don’t go to any funerals.

One reason for being afraid to die is the uncertainty of death. There is no more control of the body by the mind because of the physical body will now plunge into unconsciousness. There will be no longer a conscious mind. This is one fear which haunted many people. That is why a 36-year-old Meitei woman feared her end. She said, “I am scared to die... because after death, I won’t be able to come back here again”. As she did not know what happened after death, she did not want to die.
Some of them were scared because of the heavy load of burden that they were carrying. In much of the Christian tradition, the aim is to die with a clear conscience, whether by reason of right behaviour or by way of well-timed repentance. A Rongmei woman, aged 27 years, was on her nerves when inquired about her death. She said, “I'm scared (to die). I'm burdened physically, emotionally, spiritually and financially”. It reminds one of what Solomon (1999: 153-154) said that the most effective denial of death simply insists that death is not really death, that life goes on in some more or less self-identical medium. This might be the survival of the soul pure and simple. It might be the survival of one's mind, one's memories, and one's sense of self. It might be the reincarnation of the soul into another creature, perhaps another person. It might be something much grander, unification with the Godhead or joining the Divine Inner Circle.

Physically, she was going through lots of pain and struggle from diseases. She was also on emotional turmoil because her family had cut off all ties from her for marrying her husband against their wishes. Financially, she was facing the hardest time of her life. Her husband did not earn and they survived by brewing liquor. She had to spend money for family maintenance, and also for her and her husband's treatment and medicine. Though hers was a joint family, she was very insecure. At the same time, she was also fighting a spiritual battle. Though she was born and brought up as a Christian, she got married to a non-Christian person and she no longer lived the life or the faith of a Christian. This
was one big thing that really burdened her. With all these disturbances
and imbalances, she was scared to die.

Some got angry when their turn comes to die or when death
comes nearer. This 33-year-old Kuki woman was one such person. She
could not die even if she wanted to. She could not bear to leave behind
her son who was also HIV-infected. She was angry with death because
she felt closer towards it and it was taking her away from her son.

Even in their last stage, they continued to cling on to life.
Though many had accepted their death, there are some people who
continue to refuse to surrender. There were also many who had gone
through the period of being dead to the overcoming of their fear. They
had to be tested to reach this stage, undergoing through trials.

The testimony of a 37-year-old Tangkhul woman will take us
along her journey from fear to courage. She testified,

At first, I was scared of death. No more now. The
hospital which I was admitted to was near a cemetery. I
was in a terrible state. That hospital was meant for HIV
positive people only. Whenever somebody died in the
hospital or when there was any burial in the cemetery, I
thought about my death. I kept thinking of the time I
might die or probable the nature of my death. I used to
shiver thinking of death.

She continued,

In spite of all these apprehensions before, I'm not
scared anymore. God has given me the courage to
accept my fate. I've surrendered all my burdens to Him.
He has set me free from all worries and burdens.
A 45-year-old Kuki woman had a similar tale to tell. She said,

By God’s grace, I’m not scared of death anymore. If God has destined me to die of this disease (of AIDS), so be it. Many people have died before me, though they were healthy and young. When I think of how God still preserves me, I’m not scared of this disease, I can’t say about the few moments before my death. I may feel scared that time but as of now, I’m not scared of death.

For those women who were spiritually sound, reality was faced courageously. The feeling of fear and uncertainty was replaced with hope and assurance of something better. But the final point of death is reached through a journey of dying. This is true for most of the people. Some people who died an instant death did not come across the process of dying but the people who died of disease went through it. It is seen that this process of dying is not a pleasant one as found out in the following discussion.

5.1.3. Fear of Dying

“To die is not so bad, but to die in suffering is terrible”, runs a quotation as said by Dr. Christian Bernard. Death would have been nice if dying has no role to play. Everyone is destined to die and so it is bearable. But not everyone is destined to die in suffering or suffer before death. According to Solomon (1999), there are many things worse than death. Painful, debilitating, terminal illness is worse than death. This dying process cuts a person into bits and kills him finally. For a person with AIDS, life’s every moment is a torture from the day they realized their HIV status to the present moment. Life is a torture. And torture is
often thought to be worse than death. For instance, the Muslim woman who was not afraid of death was afraid of dying.

And for this 30-year-old Meitei woman, the worst part about AIDS was dying in suffering. She had not only experienced the pain of suffering but had also seen others die in suffering. In her own words,

My cousin died of AIDS. I think he was amongst the first batch of HIV positive people in the state. He died in a very pathetic condition. That's why, whenever I think or hear of AIDS, I think of him. I think that whoever suffers from AIDS die like him. I'm very afraid. I've even attempted suicide.

A 36-year-old Muslim woman, a widow of a person who died of AIDS lived at her brother's house with her daughter. Though her brother's family took good care of her and loved her, she was full of guilt. Her legs were swollen and she could not move around. She was always in need of assistance from others. Though nobody complained about her, she felt very insecure. She was living at the mercy of others. She said, "I am not scared of death but scared of sufferings. It's better to die than to live like this. I am a burden to my family. I can't live and suffer like this. I don't want such a life".

Living with AIDS can also be interpreted as dying of AIDS as learnt from their stories. A young Rongmei widow of 28 years of age was suffering in every possible way. She became a widow because her husband had died of AIDS. She has financial problem because she needed more money for her treatment and medicine. She could not
return home because she did not want to be a bad influence to her younger siblings at home. Socially, she was looked down. Her spiritual life was also shrouded with guilt and remorse because she put shame to her faith by marrying a non-Christian person though she was a daughter of a pastor. Physically, she knew she would not live long. She said,

The process of dying is too unbearable. I feel that there can’t be anything worse than this.

She paused... then continued,

Scared of death? No. It can’t be worse than my life.

Death is not the worst punishment or the worst thing that can happen to someone. Indeed, there is such a thing as a good death. And death due to AIDS is never considered as good death because of the stigma attached to it and also of the physical complicacies.

Along with the pain of physically sufferings, these women also had to bear the brunt of the way the society looked at them. They not only battle against physical pain but also social disgust. A 42-year-old Tangkhul woman recalled the days she had suffered much. She was bedridden for months. Her body was filled with sores. In fact, her left body rotted. She could even see her own hip bones. She stanched. People were reluctant to come near her. When others shun her or avoided her, it was a terrible feeling but when her own daughter gave her the same treatment, it was unbearable. Her friends were standing afar and crying. Fortunately, she got cured from that illness. But she continued to live in constant fear and anxiety. She said,
Though I am not ill and bed-ridden like before, I have this fear and worry that I will face the same treatment (of disgust from family and friends) again if my body rots like before. I don't want to go through that again.

She added,

Enough of this pain and sufferings! Dying like this is unbearable. I'm waiting for death to embrace me.

More than the physical pain, she was more concerned about the psychological sufferings which she had and is suffering because of the discriminating nature of the society. A 33-year-old Kuki woman, whose husband had died of AIDS years ago also faced such a situation twice - while her husband was on his dead bed and also while she was in the same condition as her husband's. She recalled,

We live in a government quarter. My husband was brought back from the hospital, not because he got better but because he was dying. The doctor could not treat him anymore. Our neighbours came to visit him, as a gesture of being good Christians. But they never came near him. They chose to sit in the other room. When we offered them tea, they declined. They were afraid to take even water from our house.

If she had gone through that trial of shame and humiliation, she still had to undergo one more time. She continued the recollection.

The same thing happened in my case also. They came and prayed for me but I don't think God answers such prayers. Their hearts are filled with dirt. I don't want their prayers. Instead, I want them to become aware about HIV/AIDS.

That was one reason why another woman, a 33-year-old Rongmei woman had this fear. Though she had become darker than
before, lost weight and patience (she got easily irritated) as a side effect of ART, she had not reached that stage where she looked terrible, but feared in anticipation. She said that people with AIDS looked terrible at their last stage. Their faces and their bodies become deformed, she said. She also knew that others felt scared to look at them even. She said, "They (people with AIDS) are disgusted and shunned. I know that I'll die one day but I don't want to reach that stage. I want to die before I reach such a condition". She felt that such looks (which often look unpleasant) was one factor of facing social ostracism.

Nobody wants to be despised or hated. These women with AIDS already had too many to worry about. There already was too much to suffer from within. And when this young widow, a Rongmei woman was given a chance to opine on this matter, she expressed in anger.

Dying itself is bad. We can do without such extra pain from their side. It's already bad, don't make it worse. If their visits bring contempt and disgust, I don't want them to come.

Thus we see the varied battles that these women were fighting. If on one hand they were battling their physical pain, they were fighting the pain that they received from the society on the other hand. To top with that, there was financial crunch, emotional battle, and spiritual turmoil among others. Though they were struggling to survive, deep down, they knew that they were going away. They knew that they were not going to live long. When things got too hard, and when their physical body and the reality situation could no longer live up to their
desires and aspirations, they just give in to the flow of the current. So, some of them started making preparation to meet their end.

5.2. Preparing to Die

While going through these turmoil and battle, they somehow made preparations to die. Most of the women were mothers. Something that worried them to death was the future of their children. On the other hand, this worry for their children was the thing that ‘saved’ them from death, the last straw that held their breath. Like the case of a 29-year-old Tangkhul woman who said, “I feel like dying. They say that if we stop taking ART, we’ll die. Whenever I think of stopping ART, the thought of my daughter comes to my mind. This thing makes me strong and gives me the zeal to live again”.

Some women moved a step ahead and made provision for their children’s future. A 42-year-old Tangkhul widow, for instance, had talked with her husband’s elder brother to look after her children after her death. A Rongmei woman, 28 years of age felt secured in the thought that her parents stood by her in such an hour and so left the future of her children to them. Her husband was dead and relationship with her in-laws was not so good. She did not expect them to look after her children after she had gone.

Two other women, Muslim widows were dying with the assurance from their respective parents that their children would be looked after if anything happen to them. These are few ‘lucky’ women unlike many
others who could neither live nor die with the thought of their children's future.

Preparations could also be in some other way. For example, a 36-year-old Meitei woman, who was a new convert (from Hinduism to Christianity), told her children to bury her dead body. Since she had become a Christian, she did not want to be cremated.

Another Meitei woman had this wish. Her elder son lived with her parents-in-law. The mother in her always longed for her son to live with her and her younger son but the situation compelled her to accept the condition. So, he told both the families to bring both her sons to be by her side on her last day. She felt that, that would be ultimate solace for her soul.

It is seen in this discussion that their preparation of death is very much related with their children. Except for one Meitei woman who was very concerned for her soul, all the women or rather mothers were more concerned for the future of their children. Their preparation is seen more in the assurance of their children's security. This is one observation which comes across all the women of the cultural group under study. While some were busy making preparations for death, there were already some women who had 'experienced' death. They were the ones who had a near-death experience.
5.3. Near-Death Experience

Fear of death is often brushed aside as a natural process as already seen. And fear of being dead is a scary reality that torments a person. But there were some women who had encountered near-death experience. For these women, they had 'experienced' death (physical death). Out of all the women studied, three women had reached the threshold of death and had come back to life. These are the narrations of the women who had the experience.

A 30-year-old Tangkhul woman's narration goes like this.

I had a near-death experience. I was hospitalized and I was on my death bed. It was not my disease but Satan who came to kill me. The Satan held my hands and legs tightly and I could not move. It seems that I was not breathing properly. I was suddenly losing the grip of my life. Everyone was praying for me. And I was praying in my mind also but I was slowly losing all consciousness. But as soon as 'Amen' was pronounced, the Satan left me. Then I started breathing normally again.

Joining hands with her experience was another Tangkhul widow, 29 years of age. She recalled,

Once I was seriously ill from excessive bleeding. I was dying. I felt as if I was passing through the tunnel of death. I had never thought that I'd live again. But then I was already dead in one way. I had lost all consciousness and had already joined with the dead people. I had no consciousness of people nursing me, taking care of me. I just felt that life was dripping from me - drop by drop.

A 35-year-old Meitei woman also narrated her experience.
My whole body was filled with blisters I was kept in the hospital. All those blisters erupted and I was in terrible pain. The doctor prescribed me medicine for relief from this pain but I took too much and I had overdose. I was told later that I was taken to an ICU (Intensive Care Unit). I could faintly hear the doctors saying that there was no hope for me (hope for recovery). Slowly and slowly I lost consciousness. I don't remember for how long I remained like that. The only thing I can say is that I have come back from death.

For these women, the feeling of being dead was not a new thing for they had gone through it and were more prepared to face it. As that 29-year-old Tangkhul woman said, "Before this (near-death experience), I used to be very afraid to die but now I'm not afraid at all. It's such a nice feeling (laughs). Now, I understand what death is. It's so peaceful".

To be dead is seen not so bad for those who had tasted it. Even though they might not have experienced it, for some, death seemed to be the means for their burdens to be unloaded. It was a release, liberation from pain and miseries.

5.4. Death as an Escape Route

The women under study had suffered much from AIDS. When life became too harsh, too torturous, they sought for an alternative. They were ready to bargain their sufferings for death. They all felt that their sufferings and pain would go away with death.

A Muslim woman, 34 years of age was beaten from all sides. For her, motherhood was no more a thing of joy but a burden because she
could not meet the demands of being a mother. She was poor, had weak body and felt like a total failure. She said, "I am fed up of struggling for life. I think that it is better to die than to live like that". Another Muslim woman longed for death because she said that if she died, she would have no knowledge of anything. By anything, she meant her sufferings. She said that she could not live and continued to suffer like that. She did not want such a life.

A 33-year-old Rongmei woman was in ruins. She was married forcibly against her wishes. And when things started to normalize a bit, her only child died and after that, her husband also died. He died of AIDS. Not only that, she was also infected. Though she come back to stay with her brother's family, they could not be of much help to her because of her poor family condition. She was always unwell and was always in need of medical help. She felt like a burden. She wanted to die, so that she can escape all these sufferings. She said,

Death... I want to die. There is no one to take care of me, nurse me... I have seen life and it was not good. I am ready to die. I pray to God to take my life. I keep praying to release me. I have seen a husband in life, a child... I have had enough.

Most of the women faced financial problem. And on top of that, they had to carry the burden of physical pain. There was no relief from their sufferings and worries. So, they longed for the ultimate end when they thought they could have eternal liberation. One Meitei woman felt that there was nothing left in life. She said that she was waiting for the
last moment because then only all her problems would go away. Just like her, another Kuki woman also felt that it was better to die than to live so miserably like that.

A 29-year-old Tangkhul woman began to question the purpose of her living. She asked herself, "What is the use (of living)?" For her, life was too hard and instead of living a long life with worries and pain, it was better to cut it short. She said,

Unlike others, even if they have such a disease, they are well-to-do. They don't have to worry financially. As for me, I can't do heavy work also and we are very poor. I feel that death will be better for me.

The question of death is manifold as seen from the above analysis and discussion. If there is the fear of the death of a physical body on one hand, there is the death of a social being (being women with AIDS) on the other hand. To top with that, they also were worried about their souls after death. Those women who felt that they had committed the sins of disobedience (the result being that they became HIV positive) were on a shaky ground as far as their spiritual life was concerned. There was also the robbery of their emotional wealth. As already mentioned that death seems nearer and more real to those people with AIDS, there is seen a certain urgency to wrap up their commitments of life.

When physical suffering is topped with emotional guilt, social ostracism and financial crunch, the problem becomes very huge. Death
could be the end of living or the end of everything. People generally believe that death brings an end to every activity on earth. Everything and anything that has to do with this world cease and life is passed on another world. It is believed that death carries a person to another realm. The body ceases to exist and the soul is transferred to another world. This is the belief which makes these women long for death because it is the end of all sufferings and miseries. It is found out that more than their ethnic background; religious affinity gives more similarity in their perception. There is difference in the views given by women of different religious group even though they belong to the same community. More than the cultural influence, they were found to be more driven by their theological belief.

They were seen to be dying while living. So there is a need to make their life worth living. Efforts need to be made to make their pain lesser, their sufferings at least bearable if it could not be got rid of. Even if a person is not in a position to provide them monetary help or other aids, a reaffirming word of concern, a gentle touch or a genuine smile can give them a sense of being loved and cared for. Hope and aspirations are what make a person keep moving ahead. And there is no harm in giving them these luxuries. If the people at home and outside (hospitals, NGO offices or other care centres, religious places, etc) treat them well, a drastic change can be brought about in the lives of such people.
However the living may be, living with AIDS has become their reality and they have accepted it. To accept it is to adjust to their lifestyle. The following chapter is the discovery of the way these women cope with their life.