

WOMEN AND SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR WITH REFERENCE TO SHAKESPEAREAN LITERARY FEMININE CONTEXT

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Abstract: This paper highlights the women suicidal behavior in our communities throughout literary works of the past and the present day. The Themes of Suicide and violence against women are embodiments by William Shakespeare's plays: Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Lady Macbeth In *Macbeth*, all these females characters are good examples for covering the theme of suicide. They are always connected with passion whether this passion is love or hate. But the connection between love, violence and death (especially suicide) requires further investigation. The hero and heroine of each play end their lives. They love each other to the extent that one cannot live without the other. They terminate their lives to be joined with who they are in love in the grave.

Keywords: Suicide, Types of suicide, Death, self-Murder and self-destructiveness Shakespearean female victims.

Introduction: The plots of Shakespeare's tragedies make frequent use of suicide, either accomplished or merely contemplated. Although his intent was the dramatic context, Shakespeare, nonetheless, clearly anticipated many features being discussed today, including assisted suicide, imitative suicide, and suicide attempts by individuals with depression. Recent studies in psychology try to see the impact of these factors on suicide. This paper attempts to show that many such features and attitudes towards suicide were perceived by Shakespeare and incorporated in his tragedies. Most suicides in this study are depicted as being admirable under the circumstances at the time. Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate the reasons behind such conducts and analyzes the type of characters who commit suicide. It deals with suicide, its types, reasons, circumstances and the attitude of the Elizabethan people towards it. The fact that suicide is a complex, puzzling phenomenon and not just a physical act of terminating life, makes its definition value laden, that is to say not descriptive. Yet, St. Augustine in A.D. 413 initiated a project that took thirteen years to complete. This work entitled *The City of God Against the Pagans* in which he used the phrase "self-murder," in an attempt to neutralize the concept by using scientific terms. (Nederland, 1999: 2). According to David Heyd and Sidney Bloch there are many terms used for self-ending like "suicide", "self-killing", "self-poisoning", "deliberate self-harm", "attempted suicide", "Para-suicide", etc. Thus, suicide is a relatively seventeenth-century term whose function was to replace "self-homicide." (Heyd and Bloch, 1999:442). During the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, all women of a dead ruler were doomed to death before installing his successor, sometimes even ministers were included and the whole number might affect the burning of several "thousands of persons including queens,

concubines and servants of both sexes." (Stein, 1992:62).

We find behind suicide today where difficult life situations are found impossible to get resolved through regular means. Thus, in solving their problems, people depend on individual decisions rather than on conventions or law enforcement. It appears that suicide is inevitable way to solve various types of personal problems, like loneliness, hate, desire for revenge, fear, physical pain, feeling of guilt, etc. (*The Encyclopedia Americana*, pp.857-858).

Reasons of Suicide:

A) Social Causes:

- Loneliness, which occurs among immigrants, divorced and lonely people. Thus, social isolation is regarded as the most important reason of suicide.
- Ragging and Blackmail.

B) Personal Suicide:

- Loneliness, which occurs among immigrants, divorced and lonely people. Thus, social isolation is regarded as the most important cause of suicide.
- Stress (pressure) caused by dear people's death, losing money, job or facing tyranny.
- Condensed media about suicide. (Abu - Hidjl, 2000, 100).

C) Maladies:

- Depression,
- Alcohol addiction,
- Schizophrenia,
- Personality disorder,
- Physical chronicle sickness. (Abu-Hidjl, 2000, 101).

D) Rational Reasons: They occur when an individual decides to take his/her own life, because there is no hope of recovering from illness. (Ibid) He/she also feels that life has no value. We may add the yearning of young people for love and communication. Thus, since suicidal people usually

feel desperately lonely, their opportunity to talk to a sympathetic, understanding listener is sometimes enough to prevent the act of despair. In fact, the youth has a strong tendency for instant gratification, want it all and want it fast. When the patient has identified with a person whom he both loves and hates, these strong ambivalent feelings are turned in on him and unconscious sadism is directed against himself. The suicides* were thus the victims of strong aggressive impulses, which they failed to express outwardly, and which as a result were turned inward. (Zilboorg, 1936: 285). The psychological theories emphasize the personality and emotional factors, whereas the sociological theories stress the influence of social and cultural pressures on the individual. Social factors such as widowhood, childlessness, residence in big cities, a high standard of living, mental disorder and physical illness have been found to be positively correlated with suicide rates. Freud states that "suicide is the result of a strong ambivalent dependence on a sadistic superego and the necessity to get rid of unbearable guilt tension at any cost." (Freud, 1924:28). He also believes that the individual's desire to live is achieved through self-esteem, and feeling supported by the protective powers of the superego. (Freud, 1924:28) When this feeling vanishes, the feeling of destruction appears. (Freud, 1924:28) In the same way with the self-murder goes the hopeful illusion that forgiveness and reconciliation will be accomplished by the killing of the punishing superego. (Ibid) Hence, we may consider Freud's theory the background to the psychological interpretations of suicide. Thus, Freud's theory of depression is summarized by G. Zilboorg as follows:

After viewing Freud's psychoanalytic theory of suicide, it is interesting to demonstrate Karl A. Menninger's view concerning suicide. He believes that there are any of the three elements in any suicide: "the wish to kill, the wish to be killed and the wish to die." (Menninger, 1948:33). So, both Freud and Menninger stress that the aggression is the prime cause of self-destructiveness. According to Durkheim, there are three kinds of suicide: "**anomic**", "**egotistic**", and "**altruistic**". Anomic suicide results when the equilibrium of society is severely disturbed, as for example, when the business cycle drops suddenly and rapidly. (Durkheim, 1952 :51). The scale, therefore, is altered and its members are reclassified accordingly. This kind expresses a mood of anger and disappointment at aspirations unfulfilled. **Egotistic** suicide, however, results from a lack of integration of the individual with other members of his/her society. (Durkheim, 1952 :51) In short, as a society weakens, the individual depends less on the group, depends more upon himself and recognizes no rules of

conduct beyond those based upon private interests. This egoism produces egotistic suicide. Durkheim's "**altruistic**" type of suicide results from "insufficient individuation," a condition directly opposite to the one producing egoistic suicide. (Ibid:60) This kind is characterized by a conviction that one is performing one's duty, or in a passionate outburst of faith and enthusiasm. Therefore, as it is illustrated, suicidal tendencies are the results of social conditions that affect the individual, to the extent of taking his/her own life. In order to differentiate between the values of life and death, it is agreed to use the term good life instead of life. Thus, it is often argued that what has value is the good life: pleasant, happy, honourable, virtuous, etc. So, assuming any scale of values, we can compare the value of different lives and also declare certain lives as not worth living at all. (Bloch and Heyd, 1999 :443). This justification underlies the rational causes of suicide. Seneca, the Roman philosopher (4B.C.- A.D.65), states that, "mere living is not a good, but living well." (Ibid:445). For Seneca, it is the quality not the quantity of one's life that matter. He also illustrates suicide from the present psychological and sociological points of view when he justifies self-murder. (Ibid) He remarks that disturbed mind and fall down in fortune are satisfactory reasons for suicide.

In Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony kills himself to avoid shame, Cleopatra kills herself to escape from being dragged by Octavius in the streets of Rome. However, suicide has no specifically moral meaning because morality is concerned with the rules and guiding principles of "the game of life", whereas suicide is a decision to opt out of the game. Suicide played a more prominent role in Greek and Roman cultures. Hence, it was the trio of great thinkers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who laid the foundations of the philosophy of suicide for western civilization, including a view which prevails today. In the case of *Cleopatra*, she was used to manipulating others to secure her power, first with Pompey (who died in 48 B.C. and Caesar who died in 44 B.C.) and finally she clings to Antony (who died in 30 B.C.). (Arab, 2001:8). Therefore, when Antony dies she, loses the manipulative power besides the loss of her kingdom, so she resolves to commit suicide. besides Egypt, Syria, Cyprus, and Crete. Thus, when Antony is brought dying to Cleopatra, she cries:

Noblest of men, wo'ot die?

Hast thou no care of me? Shall I abide

In this dull world, which in thy absence is

No better than a sty? (4.15.59-62)

Depressed and isolated with her maids in her monument Cleopatra finally contemplates suicide:

If knife, drugs, serpents, have/Edge, sting, or operation. I am safe. (4.15.25-26)

Cleopatra utters the foregoing words spontaneously, yet she unconsciously expresses her inner self. They portend her death, since she first wants to use a dagger (knife) in her attempt of suicide and then she uses an asp (a serpent) to end her life. In fact, there are many factors that contribute to Cleopatra's great sorrow and despair. First, it is the death of her lover and protector, Antony; second, his defeat at battle and third her isolation in the monument. Therefore, when Octavius's soldiers arrest her, she attempts suicide by drawing a dagger, but is prevented by Proculus. This endeavour is, however, a cry for help. Thus, Cleopatra feels sad, desperate and separated from her world and with nobody to help her, as Antony is dead while Octavius, the brother of Octavia (Antony's wife), is her enemy. Hence, she is now helpless and hopeless. In her frustration, Cleopatra imagines the humiliation at the hands of the triumphant Octavius, and how she will be taken as prisoner and shown as a war trophy in the streets of Rome. (Bradley, 1970:18).

As a proud queen, she cannot endure such a fate. So, she wishes death to end this horrible life and escape this intolerable situation, as she invites death: "where art thou death?/ Come hither, come! come, come and take a queen" (5.2.45-46). Shakespeare makes it clear that Octavius has taken this note seriously, and he himself comes to assure Cleopatra of his safe plans towards her. In fact, Cleopatra prefers death to escape the humility and to spoil Octavius's triumph. Hence, she says to Octavius:

Rather a ditch in Egypt

Be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus mud

Lay me stark-naked and let the water flies

Blow me into abhorring! Rather make

My country's high pyramids my gibbet

And hung me up in chains. (5.2.57-62).

From the foregoing lines, it is concluded that Cleopatra, as a queen of Egypt, is so proud of herself that she never allows Octavius to take her to Rome as a prisoner. For her a ditch in Egypt is a "gentle grave" (5.2.58). Therefore, it is natural that she prefers death to such a degrading life. Nevertheless, Octavius threatens to kill all her children if she kills herself. Cleopatra distinguishes the meaning of Octavius's speech. (Dusinberre, 1975:288).

She says: "He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not/ Be noble to myself" (5.2.191-193). So, she determines to do the "noble act," It is paradoxical that Cleopatra discovers the strength of her love to Antony after the latter's death. Thus, she says to her women:

O, withered the garland of the war,

The soldier's pole is fallen: young boys and girls

Are level now with men. The odds is gone,

And there is nothing left remarkable

Beneath the visiting moon.(4.15.64-68)

It is obvious that Cleopatra cannot bear the psychological pain of being deprived of her previous life and cannot tolerate the humiliation of the present life. For the new situation is like imprisonment for her. That is why she says about the clown who brings the snakes: "He brings me liberty" (5.2.237). As a matter of fact, Shakespeare develops his characters. Cleopatra is changed from a mere harlot to a thoughtful, calm and decisive character, like Juliet. (Stewart, 1985:68). She develops from a mistress to a mature woman. *Antony and Cleopatra*, for the two protagonists end their lives according to the "high Roman fashion. The concept is more succinctly stated by Cleopatra, fearing humiliation at the hands of Octavius, declaims:

If knife, drugs, serpents have/ Edge, sting, or operation, I am safe. (Shakespeare, 1962). All subsequent references to this play are taken from this edition. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 4. 15. 25-26) Elizabethan Law punishes those who sell poison by death. (Fabers, T.R, 1971: 23).

Suicide in *Romeo and Juliet*: When Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* about the same year (1595), he avoids this since he knew his audience would not take kindly to Juliet's body having a stake driven through its chest. John Donne (1573-1631) considered suicide a means of liberating oneself from exploitation and oppression. Thus, the prohibition of self-murder to Donne, was a superstitious way of preventing people from escaping the tasks expected of them by the prohibition. (Lawrence, 2005:3). Therefore, suicide in the Elizabethan period is prohibited by the church and punished by the law.

Romeo and Juliet is a Christian play. The main source of the play is Arthur Brook's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562). (Spencer, 1967:46). There are many causes and motivations, however, that lead the individual to the act of suicide. The hero and heroine of *Romeo and Juliet* have enough causes for ending their lives. Its protagonists defy their families long quarrel by their love. They prove that love is even stronger than death itself. Juliet is still a young girl when the play begins, she is only fourteen. At the Capulets' party she falls in love with Romeo. Consequently, she marries him secretly. After their marriage, Romeo kills her cousin, Tybalt, and Paris proposes to marry her. Therefore, Juliet is in a difficult situation and has a suicidal tendency, as she says: "I will to the Friar to know his remedy/If all else fail, myself have power to die" (3.5.255-6).

According to Shneidman*, Juliet cannot tolerate the agony of losing Romeo who lies dead beside her in the vault. Feeling hopeless, helpless and frustrated she terminates her life in order to escape her

dilemma. Juliet defies the whole world for the sake of Romeo's love. His love supports her and gives her strength. When he dies, undoubtedly, she feels helpless and hopeless. She feels that she has done everything to maintain her love. But now Romeo is dead, and there is nothing left for her except her life, that becomes a burden on her. So, she resolves to end it immediately. She says in the last scene of the last Act:

Then, I'll be brief. O happy dagger,
Snatching Romeo's dagger.

This is thy sheath [*stabs herself*]; there rust, and let me die. (5.3.169-170).

We apply Menninger's wishes again. Juliet has the wish to kill herself to escape the psychological pain of losing Romeo. In a soliloquy Juliet remarks if the potion does not work to prevent her marriage to Paris, she will end it by the knife (4.3.23). On the other hand, Juliet is isolated. She is alienated from her parents and her Nurse. Her parents force her to marry Paris, and her father threatens to throw her out of the house if she insists on refusing Paris's proposal of marriage, saying: "you shall not house with me" (3.5.189); her mother does not sympathize with her, as Juliet asks her help in postponing the marriage she replies: "I'll not speak a word /...for I have done with thee" (3.5.203-204). Juliet's Nurse, who knows her sincere love to Romeo, wants her to marry Paris and break her vow of marriage, saying: "I think it best you married with the county" (3.5.218). Juliet is now alone, separated from her family, her friend (the Nurse) and, above all, she is now separated from her husband, Romeo.

Hence, her suicide is an egoistic type, because society could not help her, and because of the long quarrel between the two families. individual, however, gives a warning before committing suicide. (Stengle, 1972:84). Thus, Juliet says to the Friar: "I long to die/If what thou speakest speak not of The remedy" (4.1.66-67). So the audience knows that Juliet will kill herself, if her union with Romeo will not be achieved in life.

Shakespeare depicts the two lovers as true characters to life. He portrays their impulsive love, their impatience, rashness, isolation, suicidal tendencies and their ultimate suicide. Shakespeare seems to be influenced by the thoughts of his time, especially those of the humanists who believed that "the best classical culture could be fused with Christianity." (Holman, 1980:218).

That is why he honours Romeo and Juliet's suicide, as it ends the feud between the two families. According to Christianity, suicide is a disgrace to the two families, but Shakespeare adopts the Roman concept of suicide. Thus, old Montague promises to build a statue in gold for Juliet, as he says: "for I will raise her statue in pure gold" (5.3.299); and old

Capulet promises the same for Romeo, as he says: "as rich shall Romeo by his lady's lie" (5.3.303). They are immortalizing Romeo and Juliet. Yet, Shakespeare condemns suicide in another place of the play, as the Friar says to Romeo who wants to kill himself:

Hast thou slain Tybalt? Will thou slay thyself?

And slay thy lady, that in thy life lives,

By doing damned hate upon thyself? (3.3.1166-118)

The Friar is condemning killing oneself especially in Romeo's case because the Friar is connecting between Romeo's life and Juliet's life because by killing himself, Juliet will be discovered as a sinful woman. Then she might be condemned to death because of her action. It seems, however, that Shakespeare is concerned about the love of the couple. He wants only to glorify them as human beings regardless of religion or any moral principle.

Suicide in *Macbeth*: Suicide in *Macbeth* of Shakespeare's mastery of human nature, however, shows us that *Lady Macbeth's* womanly heart makes her incapable of taking a life unless she renounces her nature. A woman naturally gives and nurtures life, to take life she has to reject the distinctive essence of her female being. That is why she invokes evil spirits to "unsex her". Lady Macbeth, undoubtedly, suffers from depression,* which leads her to the act of suicide. She loves Duncan as a father, because he is like her father as she says, "had he not resembled/ My father as he slept, I had done it" (2. 2. 12-13). But at the same time, she wants to get rid of him and take his crown. So, those two strong conflicting feelings cause unconscious sadism against herself, resulting in her death. As a married woman, Lady Macbeth feels that her entity and self-fulfillment will be achieved in having children. But at the same time she is aware of her husband's potency and her sterility. This case creates a great potential power inside her, this power, however, seeks an outlet. This is represented by ambition. She wishes to gain the crown to have power as a substitute for her barrenness. Therefore, when her husband tells her in a letter about the prophecies of the witches, she thinks immediately of killing the king. Hence, when the servant tells her about Duncan's coming to their house, she says: "thou art mad to say it" (1.5.29). Freud, however, points out that Lady Macbeth is an example of a person who collapses on obtaining success, after striving for it with single-minded energy. (Massi, 2002:7-15) In the beginning, she has no hesitation, and no sign of any conflict within her. Moreover, she is ready to sacrifice even her womanhood to her murderous intentions. (Ibid). Thus, she says:

Come you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts;
unsex me, here,

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top- full Of direst cruelty, make thick my blood Stop up th' access and passage to remorse. (Shakespeare,1960).

All subsequent references to this play are taken from this edition. (1.5. 39-43)

Lady Macbeth is a strong-willed woman who dominates her husband. She instigates him to kill Duncan, the king, in their house. Moreover, she takes part in the regicide in order to gain the throne. But she terminates her life at the end.

Conclusion: Shakespeare's plays give witness to his profound knowledge of human nature and psychology. This knowledge is, however, a product of his unique mind, throughout the theme of suicide we observe Shakespeare's dramatic development. In the earlier play *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare

concentrates on the love of the two lovers. But in *Antony and Cleopatra* he focuses on other things beside love, such as honour, nobility, pride and immortality. *Lady Macbeth*, however, is disappointed after gaining the kingdom since it does not meet her expectations. Shakespeare, however, depicts suicide from the sociological point of view, too. He illustrates that loneliness, failure, and a sense of duty force man to commit suicide. His characters' suicides are of the egoistic type as Juliet, or anomie as Antony, Cleopatra and altruistic as Antony. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's unique genius approaches suicide from the psychological, sociological and classical point of view as it does today.

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