



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Of Defiant and Suicidal Heroines in 19th Century Literature

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Abstract

The construct of women as “deviant” has a long history. It can be seen in the world’s major religions and spiritual traditions, which often view women as “uncontrollable”. This historical lack of open discourse about the differences between men and women has led to numerous misunderstandings. It becomes a reason for labeling female behavior as abnormal even to the extent of labeling them as crazy, mad, or insane whenever they transgress their socially prescribed boundaries. Women have been positioned as the ‘other’, whether as ‘mad’ or ‘evil’, or as ‘witches’. Noddings (1998) reminds us that a fascination for defiant women has always been popular. With the revival of feminism in the last half of the twentieth century, feminist academics such as Jane Ussher (1991) at last began to question these discourses and practices.

In this paper I will look at some of the most famed suicides in 19th century literature. According to Lorna Ruth Wiedmann it is in the nineteenth century that novelistic suicide patterns first emerge, the most significant ones being that of Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina and Therese Raquin. Regardless of their methods, the women who choose the path of suicide seem to fall into two main categories: those who are downright delusional and those whose suicide is an act of desperation or defiance because they feel backed into a corner in some way. Are these women desperate? Delusional? Or are there different psychological issues at work here?

Key Words: women, suicide, feminism

Throughout history women have often been constructed as “deviant” and ‘uncontrollable’. Women’s hysterical nature has been attested by not only the world’s major religions and spiritual traditions but also in literature. Women have often been positioned as the ‘other’, not only as women but also as witches, lunatics and sorceresses. With the revival of feminist discourses lately, academics such as Jane Ussher (1991) begin to question these discourses and practices.

Some of the most famous female characters in literature have committed suicide like Juliet, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, Goneril, Cleopatra and Edna Pontellier. Through the ages, critics have argued that suicidal women demonstrate their own brand of heroism and defiance by becoming the sole masters of their fates and venturing in places where no sane person would. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why writers have historically included suicidal women in their narratives. It is a reflection of a disturbing reality of society and it also indicates how women can take extreme measures in certain circumstances.

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It is not difficult to find numerous explanations for suicide among heroines in nineteenth-century literature, such as the weakness of women, character flaws, or unhappiness in marriage or extramarital affairs as is the case with the three women I discuss. These iconic women in nineteenth century literature- Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina and Therese Raquin commit suicide. The way each woman dies is interesting and significant in its own different way. However the common underlining thread that binds these women together is the frustration they face in their marital lives and their attempts to do something about it. Gustave Flaubert gets Emma Bovary to drink poison out of despair and desperation after her mounting debts, which she contracted during her illicit affairs, threaten to expose her infidelity to her husband, Charles. Tolstoy gets Anna to throw herself before a moving train and Zola gets Therese to drink poison. The question arises why did Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Zola choose suicide as an end for their adulterous heroines? Why do the women commit suicide, or, why do the authors of these texts resolve the question of adultery by writing the women committing suicide? It is significant to note here that men who have extramarital affairs are seldom written into suicide.

In Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary*, the main character, Emma (Madame Bovary), is seen to be constantly prone to dizzy spells and nervous attacks she has unrealistic expectations from life fuelled by her reading of romantic novels. Emma is also portrayed as the victim of her society; she is the victim of the 19th century bourgeois sexual repression of women. Such an understanding has constantly accompanied and influenced the novelistic representation of the woman reader and, in particular, the aspect known as 'Bovarisism'.

'Bovarisism', of course, owes its name to Flaubert's heroine, but Emma Bovary should be considered as the most famed expression of a tradition that starts well before her and outlives her for a long time. Significantly, from the late eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century we see numerous fictional heroines like Anna Karenina and Therese Raquin who show similarities with Flaubert's Emma: the awareness of one's own dissatisfaction; the passionate desire to live and the desperate attempt to replace the daily frustrations of real life. These women challenge the traditional roles attributed to women. They also defy the notion that all women settle happily and comfortably in their home life once they are married. These women are frustrated and bored in their married lives and want to feel and experience the passion of love which eventually leads to their destruction. It seems that the authors seem to be warning women of the fate that would befall them should they become too adventurous for the society's liking.

Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary and Therese Raquin are bold women who were perhaps born before their time. Nineteenth century moral sensibilities were extremely conservative. Women who did not fit into the conventional role of wife and mother were frowned upon. What alternative ending could these defiant women have. The question arises

why does Emma commit suicide? Does she become so influenced by fiction that her reality is altered eventually causing her to become disillusioned and take her own life? Do the men in her life destroy her? Is she truly the master of her fate or a woman who is so manipulated by the men in her life that she has no recourse left but to take her life. Critics of Madame Bovary hold multiple interpretations of the motivations behind Emma's suicide. From a Marxist view, Emma becomes influenced by the bourgeois society and becomes immersed in the materialistic norms of the nineteenth century, which causes her to incur so much debt that she faces legal action. From a feminist view, Emma is seen as a woman struggling within the norms of the nineteenth century patriarchal society. The fact remains that she is very limited and has no outlet to give vent to her emotions, and her suicide is seen as an escape. Emma sees no future for herself as a woman who can explore her sense of self and identity. Furthermore, Emma is seen as a corrupt because she is a self-centered, person who thinks only of herself and commits suicide for completely narcissistic and what may seem irrational and frivolous reasons. As a married woman who has had the privilege of education, Emma is neither a complete victim of her society, nor is she a completely selfish, self-obsessed person. Society would expect a woman in her position to be happy as she has many things going in her favour. Her inner yearnings and anguish at being unloved are not taken into account. However, as a literary heroine who ends up committing suicide, critics try to make meaning of her suicide to make the character whole, give closure to Emma. However Emma is not only an instable character but her suicide is an ambiguous act. Of course it is impossible to assign any definite meaning to her suicide though multiple explanations can be conjectured.

Even today Anna Karenina, the sensational romantic tragedy of tsarist high society, provokes excitement, awe and respect from readers across the globe. Readers as diverse as JM Coetzee, Jonathan Franzen and Oprah Winfrey have commented on the novel. Anna unlike Emma is married to a high ranking official but he leaves her cold and emotionless. In the eyes of the world she is a prominent and influential person by virtue of being married to Karenin. Yet she feels empty and unfulfilled. She struggles desperately with her attraction for Vronsky and there are times when she forgives Karenin. In the end she is unable to find solace, neither in her husband nor in her lover. Anna commits suicide because not only is she depressed, but she also develops a paranoid jealousy of her lover, Vronsky. She begins to fear that he will abandon her. She starts taking sleeping pills and she is angry with the society which so easily embraces Vronsky but isolates her on account of being a woman. She becomes insecure about Vronsky and fights with him. She becomes delusional that Vronsky is planning to abandon her for another woman. Unable to control her thoughts she jumps in front of a train.

Why did Tolstoy choose such an end for his adulterous heroine? One answer may be obvious: the author consciously seeks to portray a woman's emotional instability and turbulent psychology. Why however is suicide the only option for women wanting to explore their sense of self. An equally obvious question may also be posed: it is possible that the authors of that time chose suicide as an end for their heroines in order to appease society's implicit and explicit demand of punishment for adultery. Anna Karenina's suicide can be seen not only as renunciation but also as a defiance.

The last suicidal woman Therese Raquin follows the pattern of a woman wanting more from the drudgery of a monotonous marriage. *Therese Raquin* is a brutal and relentless account of a pair of lovers who become haunted by

their victim, and who, in killing the obstacle to their desire for one another, also succeed in killing that very desire. Though Therese and Laurent suffer as a consequence of murdering Therese's feeble, ailing husband Camille; their guilt is entirely "physical" (i.e. nervous hallucination, haunting, exhaustion) and not in any way "mental" (i.e. moral). So Laurent, placed in the same situation again, would do exactly the same thing and murder Camille all over again in order to get rid of his ghost. 'Thérèse Raquin' is a psychological thriller which explores the psyche of the criminal mind and seeks to examine the repercussions of a criminal act along with a woman who defies society's codes and murders her husband along with her lover. Life seems to continue as before in the Raquin household except for the disappearance of Camille. Both lovers cunningly manage to arrange their marriage without raising any suspicion.

The adulterous affair between Thérèse and Laurent corresponds actually to that of Rougemont's theory in *The Love in the Western World*. After committing the crime in killing Camille, Laurent and Thérèse are not attracted to each other. The irrational passion they felt for each other previously spirals into disgust and fear. Moreover, they progressively hate each other after their marriage, which was the goal in killing Camille. Indeed, the adulterous affair is exciting because of the obstacle, it is the romantic love which is thrilling and such a thrill is possible due to the obstacle, in this case, the husband. Passion was possible for the lovers because of their consciousness of breaking the rule and their passion needed always an obstacle, otherwise, it dies. No passion lasts forever and there is no passion in marriage actually after a certain time. The problem then with passion is that neither every obstacle lasts forever, so death is the last solution and, Rougemont would say, the lover's most secret desire. Death is the only obstacle which remains forever and which feeds lover's 'love'. Thérèse and Laurent can just kill themselves because they have discovered that marriage's happiness was a mirage, they needed Camille to find the passion. And actually the only scene of relief in the whole novel is at the very end, when they decide to commit suicide:

After a time, all three women in the above examples feel an unbearable boredom with their lives as married women. The men they are married to are able to offer them much, but not the most significant matter: love. Apart from the particular individual constellation of personality and other narrow specifics, it is the intense pressure of male dominance in a patriarchal society where their only way out becomes adultery. Anna Karenina, unlike her brother -- for reasons I already mentioned abandons her husband. Emma, on the contrary, cannot persuade her lover to take her away and leave husband and country. He is not in love with her, and their relationship in his eyes is nothing but a casual love affair, like so many others he has had so far. Thérèse Raquin is more successful than Emma, on the other hand. She manages to persuade her lover to assassinate her husband. All three women are on the point of a nervous breakdown. Anna begins to take drugs and her relationship with Vronski turns more and more strained and complicated. She suspects that he has become bored with her and that he will abandon her. The only way out of her emotional abyss is suicide. Emma, like Anna, also kills herself, abandoned as she is by her lover, and immersed in debts. Neither will Thérèse Raquin avoid suicide. The crime she committed breaks her nerves and the nerves of her lover, Laurent. Wanting to escape from their despair, they try to kill each other but when they realize, horrified, each other's plans, they decide to commit suicide together.

Apart from the particular individual constellation of personality and other narrow specifics, it is the intense pressure of male dominance in a patriarchal society where their only way out becomes adultery. Thereafter the only way out of their emotional abyss and personal chaos is suicide. The question in the end still remains unanswered, is it a sin for women to seek personal happiness over and above the constraints of a conservative society which gives so much freedom to men and so little to women and is suicide the only option left for them in the end if they do so.

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