

# Interpreting Suicide



# Interpreting Suicide:

*Textuality of a Mortality*

By

Anilesh T. T.

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By Anilesh T. T.

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Dedicated to the dignity of wilful deaths.



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## PREFACE

Suicide is ubiquitously understood as one of the most enigmatic gestures of life that makes any attempt to decipher it a futility. Still, as an undefeatable race, we the humans, like the curious Jonathan Harker who ventured out to the prohibited chamber in Dracula castle and the prototypical Eve who dared to be seduced to the taste of the forbidden fig fruit, have never spared an opportunity to play with the enigmas; so has been our encounters and engagements with this primordial act of self-annihilation. Since the first man on the earth, or specifically, since man has developed a living-reflecting mind, he/she has had lethal rendezvous with suicide and its allies. Doubtless, suicide has never been a monolithic mortality. It is not just dying, and as Karl Menninger has wisely observed it is "a peculiar kind of death which entails three internal elements: the element of dying, the element of killing, and the element of being killed." Such sincere inquiries into suicide remind us of one fundamental aspect that a reading of suicide is perhaps worthier than just committing it. Holding such a critical perspective, this book was germinated and aspires to be a scholarly endeavor to analyse the complexity of suicide.

Personally, what led me to this intellectual pursuit is an existential perturbation what is known as Existential Angst in the philosopher's glossary which I used to experience in my veins since my childhood days. The occasional all of a sudden realization of the inner vacuum would take the adolescent me to a spontaneous urge to get terminated for apparently no material reason. Though I was not 'committed' to suicide except in such moments of existential anguish, I found many people both in life and literature who happened to kill themselves for various self-proclaimed reasons. There I met Cleopatra, who translated death from the fangs of a mortal asp; Ophelia, who drowned herself in both the water of the brook and the embarrassing lovelessness of the great Shakespearean procrastinator; Anna Karenina who jumped before the rail wagon where she first met love in Alexei Vronsky's eyes; and Seymour Glass who shot himself at the moment of realization that it was none other than himself the existentially overfed banana fish, and the many more in literature. I also met Zeno, the founder of the stoic ideal of body mortification who killed himself by wilfully stopping his breath; Virginia Woolf, who fathomed the depth of the river Ouse with her life; Yukio Mishima, who ritualized his death through

a traditional Seppuku; and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who found in death an art that resembled a sculpturing of mental abyss. Still there were self-annihilations more dramatic than a drama and more fictitious than a fiction in real life that were waiting for me to be witnessed: the death of the rich and the poor, the elite and the subaltern, the socially marked and the culturally devoiced. A plethora of such suicides led me to initiate a personal, still a systematic, philosophical investigation into the phenomenon.

The first chapter of this book intends to offer a more conceptual survey than a historical or chronological development of the primeval act of suicide. Though it proves itself a near impossibility to find the real roots of the act of suicide, it is possible to locate the philosophical attempts that tried to decode the fatal gesture. In this regard, this chapter is an intellectual endeavor to locate the cultures, religions, and philosophical and psychological schools that found in suicide a topic worth-discussing. It also throws a glimpse into the thinkers and writers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Albert Camus and Emile Durkheim who have committed themselves in understanding suicide. The second chapter functions as the theoretical framework of the perspective from which suicide is read in this book. As the sub-title suggests, what is attempted in the study is to see the act of suicide as Text. Since the concept of Text is one the most problematical ones in contemporary theory, attempts have been made to explain the definitions offered to Text by the trailblazing theorists like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Stanley Fish, and Stephen Greenblatt. Since undoubtedly they differ in their understandings about Text at several points, this chapter focusses on the analogous theoretical arguments they carry in their definitions of Text. This chapter also informs the reader in what sense the term Text is defined and applied as a framework in the analyses made in the book. Consequently, the Text of the writer is more or less a conglomeration of chosen points of definitions taken from similar or disparate ideas of Text. The third chapter consists of the studies of two literary characters. The first one is Jocasta, the ill-fated mother/wife of Oedipus whose story is mentioned in Sophocles' classic play *Oedipus Rex*. This analysis attempts to disclose the gaps existing in the linear readings done on Jocasta, and to unveil the unnoticed and unrevealed facets of Jocasta's personality. The second case in this chapter is a re-reading of Seymour Glass, the character who was immortalised in the fiction of J.D. Salinger. This reading tries to see a Seymour who is not fragmented by literary principles. The fourth chapter deals with the suicides of two writers, Nanditha and Shalvy. Nanditha is the young poetess committed suicide in 1990 in Kerala. She can be seen as interpreted largely with the help of her biographical details. In other words,

her poems, which were published posthumously were studied on the basis of the actual events in her life. My attempt here is to free Nanditha from the critical confinements, and read her suicide as Text, a methodological field which does not hold any confinement. For the purpose, I re-analyse a generally unnoticed poem of Nanditha from a different perspective. Shalvy was an equally talented poet in Malayalam Literature who had several similarities with Nanditha, and many of his poems were also published posthumously. Shalvy's poems, which were largely personal and confessional in nature, were not given due importance. They were suffused with suicidal imagery, and he can be seen admitting his lifelong preoccupation with suicide in the 'pre' and 'post' notes attached to them. But, it can be seen that Shalvy's suicide was read on the basis of the actual events in his life. My attempt, in this study is to bring out Shalvy's suicidal inclination concealed behind and between his lines. The final case analysed in the fifth chapter has two parts which, in a sense, are related to each other. If the first part is an analysis based on the disproportionate increase in the rate of the suicide of the subaltern in Kerala, the second is a psycho-cultural analysis of the suicide of a particular person, a girl who belongs to the marginalised group in Kerala. In this case, the suicide is seen as a cultural text. The study functions on the theoretical presupposition that one's identity is a cultural construct, and each individual has multiple identities. It discloses how the generally unnoticed or intentionally quietened psycho-cultural reasons work as potential driving forces of suicide. It also tries to explain how the subaltern re-writes the social/cultural text of suicide.

As the study gets published in the book form, I am grateful to a few individuals: Prof. Prasantha Kumar, my mentor and a scholar par excellence in Literary Studies who was kind enough to write a Foreword to this book; Dr. (late) Sindhu Menon who was my Research Supervisor in M.Phil programme, and my parents who stood fast for the successful completion of my studies and research. I have thanks with love to Mr. Sreejesh, my artist student and friend who did the profound cover design of the book. I am very much thankful to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their professionalism and exceptional author-friendly system of publication that materialized this book. I gratefully remember Mr. James Britton who did the exemplary proof reading for my book.

Kannur

Anilesh T.T.



## FOREWORD

Prof. N Prasantha Kumar  
Former Professor and Head  
Department of English  
Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady  
Kerala, India  
5 May 2023

Anilesh's book *Interpreting Suicide: Textuality of a Mortality* is an enlightening reading of suicide as a mode of representation with five case studies on suicide. In the contemporary sense, text is anything that can be interpreted or critiqued. In other words, text is a product of discursive practice representing the relation between subjectivity and ideology or power and knowledge. The act of suicide is a product of consummate desire like any finished work of art. It expresses the self or subject position of the suicide at a point of crisis of his life. A person commits suicide when he thinks that the pain of life is greater than the pain of death. The suicide has thus a justification for his self destructive act. The case studies of two poets are interesting anecdotes for psychoanalytical studies: one is the case of an amateur poet, Nanditha, and the other is that of a daring publisher and poet, Shalvy. The suicide of the former can be connected to her poetic process constrained by marginality while the suicide of the latter can be related to his financially unsuccessful career as a publisher. Anilesh has successfully connected these actual suicides in recent Kerala history with two representations of suicide in literature: suicides of Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex* and Seymour Glass in Salinger's short fiction. He has also enquired into the suicide of a subaltern girl as a case study of increasing instances of suicide among the marginalized of the marginalized. He has proved that whether in life or art, suicide is a product of textual practice subject to hermeneutic interrogation.

Suicide has remained an elusive phenomenon since the beginning of civilization. Despite the several psychoanalytical explanations about suicide, there is certain mystique about the causes and motives of suicide. The act of suicide cannot be simply dismissed as an act of self destruction. The Russian revolutionary and anarchist Mikhail Bakunin remarks that "the passion for destruction is also a creative passion." It is in this context that his biography by Mark Leier is titled *Bakunin: The Creative Passion*. Leier

wants to negate the popular contention that suicide is a destructive passion. Suicides have justification for their act of self destruction. The protagonist of the film *Elvira Madigan* (1967) argues that suicide is a way of thwarting outside forces that are making living impossible. The suicides of the confessional poets point to this fact. There is an element of silent heroism in the dark glory of their apparently dreadful end. John Berryman jumped into the frozen Minneapolis River. Anne Sexton succumbed to the ever persisting temptation of death by carbon monoxide poisoning in her red Limousine. Sylvia Plath gave into the irresistible fascination to death through LPG poisoning following René Crevel's description of perfect death in *Détours*. Their apparent disinterestedness in life was matched by the mysterious methods shrouding their suicide. Robert Phillips argues that their self destructive urge was the inevitable outcome of their creative passion which consummated in what may be termed extremist poetry or what C.D. Lewis phrased "poetolatry," a queer combination of poetry, reality and tragedy. Their suicides seem to justify Albert Camus's remark that the reason for living is also a reason for dying. Nanditha's suicide is a case which can be compared to the suicide of some of the confessional poets, though it has not received the hype of a cult.

Extensive research has been carried out on the socio-psychology of suicide. Suicide arises from the character of an individual and depends on his perception of life and the world. But the imminent cause of suicide is the real or imaginary misfortunes of the victim which often sound odd and incredible or even irrational to the observers. Most suicides are committed in a passionate state as the self destructive impulses cease the victim abruptly like the violent cries of children. Suicide is rooted in the pseudo-civilization which makes it impossible for the modern man to carry out the struggle for existence. Lack of support or hope in a favourable future accelerates the suicide impulses. Every suicide strives to end life in the quickest way possible. The motive of suicide is closely related to the choice of means. The argument that the primitives showed no tendency to suicide makes it a malady inherent in modern civilization. Suicides are bloody sacrifices of the civilizing process, which Thomas G. Masaryk called "Kultur-Kampf." Shalvy was a minor but remarkable publisher whose business was circumscribed the culture vultures in the field. His business has impeded his creativity as a poet. It seems that his identity as a publisher creates a tension with his identity as a poet. Though this tension generally becomes artistically productive, it has proved to be unproductive and fatal in his career. His suicide was a self sacrifice made for a cause in a materialistic world.

Coleridge's visions of life-in-death and death-in-life have been used as a poetic idiom and a symbol of modern civilization. Modern man is in a Catch 22 situation struggling between survival and suicide. Self-centredness alienates him from his self. He simply survives and no longer lives. Survival is a kind of partial suicide where the individual has lost his humanness. Suicide is a flight from complete existence into death whereas survival is a flight away from death. In this context, Benjamin B. Wolman and Herber H. Krauss argue that every suicide or attempted suicide is preceded by an existential partial suicide. Therefore, survival is a state of partial existence before suicide. Wolman and Krauss even call survival "pre-suicidal syndrome." A reduction of human possibilities results in the pre-suicidal syndrome. The fifth case of the unnamed marginalized girl is driven by her inability to lead a dignified life due to hostile human conditions. Though Kerala is socially and educationally progressive, residues of caste discrimination is conspicuous in the social life of Kerala. The subalterns are denied human dignity and treated as subhuman species at least in some cases.

Freud explained that suicide is the outcome of the cumulative frustrations of a lifestyle resulting from the coupling of pathological self love and desire for unattainable aspirations. The unconscious is the source of *eros* (life instinct) and *thanatos* (death instinct) on the one hand and creativity and neurosis on the other. According to Wolman and Krauss, in a suicide, *thanatos* predominates and gains control over *eros*. But suicide is a multiplay determined by the interactions of several motives of which ego-splitting and identifications are the dominant. The death instinct of the victim provides a source of energy required for the suicide. According to Edwin S. Shneidman, the aggressive death instinct is directed outwards and tormenting destructive instinct is directed inwards, resulting in the splitting of the ego. The intrinsic violence finally gets manifested in the violent self destruction. Traumatic neurosis and psychosis also become causes of suicide. The former case involves continuous re-enactment of the unconscious conflicts emerging from a traumatic situation where images of death condition the self. The feeling that one's part of the self has died and that one has killed a person in a symbolic way are tortuous to the self. Such experiences, according to Wolman and Krauss, are related to transgression and guilt and result in ambivalent feelings like hatred, self loathing and death wish. Thus, unresolved, ambivalent emotions lead to suicide.

The suicide of Jocasta is motivated by guilt consciousness. In fact Oedipus and Jocasta constitute the two halves of the confessant self. Oedipus represents that part of the self which wants to reveal more even when the

revelation is fatal. But Jocasta represents the other part of the self which wants to inhibit fatalistic revelations. In the story, when Tiresias revealed the reason for the drought and famine of Thebes, Jocasta by intuition that Oedipus could be the reason and she tried to prevent further revelations. When Oedipus insisted on to reveal more, Tiresias revealed the fatal truth step by step. Jocasta committed suicide as she feared that she would turn out to be an outcast for her participation in incest. Tiresias's revelation shattered her relations with Oedipus and her other children. When Oedipus's identity was revealed, she was overpowered by many conflicting ambivalent emotions which motivated her to kill herself.

Death is a possible outcome of a suicidal crisis which expresses in a desperate and dangerous way one's feelings about one's self, though in ambiguous terms like oscillation between life and death. According to Schneidman, the suicide courts disaster in the situation without feeling that death is possible at all. This is interpreted as an urge to rediscover oneself through death. The suicide has a sense of guilt which denies him any right to life and creates a feeling that he is destined to have a dead life. According to Wolman and Kraus, the suicide pursues a desire for a non-being and achieves a state of death-in-life. People suffering from dysmutual disorders are prone to suicide. They are unable to live with people on a rational, mutual level. They cultivate a feeling that no one can be trusted and find life worthless to pursue. They find that loss by betrayal is more unbearable than loss by death. According to Wolman and Krauss, desertion and betrayal seriously damage the self of such individuals. Loneliness and ennui are unenviable states of existence for them. Self destructive tendency contains a high degree of self extinction. The extreme form of self destructive act need not be negative. It is a way out of conflict and crisis. It has a residual fulfilment and gratification. Suicide is often pursued as a means to defeat the external forces that make dignified living impossible.

The role of society is crucial in driving individuals to suicide. Émile Durkheim in his masterpiece *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* suggests that suicide is a consequence of oppressive social structure. He classifies suicide under four heads: egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic. The first category, egoistic suicide, is the kind of self destruction pursued by persons who fail to live up to social norms and expectations as in the case of Shalvy who considered book publishing as a cultural practice rather than a business. The third category, anomic suicide needs some explanation in the context of suicide of creative writers like Nanditha. Raoul Naroll proposes "thwarting-disorientation theory" to explain the causes of altruistic suicide. According to him, persons with weakened, threatened or broken social

relations, and persons with domestic unrest or marital problems are easily prone to suicide. When interpersonal relations become difficult or impossible, the consequent alienation and isolation give into self destructive urges. In the case of Seymour Glass, there is a discrepancy between social norms/expectations and one's practice of the same. Self-profit motive is attributed to anomic suicide. According to Durkheim, suicidogenic situation is produced by the interaction among ambivalent attitudes, high goal-means discrepancy, loneliness and inadequate perception of the immediate condition which is inescapable. Persons who fail to overcome the situation end up in suicide. Jocasta's case is an example of fatalistic suicide where chance is also an important factor.

Seymour Glass, a character in J.D. Salinger's short fiction, appears as a problematic husband in the conversation between his wife and her mother. He is alienated from his wife's family and has failed to cultivate sound social relations in life. But he appears as friendly and innocent to his children. He seems to undergo an infantile regression to reach the innocence of his childhood. He disrobes himself before his daughter Sybil and kisses her feet but he fails to maintain a healthy sexual relation with his wife Muriel. He used to tell "banana stories" to his daughter which is intrinsically phallic whereas he keeps a communication gap with his wife. Thus, he appears as two different selves: a social outcast in the adult world and friendly and innocent in the children's world. His social relations become dysfunctional. Since he has no social anchorage, he is driven to suicide. The suicide of the subaltern girl is the tragedy of an unsustainable society. Society often fails to support individuals who struggle with life. Society's help is often limited in rhetoric rather than in concrete terms. The suicides in subalterns are actually the results of deficient and miserable living conditions. The attribution of cultural parameters and hierarchical structure to such suicides is irrational. Moreover, the gender variable and the Harlequin syndrome in the case of the girl are unfounded.

Creative process is at once a quest and an experience. Freud thought that conflict is the source of creativity. But Jung saw that creativity is the absolute antithesis of a reaction which eludes human understanding. Kierkegaard found suffering as a necessary consequence of creative process. Karl Shapiro found an inverse relation between sensitivity of the artist and pain he undergoes: the greater the sensitivity, the lower the threshold of pain and suffering. As an exceptionally sensitive person, a creative artist is more egoistic; he feels more, more personally and more painfully. Lynne Salop illustrates this argument in the interconnectedness of the miserable life and fatal creativity of Sylvia Plath. She argues that an

artist's creativity is likely to harm some other activities of the mind. Freud, Jung and Kubie established an intricate relation between the creative and neurotic processes. The symbolic creative process correlates emotional references to concrete meanings. Experiences of the artist are concretized into images expressing precise and effective messages. An artist or a writer is responsible for the action of his created characters. Sartre argues that the artist as a creator commits himself to the fearful adventure of facing the dangers risked by his creatures. Adler finds that the creative process involves a set of bipolar activities. This results from a tension between the self-unfolding and self-effacing poles in terms of progress and repression, harmony and disharmony, serenity and anxiety. The tension is resolved through the creative output resulting in psychological relief. Therefore, creativity acts as a catharsis for emotional disturbances of the artist. Salop finds such a cathartic effect in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Nanditha's poetic output need be studied in this context, though as "an inheritor of unfulfilled renown."

Camus observes that absurdity of life demands that death and art cannot transcend the absurd. He states in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that suicide is an act shaped within the silence of the heart as a great work of art is. Camus finds absurdity as a sense of being nothing. In the context of radical reality, art matters less than violation. When art becomes destructive or self defeating, suicide becomes a matter of choice for the artist. It is the external manifestation of an inward tumult. Camus developed his concept of absurdity in the post world war period marked as the most chaotic period in history. The chaotic nature of the art is also matched by the chaotic behaviour of artists. In the case of many artists, suicide becomes the ultimate work of art. The objective of this kind of art is to shock and to warn the readers. Art survives the artist despite the chaos that encircles both the art and the artist. The chaotic and destructive nature of art demands a perpetual and restless urge to explore, to experiment, to innovate and to destroy accepted styles and to create new ones. Art changes when the forms available are no longer adequate for expression. Every innovation in art is followed by an inward shift which results in an inward response and sometimes an inward disaster. The psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton states that a "psychic numbing" seizes the artist on his encounter with death. The post war period witnessed large scale death everywhere. This renders death indifferent, impersonal, inevitable and meaningless. This makes an unprecedented demand on the artist to find a new language to express the element of self destruction, a new medium to represent the dimension of unnatural, premature death. This new language maybe called the language

of mourning and art takes the cathartic function of mourning. The poetry of Nanditha and Shalvy are examples of poetry of mourning.

Some suicides are expressive tragedies that shock and warn the society. They serve the cathartic function of a tragedy. As Coleridge states in “The Rime of Ancient Mariner,” tragedy makes us sadder but wiser: “A sadder but wiser man/He rose the morrow mourn”. Kafka stated in his letter to Oscar Pollack: “The books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation – a book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us.” He means that a great work of art moves us by making us experience the loss and pain associated with life; they prepare us for a tragedy, which according to D.H. Lawrence, is like a kick at misery. As a comic relief in Shakespeare, suicides in society prepare the living to live a healthy life.

Though Freud placed death instinct beyond the pleasure principle, he believed that it is pleasurable. This compels the artist to assume the role of a scapegoat. He risks life and explores his vulnerability in his attempt to evolve a language of mourning. Some great works of art or literature are metaphoric expressions of suicide. Kafka committed artistic suicide when tuberculosis failed to deliver him natural death. Boris Pasternak wrote an epigraph to the successful suicides of this generation: “. . . a man who decides to commit suicide puts a full stop to his being, he turns his back on his past, he declares himself a bankrupt and his memories to be unreal. They can no longer help or save him, he has put himself beyond their reach. The continuity of his inner life is broken, his personality is at an end . . . ”. The suicides retain the freedom to kill themselves which is regarded by them as a form of affirmation.

The artist values his life and truth so much that he cannot withstand their negation. The suicide is deprived of all choices since he loses the uniqueness of his self and the distinctiveness of his situation. Many artists think that suicide is better than survival. Beckett’s characters survive suicide and lead a kind of posthumous immobile lives with a language which confuses rather than mourns their situations. Since the artist cannot escape from the labour of his art, he confronts the confusion of his experiences. The greater the demand on his rationality, the greater the imaginative resources he must seek. The burden of intelligence leaves in dissatisfied and restless. Extremist poets undergo psychic exploration along the crests and troughs of the tolerable and the intolerable. They are committed to the raw material of

dreams. The grief, guilt and rage which they elliptically express through dreams are that which they want to express explicitly and consciously. Dreams are only metaphoric representations of the reality of experiences. Nanditha's poetry is cannibalistic like the extremist poetry of Plath or Sexton.

In the case of confessional, autobiographical, neurotic or narcissistic writers, writing is the direct outcome of psychic disintegration. The artist undergoes a centripetal spin towards suicide due to disintegration of the self. This is countered by a centrifugal desire for psychic wholeness and integration. The artist achieves psychic reintegration through the extreme step of self sacrifice. Thus, he finds a new identity through the very process of self extinction. The artist finds self destructiveness a way to normalize himself, to attain consummation of his art and life. It helps him to cope with threatening crises and to combat overwhelming external forces. In art or literature, it is achieved through the twin processes of transposition of opposites and transmutation of objectives. Self destruction promises both relief and fulfilment. Therefore, the artist discovers certain affinity with death. He creates his own versions of death in order to transcend the situation or resolve the conflict. This is done by changing an intolerable reality into an idealized existence, failing which such a state is anticipated in death. The artist finds life and death so ambiguous that he libidinizes reality and turns death into an idealized state of existence.

Suicide is a strategy of death capable of manipulative acts which includes a sense of healing. The artist finds that though death is a calamity fringed with pain and defeat, it is a fulfilling kind of reality. He finds his art a means to retrieve his self submerged in the misery of existence. Since art is a mirror to nature, the artist finds out his identity through art. The realization of identity changes him beyond redemption. The artist merges with the image. In his quest for identity, the artist vanishes into his art to find fulfillment and a posthumous life materialized in his art. In his struggles with death, he finds that though he cannot overcome it physically, he can transcend it aesthetically. Thus the creative act alters the social will and gains immortality to the artist. Nanditha's suicide is an inevitable consequence of her poetry circumscribed by marginality whereas Shalvy's suicide is a manifest case of scapegoating. Jocasta's suicide is a result of social/cultural orchestration whereas Seymour Glass's suicide is motivated by redundant social relations. Thus, suicide is a very interesting topic to read and research. Anilesh's book provides an introduction to the readers interested in unravelling the mystique around suicide. In this context, it is but worthy to

remember the cryptic statement of the Russian poet Mayakovsky in his suicide note: "I don't recommend it for others."



## INTRODUCTION

Suicide, which is generally understood as the act of intentional self-killing, is as ancient as humanity itself. This fatal gesture has been practised for thousands of years in almost all societies irrespective of their geographical and cultural specialities. As a form of social behaviour, each culture has developed its own views on suicide. These cultural perspectives can be seen ranging from outright condemnation to silent acceptance. Philosophy, psychology and law have tried to demystify this catastrophic act. Such perspectives also vary, from viewing it as the single exit from the universal absurdity to symptomising it as a mental disorder. They have also read it as the final exit from one's problems, a cry for help, an act done upon the realisation of the meaninglessness of life and a powerful means for political protest, amongst other interpretations. But, due to the special nature of suicide, it cannot be said if there is any single reason which functions as the real driving force behind each individual example. Rather, the reasons can be many and complex. It is better to see the reasons for suicide as a conglomeration of different responses to several issues about which, sometimes, even the person who is committing the act is not aware. But, contrary to this fact, it can be seen that cases of suicide can be read as the outcome of isolated immediate reasons. It is as if one commits suicide as the solution of a certain problem which can be analysed objectively. A water-tight compartmentalism has been brought among the reasons of suicide. The paradox in it is that the rate of suicide is high after this "objective analysis" and its "solutions", even in the most developed societies of the world. Since one's identity is conceived as a social and cultural construct, a complex labyrinth of various ideologies and world-views, it can be seen that no "correct" reading is possible on any of our actions including suicide. His/her "manyness" stands beyond all attempts to categorise the act.

A general reading of the criticism concerning the suicides of literary characters and writers will reveal that linear readings have been imposed on the majority of them. Their suicides have been deciphered as the outcome of obvious objective causes. A thorough reading will reveal that most of these critiques are myopic critical exercises done on the basis of particular critical theories. In this regard, they can be seen as readings from certain

fixed positions. Moreover, they can be seen adhering to their principles which forbid other readings from existing, rather than denying those readings to be true.

Considering this, my first attempt in this book is to acknowledge and unveil the chaotic infinity of the driving forces that lie behind the suicides in each text. For this purpose, I apply the poststructural theoretical concept of Text to the phenomenon of suicide. In other words, what I am trying to do in this book is to see the cases of suicide, which I mention here, as texts. I argue that suicide has been previously read as ‘works’, as closed spaces which offered singular meanings. I attempt to read or re-read them as texts, the methodological field of which can be interpreted infinitely. So, in this sense, my endeavour can be summarised under two approaches: unveiling the contradictions and lacunae of the linear critiques of suicide, and simultaneously offering a reading which does not *adhere* to any specific theoretical principle. For analysis, I consider five cases of suicide among which four are from the literary sphere – two are the suicide of literary characters, and two are of writers. The fifth case is based on the actual suicides of the marginalised people of Kerala. For the concept of Text, the ideas of theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and Stanley Fish are adopted.

The first chapter is a general account of the history of suicide. It identifies suicide as a social practice since time immemorial, and notes the practical impossibility to collect all the data of this fatal act within the limited time of my research. So, in this chapter, I mention the different perspectives of suicide. I describe how the prominent cultures, religions, philosophical and psychological schools of the world view the phenomenon of suicide. Accompanying this description, for the easy understanding of the analyses, I give a brief summary of the arguments of four great thinkers on suicide: Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Albert Camus and Emile Durkheim. The second chapter functions as the theoretical framework of the project. This chapter is an attempt to describe in which sense the concept of Text is applied in the arguments. Since the concept of Text is one the most problematical ones in contemporary theory, I try to explain the definitions offered by reputed theorists like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Stanley Fish and the New Historicists. Though they differ in their ideas about Text at several points, this chapter contains their notions of Text which have similarities in nature. The chapter also explains how the researcher views suicide as Text, and analyses the benefits of doing so. The third chapter consists of studies of two literary characters. The first one is Jocasta, the infamous mother/wife of Oedipus, whose story is mentioned in

Sophocles' classic play *Oedipus Rex*. This analysis is an attempt to disclose the gaps in the linear readings done on Jocasta, and to unveil the unnoticed facets of Jocasta's personality. The second case in this chapter is a re-reading of Seymour Glass, the character who was immortalised in the fiction of J.D. Salinger. This reading tries to see a Seymour who is not fragmented by literary principles. The fourth chapter deals with the suicides of two writers, Nanditha and Shalvy. Nanditha, a young poetess, committed suicide in 1990 in Kerala. She can be seen as interpreted largely with the help of her biographical details. In other words, her poems, which were published posthumously, were studied on the basis of the actual events in her life. I attempt to free Nanditha from these critical confinements, and read her suicide as a text, a methodological field which does not hold any confinements. Toward this purpose, I re-analyse a generally unnoticed poem of Nanditha from a different perspective. Shalvy was an equally talented poet in Malayalam literature. He has several similarities with Nanditha, and many of his poems were also published posthumously. Shalvy's poems, which were largely personal and confessional in nature, were not given their due importance. They were suffused with suicidal imagery, and he can be seen admitting his lifelong preoccupation with suicide in the 'pre' and 'post' notes attached to them. But, it can be seen that Shalvy's suicide was read on the basis of the actual events in his life. My attempt, in this study is to bring out Shalvy's suicidal inclination concealed behind and between his lines in various manifestations. The final chapter has two parts which, in a sense, are related to each other. If the first part is based on the disproportionate increase in the rate of the suicide of the subaltern in Kerala, the second is a psycho-cultural analysis of the suicide of a particular person, a girl who belongs to this marginalised group in the region. In this case, the suicide is seen as a cultural text. The study functions on the theoretical presupposition that one's identity is a cultural construct, and each individual has multiple identities. It discloses how the generally unnoticed (or intentionally quietened) psycho-cultural reasons work as potential driving forces of suicide. It also tries to explain how the subaltern re-writes the social/cultural Text of suicide.

These readings, which may seem unconnected at all other points, are connected at one axial point: in my treatment of all of them as Texts, in the modern theoretical sense. Only the "demoniac plurality" of textuality could have enabled me to range so freely among my choices. By the same token, my readings are not *the* readings of suicide, but unlike the work-based reading which closes off further avenues of interpretation, my Text based readings leave the doors open for dialogue, discussion, for almost anything but conspiratorial, authoritative silence. This vocal nature, which I hope my

readings have managed to indicate, can allow reinterpretations of literary characters, and acknowledge that a person can hold within his/her self the identities of writer, individual and suicide among others without contradiction. Most importantly, such an approach may allow the silenced (whose suicides are not usually subjected to critique) and subaltern victims of the social misuse of power not just a voice but even perhaps a Bakhtinian polyphony<sup>1</sup>, one which may carry the seeds of revolution and subversion.

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<sup>1</sup> Polyphony, which literally means ‘many voices’ is a concept used by Mikhail Bakhtin in critical analysis. In literary criticism, the binary monophonic/polyphonic is used to distinguish between literary texts. In the former type of text, the author represents an elevated and authoritative voice above the voices of the main protagonists, and in the latter type, the voices of the author and main protagonists are equal. If monophony is strongly linked with asymmetrical communication models, imbalanced power relations and hegemonic structures in a text, polyphony is associated with symmetrical communication models, equitable power relations and even democracy (Vaagan, Robert W., “Open Access and Bakhtinian Dialogism.” [http://elpub.scix.net/data/works/att/210\\_elpub2006.content.pdf](http://elpub.scix.net/data/works/att/210_elpub2006.content.pdf)).

# CHAPTER I

## PERSPECTIVES OF SUICIDE

Etymologically, the word *suicide*, which is now used both as a verb to refer to the act of intentional self-killing and as a noun describing a person who commits suicide, can be traced back to its Latin roots. It is formed from a combination of the Latin words: *sui-*, which means "of oneself" and *cide* or *cidium* which means "to kill". As a behavioural act seen in society, suicide is probably as ancient as humanity itself. Suicide has been practised for thousands of years – existing in contemporary, historic and prehistoric societies – but its moral, mental, social, ethical and physical dimensions still continue to haunt the individual human mind as well as the collective social conscience, as a source of both embarrassment and guilt whenever it comes up for discussion. The act of suicide has been studied countless times, both to comprehend the motivating factors behind it and to find potential solutions. So far, no research has succeeded in presenting a holistic account, though each attempt has contributed something new to the continuing debates on the subject. Naturally, most of these studies were conducted on the basis of the then dominant ideologies and theories. The concern over this act of self-annihilation is clearly indicated by the fact that a whole branch of enquiry, entitled suicidology – defined as “the study of the causes and prevention of suicide” – exists today as a professional discipline with global academic branches.

Societal responses to suicide range from outraged condemnation through mild disapproval to acceptance, incorporation and even approbation. The varying perceptions of suicide have obviously been shaped in most cases by culturally dominant perspectives on themes such as religion, honour and the meaning of life, and therefore, they differ from time to time and from society to society. Current history provides viewpoints for contemporary opinions on suicide, and the historical approach makes it possible for us to see suicide in different temporal and spatial contexts, to understand the meaning it has for people of varying backgrounds, and to understand the close relation between suicide and changing social conditions, value systems, institutions and ideologies. Since it is manifestly impossible here to do an exhaustive

study on the recorded history of suicide and the reactions and speculations it has engendered, I have selected a few societies and their responses to suicide to analyse in this chapter. I also mention some of the most prominent religious, medical and philosophical views on suicide.

We need to go through the Bible, mainly the Old Testament, if our socio-religious group for study is the Jewish community. It can be seen that biblical suicides are rare. There are only six instances reported in the Hebrew Bible and one in the New Testament. They are the cases of Saul, the first king of Israel; his loyal armour bearer, Ahitophel, the bosom friend of Absalom; Zimri, who usurped the throne of Israel in 876 BC; Samson, who killed himself with the Philistines at the temple of Dagon; and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. Their motivations vary, from a desire for an honourable death and loyalty to their master or friend to the awareness of hopelessness; from rejection to an unextinguished thirst for revenge or a sense of utmost guilt and repentance. However, it should be noticed that Jewish society did not condemn the act, and there was no specific word for suicide in their culture. The 'Suicide' of Abimelech is also mentioned in the Old Testament (Judges), but it is a case open to debate (Perlin).

As far as Greco-Roman culture is concerned, there were several instances of honour suicides committed to avoid capture and humiliation. The cases of Demosthenes, the opponent of the Macedonians, and Hannibal, the Carthaginian chief who killed himself by consuming poison are prominent examples of this kind of suicide. A Samurai<sup>1</sup> kind of bodyguard was also maintained by some Greek captains. They were bound by a vow to live and die with their master. Another form of institutional suicide which prevailed in Greco-Roman civilization was that of widow self-immolation (Perlin). In this custom, which is analogous to the Hindu custom of Sati,<sup>2</sup> a widow or a concubine had to commit suicide when the husband or master died (Perlin). Theatricality and exhibitionism were also evident in some cases, like that of

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<sup>1</sup> The samurai were a Japanese warrior class. They showed utmost loyalty to their masters and they were even ready to commit suicide for their masters (Perlin).

<sup>2</sup> Anglicized as Suttee, it is a feminine noun formed from the verbal root Sat, meaning real, true, good or virtuous. Such epithets were applied especially to a widow who on the death of her husband proved her devotion by being burned with him on his funeral pyre. But early Christian missionaries erroneously applied the term sati to the act itself. Though self-immolation may sometimes have been voluntary, and a genuine expression of devotion, it was more often an obligation imposed by custom, to show her loyalty to husband (Bary 73).

the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus Proteus<sup>3</sup> who killed himself at the Olympic festival in 165 AD. Prominent examples among Roman suicides would be Cassius and Brutus, conspirators in the assassination of Julius Caesar; Pontius Pilate, who was the ‘Judge’ of Jesus; and two emperors, Quintilian and Nero. In short, suicide in Greco-Roman culture was the physical manifestation of several causes, such as unresolved emotional conflict, inescapable humiliation, utmost loyalty and a basic frustration with life.

As far as the Asian cultures are considered, the Chinese, Indian and Japanese attitudes regarding suicide are here taken as representative samples. Though these cultures have internal differences in their attitudes towards suicide, their views can be seen converging at the key point of honour. In Chinese culture, the act of suicide was always regarded ambivalently. Ritual suicide was relatively common among the Chinese as a form of political protest. It was a preferred method either as a means of escaping from persecution or as a form of extreme political protest. Another kind of suicide that existed and was valorised in Chinese culture was that of lovers. Instances of this can be seen in 17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese classics such as the *Butterfly Lovers* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Ling).

In Indian culture, suicide has traditionally had a ritual background, but has also been a form of political protest, something apparent in the relatively recent freedom fighters against colonialism, as a warrior code or a way to escape from being dishonoured by one’s enemies. *Sallekhana*,<sup>4</sup> *Jauhar*<sup>5</sup> and *Sati* were the major forms of ritual suicides in Indian culture.

Perhaps, the greatest traditional reverence for ritual suicide in Asia was seen in Japan. Until recently, when the number of suicides went beyond all limits, they did not consider it a problem. Of course, this tacit sanction of suicide made an extremely complex ritual out of it, and the Japanese called it *Seppuku*, better known as *Hara-kiri* in English lexicons. This refers to the

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<sup>3</sup> “In 165 A.D. He [Proteus] ended his life before a large crowd by cremating himself ritually on a pyre in the Indian manner” (Perlin 7).

<sup>4</sup> The term *Sallekhana* refers to sacred death by fasting when the end of life is very near due to unavoidable circumstances such as illness or old age. This tradition, part of the Hindu culture, can also be seen happening in the case of Vidura in *The Mahabharata*. The *Satyagraha* movement of suicide as protest has the method of fasting until death in common with *Sallekhana*.

<sup>5</sup> Voluntary death of royal Rajput women in order to avoid capture or dishonour at the hand of their enemy.

ritual of self-disembowelling which was performed in feudal Japan to maintain one's honour. Japanese authors have written about this, some of whom – such as Akutagawa, Kawabata and Mishima – actually committed suicide. Japanese law does not criminalise suicide, though now they consider assisting or encouraging suicide as a serious crime (West).

There have always been, however, attitudinal differences between major religions regarding their views on the act of suicide. Christianity has had a changing attitude towards suicide through history. Early Christianity considered death in defence of or conviction in their faith as martyrdom, as an opportunity to die as a blood witness to Christ. It did not condemn the practice. Even the death of Jesus Christ was considered as a kind of suicide by theologians like Tertullian (Perlin). As Christianity became a dominant religion of the Roman Empire, its views on suicide changed considerably. It was St Augustine who presented the first Christian condemnation of suicide. His arguments were based on the biblical commandment "thou shall not kill." This was a humanitarian opposition. Later, suicide was equated with murder, and started being viewed from a criminal perspective. Several legal penalties and social judgments such as confiscation of property, degradation of the cadaver, refusal of burial in consecrated ground, defaming their memories and persecution of their families were what awaited potential suicides, and even attempted suicides. In the sixth century, suicide became a religious sin and an ecclesiastical crime. In modern Christianity, suicide has been considered a grave and mortal sin, and any attempt to commit suicide is threatened with excommunication according to the ecclesiastical rules. Moreover, suicide denies all human claims to enter into Heaven and communion with God, which is the ultimate aim of every Christian. Some Christians, while believing that suicide is generally wrong, may hold the opinion that people who choose suicide are severely distressed and should be forgiven. It also should be mentioned that there is no specific verse in the Bible that explicitly states that suicide leads directly to Hell.

Islam views suicide as a sinful and highly detrimental act to one's spiritual journey. In Islam, killing oneself and killing other people are both prohibited. The Qur'an says: "Do not kill yourself" (4: 29). According to Islamic law, any person who dies by suicide and shows no regret for his wrongdoing will spend an eternity in Hell re-enacting the act by which he took his own life. Suicide is considered a cardinal sin in Islam. Muslims believe those who have committed suicide to be forbidden from entering Paradise. "And do not kill yourselves," declares Quran (nor kill one