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- REZUMAT -

SUICIDUL ÎN LITERATURA ROMÂNĂ

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Suicide is the act of self-suppression, which has been practised since the ancient times.

Literary critics and aesthetes have been debating the issue of taking one's own life, but no thorough study of the suicidal act has been undertaken so far regarding several of the greatest writers in Romanian literature.

I have chosen this topic in order to explain the underlying causes of suicide, in an attempt to decipher the hidden meaning of this act, which is at times intentional, and at other times it springs from an internal urge. I have learned that the person resorting to self-suppression often thinks about the act in great detail, its cause being mainly of psychological nature or not having a solid argument at all. Down the ages, people have chosen suicide for various reasons: whether to save their honour or out of conviction that there is somewhere a better world, whether to find their own self, their identity or they have been pushed into darkness by the traps of unrequited love.

Not intended as an exhaustive study of the topic, the present research paper, titled *Suicide in Romanian Literature*, presents an update on the thinking patterns of the individual resorting to suicide, from the psychological, philosophical, ethical, moral and clinical perspectives.

The hypothesis of the examination is that all suicides, starting yet from Antiquity and continuing to the present day, have intertwining complementary traits, whose logical thread revolves around the individual as a rational being, capable of applying free will in their decisions, including the one regarding the choice of life or death.

As to the research perspective, I have created an analysis of the concept of suicide going back to the ancient times, I have examined the manner in which suicide is addressed by philosophers, psychologists and literary critics. I started by exploring the inner world of the most renowned Romanian writers who chose darkness over light, in an attempt to analyse and decipher the causes that determined them to commit suicide. I noticed that in their case, their work is a reflection of their actions and, conversely, their actions are reflected in their works.

The decision to write about *Suicide in Romanian Literature* came as a result of noticing the fact that this issue has not been dealt with from all perspectives, as it is a complex topic, allowing for a wide range of approaches, in regard both to the human being and the concept.

The individual and the suicide - these concepts involve awareness of the inner being, of the two selves the human being is endowed with upon birth - the human soul and the divine soul. The human soul is prone to perils, it is fragile, vulnerable, and subjected to anguish and

inner torments, as it is capable of loving or hating itself. Excessive love or excessive hatred can lead to inability to understand the human being, to deny the tests life throws at us and, implicitly, to welcome death.

Starting from the fact that life must be lived regardless of the manner, that it is a divine gift and that the man has no right upon his own life, the present paper also brings arguments in favour of the idea that the same man can and does have an authority over his own existence if there are reasons to lead him to death, in spite of having chosen life.

The innovative feature of this work resides in the shift of perspectives from which I analysed suicide and its underlying causes.

Another innovative element of this study is its explanatory endeavour of the works of the Romanian writers who have committed suicide, as well as the identification of the reasons they committed suicide, as reflected in their works.

This gesture is fully mirrored in their writings, as, in itself, the process of writing was a means of escaping the unbearable reality they were living in. Some chose suicide because of unrequited love, others because of honour, loneliness or simply because they did not understand themselves. When you fumble in the dark, trying to find yourself, rediscover yourself, understand your own life, but in the end you become aware of your own finitude, you are left with nothing else but the abyss, the void, passionately yearning to find there, somewhere, far away, beyond, your identity and peace.

An additional innovative aspect is the decyphering of the characters' stimuli to commit suicide in the works of the Romanian authors. For many of them, it is still love which is the fundamental element to self-suppression, seconded by the endless quest for happiness. Generally, the man chases what we call happiness, which is, in fact, a state we cannot define, but which is explained through our deeds and actions. One is happy as long as they are aware of what they are, of what they do and as long as they understand that this state is ephemeral, just as life is. Those that could not, would not or did not manage to understand it committed suicide, considering themselves to be masters of their own life, of the universe, defying the laws of the divine soul.

The current paper is structured into four ample chapters, each chapter organized in subchapters followed by conclusions and it proposes to explore the bleak, though real world of the suicidal act.

The first chapter, titled *A View upon Suicide*, proposes to debate the concept of suicide, as well as the interpretations it has endured along the time. Some believe that suicide means self-destruction, while others prefer to give suicide personal connotations, treating it as a personal decision, without any collateral implications.

Furthermore, suicide can be seen as a heroic deed of an individual who is aware of endangering his own life, but who believes that he is fighting for a noble cause and thus is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. Suicide represents a complex gesture which, at the same time, reflects personality traits. Some researchers attribute the meaning of punishment to it, promoting the idea that the suicidal act expresses the punishment or torture of one's own self. Be that as it may, the action of self-suppression is definite and irreversible. The one who wishes to rebel against the world, does so against their own self, denying themselves any regret or return. What is more, the person who commits suicide is viewed as the sinner who has rejected redemption.

The subsection *The Philosophy of the Suicide* takes the reader on an interesting discovery journey of the concept from the perspective of several philosophers, starting with Hegesias of Cyrene, the ancient Greek thinker, and continuing with the English philosopher David Hume, and other great thinkers like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sartre. The core idea that transcends all their opinions refers to the individual's

indubitable freedom, the free will that can be used to one's heart's desire, whether the person is too happy or too sad.

The Church is unyielding when it comes to suicide: it fully condemns this action, as the Christian arguments against suicide are based on the following verse from the Bible: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."¹ When the love of God disappears, the man ceases to love himself as well, does not value his life anymore, which makes him vulnerable and helpless.

The subchapter *The Psychology of Suicide*, was written with a view to analyse the mechanisms of suicide in relationship to the individual's psychology, to the cognitive ability to discern good from evil. Society has contributed to the man's determination to take away his life. The hostility, fury, aggression, and anger towards their own person are just a few of the psychological factors underlying suicide. There are also myths connected to suicide, which, most of the time, confirm their own likelihood. More often than not it has been proved that the persons committing suicide do not actually want to die, but want their suffering to end. They cannot put a stop to it but through suicide, because of their impossibility to defeat the psychical pain and think rationally. Even though some of the people knew how to ask for specialised help, they were unable to apply what they had learned, to educate themselves through positive thinking, which offers wellbeing and acceptance of one's self.

Suicide can also be found in the mind of every one of us; each of us has got an impression, at a certain point, that our life is insipid, bland, in other words – we feel our life is meaningless. What is crucial in this kind of moments is our capacity to sift our thoughts, to control our thoughts and not to be controlled by our thoughts. At the core of each suicide are a person's feelings in an attempt to overcome critical situations.

Among the risk-factors in suicide I have identified: madness, despair, suicidal heredity and imitation. Each of these plays a decisive role in the execution of the suicidal act. Madness can provide explanation for various types of suicide, whether maniacal – in which the imaginary plays a decisive role -, melancholic – based on depression -, obsessive – caused by a fixed idea -, or impulsive – based on the spontaneity of the person committing suicide.

Suicidal heredity and imitation are the causes of suicide when taking into consideration the genetic code of the person and the peer-pressure effect. "I commit suicide, rid myself of problems, because this is what my peer did and is, most probably, happy."

The second chapter in this paper, titled *Moments and forms in the evolution of the concept of suicide*, recreates concept of suicide from the ancient times to nowadays, referring to its forms too.

Self-suppression is reflected in the most widely known writings of Antiquity, as it was generated by pain, shame, the need to salvage dignity, by unrequited love or by introversion and angst. As far as the gesture itself concerns, Antiquity stresses upon the individual's freedom to choose life or death.

The Middle Ages knew another type of suicide - voluntary death, to escape either poverty or humility. The underlying cause of the Middle Ages explanation of suicide was insanity and the devil's influence upon the man's actions. On the other hand, Renaissance brought about a shift in the mentality of the suicide, focusing on the man's analytical ability, on his rational side, thus trying to find logical explanations to suicide.

The Modern Age is characterised by the fact that it assigns generality to the phenomenon of suicide; there are nuances society perceives it with. Some condemn it, others still promote the individual's total freedom, and others accept it or reject it, depending on circumstances. In the second half of the 19th century, suicide starts to be analysed from the

¹*The Bible or the Holy Writ*, Mark, 12:30, Romanian Orthodox Church Biblical Institute and Mission Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991, p. 1155.

psychological point of view as well. Similarity is drawn among the inner states of the person committing suicide, as various terms, which have not been taken into consideration before, are now brought under scrutiny, like unhappiness, angst, and disquiet.

Forms of Suicide, rounds off our endeavour by identifying and analysing various forms of suicide, in the way these appear in Emile Durkheim's book *On Suicide*.

The individual who suffers from excessive individualism commits suicide out of egotism, not thinking about the people around him, disregarding the others' needs, his own self being most important; that is why at the core of his suicidal act is just he and his problems. In other words, he thinks he is his own master.

On the opposite side is the suicide committed out of selflessness, in which the individual considers that it is his duty to take his own life when, because of his anguish, he becomes a burden to the people around him, bringing on a lot of pain and suffering. He believes that through his action he is saving the people who care about him from any attention he might have requested. In society, old age or illness have caused a lot of victims of this kind of suicide committed out of selflessness.

Another form of suicide is the one in which society pushes the person into committing suicide out of anomie, a society guilty of strongly polarising between the rich and the poor. The individual who feels aggrieved by the society because of his aspirations will be frustrated and will resort to suicide as an extreme solution. Economic crises also cause suffering to people with ideals, who strive to surpass their social condition, who have dreams, and then all these crumble under the walls of an inhibitory society.

The next chapter of the paper, titled *The Literary perspective of Suicide*, investigates the cases of several important writers in universal literature who chose death. It works as a preamble to the following subchapters as well. Here I have also examined several characters from the works of foreign writers who resorted to self-suppression.

Jack London, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath are just several examples of writers who committed suicide. Jack London lived an adventurous type of life, which exposed him to lots of illnesses and physical suffering and his suicide happened during a renal colic, when pain was unbearable. Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway and Sylvia Plath all share psychic instability, bipolar disorder, caused by personal crises and acute suffering they were experiencing.

The iconic character in the universal literature who lives the drama of unrequited love at great intensity is the young Werther. He commits suicide out of love, a melancholic type of suicide, most common in the individuals who are the object of our study. The book *The Sufferings of Young Werther* was a moment of inspiration for other people who had chosen to commit suicide.

The eponymous characters of the play *Romeo and Juliet* also commit melancholic suicide, unable to live one without the other.

Madame Bovary chooses self-suppression as a form of rebellion against her own life she detested, being unhappy with her own fate. She lived her life following the perfect and ideal patterns from the books she was reading. Most frequently, she mistook literature for life.

Anna Karenina puts a violent end to her life when she is no longer desired by the man she has developed a blind and eventually murderous passion for.

In the ensuing chapters can be seen the relationship and analogy between the writers' and the characters' suicide in the universal literature as compared to their suicide in the Romanian literature.

The Romanian Writer's Suicide before World War represents a vast subchapter of the paper, which tackles the dramatic manner in which suicide was the final act of some notable writers in the Romanian literature.

A writer who left an indelible mark upon pre-World War I poetry was Veronica Micle. She loved tremendously and this love killed her. We can thus state that her suicide belongs to the category of the melancholic ones, who have committed suicide out of love. The love between her and the most acclaimed Romanian poet, Mihai Eminescu, was a tumultuous and tense one, subjected to the political intrigues of the time. Her poems are easily pervaded by the disappointment caused by unfulfilled love, as well as her proneness to death. She was convinced that since she could not enjoy her love in harmony here, on earth, she would do it beyond this realm, in a world without prejudices. That was why, when Eminescu passed away, she believed that life was meaningless and, after several months, she chose to join him, thus resorting to the act of self-suppression. Suicide does not stir things much because no one can be aware of the ruthless tides of love someone is going through unless they experience them.

The correspondence between the two reveals the poetess' feelings and agony. More than often have I found at the end of her letters her desire to die and her yearn for the last kiss. This repetitive wish also shows a certain degree of sensitivity of a female's soul, longing for love, tenderness and affection. Veronica Micle's poetry abundantly exposes the passionate moments, fears and crises she was experiencing in her love for Eminescu.

The picture of the melancholic suicides is completed by Alexandru Odobescu, another writer for whom life was not worth living without the woman of his love. The passionate love he nurtures for his Geography teacher, Hortensia Kaminger, kills him. The woman he is madly in love with rejects his love and he succumbs to despair. However, with Odobescu, not only is unrequited love the main cause of his suicide, but also the precarious financial position he found himself in as a result of the extravagant lifestyle he had been enjoying. Could his suicide be seen as a means of salvaging his honour, as redemption from the toils of love or salvation from illness? Whichever the answer, the action was done on the grounds of great physical and psychological sufferings.

Dimitrie Anghel is another melancholic suicide who breathed life through the suicidal pores of love. He felt deep love for Natalia Negru, the wife of his best friend, Ștefan Octavian Iosif. Their correspondence is ample, rich in appellations, each word exuding the great love they were enjoying. At first, Helianta rejects Anghel's love, who is stifling her with telegrams, flowers, presents, only to accept it eventually as an invaluable gift. She cannot resist the obsessive kind of love she receives from Dimitrie Anghel, who has a passionate temper, intelligently aware of the laws of female seduction. Having left Iosif, Natalia dedicates herself to Anghel fully. Apparently, the two can live neither together nor apart. The excessive jealousy of the two destroys their trust and their being together no longer offers them the ebullience of the love they once knew. They quarrel more often and the moment Anghel believes he killed Natalia by shooting her reveals the drama of the passion the two share. A passion that kills and kills itself. The loneliness he dies in after shooting himself is anticipated in the lines of his poem *The Crickets' Weeping (Plânset de greieri)*.

The next subchapter of the paper debates the suicide committed by several writers during the interwar and postwar periods.

Urmuz, the writer who perceives this world as a transition state, suffers from loneliness and introversion. By committing suicide, he wishes to find the active good. In this case, it was not love which prompted him to commit suicide, but excessive loneliness, withdrawal from the world. This had affected his interaction with the people around him; he did not have many friends or a family. His death can be considered bizarre, resembling the bizarre characters he had created in his works.

He chose a pistol to end his life with, taking into account the fact that some time before resorting to this extreme gesture, he had paradoxically written an ode to this murderous tool.

He ends his life in an insipid place - some shrubs on the edge of the road - as a symbol for the alienation he had lived in.

Another writer who thought death was better than life and who is also the object of our study is Ilarie Voronca. Just as his predecessors, Voronca is also desperately in love with a pianist, Rovena, although his letters express his love for his wife, Colomba, as well.

Even though their love has endured the test of time, the fact that the woman he loves rejects him makes him question the meaning of life. In Voronca's case, it is not only love which leads him to committing suicide, but his constant search for self, for his identity. He had a restless life sometimes caused both by his being Jewish and, at other times, by too much suffering love brought about - the same kind of love that killed Odobescu, Micle, Anghel, the same kind of love that steals lives without resentment, displaying lust for death.

Voluntary death was also chosen by Paul Celan, a writer with an unsettling existence, who experienced the drama of a great love with the writer Ingeborg Bachmann. His world was most frequently a bleak one, additionally darkened by his marriage problems. Eventually, the ruthless illness of the century - depression - took hold of him, forever. His sadness, his thoughts and disquiet are all shown in his poetry as well as the correspondence he kept with his friends. His poems are deeply etched with profound meditations on the passing of time and the frailty of this life.

Ilarie Chendi is another writer and literary critic who was in search of light. As a polemical spirit, with a sound foundation in the times he was living in, he considered that the man can be the creator of his own life by starting from life and building himself an ideal.

Chendi knew how to hide his sadness under the mask of happiness. He always sought his exit from time, he always sought his place in the world and his meaning in life. The mental illness he suffered from took hold of him and when he could not contain it any longer, he resorted to suicide, firmly believing that in the life beyond he would find the place he had been looking for in this world.

Every word in his debut poem *The First Step in the World (Primul pas în lume)* exudes the pain that tormented his soul, the disappointment of finding himself in a world he did not understand, and which did not understand him.

Another lively spirit of the Romanian literature that took away her own life was Anișoara Odeanu. Her existence was a permanent oscillation among love, life and death. Her writings were marked by a pervasive smell of death. Anișoara Odeanu's artistic credo was that there was no love without death. Love and death were complementary. That was why, when the love she had found in her beloved died, she faltered no longer and committed suicide. She knew she would not be able to live without love. She had always been in search of an inner balance. She felt she could not find the meaning of her existence and that prevented her from getting hold of herself, knowing herself.

Gherasim Luca commits suicide after lucidly having drawn up several suicide scenarios. Strangulation, shooting, stabbing himself in the heart with a knife, poisoning or voluntary cessation of breathing are the methods the writer is contemplating, but does not choose any. What saves him from life is water. He throws himself into the Seine having lived a life full of anguish, frustration and quests to exit the world.

Gherasim Luca was a poet of contrasts; his desire was to reinvent both love and death, as well as the world. He had a troubling existence, being forced by circumstances to live abroad. He never found his identity either in his own or foster country. He always sought to decipher the meaning of life, love and death. He was larger than the world he lived in, which could not understand his lively and creative spirit, as well as his constant search for a redeeming meaning. Death delivered him from life, though it was not natural death, but a voluntary one, which he chose as a last resort to finding the meaning of his existence.

The creator of a novel poetic language, in which poetry and life are inseparable, expresses suicidal thoughts in his writings clearly and concisely, as if enthralled by the idea. The beginning of his work *A Love Novel (Roman de dragoste)* is defined by his contemplation of suicide. Corpses, people who kill themselves and those who hang themselves easily make room in Gherasim Luca's texts in the most natural manner. Suicide had always been in his soul, waiting, as an executioner, for the right moment.

Another writer discussed in this paper and who committed suicide is Florin Mugur. His life was a continuous battle with the illness. He lived through his illness with his wife, Iulia, by his side, to whom he dedicated his whole life up to the moment she died. The pain caused by the loss of his wife and that of his father left the poet with deep wounds, which would never heal; on the contrary, these deepened. He fought a relentless battle against his illness, continuously taking tranquillisers and becoming addicted to sleeping tablets. The profound pain and loneliness he fell prey to upon the loss of his wife made him unable to find his place in the world, contemplating suicide shortly after Iulia's death. His first plan to commit suicide was unsuccessful due to high hopes for better times and the changes that happened in Romania starting with 1989. He hoped he would be able to live to gift the world with his knowledge through his writings. He hoped he would find peace and endure loneliness easier if the world gave him the opportunity to write freely, unrestrained. However, the changes in society were not favourable; on the contrary, these increased his anguish and loneliness. All his life was a continuous battle with his illness, he was limping and shaking. Otherwise, the shake is a frequent leitmotif in his writings.

In his works, suicide, death, illness, pain, and suffering were his favourite topics. Forsaken by his friends, left without any moral support, no longer able to fight his destiny, Florin Mugur finds his eternal sleep with the help of the sleeping tablets.

The gallery of the suicidal writers concludes with the artful poet Ion Stratan, who, in his turn, decided that death was better than life. His joviality, his playful nature and his subtle irony, which can be traced in his poems, did not manage to support his love of life till the end. He loved life passionately, though he loved death to the same degree. The illness of the century – depression – did not avoid him and made him contemplate death, offering him the certainty that death was his only escape. Having experienced two divorces, his mother's passing away with whom he had lived after his second divorce made him question his own existence.

His play with water and light did not kill him, though his play with death proved fatal. He chose voluntary death too soon, though the critics of the time greatly appreciated his artful use of words. In his last volumes of poems, the metonymy of the word became the metaphor of death and the attempt to escape into timelessness.

The State of the Suicidal Character is the last chapter of the present paper, which draws attention to a detailed presentation of the drama the characters that commit suicide experience in the works of Romanian writers.

Silvestru Capitanovici, from George Călinescu's novel *The Wedding Book (Cartea nunții)*, is trapped in loneliness, being the victim of a tainted social environment despite his obsession to start a family. Being a bleak character, doomed to commit suicide from the very beginning of the novel, he does not manage to adapt to the society of the times, thinking the latter is rejecting him. Before choosing the best means of committing suicide, by hanging himself, he lucidly analyses every step of this procedure. His suicide can fall under the type committed in order to escape anomie.

Pavel Anicet, a character from Mircea Eliade's novel *Return from Heaven (Întoarcerea din rai)*, is an intellectual incapable of setting his life in order. His love for the two women

throws him off balance, brings him on the brink of despair, thus his act of self-suppression is premeditated and carefully considered.

Cezar Petrescu's novel *Darkening (Întunecare)* revolves around a character representing the type of intellectual who is misunderstood by society, gradually transformed into an anti-social and lonely individual. Radu Comșa lives the drama of love and war. The suicide he commits out of anomie by plunging into a lake is iconic of the character maimed by war and love.

Ana and Liana are two of the characters in Liviu Rebreanu's writings who commit suicide. Though of different natures, both socially and temperamentally, this comes to prove that suicide does not choose certain categories of people. The manners of committing suicide are different. Ana chooses to hang herself to escape a life tormented by lack of love in her marriage to Ion. Liana shoots herself in order to escape the rigours of a society with strict moral and ethical rules.

Another suicidal female character is Olguța from Ionel Teodoreanu's trilogy *In Medeleni (La Medeleni)*. Fighting a ruthless disease, not receiving the love of the man she loved passionately, Olguța commits suicide, thus saving herself from the claws of cancer and unrequited love. We can conclude that this suicide is an altruistic one, as the character saves herself from herself and saves the ones around her from the burden of caring for an ill person – a redeeming suicide from illness and love.

Ladima is another suicidal intellectual from Camil Petrescu's novel *The Bed of Procrustes (Patul lui Procust)*, who is misunderstood by the society, trapped in depression, angst, and his blind passion for the woman he loves. Just like in Pavel Anicet's and professor Silivestru's cases, Ladima directs his own death step by step with strange lucidity. His inability to set order in life and his sick love for Emilia cause a kind of depression that slowly eats him up inside and leads him to suicide. That is how he takes revenge on his fate.

Victims of society are Uncle Anghelache from Ion Luca Caragiale's short story *Inspection (Inspectiune)* and also Ițic Ștrul from the novel *Ițic Ștrul, deserter...(Ițic Ștrul, dezertor...)* from Liviu Rebreanu. Anghelache's suicide remains a mystery. Upon having examined the case, it has been concluded that Anghelache does not refute the inspector's opinion, that of being an honest and modest man and a man of integrity. At this point, his gesture is meaningless or has another reason the character did not reveal in the plot. We can thus infer that loneliness and fear of the unknown pushed him into committing suicide, bearing in mind the fact that he had no family of his own and that he lived together with his mother and sister.

Ițic Ștrul, the jew soldier, kills himself from honor, choosing the worthy death through courage, despite the cowardice of letting himself killed by the enemy. He is under the influence of a racist society that decides his destiny.

We will end the list of suicidal characters with a bizarre one - Turnavitu - from the writing of a suicidal author, Urmuz. An interesting match of the destinies of the two – character and writer -, should we take into consideration the fact that the character is the writer's construction and bears his mark to the deepest feelings of his being.

Turnavitu, similarly to the one envisaging him, suffers from solitude, nostalgia, uncertainty, and insecurity.

Suicide does not choose its victims; on the contrary, it is the victims that choose suicide. As we can observe, the victims of suicide are people of all walks of life, of all ages and of different temperament, people who are both exceedingly joyous and the ones who are sad, rich or poor, old or young, intellectuals or clerks. Yet another aspect to strengthen the idea that we are all equal in front of death.

Suicide does not ask, but simply happens, as a decisive act of halting life.