DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE IN WOMEN CHARACTERS OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract:

Literature is the art of words that describe life. In the case of human life, suffering plays a special role, and literature scrutinized man’s suffering and described it in its various forms.

This article presents three cases – literary characters whose psychopathology we interpreted on the basis of the literary text: Tincuța – from the novel “Tănase Scătiu” by Duluiu Zamfirescu, Ana – from the novel “Ion” by Liviu Rebreanu and Margareta – from the theater play “Gaitele” [Jays] by Alexandru Kirițescu.

Keywords: anxiety, depression, suicide, Zamfirescu, Rebreanu, Kirițescu

Even though women did not play a major role in the political and social events of early 20th Century Romania, they endured a lot of pain by them. We present these sufferings as mirrored by the Romanian literature of the time and interpret them from a medical point of view.

We analyzed the psychopathology of three characters: Tincuta – from the novel Tănase Scătiu by Duluiu Zamfirescu, Ana – from the novel Ion by Liviu Rebreanu, and Margareta – from the play Gaitele [Jays] by Alexandru Kirițescu. From the literary text we collected patient information and data for the mental state examination, and based on the findings we established the most probable diagnosis.

Tincuta – a bridge between the landlord and the steward

From an esthetic viewpoint, the work of Duluiu Zamfirescu (1858-1922) is marked by classical orientation (1) and classical balance (2). His most important achievement is his contribution to the development of the Romanian novel. Tănase Scătiu (1907) is the second volume of the cycle Comanesteanu’s Novel, the first serial novel in Romanian literature (3).

His ideological development under the Junimea trend guides Zamfirescu toward the social novel, the conflict that opposes the old Romanian nobility (boyars represented by Dinu Murugule, a lover of the land and of the peasants) to the new rural bourgeoisie (represented by Tanase Scatiu, the prototype of the upstart steward, who have nothing to do with tradition and land ties and whose only purpose in life is to become rich by exploiting the peasants; this social category will hold a considerable influence in the late 19th Century Romanian political scene) (3).

The action of the novel takes place in Walachia (south of modern Romania). Tincuta, boyar Dinu Murugule’s daughter, marries, at her parents’ will, Tanase Scatiu, and thus has to abandon her dream of love for Mihai. She gets trapped in an unhappy marriage: “From the very first day [...] Tincuta’s life was a constant fight against misfortunes”.

Tincuta’s character is outlined both by direct description by the author (“twisted nature”, “a miser and a bragger”, “tyrant of the house”) and indirectly – by dialogues or actions: (to the horse driver): “Get off, asshole [...] for the last twenty years you keep going but never leave. If you could just go to hell [...]”, he whipped the horses and took off leaving the coachman in the mud”;

“The master strikes like blind and the servant defends his head with both hands” (to his daughter).

“Zoita, my pet, stay here.
The girl is not too keen [...]”

Don’t want to stay with daddy? he asks putting on a milder voice.

No, she says, on the verge of tears.

Then just f* off [...] Go away! Out of my sight, you grizzly chicken [...] Damned family breed!”

As we can see, Scatiu has a despicable nature, rude and vulgar, a man dominated by bouts of rage. He offends and diminishes his wife: “Aw! The stupid wife I’ve got” [...] Tincuta casts him a glance. She’s all flushed with anger [...], tears have come to her eyes.

“You’re all a bunch of nutters, you and him, and all your kind [...]”

“You want to end my life before it’s finished”

“Oh please, all of you are the devil’s work, you don’t perish easily”

Frustrated emotionally, hurt by the rift between dream and reality, Tincuta lives in regret of her old love dream for Mihai. During the years of the harsh and humiliating existence with Scatiu, Tincuta develops a depressive disorder, with elements of anxiety: “Wherever she turned her mind she saw only deep desolation: she loathed her husband, she revolted against the society that could tolerate him, against God who kept him alive; her father had become selfish, childish, obsessed solely by his land [...] beside her, everything was painful and bleak” (depressive component): “For some time already, I have started to fear something unknown” (anxiety component).

Tincuta had had medical consultation and received treatment, which she discontinued later: “The doctors believe I have a nerve disease [...]”

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me all kind of drugs, which made me sleep like a stone. I gave them up”. Under the circumstances, the character’s disease progresses toward major depression: “The life with her husband seemed a monstrosity”, “The smallest anything made her cry”, “No one understood her”, “She couldn’t sleep and lost weight”. She felt abandoned by the whole world, drained of strength, without hope”. The constant conflict between the landlord and Scățiu amplifies Tincuta’s mental strain: “Please father... What can I do?... He chases me away, you chase me away... I am so miserable!”

The depressive patient’s perception of the world and life is vividly depicted by the writer: “She gave him the letter, which he threw into the stove. They were both looking at the burning paper; which crumpled and revealed the black letters on the grey background. Tincuta nodded her head.

“Tincuta nodded her head.

“This is how all that is human perishes [...] The idea of death had budded in her mind for a while now. She felt sick and hoped to die soon”.

From a psychological point of view, the events are simplified, while from the point of view of the epic construct they are hastened, precipitated (3). Tincuta probably dies from conditions secondary to depression, which are not described. “Her tormented life dwindled away slowly, little by little, leaving only the mark of the very last moment of consciousness, that she stopped hurting. She died with the clear thought of the happiness to be no more”.

In the end the narrator punishes the main character. The peasants rise against Scățiu and after getting justice from the state institutions they attack him and kill him in a scene that forecasts the peasants' uprising from the novel Răscoala [Uprise] by Liviu Rebreanu: “In one second they broke him to pieces [...] At the inquest his hands crossed over in defense over her round belly [...] [Vasile Baciu] thrust his hand into her hair and with a brutal wrench brought her down to the ground. Then he began to punch her with his fists in the head, the ribs, the belly, in a quick frenzy, panting and roaring: You slut!... slut!... I’ll kill you now!... Tramp!... Glanetșu’s son... is that what you wanted? Here then, dirty whore! [...] His eyes swollen with rage fell on the mocking belly and he started kicking her with his feet, yelping with satisfaction, as if every kick took a burden off his chest. Ana’s crossed arms tried instinctively to shield the fierce blows that threatened the fruit of her sin [...] Vasile Baciu dragged her inside, almost unconscious, closed the door and continued the beating fervently”. The next day Vasile “flung himself on Ana again, though she was covered in bruises, and beat her till the neighbors rescued her from his hands [...] From then on no day passed without beating her until he got tired”.

Sent by her father to discuss marriage arrangements with Ion, “Ana set off to Glanetșu’s house with her heart heavy, her body mortified. Her mind was drained like a dry sponge. No hope, no faith. She walked without knowing, like a chased away dog. Her pace was quickened only by the terror of the old man’s strange gaze, in which her death seemed to be floating [...] and found herself in Glanetșu’s house without realizing whether she had met anyone on her way or whether outside was sunshine or rain [...] The girl sat on the trunk uninvited, as her knees were trembling like jelly.” By this time the character already suffers of depressive disturbance. The etiology of this phase of depression includes the cruelty of the father for his daughter. Ana, childish and candid, still felt love for Ion: “Ana could only think of him, forgetting all shame, beatings and suffering”, despite his contemptuous attitude (“I loathe Ana more than I would a witch”). Ana behaves like a victim fascinated by the prey animal that caught her.

The wedding gives Ana the illusion of happiness for a brief moment: she floats “on a big happy cloud and feels redeemed for all the pain”. When during the dancing Ion embraces Florica passionately, Ana feels that “her
hopes of happiness are shattered and she falls back into the same wretched life. Suddenly she starts crying bitterly [...] Later on Ion sits beside her and says coldly: - Why whimper now? You are not going to your death sentence”.

Ion and his father-in-law are in a constant fight for possessions; Ana is just a means, hateful for both. Because Ana does not succeed in convincing her father to transfer the assets to Ion, the latter begins to assault her physically for the first time: “with great lust he raised his hand and hit her on the right cheek, then with the back of his hand on the left [...] and hit her again over the eyes that looked at him in fear [...] You also want to crush me? You have no pity either? Ion spits with relief and goes into the house”.

At this moment the character’s psychiatric condition develops into major depression. “Now she finally had to admit that Ion hated her and all of a sudden she wondered why she couldn’t see it until then?”. The lack of hope throws a bridge between depression and the suicidal tendency (4).

Under the stimulus of unbearable psychological pain, Ana enters the realm of suicidal thinking (the incubation phase of suicide, during which the individual visits the idea of death and questions the need of dying, in this case under psychopathological sociogenic factors (5)): “Ion comes into the courtyard yelling [...] lashed forward like a hawk and shouted [...] brandishing his knife: - Run, tramp, go away before I send you to hell!... and stay away from my house or I’ll slice you to pieces! Thief [...] When Vasilie saw her approach [...] he shouted through his teeth like a beast: - Don’t come to me, you broad, or I’ll break every bone in you! You wanted a beggar, now stay with a beggar... Look at him! Isn’t he proud? Now you’ve learnt your lesson [...] Where will I go now, she wondered, and all the answers were gloomy [...] tempting her to put an end to her misery, as life was no longer worthwhile [...] That night for the first time she realized the abyss in which her life was thrown and the thought of death came upon her like a happy escape [...] like a tranquil shore where all pain and hope had disappeared.

Ana’s nervous tension continues to increase and reaches a peak: “The feeling of being useless in the world follows her everywhere [...] She lived, but without any hope, life had become a burden.” The moment of self destructive outburst, in which Ana embraces the idea of committing suicide, follows shortly: “When she closed her eyes she always saw the water and a heavy hand was pushing her towards it, like to a shore washed away of all traces and regrets [...] I shall kill myself, Ion

Yeah, damn well go and do that, this way I might get rid of you!” At this time the suicide victim communicates her intentions, sends desperate signals, trying in vain to communicate with Ion.

The characteristic features of major depression are described once again by the author: “She found no joy in life”. “She felt her heart dry and empty, like a bag thrown on the side of the road by an indifferent passer-by. Little by little her mind switched off.”

During the traumatization (the phase of putting into practice the preconceived self destructive act (5)), Ana commits a psychotic suicide by asphyxiating (hanging): “taking and unfolding the rope [...] in her hands, she was full of joy [...] She rose on tiptoes, took the loop with both hands and put her head through [...] She closed her eyes and tried to let go of the rope [...] The rope became tighter and tighter. There was no pain [...] She felt a tickling and had to open her mouth and eyes. Suddenly it crossed her mind that now she was going to die, she panicked and wanted to reach the ground with her feet. But she moved them in vain, her feet found no support. Then she got frightened and started to choke. Her tongue swelled and filled her mouth, so she had to put it out... Then her whole body tingled. She felt an immense pleasure [...] Her bulging eyes saw nothing. Only the tongue continued to swell, defying and mocking, like a revenge for the silence to which she had been condemned all her life”.

The inner attitude of the suicide victim is ambivalent till the last moment: she wants self destruction and salvation at the same time (“it crossed her mind that that now she was going to die, she panicked and wanted to reach the ground and escape death”) (4).

Not long after, Ion would die too, killed by Florica’s husband who discovered their love affair.

Margareta – the tragic comedy

Alexandru Kiricescu (1888-1961) is one of the most prominent playwrights from the period between the two wars. Gaitele [Jays] (initially titled “The Wasp Nest”), his main work, is a comic satire of the manners of the bourgeoisie of Bucharest in the 1930s.

The action takes place in the rich family originated from Oltenia, in Aneta Duduleanu’s house, the widow of the boyar Tasse Duduleanu. Aneta together with her sisters, Zoia and Lena, are the “jays”, who pass judgments on everyone around, but display a suburban behaviour, playing cards and gossiping all day long, while their favorite entertainment is to watch funeral processions from the balcony (7). The play presents the evolution of the conjugal relation between Margareta, Aneta’s youngest daughter, pregnant by the young journalist Mircea Aleea. An orphan since the age of six and very poor, Mircea accepts to be Margareta’s kept husband. „MIRCEA: […] I really and truly believed that I escaped... forever escaped the dejection in which I was rolling till then...”

Initially Mircea represents for Margareta the ideal in life freed of the coarseness of her family. 

Pervaded by the comic language, the play is an outflow of wickedness, with constant irritation and interruption of the dialogue partner; thus a permanent tension is built, scattered with outbursts: at some point or other every character "shouts", "yells", "jumps", "jerks", or is "in the throes of a terrible fury"  

"MIRCEA: [about Margareta] She has complained of dizziness for four days... sometimes nausea... [...] No longer than today she threw up [...] ZOLA [jumps]: Oh, she's got that... meningitis. WANDA: Meningitis is in the brain, auntie ZOLA: [...] I meant the other... appendicitis... get her operated. (to Margareta). Don't be afraid of the knife, pet, otherwise the pus will break your bowels and you die within 24 hours [...] I am more of a doctor than any doctor. I buried three children and also mummy and daddy..."  

Margaret's drama slowly builds up. With a behavior detached from the typical Duduleni's rudeness, she is held in contempt by her family. 

"ANETA (to Margareta)... Oh dear, how stupid you are! Who you take after I couldn't tell, as I was very smart [...] Just look in the mirror and see what a face you got [...] MARGARETA: She's not my mother, she's my enemy [...] I can't stand her"  

As a constant laughing stock of the "jays", she considers Mircea her only moral support:  

["LENA (to Margareta): Wait and see: it was like a big black water... You were on the shore with Angelica [...] you know... the one who died in childbirth [...] and the water was rising and coming and roaring... You wanted to jump in, but kind of shy. Then she grabbed you by the shoulders... ANETA: Who did, sis? LENA: Angelica, sis... and she pushed you into the stream... ANETA: But Angelica didn't die in childbirth. LENA: Then how did she die? ANETA: Of peritonitis LENA (adamant): That's childbirth! D you think that Dumitrescu's niece, Anuta, died of something else? ANETA: That one died of cancer. Cancer ate into her chest [...] LENA (determined): Childbirth I say. Her breasts fevered with milk and gone to cancer. [...] ANETA (to the other wailing two): Ho now, shrews, you'll have enough time to weep her! [...] MARGARETA (who had listened in total silence, suddenly started to cry in a terrible panic that seized her entire body): Mircea!... Mircea!... Mircea!..."  

Margaret expresses her despair regarding the atmosphere in her mother's house: "MARGARETA (bursting out): [...] I'm sick of it...! I can't stand it anymore... I'll kill myself!"

Margaret suffers from a depressive disorder, caused by the continuous contempt and mockery from her family. The only thing that obstructs the depression to progress is her love for Mircea: "MARGARETA (simply): He is the only love I have in this world". However, Mircea is seduced by Wanda Serafin, a woman of doubtful morals arrived from Paris, a niece of Tasse Duduleanu, to whom he confesses the lack of any feelings for Margareta.  

"MIRCEA: She removed all emotion from her existence, there is such a void around her heart that nothing vibrates anymore, there is no life, nor feeling, except... WANDA: You... MIRCEA (oblivious): Me. WANDA: Horrible creature..."]  

When she sees the coldness and lack of feeling in her husband's behavior, Margareta undergoes the transition toward major depression:  

"MARGARETA (cling to him in despair): Mircea, you don't love me anymore!... You run away from me!... You've become a stranger [...] (between sobs): [...] I am so miserable... So miserable [...] Don't you think it's odd that I, the naive one – whom my family, my friends consider stupid – suddenly understand so many things? MIRCEA: I admit! [...] You drove me insane with your fantasies, your insinuations! [...] (he shouts) You must stop, stop it now! [...] MIRCEA (roars into her face): Beast... You are truly one with your beastly family! [...] MARGARETA (sustaining the blow): what... what... MIRCEA: You are!... You may say that over and over, like an idiot! [...] [...] Monster!... Murderer! [...] MARGARETA (with tears in her eyes): Whatever you say, my love... [...] MIRCEA (turning his head, through his teeth): Hysterical woman..."

Figure 3. Margareta (Maria Ploae) – screen shot from the film, directed by H. Popescu, 1987  

The moment of the self destructive outburst is when, due to the family indiscretions, Margareta finds out that Mircea has a love affair with Wanda. Traumatization follows shortly, Margareta commits suicide by a chemical method (overdose of opium infusion):  

"ANETA (showing a pack of letters): Here! [...] Letters from your husband to Wanda. He writes her three a day... [...] LAINACHE: Love letters. MARGARETA (sustaining the blow): what... what... GEORGES (brutally): Mircea cheats on you with Wanda... Mircea is Wanda's lover. MARGARETA (deadly calm): It's not true. [...] (During this time Margareta drops her head on the back of the armchair and waits. Georges reads). "I have barely left your arms and I already tremble with the desire to see you again. What poison have you dripped into my blood, Wanda?" (He stops) MARGARETA (breathless): Read on... [...] GEORGES (reading): ‘I got home, I entered our room [...] Margareta slumped in her recliner she doesn't seem to
leave at all now, gave me a dead smile. There was an awful smell of ether and bromide around her... Wanda, Wanda, if there wasn't for your love to... (he stops) [...] ANETA (impatient): Why do you stumble all the time? Can't you see the girl wants to know everything? GEORGES (upset): Wait, I can't make out the writing, it's all scrawled... IANACHE (sarcastically): His hand was shaking... he was excited... [...] GEORGES [...]... “...to support me, to give me strength [...], I would empty the bottle of laudanum I see on the medicine table, the drink of oblivion and of nothingness...” MARGARETA (simply): Read... (She goes to the medicine table and pours a full glass from a red labeled bottle, while Georges reads on [...] All of a sudden Margareta drops the glass she was holding, which breaks with a noise. She falls on the floor. Georges, with a strangled voice) Margot!... ANETA (cries): What did she drink? What did she drink? [...] The bottle with the red label... What did she drink? IANACHE (rushes to the table, takes the bottle and reads): Laudanum.

Margareta's suicide distresses Mircea emotionally and he refuses to continue his relationship with Wanda.

In lieu of conclusions

All three characters come from well-off families, and in the etiology of their psychopathology we find social factors – the struggle for wealth of the people around them. While Tincuta marries somewhat forcibly, Ana and Margareta love their husbands and the revelation of unreciprocated feelings is an emotional shock.

Starting from her husband's humiliating behavior and the constant conflict between husband and father, Tincuta initially develops an anxious-depressive disturbance that progresses into major depression; she succumbs – most probably – to secondary conditions. Tincuta's psychopathology is relatively briefly presented, in a simple, swift manner. From a medical point of view some of the stages of the disease evolution are omitted, while the precise cause of death is left out; one may guess, however, that certain conditions secondary to major depression indirectly led to her death.

Ana's psychopathology emerges under her father and husband's physical and verbal aggressions, together with the contempt of the people around her. Initially she develops an anxiety disturbance, which quickly shifts to anxious-depressive disorder and ends in major depression and suicide. The onset and evolution are presented accurately and in detail from a medical point of view.

Given the literary genre of the work of origin, Margareta's case is presented with relative accuracy from a medical viewpoint. Her psychopathology could have also been worsened by dysgravidia. Held in contempt by her family, rejected and betrayed by her husband, Margareta undergoes the stages of depressive disorder to suicide.

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