An Existentialist Study: Suicide as a Consequence of Madness in Joyce Carol Oates’s Fiction

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ABSTRACT — Joyce Carol Oates’s fiction reflects the existentialist psychiatrist R.D. Laing’s view (1967) that the individual is educated by the so-called ‘normal’ man to lose herself/himself to become absurd. Populated by mad characters, Oates’s fiction suggests that, inspite of its emphasis on individualism, the American culture with its conflicts and contradictions denies authentic selfhood and leads to mass. Many of Oates’s mad characters seek refuge in death. As death is an important part of the life-cycle, it is useless and unrealistic to deny the finality of death. This study will explore the violent and silent suicides of her mad characters in the light of R. D. Laing’s definition of madness and argue that, obsessed with the search for authentic individuality, Oates respects the other within the self and the natural world by emphasizing the need to go beyond the conflicts and contradictions of the culture. The capitalistic system makes people selfish and this selfishness in turn makes the system continue. Reflecting the Nietzschean view, Oates destroys the “selfish” and rotten by presenting “self murders” in order "to exorcise evil.”

Keywords — Death, R. D. Laing, Madness, Suicide.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE mad characters like Hugh, the grotesque cartoonist in the Assassins, the psychopathic serial killer Colin in Soul/Mate, the award winning poet Barbara in “Accomplished Desires”, the Jewish student Allen Weinstein in “In the Region of Ice” and the psychopathic student Anthony in “Bodies” seek refuge in death. Because death is an important part of the life-cycle, it is useless to deny the finality of Death. Denial or negative attitudes about death will lead to confusion and misconceptions about death and dying [1], which cause Joyce Carol Oates to deal with the theme of death. The capitalistic system makes people selfish and this selfishness in turn makes the system continue as her mad character Legs states:

“This selfish idea people have of wanting to live forever, their immortal souls and that kind of shit, that’s not for me like they want the world for themselves and nobody else that’s not for me. [1]

Like many writers, Oates uses literature as a reflective device and focuses the reader’s attention on death which most people avoid. Since death is inevitable, dealing with this topic is inevitable. Her readers ponder on the meaning of life, the temporal nature of life, and the benefits of planning for death [2]. The aim of this study is to analyze the concept of suicide in the light of existentialism by focusing on R.D. Laing’s definition of madness. The so called successful politician Andrew’s denial of death in The Assassins is not realistic for his brother Hugh. Hugh and the youngest brother Stephen in their madness, as the representative patriarchal hegemon Andrew labels them, are aware of the natural side of death from which escape is not possible.

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II. SUICIDE / DEATH

Oates uses the theme of suicide because it is one of the leading causes of death. As affirmed by Lester, suicide is an act that cuts across all age groups and socioeconomic groups [2]. Hugh, the schizophrenic wise man in The Assassins, Colin the psychopath in Soul/Mate, Barbara in “Accomplishes Desires”, “Andrew in “Bodies” and Allen in “In the Region of Ice” commit suicide as a consequence of their madness. In order to understand the concept of suicide as a consequence of madness the factors leading to the suicidal act must be defined. However, suicide is hard to be defined, since dead people cannot be interviewed. Three basic causes lead to suicide, the attitude of society toward the concept of suicide, stress and the interaction of the realities with the individual’s personality. According to the sociologist Emile Durkheim, suicide is common by people that fail to adapt the society or the group they belong to. The suicide rates are higher by the unmarried, by not religious and anomie. The break between the society and the individual is the main cause. As Coleman confirms [3] this break causes stress which in turn is caused by the troubles that the individual faces in his/her relationship with others, losing self-respect as a consequence of failure, and the loss of hope and meaning in life. Suicide becomes an escape for the individual. For Freud, suicide follows a depression and it is an expression of love, toward the internalized object (1959). For Schilder, suicide is a complex system and is the outcome of different mechanisms (1951). It is the direction of the enmity toward the self and the outcome of the wish to punish the person, who does not agree to reconcile. Suicide is an escape from the troubling circumstances that cannot be solved by the self. According to Bernfeld, “ the person who commits suicide acts, actually wants to kill the
other. In order to commit suicide she/he must internalize the person. Only then by committing suicide by destroying the self, she/he can destroy the other. Therefore, the individual can also get rid of the guilt that is caused by the wish to kill the other (1933). In either case the circumstances in which the individual lives are important. Social conditions cause the troubles, fragment the thought process and distort the viewpoint [4]. Oates’s characters commit suicide because of their distorted viewpoint. Whereas some suicides are attempts to draw attention like Willa the ex-wife of Andrew in The Assassins and Agnes’s attempt in Soul/Mate, Hugh’s suicide in The Assassins aims at a completed suicide. Unfortunately, he survives and becomes more confined, because he is not fully alive and is forced to live against his wish. Death at this point would be salvation for him. Colin’s suicide is a completed suicide because he, as a distorted figure representing the capitalist system and its ideals, must die. Barbara’s suicide in “Accomplished Desires,” Allen’s suicide in “In the Region of Ice” and Anthony’s suicide in “Bodies” are silent suicides. Whereas Barbara betrayed by her husband Mark, who is a writer and instructor at the university, opens the way for his marriage to his young student Dorie. Allen and Anthony’s suicide aims at giving a moral lesson to those around them. Oates uses suicide as a tool for communication. Oates with her portrayal of violent and silent suicides committed by her mad characters emphasizes a fact that the sociologist Douglas states: suicidal acts do not necessarily mean that something is wrong with the individual. It may suggest the condition in society. A suicidal act can have different meanings. Suicide can be committed to transform the soul from this world to another, or to transform one’s image in this world, or to get revenge [5].

Suicide is the result of a gradual process and the warning clues in the environment surrounding the person and his circumstances should be examined to understand the final act [4]. The help pleas of Hugh, Barbara, Allen and Anthony remains unreturned. Hugh the mad wise man in The Assassins is obsessed with the idea of death. He is rejected by his indifferent brother Andrew, when he warns him about his coming death. Andrew, who is the representative of the patriarchal capitalist society is a failure as a brother and a substitute father dismisses Hugh. Yvonne prefers to believe what Andrew told her about Hugh and refuses to represent his pain. She perceived his serious letters as a joke. For Yvonne, symbolic or not as real by his psychoanalytic psychiatrist Dr.Swann. Hugh’s pain does not end with his suicide attempt. As his encounter with women, he is also impotent in completing suicide. He fails and is left a cripple with a bullet in his head and is reduced to a babbling madman. Even Yvonne’s visit to him at the nursing home, opens the way for his marriage to his very self absorbed lunchtime crowd on Fifty-third Street – what a surprise for them—the noted prise-winning caricaturist Hugh Petrie shoots impudent brook trout and then, without flinching—without so much as a blink of the eye—A woman’s voice rises. What? What is —? Someone is approaching. No! Stay back! This is between me and it! No flinching now. No hesitation. You aim the gun—pull the trigger—oh! The first shot is perfect!—right into the fish’s head—terrible noise, . . . , plates fly, the bread basket thimbles. . . . the water glass jumps into the air, you are somehow on your feet,—you refuse to give way to panic—[5].

For Hugh his suicide is a public show. People will miss him and there will be no one substitute him. He imagines a public cry. His life becomes a kind of offer:

Without flinching, the barrel of the revolver in your mouth, gripped between your teeth, wildly your eye careens across the tables—, though the smokey fashionable glow—your audience is staring, amazed—the girl in the orange dress, is crouching, both hands pressed against her cheeks—long painted fingernails digging into her cheeks. [6]

Unfortunately, Hugh’s act of suicide will still be interpreted as symbolic or not as real by his psychoanalytic psychiatrist Dr.Swann. Hugh’s pain does not end with his suicide attempt. As his encounter with women, he is also impotent in completing suicide. He fails and is left a cripple with a bullet in his head and is reduced to a babbling madman. Even Yvonne’s visit to him at the hospital becomes an ordinary event. On the other hand, Yvonne does not feel guilty about Hugh’s attempted suicide:

She was not guilty, except of knowing ahead of time that he would die. But perhaps others had known and were equally guilty. Perhaps he had known himself . . . ? He gave her no answer. . . He wanted her to visit the nursing home, wanted her to see his brother or what remained of him; the paralysis was so complete that Hugh had to be kept alive by an iron lung, unable otherwise to breath, and they said he was blind and deaf and could not speak except in weird unintelligible means . . . Andrew wanted her to visit Hugh. She believed he did. . . He didn’t necessarily believe her guilty. . . She was convinced suddenly. [6]

Remembering Andrew she convinces herself not to feel guilty. The only person who pities Hugh is Stephen, because he shares the same fate as being labeled mad. Hugh searches for help in his letters and Yvonne could have prevented his coming suicide but she perceived his serious letters as a joke. For Yvonne, symbolic of American society, suicide is an experimental act like drugs [6]. She

Hugh has made up his mind. He is obliged to take his life because he suffers existential death and suicide is a physical need. He has already lost the harmony of his soul and body.

It’s a physical need. Stephen. Self-murder. . . One must die there is no one to commit the act. . . But it Won’t happen. Stephen. It won’t. I won to you it won’t. And even if it did . . . depend upon me to be inventive. But don’t pity me. [6]

By sending Stephen away he secludes himself. His imagination of his own suicide and his thoughts related to the lesson his death would give is disastrous, but will set him free:

First in history, murder/suicide at ( a Petite Place, busy and very self absorbed lunchtime crowd on Fifty-third Street – what a surprise for them—the noted prise-winning caricaturist Hugh Petrie shoots impudent brook trout and then, without flinching—without so much as a blink of the eye—A woman’s voice rises. What? What is —? Someone is approaching. No! Stay back! This is between me and it! No flinching now. No hesitation. You aim the gun—pull the trigger—oh! The first shot is perfect!—right into the fish’s head—terrible noise, . . . , plates fly, the bread basket thimbles. . . . the water glass jumps into the air, you are somehow on your feet,—you refuse to give way to panic—[5].

III. SELF- MURDER/ MURDER-SUICIDE

Hugh rejected the idea of suicide for a long time because he believed his enemies would be satisfied [6]. But again Andrew triggered his suicide with the words he uttered. When he talks to Stephen, his long delayed suicide attempt and his death wish is revealed:

Suddenly it stops, Stephen. The Wheel. It is spinning freely and beautifully and then it slows, it stops. . . It comes to a dead stop. You don’t understand you can’t. . . The Wheel is spinning and perhaps it will never stop again for me. . . But if it does. . . If I decide to. . . You don’t understand me eventhough you look solemn and sympathetic and Christ like. . . There’s nothing I want from you. . . You don’t know the world and I do. . . you cannot know the horror and I do. [6]
Hugh wants to awaken negative feelings and wants to punish his relatives and thereby take his revenge. His suicidal tendencies, like his madness, have their roots in his childhood experiences. His experience in his family makes his suicide more likely. Hugh’s mother also had suicidal tendencies because she was an alcoholic and was unhappy in her marriage. Loss of personal relationships is one of the leading factors for a woman to commit suicide [5]. His mother’s suicide affects Hugh deeply.

Colin’s childhood is also important in his being a suicidal person. The lack of authority figures make him a psychopath. He wants to commit a murder-suicide, because the act of killing oneself and killing another person have many aspects in common. Both acts can satisfy certain needs. In both cases the person wants revenge, whether he hurts others physically or makes others responsible for a suicide [5].

With Colin, Oates comments on the murder-suicide common in The United States. The murder often follows a real or threatened separation. The idea of separation is so frightening to the murderer. They do not commit suicide because adolescence is not the time of mature and responsible act. It is an act without the influence of others [5]. Hugh’s suicide can be seen from this point of view. Unfortunately, Hugh is not allowed to die and is forced to suffer in a world he does not want to live. Like Hugh, Oates’characters are not allowed to escape pain and suffering. Suicide is a bold act and requires the individual to break through cultural restraints [5]. Only two ways of being exist for Oates’ characters: a perfect life or death. Since perfect life cannot be achieved they prefer death.

Colin Asch was telling her what must be done since there was no escape and no going back. All that’s finished now! “He pressed the knife into her fingers and closed his strong fingers over hers, saying, like this”, . . . when the edge of the blade touched her throat Dorethea screamed and pushed away. . . But it’s time “Don’t make me do it to you alone”. . . “We love each other, Dorethea—we haven’t had to say so”. . . Colin snatched up the knife and held it as if threateningly against his own throat saying, hurt, reproachful,”Dorethea? Don’t you want to? Don’t you love me? You’ll let me do it alone? . . . Regarding Dorethea Deverell intently yet calmly, as if he were staring into a mirror at his own reflection Colin Asch brought the end of the blade against his throat, against an artery he’d grasped to find with seemingly practiced fingers. . . [7]

Colin considers to kill himself and rejoin his actual parents. He belongs to them and must return to the place he belongs. He could not save his parents and feels guilty. As defined by Lester, by committing suicide, he wishes to get rid of his feelings of guilt [5]. Although he does not have a strong superego that would control his actions in society, he thinks he must kill himself.

Oates mad characters often survive the adolescent years like Hugh, Colin and Legs the mad girl gang leader in Foxfire. They do not commit suicide because adolescence is not the time of life that produces the highest suicide rate. For Lester, however, adolescent suicides tend to cause great concern to everyone who has been associated with the young person involved [5]. Made evident with the suicide of Allen in “In the Region of Ice.” Whereas Allen, Hugh Colin, Anthony choose violent methods, Barbara prefers a silent suicide. Woman’s role is to suffer silently, because cultural norms severely demand women to inhibit their aggressiveness. A woman may express hostility by covert verbal attack or by gossip as Oates’women do. Hugh’s relative Pamela in The Assassins, Agnes and Colin’s aunt Ginny in Soul/Mate and many others are generally expected not to fight physically with an opponent [5]. While Barbara portrays such a woman, Legs survives as an adolescent and revolting woman. Mad nurse’s aid Kathleen also survives in The Rise of life on Earth because she believes she is strong enough to perform self abortion. Willa in The Assassins, Agnes in Soul/Mate and the mothers of the girls in Foxfire are serious alcoholics with suicidal tendencies. By consuming large doses of alcohol they seem to desire death.

Hospitalization for mental diseases play a great role in Oates’ characters lives who have suicidal tendencies. For Lester[5], the hospitalized person cannot go through treatment and its more likely to commit suicide. The mentally distorted characters like Hugh and Colin commit suicide whereas the neurotic ones attempt suicide like Willa the ex-wife of the famous politician Andrew in The Assassins and Agnes the wife of Dorethea’s lover Mark in Soul/Mate.

In any case, for the mad character, suicide is an escape from pain and appropriate end to life unlike the popular belief as presented by Stephen in The Assassins “where there is life there is still hope” [6]. Many psychiatrists like Sheidman and his colleagues (1965) also believe in this idea. For them even severely diseased people should be discouraged from suicide because “while there is life there is hope.” They feel that the guilt of these people’s death will create a crushing burden to their loved ones [5] like Stephen’s feelings for Hugh.

IV. MADNESS: AN EXISTENTIALIST DEATH

The existentialist psychiatristBinswanger (1958), in reporting the case of one of his patients suggests, suicide is the only free, mature and responsible act. It is an act without the influence of others [5]. Hugh’s suicide can be seen from this point of view. Unfortunately, Hugh is not allowed to die and is forced to suffer in a world he does not want to live. Like Hugh, Oates’characters are not allowed to escape pain and suffering. Suicide is a bold act and requires the individual to break through cultural restraints [5]. Only two ways of being exist for Oates’ characters: a perfect life or death. Since perfect life cannot be achieved they prefer death.

According to Oates, her characters should not be measured by the usual conformist standards. She reflects R.D.Laing’s existentialist view in her fiction. In order to understand the concept of madness and crime toward self or suicide as a consequence of this madness and the psychology of Oates’ characters, the anti-freudian psychologist R.D. Laing’s (1967) definition of madness must be understood. Laing suggests, in the society, the individual is educated by the so called “normal” man to lose herself/himself and to become absurd [8]. Humanbeings act out of love and hatred, combined for defense and they attack or take pleasure in each other’s company. People are induced to want all the same things, hate the same things. It’s the mass psychology that shapes the individual’s behaviour.

The collective unconscious prevents the individual to be powerful and to protest, because others behave similarly fearing gossip and scandal. Oates’ characters are obsessed with what others think and say. Gossip directs the flow of Oates’ characters. Hugh in The Assassins is obsessed with what others think and say about Andrew and Yvonne and they in turn are obsessed with others ideas. Each person thinks what the other thinks. Each person however is the other to the other and denies an internal bond with others [8]. There appears to be no freedom for the distressed individual. In case of unloyalty there is the threat of violence [8] which is in the form of being labeled as evil or mad. For Laing, to label someone as evil or mad is to cover the distorted relationships between the members in society and family. Laing avoids using the terms, ill or psychologically distorted because he considers madness as a form of personality.

Insanity is a state of health in a mad world; it is the false self completely adjusted to the social reality [9]. Madness is a reaction a person creates in an unlivable world. He also proposes that the distinction between conformity and nonconformity, sanity and insanity is unclear. Madness is a struggle for liberation from false
attitudes and values and an encounter with primary feelings and impulses that constitutes a possibility for the emergence of “true self” hidden from the false outer being, whose function is adjustment to the demands of society and the family [9].

When a person turns mad a profound transposition of his place in relation to all domains of being occurs. Her /his center of experience moves from ego to self. Mundane time becomes merely anecdotally. The mad person is confused. She/he muddles ego with self, inner with outer, natural with supernatural. She /he can often be an exile, an alien and a stranger with a loss of sense of self, feelings, and place in the world. She/he claims that she/he is dead. Madness for Laing is not a break down, it may be a break through. It is potentially a liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death[8]. Since the experience of the individual is destroyed, her/his behaviour becomes destructive. She /he acts according to the way she/he sees things, because she/he feels insecure. When the ultimate basis of the present world is in question, the individual takes on roles. Since each see the fragment of the whole situation differently, the reactions are different [8]. Schizophrenia is only one of these reactions.

There is no “true” sanity and “true” madness. The madness of individuals is an artefact wreaked on them by others and by themselves. True self is adjusted to the alinated social reality [8]. Sanity and madness must be understood in existential social terms. The distinction is not easy. Laing with his radical view of madness as a superior way of existence became appealing to writers and social thinkers of the 1960’s and the 1970’s [9]. Joyce Carol Oates is one these writers. Her mad characters like the schizophrenic Hugh in The Assassins, the psychopathic Colin in Soul/Mate and Legs in Foxfire, Kathleen The Rise of Life on Earth view themselves superior. They reject to be called diseased. They consider themselves as people with insight.

V. CONCLUSION

Sanity for Oates rests on the capacity to adapt to the external world. Oates’ concern is to show the madness of the larger crowd and make them realize their real pitiful condition to make the people act to create a better society. The members of the society are ready to see the errors of others but are blind toward their own errors. Oates’ mad characters also blames others for their failure in an ironical way. Hugh, in The Assassins feels that he is prevented in life, Colin in Soul/Mate thinks people suck his life out, Kathleen in The Rise of Life on Earth is full of rage. Legs and the other gang members blame the society. All of them put the blame on others and express their rage and emnity by calling others bad names. Whereas Hugh is left a cripple to look at, Colin dies in front of the eyes of his indifferent double Dorethea, the symbol of the United States of America. Kathleen harms her self by performing self abortion thinking that she is strong and courageous enough to overcome death, Legs survives her adolescence and does not commit suicide as she is the forerunner of the need for female empowerment.

As Oates tries to recreate a man’s or woman’s soul, absorbs herself into her/his consciousness, and co-exists with her/him. Therefore, she feels the terrible pressure of remaining sane, while dealing with her mad characters the reader feels the same pressure. Her characters experience the violence immanent in the society and suffer. Her characters suffer pain because Oates believes that everyone experiences pain of one kind and another and supress or deny their experiences. She believes this denial of pain is a hypocrisy and pain must be expressed freely [10]. Her mad characters suffer every kind of pain, beating, rape and abuse. When they are not physically suffering they suffer psychologically. The artist’s mission is to bear witness –in an almost religious sense. She portrays the experience of suffering, the humiliation of any forms of persecution in her fiction [10]. In this violent environment she feels that she must hold a mirror up to the society to awaken them from their sleeping state. Reflecting the Nietzschean view, Oates destroys the “selfish” and rotten by presenting “self murders” in order ”to exorcise evil.”

REFERENCES