

Suicide in stories from the Middle East (8-12th century)

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Abstract

Background: The belief that all or almost all suicide is the result of mental disorder has been promoted by medical professionals. Evidence suggests, however, this is not the case, and other triggers need to be considered. **Aim:** To determine the nature of suicide triggers in the Middle East during the Golden Age of Islam (8-12th centuries). **Method:** Folk tales and fiction provide valuable information about life and social issues of the time at which they are set and written. We studied a recent translation of *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights* and collated the findings under four headings. **Results:** There were 1) two mentions of suicide with no intention to act, 2) 26 accounts of suicide mentioned as a possible response to extant circumstance, 3) no accounts of suicide in response to mental disorder, and 4) two accounts of completed suicide as a response to circumstances (betrayal by a spouse and death of a spouse). **Conclusions:** Suicidal thinking and action was known in the Middle East in the 8-14th centuries. Completed suicide in the absence of mental disorder was known. This is consistent with current thought that the primary trigger of suicide is mental pain/distress and suicide may occur in the absence of mental disorder.

Key words: *Culture; History; Literature; Mental health; Suicide*

Introduction

Plato (428-348 BCE) taught that suicide was a sin (although he listed some exceptions). The major religions of the world also condemned suicide. In France, in the early 19th century, the theory was advanced that all suicide was the result of mental disorder, and in England in 1840, this view appeared in the medical literature (1). At the end of the 20th century this was categorically stated in the claim that studies had “shown the unequivocal presence of severe psychopathology in those who die by their own hand” (2).

Many modern suicide authorities continue to promote the belief that all, or almost all, suicide is the result of mental disorder. Researchers “ignore publications from previous decades, let alone those from over 100 years ago” (3). This refusal to consider and learn from earlier available information perpetuates the myth that mental disorder is at the root of suicide.

Our group has examined historical documents including *The Histories* by Herodotus (4) to learn from historical scholars about past triggers of suicide.

In addition to verified historical documents, folk tales and fiction also provide valuable information about life and social issues at the time at which they are set and written (5,6). We have previously learned about suicide by examination of the folk tales and literature of Ancient Rome (7), the Old Norse countries (8), early China (9), 14th century Italy (10) and other civilizations across later time periods.

A collection of hundreds of Middle Eastern short stories, written during the Islamic Golden Age (8-14th century) has been published under various titles, including *One Thousand and One Nights*. These pieces have roots in Arabic, Persian, Indian, and Jewish folk tales and literature. The identities of the many primary authors, translators and compilers who have contributed have been lost (but, that does not detract from these iconic stories).

The first European version appeared in French in the early 18th century. At that time a new batch of stories including “Aladdin’s Lamp” and “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” was added to the original Arabic collection.

In 1885-8, Sir Richard Burton published the first English translation under the title, *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* (11). This was criticized as gratuitously sexualised. In 2010, Malcolm Lyons and Ursula Lyons presented a translation as *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights* (12). This is a large work in three volumes and with 2750 pages. It is a valuable contribution to scholarship and society.

Aim

To determine the nature of suicide triggers in the Middle East during the Golden Age of Islam (8-12th centuries).

Method

The Malcolm Lyons and Ursula Lyons 2010 translation of *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights* was closely examined. All mentions suicide were extracted and arranged under headings: 1) mention of suicide with no intention to act, 2) suicide mentioned as a possible response to extant circumstances, 3) completed suicide as a consequence of mental disorder, and 4) completed suicide in the absence of mental disorder.

Results

1. Mentions of suicide with no intention to act.

There were two mentions.

- i. On Night 548, the story was told of Sinbad being stranded on an island with his men. A huge snake swallowed and crushed one of them from time to time. Sinbad is reported stating, “I thought of throwing myself into the sea to find rest from the troubles of the world, but could not bring myself to commit suicide as life is dear”.
- ii. On Night 722, the story was told that Prince Ardashir was in love with Princess Hayat al-Nufus and he gave her a letter. She was greatly offended and stated, “the dog may be mad and have lost his wits; he may be trying to commit suicide”.

2. Suicide mentioned as a possible response to current circumstances.

There were 26 threats of suicide or wishes for death (Nights: 8, 23, 51, 52, 55, 57, 101, 102, 130, 136, 144, 219, 256, 274, 584, 633, 719, 720, 722, 731, 735, 758, 762, 784, 793, and 795). Sixteen came from females and 10 came from males. Examples include:

- i. On Night 23 a story was told of Ajib, who believed his father was Shams al-Din Mohammed (king of Sistan, a region in modern Iraq). However, the local children told him that Shams al-Din was not his father, but his grandfather. Ajib went to his mother (Sitt al-Husn) and demanded to know the real identity of his father. “If you don’t tell me the truth, I’ll kill myself with this dagger”.
 - ii. On Night 51 the story was told of Christian Princess Abriza who was introduced to King Omar (584-644), one of the most influential Muslim caliphs in history. It was apparent that he found her attractive. Abriza said, “If he were to take me by force, I would kill myself”.
 - iii. On Night 265, when Habzalam Bazaza approached the slave girl Yasmin, “with delight she drew a dagger from her belt and said: ‘Get away from me or else I shall kill you and then kill myself’”.
3. Suicide as a consequence of mental disorder.
There were no examples of suicide as a result of mental disorder.
4. Suicide in the absence of mental disorder.
There were two stories of completed suicide.
- i. On Night 583 the story was told of three unnamed people – one being the son of a vizier, the others being a bath owner and his wife. The vizier’s son bathed and then asked the proprietor to arrange for the services of a prostitute. The proprietor thought he observed that the other man’s penis was exceptionally small. He arranged for his wife to provide services and get the money; he anticipated the required services would be minimal. However, the vizier’s son and the bath owner’s wife made a lot of noise and enjoyed protracted activities. The bath owner threatened he would kill himself if they did not desist. They did not. Finally, “in an excess of wretchedness and jealousy, he climbed to the top of the baths and threw himself down to his death”.
 - ii. On Night 986 the story was told of Abd Allah (624-692) the leader of a caliphate based in Mecca, and his wife. The couple were kidnapped and taken aboard a boat. The kidnappers threw Abd Allah overboard and it was assumed (incorrectly) that he had died. Abd Allah’s wife said, “My husband is lost in the sea and I shall follow him”, threw herself overboard and was drowned.

In summary, there were two mentions of suicide with no intention to act, and 26 mentions of suicide as a possible response to current life circumstance. There were no examples of suicide as a response to mental disorder, but two examples of suicide in the absence of mental disorder – one (male) in response to spouse preferring another, and one (female) in response to the death of the spouse.

Discussion

The belief that all suicide is the result of mental disorder was first promoted in the early 19th century and was still strongly proclaimed at the end of the 20th century (2). In 2014 the World Health Organization (13) stated that this belief is a “myth”, but it persists. A disadvantage of this belief is that it directs suicide prevention programs toward medical “solutions” and discredits community prevention activities.

The aim of the current paper is to better understand the triggers of suicide. We learned that in the Middle East, 700-1300 years ago, suicide was suggested and performed as a response to

painful life circumstances. Importantly, we found completed suicide in response to life circumstances, in the absence of mental disorder.

It may be a limitation of this study that we examined, not a factual history or medical text, but *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights* – a folk tale manuscript designed for entertainment purposes. However, fiction conveys social values (14) and information (15). “Stories”, to be successful, must be considered sensible and to reflect the current behaviour by both the author and the public. Of course, complete farce and science fiction do not reflect the times at which they are written, but this collection of stories is not in either of those styles.

Naturally, some exaggeration or distortion may enter individual stories. However, here we have access to 1001 story-telling periods and many hundreds of stories – and there is general uniformity and homogeneity in tone and philosophy/attitude.

The exact dates of writing of this huge document are unclear – but, most was written around 1000 years ago. Also, the geographic origins of some of these stories are uncertain. However, the information which can be derived complements the information we have obtained from earlier (7) and later (10) periods, in other parts of the world. Thus, folk tales and literature of 1000 years ago indicate that suicide can occur in the absence of mental disorder. While there are limitations to this method, the information we have suggests that suicide may be more common in the absence rather than the presence of mental disorder.

In this study there were no suicides as a result of mental disorder. There were two completed suicides as a consequence of loss of a loved person. There were a large number (26) of instances of suicide being threatened or considered as a solution to predicaments such as defilement, loss of honour more generally, and a more painful death.

These findings are in contrast with the belief that all or almost all suicide is the result of mental disorder. These findings are consistent with stories from Ancient Greece and Rome and the Old Norse countries. These findings are also consistent with stories from France, Spain, England, and other European countries from 1000 BC to the present time. This is an important study as it fills the only remaining gap in the material we have presented using this approach. We can state confidently that in the creative literature of the world over the last 2.5 thousand years, there is nothing to support the belief that suicide is always or almost always the result of mental disorder, and much support for the belief that adverse circumstances lead people to consider suicide.

Schneidman (16) argued that psychological pain is the universal trigger of suicide (in either the absence of presence of mental disorder), and a systematic review of the medical literature supports that conclusion (17). The evidence we obtained from stories of the Golden Age of Islam (the distant past) is consistent with that position and indicates a persistent truth.

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Conflict of interest: none

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