

Sad Paths of Interrupted Lives:  
Female Suicide and Modern Life in Recife of the 1920's<sup>1</sup>

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Discrimination does not exist when it comes to suicide' because it can affect people regardless of gender, race, social class, etc. However, this doesn't mean that there cannot be differences between men and women, for example, as with regards for the reasons for committing suicide. These differences were striking on the issue of female suicide in the city of Recife, Brazil, when viewed in the context of modernity of the 1920s.

Some Brazilian cities were undergoing changes since the late nineteenth century, caused by the pursuit of Brazil to modernize itself and to be civilized. This change in the daily life of its population, coupled with the consolidation of the Republic, led to the liberation of individuals, particularly women, from the influence of family, of religion, of community or of social relationships. In other words, the period is characterized as the initiation of new behaviors.

The suicides that occurred in Recife in the 1920s can be understood from the perspective of Emile Durkheim, through his work "The Suicide". He studied this phenomenon by relating it to social causes. Among the four types of suicide he addressed, the emphasis was given to the anomic, because it refers to modern and economic societies where the individuals are in the process of profligacy, due to social changes, which can be caused by economic progress or crisis.

If therefore industrial or financial crises increase suicide, this is not because they cause poverty, since crises of prosperity have the same result; it is because they are crises, that is disturbances of the collective order. Every disturbance of equilibrium, even though it achieves greater comfort and a heightening of general vitality, is an impulse to voluntary death. (DURKHEIM, 2005, p. 264/265).

These crises have the characteristics of changing human needs, these being the physical, the moral and the desires in which they are truly regulated (not necessarily in the legal sense) according to each social class. In other words, each class has a notion of its own well-being to which it can aspire. These needs are not fixed, because they vary according to the collective income and changes in society's moral ideas.

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Because of this, in times of economic disaster, individuals are forced to reduce their demands, subjecting them to a lower degree to which they were accustomed, due to society going through new moral re-education in reference to the benefits of social action. However, the same occurs in periods of prosperity, given that there is a sudden increase of wealth and power, also causing changes in conditions that require some time to be reclassified by the public consciousness. Thus, note that periods of crisis produce a state of lawlessness, which can also be defined as anomie, a name given in reference to this type of suicide originated by Durkheim.

This paper seeks to understand the connection of Modernity, which caused changes in the women's social life, domestic and labor, with female suicides in the city of Recife during the 1920s. To achieve this, a database of suicides and attempted suicides of that decade, reported in the local Newspaper *Diario de Pernambuco*, was constructed, combined with research data obtained from medical theses of that period, and criminal cases and other journals.

## 1. **The Modern City of Recife and the Construction of the Modern Woman**

The Crazy Years, as the 1920s became known, were a period just after the First World War, which caused the emergence of exacerbated feelings (insecurity, fear and hope) that reflected on all human beings. According to Rodrigues (1997) the Great War accelerated the emancipation of women with the affirmation of new moral values, and also helped in encouraging technological development and opened the Brazilian culture to the influences of Eastern Europe and North America.

Among the technological innovations, electricity brought more changes in the homes of the families in Recife. In particular, it helped the woman, since it came to make housework less strenuous. This is because electricity:

...was fundamental to the modernization of customs and daily life. The banality of power consumption, starting with public lighting, was expanded to residential and domestic use, electric irons for ironing, ceiling fans, electric cookers, refrigerators and phonographs were some items from a long list of technological innovations that were powered by electricity, which began to be sold in São Paulo, in modern importing stores. Calculating machines, cash registers, the dataphone, the cinematographer, electric lamps, parks with electrified amusements, the Ferris wheel invaded the daily life of the city of São Paulo, bringing a true revolution to the senses and contributing to the formation of a new cultural and technical order so-called modern. (LORENZO, 1997, p. 178).

Electricity also allowed the transition of the horse-drawn trams to electric trams, causing a revolution in the means of locomotion. However, the target of success fell on

the automobile, which had a major role in changing the urban landscape, by shortening the distances and travel times. An important factor "in a time when the struggle for existence has acquired a tragic aspects, and that everyone had business fever, you need to run, walk quickly, get on time, swallow distance and extend the time, in a mad rage".<sup>3</sup>

Unlike electricity, cars were not popularized, because only a small minority could possess them, thus increasing the popular desire for this modern innovation. The car even changed women's clothing, with the emergence of a fashion appropriate to riding in an automobile, as shown in the Fashion section of the *Diario de Pernambuco*.

Fashion provided a new female sociability. This is because the old clothes consisted of corsets, long skirts and bustles which made it difficult for women to socialize. Therefore, women of middle and upper classes abandoned the heavy clothing and began to dress according to the French's fashion." (RAGO, 2004, p. 586). Material objects now had a special importance in life. When Madame Soubeyrand had her jewelry stolen by an Italian "escroc" in Paris, valued at around two million francs, she ended up committing suicide<sup>4</sup>.

This new mentality that gave importance to material wealth and physical appearance was due to the emergence of a new model of life, the *American way of life*, based on consumption and mass culture.

The merchandise fetish presented in the modern societies transformed the dimensions of the objects, redefining or hiding its usage value. The modern society starts becoming a vast empire of seduction, overwhelming, to the extent where science and technology combine with the almost uncontrollable ambition of capital. The society of consuming seeks passage to the dream and the desire of men. (REZENDE, 1997, p. 62).

Female seduction was now used as a weapon, tricking men, since it made women more attractive, with their makeup, hair done, legs in the style of *Bataclan* and the latest invention of that time, "a funnel of cloth, hard, where it placed the dainty and tempting breasts"<sup>5</sup>. Note, then, that the appearance was not restricted only to the field of fashion," the feminine habits are considered within a certain universe, where they associate, in most cases, females to beauty, to fashion, to love, to seduction. "(REZENDE, 1997, p. 68).

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<sup>3</sup> CUNHA, João Vidal. **O Problema Médico do Chauffeur**. Tese. Salvador: Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia, 30 de Outubro de 1928. P. 23

<sup>4</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Suicídio**. Recife, friday october 15th, 1920. P. 1. Fundação Joaquim Nabuco (FUNDAJ).

<sup>5</sup> VAZ, Blasco. "Engana-homem". In: **A PILHÉRIA**. Recife, 20 de setembro de 1924. Nº 156. P. 14.

The red leotard gradually became part of the wardrobe of the young, especially in the 20's, when the figure of the modern woman, lean, agile, aggressive and independent, compared to the flapper, the suffragette or to the American actress, became admired by both female and male audiences. (RAGO, 2004, p. 586).

There were innumerable products that appeared to embellish the woman: makeup, creams, perfumes, and to make daily activities faster, as the Gillette blades. The body becomes a target of the advertising discourse, creating standards of beauty and ugliness. In order for the modern woman to be beautiful, it was necessary to follow the Ten Commandments of the beautiful woman:

- 1 - When the mirror tells you that you are a little unwell, rest.
- 2 - To conserve the hair you need to wash it once a week.
- 3 - Oral hygiene requires a slight massage by applying a finger to the lips and to its upper and lower parts.
- 4 - Practice a massage of the tip of the chin every day.
- 5 - The nose requires a daily massage with your fingers.
- 6 - If the tip of the nose becomes purple you should apply hot compresses with a very thin piece of cloth.
- 7 - To avoid wrinkles commonly called "chicken legs", you should wash your face frequently with water as hot as you can bear.
- 8 - The brightness of the eyes is maintained by bathing them in rose water and using a special container for it.
- 9 - So the ordinary double chin does not appear, you should sleep with your head very low, as low as possible.
- 10 - The skin is refreshed with very hot baths.<sup>6</sup>

As for the ugly, according to the article written in the *Revista Feminina* in 1920, they shouldn't pretend to be beautiful. They should educate themselves, improve their health, be simple, well-mannered and gentle. Thus, besides the division of social classes, there was now the division by physical criteria.(PRIORE, 2011).

Beauty was fueled by the entertainment media and the press of that time, with their beauty contests. The ugly were compared to monsters, fruit of an ambitious mother that passes her talent unevenly among the children. "And the proof is there are individuals of a rare beauty, while others are real monsters, repellent beings, used to fantasize the fairy tales, but they exist, truly in real life."<sup>7</sup>

For the ugly there was still salvation, the use of makeup, which could make them beautiful. According to a report in the *Diario de Pernambuco*, being ugly had its positive side. The ugly were more affectionate, as expressed by the actress Pola Negri. She also said that the non beautiful were the ones with firmer values and opinions.

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<sup>6</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Decálogo da mulher bonita**. Recife, Saturday, december 25th, 1926. P. 8. FUNDAJ.

<sup>7</sup> ROCHA, Leduar de Assis. **Fealdade**. In: A PILHÉRIA. Recife, august 11th, 1923. Nº 98. P. 16.

However, they are more dismissive when it comes to love, through their own fault, because they do not take the time to take care of themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Besides ugliness, obesity and old age began to be rejected, in which "age begins to be associated with the loss of prestige and alienation from social interaction. Fat is directly associated with old age (PRIORE, 2011, p. 115). Modern times needed modern bodies, to adapt to the new times, quickness and speed.

In fact, there is no more sacred secret to Eve than her age. By the age of 15, the girls, lightly say their age, with naive joy, from 15 to 20, girls say it without sadness, but also no joy, then at 25 they only say their age when it is contradicted or when they are required. From 25 onwards, however, God all mighty!<sup>9</sup>

There was a need to maintain oneself young, which, according to a report in the *Diário de Pernambuco*, could be performed through clothing and gym.<sup>10</sup> Sport and fitness began to be valued, since now to be modern was to have the body of an athlete, slim and healthy. Youth becomes prestigious at the time, associating it with the strong in a time of appreciation of movement and physical exercises, thereby improving their performance.

According to Sevcenko (1998) the appreciation of sports and of gymnastics served as an adaptive mechanism of the bodies and minds to the new realities, of a fast-paced world made possible by the new technologies.

Sports, besides improving the physical, served also as a way to ease the early or extramarital sexual activity. The lack of physical exercise was also seen as a cause for hysteria and melancholy in women.

Sports would even be a way to fight adultery that was being encouraged by romance novels. After all, as noted by the historian Monica Schpun, closed up or imprisoned, it only left women to dream of an impossible love or to try to seduce their husband's best friend. (PRIORE, 2006, p. 244)

## 2. **Women's role in Modern Family Life**

Thus, emerged the new woman, the so-called modern woman, who sought to break free from the patterns of patriarchal families, typical of rural areas. This release was seen by religious moralists of the time as a factor contributing to suicide, because the ties that bounded individuals were becoming weaker, as well as the solidarity among

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<sup>8</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **As moças feias são mais efficientes.** Recife, october 17th, 1926. FUNDAJ

<sup>9</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **A idade das Mulheres.** Recife, april 17th, 1927. P. 7. FUNDAJ

<sup>10</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Para nos tornarmos jovens.** Recife, Sunday, april 17th, 1927. P. 7. FUNDAJ.

individuals. This weakening was intensified by the growth of urban cities, thus leaving isolated individuals.

The proposal was to be "civilized," as were the French and Europeans in general. Thus, all sorts of expressions of local social relations that were not considered civilized were fought by the press and prohibited by law. The traditional meetings, group or community parties, and even serenades or bohemian events suffered restrictions. In the same direction, popular and religious cults were banned. [...]. [Thus] What was being witnessed was the dissolution of the traditional forms of solidarity represented by the neighborhood, family and clan groups, cronyism and tutelage. (D'INCAO 2004, p. 226).

Social ties, whether by family or other members of society, are a form of support and guidance to individuals. Family relationships are extremely important as influencing the future of an individual's social relations and recent research shows that there is an association between the family and social relationships with suicidal ideation (BAPTISTA: 2004). Family and marriage serve as a form of protection against suicide, except in the marriages of young people (teenagers) when associated with family conflicts, stress with new life and unwanted pregnancy.

Many researchers believe that an individual's suicidal behavior is a multidetermined act in which family tensions, disruptions, and patterns of interaction play a role. [...] Richman concluded that "suicide is not an individual act, but is part of a collusive communication system that involves an entire family and social network. (BONGAR, 2000, pp. 224/225).

Therefore, there is a good chance that the break of the bonds of traditional Brazilian patriarchal family had some influence on the occurrence of suicides. Possibly, being the fear of the growing emancipation of women outside the home and thus its effects on marriage; church, doctors and jurists preached the importance of the women as a mother, a wife and a homemaker as key to the development of society. This may be seen in the Civil Code of 1916, which placed the women as submissive and inferior in marriage.

The Civil Code of 1916 established the way each spouse should be presented socially. A set of rules, duties and obligations, with its correlative and corrective inhibitor, was formally established to regulate the conjugal bond, in order to ensure family order. To each representative in the marriage was given an essential attribute. So it was up to her husband to provide maintenance of the family, while the woman was left with the social identity as wife and mother (MALUF; MOTT, 1998, p. 379).

Some women did not accept their role as submissive and began seeking work outside of the home, even seeking divorce in order to continue their new life. This was a factor, according to Filgueiras (2008), for some crimes of passion against them. Their husbands or partners didn't accept their act of "rebellion." It is worth noting that there

was still some difficulty for women to enter the field of work. Filgueiras cites a survey performed by Glauce Gaudêncio, that only 9.9% of Brazilian workers in 1920 were women.

The woman's work outside the home worried doctors and hygienists. The families of the elite and middle class worried about the young people who started in the liberal professions, while the poor working female class was always associated with prostitution, destruction and moral degradation. Money was seen as essentially male, dirty and degrading, so women should not own it.

Nevertheless, feminist publications of the time sought to reverse this situation, trying to show the positive side of female labor outside the home. There were even publications that showed that women were not always viewed as subordinate. The prevailing view, however, was that the changes in women's rights were threatening, because the woman's place was to obey and should be concerned with the wishes of her husband and not in the search for autonomy (REZENDE, 1997, p. 66)

Despite the growing emancipation of women, however, it is worth noting that this had certain limitations and negative effects. Some women absorbed some typically male characteristics, such as the haircut known as *La Garçonne*. It is described in a news article in the *Diário de Pernambuco* as ridiculous and of bad taste.<sup>11</sup>

In a satire on feminism, it is mentioned that the woman should be a feminist, so that men would be happy with the fact that they were always women. But the masculine woman, who uses a cane or monocle, almost divorced from their sex, also should use a gun and show that they are equal to a man by any means.<sup>12</sup> Characteristics of this masculine woman could be observed even in suicide and suicidal attempts by means of a gun, since this method is known as typically male<sup>13</sup>.

The modernization of the woman of this time also threatened the masculinity of men. It was up to the man to support the home and when he could not maintain the support of his family, he became desperate, even to the point of committing suicide. The man had to fulfill his moral duty towards his family and society, since the wife working outside the home was viewed as something shameful.

This process of virilization of the women is accompanied by the sensation of weakening of the men, who weren't able to upgrade the old models of male

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<sup>11</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **O Sexo Barbeado**. Recife, september 9th, 1926. P. 3. FUNDAJ

<sup>12</sup> SILVA, Homem da. Mulheres- Homens. In: **A PILHÉRIA**. Recife, July 21, 1923. Ano III, nº 95.

<sup>13</sup> Of the suicides and attempted suicides that happened in the 1920's in Pernambuco, only 5,84% of the women did these acts using a fire gun.

behavior, contributing to the ruin of families and properties. (ALBUQUERQUE JR, 2008, p. 431).

This issue of financial hardship and the increasing emancipation of women were portrayed in the text "Is marriage outdated" <sup>14</sup> where female independence and the lack of financial resources by men to bear the responsibilities of marriage was treated. This was observed in the case of Alípio A., where he committed suicide in the bathroom of a cinema because he was unable to get married due to financial difficulties. <sup>15</sup>

Financial misery led to amorous misery, because labor difficulties weakened the masculine ideal of achieving a family of good moral character, something important to the individual's status at the time. This hopelessness was seen by Beck (1996) as an important factor in identifying suicidal intentions.

Women were not only working outside of home, but according to news in the *Diário de Pernambuco* <sup>16</sup>, they were also "taking" jobs from men, like in the field of commerce. This is because a woman working in this area provided three advantages: lower wages received, she served as an attraction to the male clientele, because feminine attention is more pleasing, and women obeyed with docility.

Despite the "inferiority" assigned to women, according to this same report, they were beginning to be organized in unions, because the wages earned were spent almost exclusively on home maintenance. The report also mentions that the male support should give force to these associations, aiming for equal work and wages, but this didn't occur, since men saw these women more like disloyal competitors, rather than companions.

The male discourse of the time sought to modify the consequences brought about by industrialization, and the devaluation of the home's activities, for now the industrial production accounted for certain activities previously carried out in the household. According to Margaret Rago (2004), the association of social morality with women's work was frequent, because work in factories by ladies was seen as threatening to their honor, and as a prejudice to the "natural" development of families.

Many believed, along with English and French economists and theorists, that women's working outside the home would destroy the family, family ties would become looser and weaken the race as the children grow more loose without the constant vigilance of mothers. Women wouldn't be devoted

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<sup>14</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Estará o casamento fora de moda?** Recife, sunday, october 5th, 1924. P. 7. FUNDAJ.

<sup>15</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Diário em Alagoas.** Recife, tuesday, may 11st, 1920. P. 1. FUNDAJ.

<sup>16</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Do Rio: A Situação das Moças que trabalham no Commercio.** Recife, Wednesday, November 12th, 1927. P. 1. FUNDAJ.

mothers and caring wives, if they worked outside the home, in addition to a good number of them would not be interested in marriage and motherhood.

[...]

Heavily influenced by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by Victorian medicine and religious conceptions, the political and intellectual elites of the early twentieth century sought to redefine the place of women in society, just when the growing urbanization and industrialization of the cities opened new perspectives for them and work performance. The modern public sphere was being formed, a space where new forms of social interaction and relations between women and men came to be guided by European models, especially French and English. (RAGO, 2004, p. 585)

In this context, motherhood was one of the points in the male discourse, in which they sought to reinvigorate the role of women in the home and men in public space. Then the figure of the civic mother emerged, she was the one who would contribute to the growth of the nation by preparing their children for the future intellectually, physically and morally (RAGO, 2004, p. 585).

### 3. Criticism of Modern Women and the Relationship to Suicide

The press, which served as a mechanism for the dissemination of the new woman, was also used to criticize it. Among the topics discussed, the "status of women and women's social behavior" (REZENDE, 1997, p. 65) had space for discussion in the press, because there was an increase in the socialization of women in the city. Despite this increase and its vanity, it was not always seen as something positive, like the criticism of the habit of women applying makeup and their form of dress.

Catholics were highly concerned with the emancipation of women and the consequences of it, in Pernambuco, in the 1920s. It was definitely something of great importance, as shown below.

Much is said today on the emancipation of women. Women's societies, legions, *Christian* associations are created for this purpose, a world of things perfectly adaptable to the *Americanization* or *masculinization* of the Brazilian woman, and not considering the emancipation of vanity, which constitutes the real slavery. And there is a moral, religious, highly social problem, which may well be solved without the fuss and disguised vanity of women's social associations.<sup>17</sup>

This concern, perhaps, was due to the fact that the Church saw the family as a mechanism for the maintenance and expansion of the Catholic religion. Thus, this emancipation hindered the formation of new families. The concern was so great with the female emancipation that they published several stories and notes with references

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<sup>17</sup> O DIA. Não podem usar saia curta, nem decotes atrevidos. In: **O DIA**. Recife, Ano II, nº 6, February 27th, 1921. P. 03. Arquivo Público Estadual Jordão Emerenciano (APEJE).

that the only concern of the woman should be with taking care of the home and the husband.

**Teach the woman**

The cook well;  
The make men's shirts;  
Not to paint herself;  
The tailor their own dresses;  
To be caring and clean;  
To be modest and simple;  
To have a well arranged house;  
To prefer a husbands with an honest reputation than a man of money;  
Love before a quiet life as a couple than that of a vain society.  
To worship God in heaven and love your husband on earth.<sup>18</sup>

From the short stories, articles and notes from *O Dia*, it is easily observed that religious Catholics sought the return of the values of wife, mother, educator and maintainer of the home for women instead of increasingly becoming more emancipated, seeking refuge in vanity, fashion, in luxury, in dancing, in theaters, finally, in the new form of "freedom."

The new woman's fashion received the most criticisms from the Catholic and evangelical publishing. *O Cenaculo*, for example, mentions that "fashion exercises a true domain over women, making them slaves, giving into the environment of futility in which they move around".<sup>19</sup>

In the journal *O Dia* of March 31, 1921, a note was published entitled "The woman in a low-cut dress is a vulgar master in immorality" and cites a quote from S. Bernardino de Senna regarding the new fashion: "First burn the woman who dresses naughty, then the mother that consents to this dress and, finally, the fashion designer who makes the immodest dress."<sup>20</sup>

According to *O Dia* there was a direct relationship between a low-cut fashion, leaving a woman almost naked, and suicide. It was not about the clothes themselves, but the prohibition of using the modern fashion. Consider the following short story published in this journal that exemplifies this:

**What will the poor mother do from here on?!...**

Alice, a young 16 year old, flirtatious and flapper, is rebuked by her mother because of her excessively low-cut and short dresses! ... That it was a scandal to their neighbors, to people who passed by and saw her. But the girl protested and stamped her feet ... The discussions got more heated day after day. After all, the good mother, with a tear of dignity, forbade the *flapper*

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<sup>18</sup> O DIA. Ensinar a mulher. In: **O DIA**. Recife, Ano II, nº 4, January 30th, 1921. P. 05. APEJE

<sup>19</sup> PEREIRA, Aluisio. "As mulheres". In: **O CENACULO**. Recife, September, 1928, ano IV, n. 8, p. 2. APEJE

<sup>20</sup> SENNA, Bernardino "A mulher decotada é uma mestra vulgar de imoralidade". *O Dia*, Recife, 31, March, 1921. nº7, p.1. APEJE

from wearing short skirts ... From now on she would have to dress in long skirts, low-heeled shoe, etc.. Alice, desperate, frantic, devilish, sipped a glass of port wine, with a strong portion of potassium permanganate in it and then a minute later... She put her mouth in the world! Assistance came and she was put out of danger! What will the poor mother do from here on? Ah ... this is modern education!<sup>21</sup>

According to *O Dia*, modern time women should want an honest man and should give up luxury and vanity, seeking a simple life with the mastering of the art of cooking. This way she will get the man who she wants. If women are given to vanity, with low-cut close and on the hunt for husbands, they will certainly end up just showing too much of the merchandise and scaring the buyer away.

The religious moralists allied, too, the issue of romantic novels, theaters and cinemas to female suicides. According to *O Dia*, this happened due to the influence of modern novels on the imagination of the young. They possibly induced thwarted longings that the inexperienced heart could not bear ending up seeking suicide as a solution to their rave. Or yet, the young man fascinated by gambling, brought dishonor to his family, and preferred to get rid of his shame by suicide, rather than to seek a new life.

This period saw a great intensification of the movies during the 1920s. Perhaps the biggest revolution coming from the cinemas was its influence on behavior patterns of the population, such as fashion, consumption, habits, tastes and beauty.

Thanks to the American cinema, new female images began to multiply, and, novelty: the beauty became an engine of desire. Fashion has become one of the main articulators of the new aesthetic ideal imposed by the American film industry. Paris was no longer who dictated, but the Hollywood studios. In the pages of magazines like *Cinearte* papers with suggestive titles like "What the stars wear?", "Short hair or long", "Young women should wear socks or not?", "Why stars smoke? ", etc., could be found, by the dozens. (PRIORE, 2011, pp. 114/115).

Movies also caused other changes in the Brazilian society, especially towards women, because Hollywood films dealt mainly with the themes of love and betrayal, with the female characters usually involved in a love triangle. In this way,

Certain representations of the cinematic universe began to fill the heads of modern girls. French words like *coquetterie*, literally the concern to validate oneself to pleasure, and *allure*, distinction of size, are added to others, in English, due to the influence of the film: *sex-appeal* and the *it* factor. The first doesn't require translation, the second, referred to the "what" of seduction that was inside every woman. "*It* is a gift of attraction [...] a passive quality that attracts attention and arouses desire. The woman must have *it* to attract the man, explained the writer of *Cinearte* in 1928. The *sex-appeal*, according to the same chronicler, is defined by the physical "attractiveness and perfection,

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<sup>21</sup> O DIA. Que irá fazer a pobre mãe d'aqui por diante?!.... In: **O DIA**. Recife, Ano I, n°4, January 30th, 1921. P. 05. APEJE.

by provocative attitudes, the liquefied and dangerous look, in the slow and sensual walk, in the contoured and inviting lips". (PRIORE, 2006, p. 275)

Women weren't only targeted from the religious aspect but also from the judicial. Suicide was investigated by a competent authority, for there are only two forms of death, according to the legal right: the natural and the violent. The last type consists in deaths by accident, homicide or suicide, and, as such, becomes a target for investigation, since there is a need to determine what the real cause of death was.

Among the suicides in citizens, women were the most investigated. In 14 cases, found in the Pernambuco Justice Memorial in the district of Recife in the 1920s, referring to suicide and suicide attempts, 9 were for women. The data indicates that they were in a more popular class of society. This is because of the nine cases investigated, five worked as domestic help and in the other four cases, there was no mention of their profession, noting that one was only 12 years old. In the five documented cases: one woman could read and write, two were illiterate, and also four were single and only one was married.

In most of the cases of female suicide, the women exercised a profession. However, the information was excluded from documentation by a sexist and elitist system that sought to keep women in the role of submission. This fact can be well seen in one peculiar case: the suicide of a minor of 16 years, Maria A., who "allegedly" committed suicide, at 1 pm on October 25, 1929, by ingesting ant poison.<sup>22</sup> Maria was a domestic at the residence of the Marquis of Paraná Street, where, also, the event took place. Since she died before the arrival of public assistance, her "testimony" couldn't be collected.

The Police in the investigation of the case took the testimony of three individuals: the employer, the employer's brother in law and a bricklayer. The three testimonies stated that the minor had committed suicide, but reports of the event present three totally different stories. The only thing in common is that she had committed suicide, the method used for the act and where the event occurred.

Even with conflicting versions, apparently, the police and the municipal judge of the criminal court of Recife accepted it as a suicide, given that there was a privileged class of witnesses claiming the death to have been a suicide. It may never be known for sure of what really happened, if Maria committed suicide or "was suicided" because, as Marcos Bretas reports (1997, p. 169), "children employed in domestic service were

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<sup>22</sup> Criminal Process. Felon and victim Maria A. Box 944 of the district of Recife, 1929 (MJPE).

kept under surveillance by their employers / guardians, a situation quite common, and the fact that runaways were something common, this indicates that the relationship was not exactly harmonious. "

We can notice the male domination, and also an emotional domination, on the case of the attempted suicide of the 25 year old, Evangelina L. or C.S.<sup>23</sup>. She met a guy named Severino O. X. in the city of Maceió. He was a 28 year old policeman. The two had a romantic relationship, but Severino later said that he wasn't dating her. In 1927, he ended up returning to Recife. Later on, Evangelina also went to Recife in search of Severino, because she missed him so much. However, Severino was now unemployed, and because of this, she had to find work as a domestic.

Evangelina later on returned to her hometown, but once again because of Severino, she ended up returning to Recife, where she got another job as a domestic, but in this case taking care of a sick person. In her criminal report, she states that she would give Severino presents, showing that she still had interests for him. After the death of the sick patient, Evangelina stayed in the residence of Mr. Seixas, the spouse of the deceased, as a favor, until she moved out to a friend's house. On her report, she stated that she was called by a servant of Mr. Seixas to report to his house, since he was accusing her of stealing jewelry.

Arriving there, she declared that she didn't steal anything, but was locked in a room in order to confess the robbery. She mentions that she was locked there for 3 days, without any food and being mistreated. Evangelina said that she asked to go to the restroom and there she found a can of creolina (disinfectant product), ingesting a certain portion, moaning on the effects of the poison, that resulted in medical assistance.

With this case we can observe the power that the better economical class had over the working class, specially, woman and their employees. They used this power to threaten their victims, since everything indicates that Mr. Seixas didn't want to take the case to the police.

This sexiest view on female suicide wasn't restricted to the legal industry, but also to doctors, as noted in medical theses of the Faculty of Medicine of Bahia in the period studied here. Doctors<sup>24</sup> when comparing suicide rates among men and women

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<sup>23</sup> Processo relativo a Evangelina L. ou Evangelina C. S. Caixa 773 da Comarca do Recife, 1929. Memorial da Justiça de Pernambuco (MJPE).

<sup>24</sup> COSTA, Quintino Castellar da. **Do Suicídio e sua Prophylaxia**. Tese em Medicina. Salvador: Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia, 28 de Outubro de 1927; SERAINE, Florival Alves. **Suicídio e Mimetismo**. Tese em Medicina. Salvador: Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia, 30 de Outubro de 1930;

noted a predominance of males. The reasons for this were attributed to the fact that men are the stronger sex; have stronger social responsibilities, with difficulties in maintaining the family. However, for the doctors, the main cause was man's vulnerability to pain, not supporting either moral or physical sufferings, and the predominance of the male use of alcohol as an escape mechanism which was another factor for suicide. They also consider the male suicide as cowardly and selfish, because it left their loved ones fragile and helpless.

Women would commit suicide in a lower rate because they are shyer and more docile, and are more confident about the future, and thus more easily support the agonies of life, fighting against death and misery, thinking of the welfare of their children. Seraine<sup>25</sup> states that the suicide of women, especially single women and prostitutes, only occurs because of passion, "... especially in our country, where women rarely have another concern, in the epic and the state, for which they commit suicide."

Thwarted love affair, forbidden marriage by parents, especially among us because of the prejudices of color, impossible to achieve civil unity in the face of lovers, has filled the statistics of passionate suicides that ordinarily is seen between two persons fall without life, intending thereby to unite in death, since they could not be in life. Cruel and fatal disillusionment awaits them, but on the other side.<sup>26</sup>

Alcides Siqueira<sup>27</sup>, in his medical thesis on love, shows passion to be a powerful weapon, because,

[...] Love is to desire the happiness of the beloved but in her presence. "If love is prone to more than two – jealousy is born, because it must clearly be exempt if one of the two - germinates despair, often inconsolable, which leads to crime and suicide. Without the loved one, how to live? If life, so much charm it contained, is transmuted into a bundle not transportable? If the heat that animates and gives life, becomes the cold chills? If, without love rewarded, the soul is a vacuum - without beliefs, without stimulation, without the light of hope - foggy of sadness and despondency? How, without strength for life, to have energies to fight? How? ! For the weak, death beckons as the last resort, with a prestige, divine balm - commit suicide, about the strongest, pummeled the whipping of vengeance - kill. Phedra kills herself, for that is despised by Hyppolito. Pyramida, Ovid recounts, believing Thisbe dead, committed suicide on the spot where she made her appointment, by judging being betrayed, when faced with the lifeless body, also committed suicide,

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SOUZA, José de Araujo. **Do suicídio por envenenamento, principalmente na Bahia**. Tese em Medicina. Salvador: Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia, 30 de Outubro de 1929.

<sup>25</sup> SERAINE, Florival Alves. **Suicídio e Mimetismo**. Op. Cit. P. 8. LAPEH

<sup>26</sup> COSTA, Quintino Castellar da. **Do Suicídio e sua Prophylaxia**. Op. Cit. P. 23. LAPEH

<sup>27</sup> SIQUEIRA, Alcides Lopes de. **O Amor como Dirimente Penal**. Tese em Medicina. Salvador: Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia, 20 de Novembro de 1927. LAPEH.

Romeo takes the same resolution Juliet. The double tragedy of suicide is, even today, the epilogue of passions often unhappy.<sup>28</sup>

Jealousies, when exalted, can also lead to suicide, and murder. Some crimes of passion have both present, because after the murder of a partner, the honest individual ends up feeling regret or remorse, and ends up driven to suicide. For Alcides you cannot deny the power of love, as can be noted in the following quote:

Love is like opium, when measured – it is a divine balm that ceases pain, which soothes and comforts the heart, which renews and make life serene, if exaggerated – it is a fatal toxic that digs an abyss of profound suffering, which crushes and appalls the heart, which absorbs, runs over and kills existence; if too little, it is the backwater of peace, beneficial euphoria, the stillness of the evangelical life; too much, it is the idea that obsesses and hallucinates, that subjugates willpower, which leads to delirium, crime, suicide ... It is then that love, like Bourget said "it is certain mental and physical state during which obliterates everything in our thoughts, our hearts, in our senses, ambition, duty, past, future, habits, needs, all by single idea of a particular entity."<sup>29</sup>

While more men commit suicide, women are the ones who attempt suicide more. For Souza (1929) this was because not all women want to die, they may even fake a suicide attempt in order to call attention to themselves. "A woman who can pretend to cry and syncope, for mere convenience, is also able to take a little kerosene or creosote, and say she has been poisoned, so, soon after causing panic in the family or with her lover, she can achieve something she desires."<sup>30</sup> However, there was a case in Recife where a person faked a suicide attempt and ended up in jail, but this was done by a male, not a female.

In summary, the news of suicides and suicide attempts published in the *Diario de Pernambuco* in the 1920s reported female suicides as being more connected to love, to passion and to jealousy.

#### 4. Female Suicide Statistics in Recife in the 1920s

If a person committed suicide or tried to kill themselves in Pernambuco in the 1920s, they could have their name published in the *Diario de Pernambuco* as someone who tried against their own existence. Not depending on whether you were rich or

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<sup>28</sup> SIQUEIRA, Alcides Lopes de. **O Amor como Dirimente Penal**. Tese para obtenção do grão de Doutor em Ciências Médico –Cirúrgicas. (Cadeira de Medicina Legal). Salvador: Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia, 20 de Novembro de 1927. P. 42. LAPEH

<sup>29</sup> Idem, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> SOUZA, José de A. **Do suicídio por envenenamento, principalmente na Bahia**. Op. Cit. Pp. 28-29. LAPEH

poor, white or black, man or woman, young or old, if you attempted against your own life, you could have your name published in the newspaper.

In fact, it was not just your name that would be published, but also various other data, such as: home address, which included the building number, marital status, occupation, age, race, among others. In addition to the individual's personal characteristics, other facts were also published as references to the act itself, as the method used, the instrument, where the act took place, the reason, etc.. However, the amount of information varied from case to case. Some even had their suicide note published.

The *Diario de Pernambuco* published 821 cases of suicides and suicide attempts during the 1920's, excluding the cases where there was doubt if the death was caused by suicide, accident or a crime. Despite police investigation of the cases, most never had the results published later on in the newspaper.

Of the above 821 cases, 502 were for women (with 405 attempted suicides and 97 suicides) and 319 cases were for men (with 166 suicides and 153 attempts). Of the suicide attempts, 70.93% were female and 29.07% male, or in other words, there was one male suicide attempt for every 2.44 female attempts. Of the suicides, 61.2% were male against 38.8% female, or one female suicide per 1.58 male.

This difference occurs because humans, while they may be male or female, are also different in their physical biology. There is a thesis, however, that a person can become masculinized or feminized. In this case, both biological and socio-cultural aspects affect and, consequently, also exert some influence on suicide.

Although most of us accept a number of gender stereotypes, research has substantiated only a few, mostly small, disparities between the sexes. Of those relevant to suicidology, even fewer appear germane. In the cognitive domain, females are more verbal than males. Thus, we might expect to find differences in suicidal communications with females "crying for help" more than males. In the social domain, aggression, both physical and verbal, is more characteristic of males. Thus, we might expect to find more violent behaviors among males. Females are more sensitive than males to nonverbal communications and cues. Thus, they are more empathic to the feelings of others and more susceptible to social influence than males. Also, there is some suggestive evidence that females are more willing to admit to their fears and anxieties. Thus, we might expect to find more social reactivity and help seeking/help accepting among females. (MARIS *et. al.*, 2000, pp. 146/147).

Thus, men and women act and react different among themselves, something that also is observed in suicide. This large difference can be partly justified by the means used to perform the act since men are more apt to violence, they will use more violent means, which may raise doubts whether it was suicide, accident or crime.

Women tend to choose less violent means, thus, they have preferences for poisons and drugs. These are easier to use, free of pain and easily accessible. The data obtained shows predominance for poisoning, both male and female, when considering the number of suicides and suicide attempts as a whole. After poisoning, firearms and bladed weapons, are instruments typically considered male, given their characteristic aspects of violence. Among women, fire was the second option.

Considering suicide separately from attempted suicide among women, death by fire was dominant in suicide and poisoning in attempted suicide. Among men, shooting by firearms dominates in suicides and poisoning in attempts. According to Maris *et. all* (2000) poison is the main method of suicide attempts in non-fatal cases, because it requires a certain period of time to cause death, thus allowing a greater chance of distress, an intervention or a reconsideration.

The predominant method of poisoning is probably sought by women since it wouldn't make them disfigured, or in other words, it is a method that would allow the maintenance of their beauty. (MARIS *et. al.*, 2000) We assume this is possible due to the marketing of beauty, thinness, the fashion, fitness and beauty products at this time in Recife.

However, the dominance by the method of poisoning may well be due to the fact that it was easy to acquire poisons at this time, as noted by Dr. Souza in his medical thesis.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding the use of fire, this was something typically feminine, since only 10.95% of cases were performed by men by this means. Suicide by fire does not seem a logical choice for suicide by women since it indicates a death with such pain and violence. According to Santana (2010), however, fire presents symbols of divinity, purification and regeneration, so much so that the Inquisition used it as a method to purge the evil from the individual. Thus, fire may be linked to the symbolism of God and the sun, or factors that illuminate.

Fire can also be linked to passion, when it comes to worldly significance. Therefore, it presents a symbolism related to sexuality, related to the lack of control, "as the flame that consumes, eats." (SANTANA, 2010, p. 66). Through this idea, Santana justifies suicide attempts in this form when linked to the conflicts of love.

According to Morselli,

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<sup>31</sup> SOUZA, José de Araujo. **Do suicídio por envenenamento, principalmente na Bahia.** Op. Cit. LAPEH.

Woman whose life is bound to the domestic hearth, and who preserves even on the most serious occasions the feeling of decorum, appears to have a repugnance to commit suicide openly, or in public places. Thus we see her proportions of death augmented in suicides committed in private houses, and if those by drowning appear an exception to the rule, it is certainly owing to her marked propensity for that method. Hence it may be noticed how suicides in wells adjacent to houses are less rare among women, whilst in rivers, whether in the open country or running through cities, the proportion of men exceeds that of women. [...]. For the violent deaths committed also within-doors, the woman always prefers her own house to that of others, and the most remote and obscure parts of the house. (MORSELLI, 1882, PP. 351/352).

The preference for female suicides and attempted suicides in the home are suggested by our data, since 90.14% killed themselves or tried to commit suicide in their homes, while only 48.25% of men choose their homes.

The rates of suicide and suicide attempts also vary with regards to age ranges, in which the average age was 27 years, with a minimum age of 8 years and a maximum of 90. The age group with the highest number of suicides was 21 to 29 years. This peak can be explained by low life expectancy of the population, although we don't have the exact life expectancy of that time, we can assume that it was smaller than that calculated by IBGE in 1942, which was 42.7 years.

Another possible reason while this group has the highest prevalence of suicide and suicide attempts can be traced to family issues at the 1920's, since an unbalanced family environment can increase suicidal behavior. According to Durkheim, marriage was seen as something that protects against suicide and some current studies also suggest that protection.

However, this has not been verified by our study, in which the suicide of married couples reached its peak in this group of 21 to 29 years. This possibly shows a possible deregulation in the family structure of that time, which during its adaptation to new habits of modern society was no longer protecting individuals from suicide.

There is still the possibility of unhappy marriages, given that divorce and separation weren't well accepted, and this can be seen in a short note published in the *Diario de Pernambuco*, saying:

Against divorce - Belém, 29 - Being interviewed about the vexed question of divorce which currently has revolutionized the main centers of the country, Mr. Almeida Genú stated that divorce is a terrible chancre and unfortunate the society that has planted it in its womb. He added that the exaggeration of women's fashions is the leading cause for the divorce law, this execrated fashion being a consequence of the lack of education and zero moral education in the myths in which we live. He later said that to raise the moral level of Brazilian society we must take care, frankly, fairly and honestly, of the real

education of youth, which can easily be achieved by delivering them to competent and worthy masters.<sup>32</sup>

Marriage between young people was seen by some doctors of that time and by the Catholic religion as a protective factor for suicide, something that we believe has foundation, as current statistics show that married people are less likely to commit suicide. However, in the 1920s, the institution of marriage and family was going through a period of remodeling, in other words, a period of lawlessness.

The bourgeois family, with its habits that favored the deconstruction of the old sociability and established new standards of social behavior, was gaining place in Recife since the late nineteenth century, when the bachelors began to adopt new behaviors, such as the abandonment of rural occupations and adherence to bureaucratic professions. A new style of living, residing, educating, behaving and building and managing families were being established socially, and the city began to be dissected and reshaped by the emerging new knowledge to better accommodate these men of the "new type". (OLIVEIRA, 2002, p. 327)

For Durkheim, marriage exercised some favoring against suicide in the individual from the age of 20 because it would reduce social isolation and further integrate individuals. It would also be true for societies in which men absorb more benefits from marriage than women, since they are more vulnerable to suicide when the marriage dissolves.

However, our data base from local newspapers reported that the majority of suicides were among married men (55%). This is possibly explained by the financial responsibilities imposed on men to support their families, that being his social and moral obligation. This can be exemplified in the attempted suicide of José P.S.<sup>33</sup>, worker at the factory Lafayette, who threw himself into the Capibaribe River, but was removed by two police officers who took him to the police station to testify. On the way, Joe still threw himself under the wheels of a tram, although nothing happened in response to the motorman's quick action. In the police station, he justified his acts by the difficulties of life, possibly by low wages and his obligation to support his family, since he was married with two children.

As for the cases of married women (45%), we assume that this happened in response of their submission in marriage, seeing that the woman should take care of the home, children and family, only being allow to work out of home if they had permission from the husband, according to the civil code at the time. Some women, according to Filgueiras, choose separation so that they could work outside the home, something that

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<sup>32</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. Recife, Sunday, october 31th, 1926. P.1. FUNDAJ

<sup>33</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Tentativa de Suicídio**. Recife, July 25th, 1920. P. 4. FUNDAJ

is observed in our data when relating professions with married life. None of the married woman who committed suicide or attempted suicide had jobs outside the home. If they did possess other jobs than the domestic one, this information was not disclosed in the news.

As for the single person, this was a time of greater freedom from the control of family and church, thus, providing the so-called *flirts* and *footings*, in which individuals were no longer building emotional ties and families, something that was even a medical concern. In spite of the increased freedom, however, women in this group were still indoctrinated with the importance of marriage and family for the development of society and morality.

In this group, the suicide rate was more prevalent among men, which can also be justified by financial difficulties, which hindered the maintenance or construction of a family. Financial distress could lead the honest man and well liked to commit a crime, such as Cecílio<sup>34</sup>, who broke into the house of a farmer in Pesqueira, robbing a certain amount of money and injuring one of the farmer's daughters who reacted to the robbery. Cecílio was later found hanged with the amount of money stolen in his pocket. It was believed that the suicide was in response of the guilty feelings of committing a crime, since he was known, in the region, as a good man.

Another analysis factor would be race (white, brown [mulattos], and black), as defined in the news. In the cases in which this data was recorded, there was a large prevalence among whites, followed by browns and finally blacks. This same racial classification was observed by the doctors of the period. They attributed the higher rates among whites due to higher cultural and educational levels. Our data base registered a professional relationship with race, given that store owners and employees of the commercial area predominated among the whites, while among the brown victims contractors, industrial workers, tailors and also workers in the commercial area predominated, and among the blacks cases, construction and industries workers, vendors, and especially domestic employees were recorded.

It is noteworthy that the amount of race-related activity of domestic employees was the same among the three races (four cases each). However, they were recorded in different proportions: 11.43% for whites, 21.1% for mulattos, and 57.1% for blacks. Thus, the data suggest that at that time the whites were more likely to have "better" jobs

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<sup>34</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Roubo e Suicídio**. Recife, January 25th, 1920. P. 5. FUNDAJ

than the other members of the two races, something that can be justified by eugenics, which attributed superiority to the whites.

This same relationship of dominance can be observed when analyzing the issue of race with gender. Although there were more female cases, this does not affect the relationship mentioned above. Data from the *Diario de Pernambuco* show a predominance of white women, although we saw earlier that criminal cases were predominantly related to women and, in particular, the brown ones. This shows that race affected the progress of criminal cases in Recife the 1920's, because although there is a majority of cases reported among white, non-Caucasian women were suffering more investigations. Perhaps with respect to black women, there was no interest in investigating their cases, given the assignment at the time of their inferiority.

Discrimination against the black was visible in the news, since they often start the news with the woman and her name [...], but when it came to a black woman, noted by the news of December 11, 1927, that began as follows: "The black lady of 22 year old Alice [...]"<sup>35</sup>.

In the collective consciousness, associations are deeply rooted between black and idleness, violence, sexual permissiveness. The introduction of this booklet is just one example of how this is reflected in the press. Being black is an attribute conferred by nature which is only partially dissolves by the exceptional demonstration of positive features. (FAUSTO, 2001, p. 67)

Maris *et. al* (2000). justify the minority of blacks in rates by the simple fact that instead of guiding the aggression against himself, they discharge it on others. As noted by Boris Fausto (2001), in which blacks and browns would rob and steal, while whites committed more homicides and sex crimes.

Maris (2000) also addresses the issue that black families are constituted of a larger number of people, thus having more family bonds. Fausto (2001) noted that people of color tended to value marriage and virginity. In analyzing our data, in regards to a correlation between race and marital status, there was a weak marriage relationship among blacks, something that, according to Durkheim's thought, would cause a higher rate of suicide. However, that was not the case in Recife in the 1920's.

These data, however, have a false sense of reality, because there was news that expressed the existence of individuals living with partners, implying that they had an intimate relationship between them, but weren't married by law, so their marital status was determined as single. Besides that, according to Maluf and Mott (1998), "most

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<sup>35</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. Sunday, december 11th, 1927. P. 8. FUNDAJ

women lived in a consensual marital relation, without the effective male presence in the home, or lived with a partner that didn't have a regular or effective job."

Among the most common occupations of women, of those that attempted suicide or committed suicide, were commercial area worker, domestic service, industry, service provider (in this case a cook), teacher, and in prostitution. The majority was made up of workers performing domestic services and then prostitution. In these two professions, the majority consisted of young people between 15 and 29 years, and those who worked in domestic service, 50% were below the age of criminal responsibility (21 years).

The employment of minors was common at that time. However, as noted earlier, they were kept under surveillance and, according to Marcos Bretas (1997), they constantly would escape, showing the existence of a non harmonious work environment. Besides constant surveillance, another possible reason for the culmination of suicides and the suicide attempts would be high demand of physical activity demanded for the job, for "as the laundry, preparing meals and cleaning house, ironing and starching clothes were equally exhaustive and time-consuming activities. "(MALUF; MOTT, 1998, p. 414).

The modern, urban and industrial society also brought changes in prostitution, which went from domestic to urban. However, prostitution in Recife in the 1920s had its ambiguities, because at one time there would be a major repression against them, while at others they would just be "forgotten" by the authorities.

Permeated by moments of conflict and repression and periods in which a policy of tolerance was the tonic, the police action in relation to prostitution was conducted at the mercy of influences and negotiations at the time, varying according to the authorities, with requests for influential figures, or even with the power of persuasion and seduction that the working women in the field exerted over the authorities. (COUCEIRO, 2003, p. 146).

Seduction was also able to make someone commit suicide. Fernando R., 22 years "taken by love for the referred woman [Analia] and without enough money for the expenses that his passion demanded"<sup>36</sup>, committed suicide with a shot in the ear. Thus, the same way prostitutes could cause passions, they could suffer from it, so that culminated in some of their suicides.

Another variable in relation to the issue of suicide was drugs. "Finally, in the 1920s, police linked prostitution to the new crime of drug trafficking. [...]. They were considered as the main customers of drug's dealers." (BRETAS, 1997, p. 203).

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<sup>36</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Tentativas de Suicídio**. Recife, february 11th, 1921. P. 2. FUNDAJ.

According to David Lester (2000), most studies show an association between suicides attitudes to the abuse of narcotics substance, which can be drugs or alcohol.

According to some scholars,

The professional occupation of an individual influences the risk of suicide, because in some professions there are particularly high incidences while in others the rates are especially low. Occupations are particularly relevant with regard to the access of lethal methods and also the variable level of stress that they provoke, thus can facilitate in the suicidal act. (VOLPE *et al*, 2006, p. 18)

Interestingly, all the women in prostitution chose poisoning and all but one, for whom no information was available, used potassium permanganate in the act. This product was used as an antiseptic and disinfectant, being used in the bath to sanitize the private parts. In that way, this product is related to their profession.

Female suicide was also linked to other forms of crimes like murder, adultery and theft. Personal honor in the 1920's exerted an important role in people's lives, so much that the woman Sebastiana<sup>37</sup> committed suicide because she was caught in the act of adultery by her husband.

According to Boris Fausto (2001, p. 124), there was "a considerable number of husbands and murderers in general who committed suicide or attempted suicide after the crime." Recent studies show that cases of murder-suicides are extremely rare.

In the majority of murder-suicide men kill women they are romantically involved with or estranged from and then kill themselves. The most typical of these involves partners with a chronic love-hate pattern: They cannot live with each other; they cannot live without each other. The male (typically) batters his partner for affection, as if his life depended on it. When she threatens or manages to sever the relationship, he reacts with jealousy and rage. Her rejection makes him feel shamed, ruined, and rejected, and he reacts further by murdering her and killing himself. (BONGAR *et al.*, 2000, PP. 225/226).

However, not all women remained submissive and accepted their inferior status in relation to men, as mentioned by Soihet,

Unlike the usual, many victims of popular violence rebelled against the mistreatment of their companions on a proportionate violence, precipitating extreme solutions, again belying the stereotypes about current attitudes of submissive women. (SOIHET, 2004, p. 370).

This can be observed in the case of Maria M. C<sup>38</sup>, who was tired of her husband for being an inveterate drunkard, threatening him with death, something she did. Maria poisoned her husband and after killing him, she repented and committed suicide.

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<sup>37</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Suicídio**. Recife, wednesday, november 17th, 1920. P. 2. FUNDAJ

<sup>38</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. Recife, Tuesday, october 10th, 1922. P.4. FUNDAJ

Abuses that could also be financial, because as Soihet mentioned, women were much more likely to offer freelance services than men, so

[...] Poor men found a safe haven for women in the face of the troubles of life, marked by unemployment or the meager gains. They could not, however, enjoy a more egalitarian relationship with their partners, since they focused on the dominant stereotype that the woman was his private property on which he had unlimited power. The insecurity and frustration resulting from the inability to exercise the role specifically prescribed to them exacerbated his aggressiveness. (SOIHET, 2004, p. 380).

Despite the importance of marriage for women, they reacted to it. The role of submissiveness could be rooted in their thoughts and attitudes, so that Maria - the case mentioned above - despite suffering with the drunken husband, after taking action, repented, the reason for her suicide.

The female suicide being used as a form of revolt against male domination can be seen in the letter left by Nair. It was left in a way to threaten her husband, as can be seen below.

My dear husband - until the day of final judgement, death for me is rest, for the fate that I do not deserve forces me to go to sleep the sleep of eternity but **my spirit will be chasing you and everyone. I won't leave you and the others who were accomplices to my death.** So you can believe that I was never false, I end this full of pain, soaked in tears. From your wife - Nair.<sup>39</sup>

## Final Thoughts

The 1920s in Recife were marked by the growing emancipation of women, who sought their freedom from the sector that controlled them, their marriage in particular. However, the women's world still was strongly linked to emotions, since the reasons why they committed suicide or attempted suicide at that time were related to love and emotions.

Love in modernity, according to Hugh Augusto (2010), had become something essential in marriages and in affectionate relationships, a movement having occurred, in the first decades of the twentieth century, "with the insertion of love as an emotion to be valued and desired, which accredited it to be an expected element within relationships between men and women, especially of marriage "(MEDEIROS, 2010, p. 142).

However, we note that this modern love also came to be the reason for several suicides and attempted suicides, because love did not necessarily mean union, given the

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<sup>39</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Tentou contra a vida ingerindo ácido azótico.** Recife, Wednesday, may 23th, 1928. P. 4. FUNDAJ

presence of abandonment from the partners, breach of engagements and several cases of jealousy.

Thus, the absence of love, or at least the idea of it, had a role in suicides and attempted suicides in Pernambuco in the 1920s, according to Ornish,

When the person is unable to experience the feeling of togetherness and community in a healing way, they usually find it in other shady and self-destructive means. The powerful need that humans have of intimacy, connection and community can be prepared for the cure, [...], but can also be distorted, leading to disease, despair, and darkness. This need for intimacy is so strong that it can even overcome our instinct for survival. (ORNISH, 1998, p. 27).

Edwin Shneidman (2004) mentions that people in general have the need to *succorance*, which would be the quest for affection, to be nurtured, loved, protected, supported and assisted by others. It is something that should be typical of women in the 1920s, as they should be submissive to the men who should provide their needs, thus constituting the ideal bourgeois family.

The survey data show that in the majority of suicides and attempted suicides that occurred for reasons of love were among women. In their submissive roles, they wanted love and attention, often accepting various abuses in search of acceptance and affection, as shown by Shneidman.

It may be noted that despite the appreciation of marriage as a factor in social status, being married or engaged didn't mean that an ideal marriage would take place. The engagement could be over at any time, as occurred with Laurinda M.<sup>40</sup>, 20, who worked as an auxiliary in a telephone company, and whose fiancé was in the Amazon. She had received a letter from her fiancé saying that he was going to the United States a few days before her suicide attempt, the reason why he wouldn't return to Pernambuco to get married.

Although Rezende (2008, p. 63) noted that "the modern woman is not interested in romantic love dreams anymore," we found that love still had a key role in people's lives, especially in that of women. Perhaps this was due to changes in social structures that allowed a deep sense of loneliness and isolation, at that epoch, so *succorance* was needed, as mentioned by Shneidman.

Fear of loneliness has been like a ball and chain that restrict ambition and is an obstacle to full life [...].

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<sup>40</sup> DIÁRIO DE PERNAMBUCO. **Tentou contra a existência, atirando-se ao mar.** Recife, Thursday, march 8th, 1929. P. 6. FUNDAJ.

[...], An epidemic of loneliness sweeping the world, hand in hand with prosperity, and even worse, the greater success that is achieved, the more likely the suffering it caused, [...].(ZELDIN, 2008 , p. 78).

Rezende (2008) also noted in his research reports an increased suicide rate because of abandonment and the difficulties of sharing life with another, which ultimately leads to despair. This is because "social isolation or social conflict relationships are often found in suicides." (MELEIROS *et. al.*, 2004, p. 116)

Social interaction, generally, exerts its protective factor when it isn't negative. Suicide among married at this time really didn't mean that they were actually "married", due to frequent departures from home, partner abuse and adultery. To Dr. Quintino Costa (1927), marriage among young people should have a key role in reducing suicides, since it would provide the moral elevation of society, reducing the number of venereal diseases, better soil settlement, and better use of products produced by the glands of internal secretion of the genital organs.

As for suicide among singles, it is worth remembering that this was a time when flirtation was one of the most common practices of relationships in which there was the involvement of many partners and as fast as it started, it also ended. This epoch was an epoch where beauty became something fundamental, with the cult of beauty, thinness, fashion and a body well cared for.

In addition, although this was a time where marriages increased out of love, It was also an era of seductions, where "an imaginary vision was spreading influenced by modernity: bare legs, seduction games in every gesture or look, finally, the breaking of taboos that heralded the modern woman" (PRIORE, 2011, p.111) So, seduction could be on every corner, so much so that according to Couceiro," men appeared in the social notes as victims of cunning and the power of seduction from the young girls "(COUCEIRO, 2003, p.208).

This also serves to justify suicides and attempted suicides where the reason was jealousy, one of the main reasons at that time, in particular for women. According to Couceiro (2003), the scenes of jealousy, accompanied by discussions and disputes were common in coffee shops of Recife in the 1920s.

In summary, the survey data show that the matters of love dominated the total phenomenon of suicide, especially attempted suicides. These cases occurred predominantly in Recife, during its phase of modernization, as compared to rural areas and especially among the younger population who migrated to Recife from the rural

areas seeking better conditions, and who were more susceptible to fleeting passions and casual relationships.

Finally, note that the 1920s were marked by the growing emancipation of women. They were, however, still being held submissive to the social system. The suicides that occurred in Pernambuco in the 1920s suggest an increase as a result of the progress made possible by modernity and especially from the innovations implemented – both as cause and instrument of suicide. This study, therefore, joins the current studies that suggest the validity of Durkheim's theory in relation to progress and its consequence on the rise of suicide rates.

Modernity allowed the introduction of innumerable technological advances in the life of Recife, changing habits and desires. These are probable causes so that,

Aspirations for material or consumer goods can accelerate faster than the supply, creating a situation of anomie. In addition, a quest after limitless material goods is seen as meaningless. The key to suicide prevention rests in strong social bonds to family, religion, and work. Economic growth and the quest after material goals can detract from maintaining strong social bonds. (STACK, 2000, PP. 203/204).

But the effects of modernity were already setting in, with the charms to modern objects, which passed on to be sources of desires and fetishes. The young people and the wives were freeing themselves from the institutions that once controlled them, seeking the desired freedom, which charmed, but also destroyed.

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