

# **Narrating Unreason: Madness as Method and Social Critique in Sandhya Mary's *Maria, Just Maria***

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines madness as a narrative strategy and a mode of social critique in Sandhya Mary's *Maria, Just Maria*. Through its non-linear narrative structure, the novel destabilizes conventional notions of reason, normalcy, and psychological coherence by interweaving memory, fantasy, reality, humour, and irony. The resulting dreamlike narrative landscape reflects the fragmented consciousness of Maria, tracing her trajectory from a troubled childhood to institutional confinement within a psychiatric hospital. Significantly, the novel resists a clinical understanding of madness; instead, it presents madness as a socially imposed category directed at individuals who fail or refuse to conform to dominant norms in their struggle for survival and selfhood.

The paper locates the origins of Maria's psychological distress in childhood trauma and explores its manifestations through Freudian formulations of loss, repression, and unresolved

grief. It further draws on Michel Foucault's theorization of madness as a socially constructed discourse, R. D. Laing's conception of madness as a response to an intolerable social reality, and Phyllis Chesler's critique of the gendered production of unreason. By interrogating the binary opposition between sanity and madness, the novel exposes the repressive structures of the family, the ideology of respectability, and the demands of a productivist social order. Ultimately, *Maria, Just Maria* reimagines madness not as pathology but as a mode of truth-telling, self-preservation, and feminine resistance. In doing so, it challenges dominant epistemologies of rationality and foregrounds unreason as a critical site from which social and gendered forms of power may be questioned and contested.

**Keywords:** Madness, Subversion, Social Construction, Childhood Trauma, Gender And Unreason.

"How I wish I could live a normal life like everyone else..." (213), exclaims Maria, a girl born into a Syrian Christian family in Kerala who is deemed mad by the madding crowd around her. Sandhya Mary's debut novel, *Maria, Just Maria*, examines madness and sanity largely through the perspective of a child who wanders the village and toddy shops with her eccentric grandfather, defying the standards of modesty and discipline that society expects. Originally published in Malayalam as *Maria Verum Maria* by Mathrubhumi Books in 2018, the novel established Sandhya Mary as a significant new voice in contemporary Kerala literature, distinguished by her fusion of comic energy and humour, philosophical seriousness, and a radically unconventional narrative sensibility. Its English translation by Jayasree Kalathil, published by HarperCollins India in 2024, won the Crossword Book Award for Indian Language Translation (2024) and the MBIFL Book of the Year Award (2025), and was shortlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature and the Atta Galatta–Bangalore Literature Festival Book Prize (2024).

The novel's non-linear narrative tells the life of Maria, a woman in her thirties who sees herself as "beneath everyone else" in the psychiatric ward because, she says, her madness is "the result of a careless mind" (13). This paper argues that *Maria, Just Maria* deploys madness not as a theme to be explained but as a narrative method that subverts the social order's claim to define sanity, normalcy, success and the worthiness of life. By granting narrative authority to the perspective that the dominant order has disqualified as unreason, the novel inverts the hierarchy through which society distinguishes the sane from the mad and reveals that hierarchy to be a social construction sustained by power and repression. The paper traces madness in *Maria, Just Maria*, from its roots in childhood trauma and loss to its function as a mode of social critique and feminine resistance.

The novel opens when Maria wakes from the unmappable territory of an elaborate dream she narrates, as though recalling "a surrealist movie shot in sepia tones" (3) entangled with a sequence of fragmentary, affectively charged images of travelling, injury, wounds, blood, and weeping, in which she journeys through a "desert-like place in the intense heat" (4) in a pick-up van. The decision to begin the novel with a bizarre dream is not an incidental choice but a foundational structural one that establishes, from the first page, that the narrative will accord the dream, the fantasy, and the subjective image the same status as conventional realist representation. The reader is placed within a consciousness for which the boundary between dream and reality is permeable yet coherent.

The narrator's reflection on the dream introduces the novel's central preoccupation with the relationship between psychic suffering and madness: "Scientists say that our dreams last only for a few seconds," she observes, "but for some people, there is unspeakable trauma in their dreams, the kind of trauma they would have never experienced in their waking lives, that drives them to madness" (4). The formulation locates the origin of madness not in a biological state or chemical imbalance but in trauma, an "unspeakable" suffering. Maria's sorrowful

question, "Why did such unbearable dreams come in search of me?" (4), frames her condition not as a pathology she possesses but as an affliction that has sought her out, a return of something she has suffered rather than a disorder she has generated. This framing aligns the novel's understanding of madness with a psychoanalytic rather than a narrowly medical conception.

If the opening locates the psychic roots of Maria's condition in trauma, the broader narrative situates her madness within a social field in which the very category of madness is produced, assigned, and policed. In *Madness and Civilization* (1961), Michel Foucault argues that madness is not an unchanging biological reality to be medically defined but a social construct shaped by the shifting relations of power and knowledge. What counts as madness, who is designated mad, and how the mad are treated are determined not by nature but by how the social order defines the boundaries of reason, normalcy, and acceptable conduct. By confining and silencing the constitutive outside of reason, the social order maintains its authority over the limits of the thinkable and the livable.

This understanding of madness as a socially imposed designation is one Sandhya Mary herself articulates with striking directness. In a conversation appended to the published novel, she reflects on the mechanism by which the label is assigned: "Society will very easily brand you mad or crazy just because you don't live according to its norms and conditions, or it sees you as being different from its conception of normal or from so-called normal people. That is so cruel." She asks, "Why can't we accept that there is nothing called normalcy?" (223). The statement resonates with Foucault's central thesis that madness is produced by the social order's intolerance of difference, as Sandhya Mary's phrase "so-called normal" suggests, a construction rather than a natural fact. Her rhetorical question directly challenges the very category of madness, rejecting the assumption that there exists a stable, objective standard of normality from which the mad person deviates. She extends this critique to the suppression of emotional

expression: "I have often felt that if screaming out loud was considered okay in our society, many of us would not end up in psychiatric treatment" (223). The observation identifies psychiatric confinement, consequently not of inner derangement but of a social order so intolerant of the open expression of suffering that those who cannot suppress their pain are removed from the community of the sane. She connects this to the fate of the creatively unconventional, recalling people "who were 'branded bhranthans,' people who were deemed mad, who were highly creative but different from the rest of us, whose families were giving them psychiatric treatment even though they had brilliant minds" (224–25). The brilliant minds consigned to treatment are not deranged but different, and it is their difference that the label of madness is deployed to discipline.

The novel dramatizes this mechanism with clarity in the exchange between Maria and her husband concerning her decision to seek a divorce. The conversation proceeds as an interrogation in which Maria's desire for a different kind of life is met by her husband's appeal to the self-evidence of the established order:

'But why?'

'I want to be happy.'

'Aren't you happy now?'

'Sometimes yes, and at other times, no.'

'You do realize that's just how life is, don't you?'

'That's how life is as we know it. Another life should be possible.'

'So, are you saying you can't be happy with me?'

'Not just with you, with anyone.'

'You're being selfish by considering only your happiness.'

'Not at all. I am doing this because I want to show others, everyone, that another kind of happiness is possible.'

## 'Are you mad?' (9-10)

The exchange precisely enacts the Foucauldian mechanism by which madness is socially assigned. Maria's statements are not, by any reasonable standard, expressions of derangement, whereas her aspiration toward "another kind of happiness" (10) is utopian rather than pathological. Yet the husband's response – "Are you mad?" – (10) is not a genuine inquiry into her mental state but a disciplinary instrument. The category of madness here polices the limits of the acceptable by branding whatever exceeds them as mad. As Sandhya Mary's reflections make explicit, this branding is inappropriate precisely because it punishes difference itself, mistaking the refusal of a constraining normalcy for the loss of reason.

If Foucault illuminates the social construction of madness, R. D. Laing's existential psychiatry illuminates its experiential logic. In *The Divided Self* (1960), Laing argues that madness is frequently not the unintelligible breakdown of a defective mind but a rational response to an unlivable social situation. Where a person's authentic character is persistently rejected or invalidated by those on whom she depends for recognition and love, the retreat into a secluded inner world becomes the only logical strategy for self-protection against a world that refuses to let it exist. Maria's biography conforms to this model of how toxic family dynamics and the systemic invalidation of feeling produce distress. She is the unwanted fourth child of her family, abandoned by her parents in early childhood and sent to live in the ancestral house with her grandparents, only to be returned years later to the parents who had given her away. Maria recalls this when explaining her rebellious nature: "If someone were to ask me what the most difficult period in my life was, even if I lived to be a hundred years old, I would answer: childhood. It was the single most torturous period I endured" (158). This early history of rejection and displacement constitutes a profound disruption of the basic conditions of psychic security and belonging through which the self acquires its sense of continuity and worth. Maria grows up in fundamental insecurity, lacking the love, care, and recognition the

family is supposed to provide, and in response, she develops a defiant, unconventional manner that the social world reads not as the symptom of her deprivation but as evidence of her own deficiency. She is stamped weird, undisciplined, and uncultured by the very social order whose failure to provide her with security has produced the behaviour it now condemns.

The single attachment that sustains Maria through this history of rejection is her relationship with her grandfather, Geevarghese, whom she calls Appachan, who remains her sole source of emotional security, her father-figure, mentor, and companion. It is the loss of this relationship that the novel identifies as the immediate precipitant of her madness. Maria believes she became mad after struggling severely to come to terms with his death and the loneliness that engulfed her: "Appachan was the anchor of my life. So, to be perfectly honest, it was not his death but my imminent orphanhood that scared me the most" (15). In terms of the Freudian theory of mourning, the grandfather's death is not merely a sad event but the catastrophic loss of the single object through whom Maria's fragile sense of being loved and recognised had been sustained. In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud distinguishes mourning as the conscious process by which the bereaved gradually withdraws attachment from a lost object, in which the loss is not worked through but turns inward, so that the ego itself becomes identified with the lost object and impoverished by it. Maria's conclusion: "his life was over; so was mine" (20), articulates this melancholic identification in its blatant way that the death of the grandfather is experienced as the death of the self.

The most consequential manifestation of Maria's unmastered grief is her complete withdrawal into silence. Following her grandfather's death, she stops talking altogether, and it is this refusal or inability to speak, more than any other feature of her bereavement, that confirms for those around her that she has lost her mind and must be institutionalised. The silence is the pivotal point at which Maria's private suffering is converted into a public diagnosis. Read through the Freudian framework, Maria's mutism is the logical culmination of

the melancholic process. Speech is the primary medium through which the self relates to the world of others, and to cease speaking is to cut the bond between the inner self and the social world through which existence is sustained. Maria's silence enacts, at the level of the body, the severance she has already declared in words. Having lost the one deep-rooted relationship that held her in being, she withdraws entirely from the relational world.

The Laingian framework recuperates the intelligibility, even the rationality, of this silence. For Laing, the withdrawal the world calls madness is frequently the self's last strategy of self-preservation against an environment that has refused to recognize it. In a family that never acknowledged her attachment to her grandfather and cannot register the magnitude of her loss, speech offers Maria nothing, as there exists no one capable of receiving what she has to say. Silence, in this situation, is not the absence of meaning but a meaningful withdrawal of a self from a world that has proved incapable of hearing. Maria's mutism is, in the Laingian sense, a sane response to an insane situation, the only available means of preserving the integrity of a grief the social world refuses to honour. It is the supreme irony of Maria's situation that this silence is read solely as evidence of madness requiring psychiatric intervention. The family that could not recognize Maria's love or accommodate her grief, responds not by asking what her silence might mean but by removing her to the institution in which the socially designated mad are confined. The psychiatric hospital becomes, in Foucauldian terms, the site to which the social order consigns what it cannot comprehend and will not tolerate. Maria's silence, which began as the expression of an unbearable loss, is answered not with care but with confinement, treated as a symptom to be cured.

The social construction of madness that Foucault describes does not operate uniformly across subjects; it is profoundly gendered. In *Women and Madness* (1972), the feminist psychologist Phyllis Chesler argues that mental illness has historically been deployed as an instrument of patriarchal control, by which women's deviations from the prescribed roles of

obedient daughter, dutiful wife, and self-effacing mother are reclassified as symptoms of unreason and subjected to psychiatric discipline. A woman who refuses the constraints of traditional femininity and asserts her own desires is liable to be labelled mad, her non-compliance reframed as a mental disorder. The novel's characterization of Mathiri Valyammachi, Maria's great-grandmother and the most eccentric character, illustrates Chesler's thesis. Mathiri Valyammachi's entire life constitutes a sustained violation of gendered and religious hierarchy, and her designation as a madwoman follows directly from that violation rather than from any genuine disorder of mind. Her transgressions are, significantly, transgressions of patriarchal, ecclesiastical, and familial authority. She is a prophet, a woman who claims for herself the visionary authority the religious order reserves for men. When the parish priest comes to admonish her that "prophesying was not something good Christians got up to" (83), she outwits him. At fifteen, upon her marriage, she completely ignores her mother's advice to abandon prophesying. She fearlessly neglects the regular church attendance through which the community polices its members' piety. She keeps a talking parrot, Ammini, whom she teaches weird parody songs that astonish those who hear them, and she performs the supreme act of refusing an imposed identity by announcing that "she didn't like the name Mathiri and that henceforth her name would be Ursula" (94), claiming for herself the right to name that the patriarchal order reserves to its male members.

Her most audacious transgression is rewriting the *Bible*, mixing it with tales from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, on the grounds that the Hindu epics were "written by people who had creative sensibilities, but the Bible lacks such artistic flair" (97). The act is a breathtaking assertion of female creative and intellectual authority. In each of these transgressions, Mathiri Valyammachi claims for herself forms of authority, creativity, and self-determination that the patriarchal-religious order reserves for men and denies to women, and it is precisely this idiosyncrasy that marks her as a madwoman. Her madness, like Maria's, is not

a condition she suffers but a designation she incurs. In Mathiri Valyammachi, the novel makes visible the transformation of female refusal into feminine madness.

Maria's madness emerges as the product of an identifiable history of childhood abandonment that disrupted her sense of belonging. The singular attachment to her grandfather, the catastrophic loss of that attachment, and the silence into which she withdrew are revealed as the legible aftermath of a love unacknowledged and a loss unmourned. The novel's deeper achievement lies in its inversion of the very hierarchy through which sanity and madness are distinguished. The question it finally poses is not what is wrong with Maria, but what is wrong with a social order that abandons its children, cannot accommodate grief, pathologises difference, and confines those who refuse its narrow definition of the acceptable life. In this reversal, madness becomes a mode of truth-telling in which Maria's madness and muteness are revealed as a form of radical honesty in a world that silences those who will not conform.

This ethical vision finds its clearest articulation in Sandhya Mary's own reflections in the appended conversation. Against the social impulse to classify, diagnose, and confine, she offers a simple and radical injunction: "don't brand anyone" (225). Her rhetorical question dissolves the authority on which such branding rests: "If a person is happy, or maybe not even that happy, and talks to themselves, who are we to brand them crazy?" (223). What she sought to convey through the figures of Maria and Geevarghese, she explains, was a vision of human freedom and mutual acceptance: "let everyone live their own lives in their own way" (225). It is in this exhortation that the novel's social critique resolves into an ethics of inclusion. *Maria, Just Maria* does not merely diagnose the social construction of madness, rather it imagines a world in which difference is met with recognition and care, in which the grieving are allowed to grieve, the unconventional to be unconventional, and the unhappy to seek another kind of happiness without forfeiting their place in the community of the sane. By narrating unreason from within, and by revealing the reason of the unreasonable and the madness of the normal,

Sandhya Mary's novel insists that the deepest cruelty lies not in madness itself but in the social refusal to let people live their own lives, in their own way.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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