

## Awakening through Madness: Trauma as Cultural Diagnosis in Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman*

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### Abstract

This article is devoted to the study of trauma portrayed in Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' (1918), a landmark work in modern Chinese literature that explores trauma through the lens of social and cultural oppression where the protagonist's madness exposes the hidden cruelty of society under feudal traditions. In this story, madness functions as a form of traumatic awakening, revealing the moral corruption, fear, and normalized violence that ordinary people fail to see. The fragmented diary form mirrors the disrupted consciousness caused by trauma, reflecting how it affects memory, perception, and daily life.

Through the lens of trauma studies, this paper argues that Lu Xun uses madness as a tool to expose cultural and social trauma, making his work a powerful critique of moral and ethical failure in society. Through this lens, the story not only reflects personal suffering but also serves as a diagnosis of a society wounded by tradition, oppression, and fear.

This paper argues how Lu Xun uses madness as a narrative strategy that reveals cultural and social trauma in addition to critiquing feudal traditions and societal oppression through symbolic and psychological representations.

**Keywords:** Trauma-Studies, Cultural-Trauma, Madness, Collective Trauma, Chinese Literature.

### Introduction

Lu Xun is widely regarded as one of modern China's most prominent and influential writers whose works have been considered as an encyclopaedia of Chinese society. He has an irreplaceable place in the history of Chinese literature not only as a writer, but also as one of the signatures that shaped modern literary thought and introduced Chinese literature to the world. He began his artistic career with essays, and later wrote different kinds of stories, and published a book of poems. His *Diary of a Madman* (1918) stands as a foundational text of modern Chinese literature and a powerful critique of traditional Chinese society at a moment of profound historical transformation. Written during the

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early years of the May Fourth Movement, the story employs the voice of a mentally unstable narrator to expose the oppressive moral structures embedded within Confucian culture. By framing social critique through the consciousness of a “madman,” Lu Xun challenges conventional distinctions between sanity and insanity, suggesting that what is labelled as madness may, in fact, represent heightened awareness and moral clarity. The text thus positions psychological trauma not merely as an individual affliction but as a symptom of broader cultural pathology. The figure of the madman serves as both narrator and symbolic device, allowing Lu Xun to challenge prevailing definitions of sanity, morality, and social order. Rather than portraying madness as a purely medical or psychological condition, the text presents it as a reaction to an oppressive cultural environment. The madman’s growing conviction that the people around him are “cannibals” reflects his awakening to the exploitative nature of feudal ethics, particularly those justified by Confucian doctrines such as filial piety, hierarchical obedience, and moral absolutism.

Through the lens of trauma studies, this paper argues that Lu Xun uses madness as a tool to expose cultural and social trauma, making his work a powerful critique of moral and ethical failure in society. Through this lens, the story not only reflects personal suffering but also serves as a diagnosis of a society wounded by tradition, oppression, and fear.

This paper also argues how Lu Xun uses madness as a narrative strategy that reveals cultural and social trauma in addition to critiquing feudal traditions and societal oppression through symbolic and psychological representations.

### **Discussion**

In literary studies, madness is often understood either as a symbol of social abnormality or as a sign of mental illness. In *Diary of a Madman*, however, madness is not shown as a personal medical problem. Instead, it is presented as something created by society itself. From the perspective of trauma studies, the madman’s fear, suspicion, and broken thoughts can be seen as reactions to long-term moral violence. This kind of violence is not obvious or sudden; it is hidden in everyday traditions, accepted as normal, and passed down from one generation to the next.

Trauma scholars point out that trauma does not always come from one shocking event. It can also develop slowly through constant pressure and oppression within social systems. The madman’s way of thinking reflects this kind of experience. His diary is disordered and repetitive, which shows how traumatic memories often return again and again in an uncontrollable way. In this sense, trauma becomes a cultural problem that appears psychologically when an individual begins to recognize and question the violence embedded in society.

### **Cannibalism as Cultural Metaphor:**

The most striking image in *Diary of a Madman* is that of cannibalism. The madman’s belief that people “eat people” is not meant to be taken literally; rather, it functions as a metaphor for moral consumption. Traditional ethics, particularly those associated with Confucian hierarchy and filial obligation, are depicted as systems that sustain themselves by sacrificing individual autonomy and compassion.

Cannibalism represents the way society controls people through pressure, guilt, and moral fear. Through the image of cannibalism, Lu Xun reveals how violence can be hidden inside moral values, making it common and hard to challenge.

### **Madness as Awakening and Resistance:**

In *Diary of a Madman*, madness is presented not as a weakness or illness but as a form of awakening and resistance. The madman is called “insane” because he begins to see the cruelty hidden within traditional society. While others blindly accept social rules and moral values, the madman

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questions them. His madness, therefore, represents his awakening to the truth about the oppressive nature of these traditions.

As the madman becomes more aware, he also becomes more isolated. Society labels him mad in order to silence him and protect its own values. This shows how anyone who challenges accepted beliefs is often rejected or ignored. The madman's fear and paranoia are not meaningless; they are reactions to realizing that violence and injustice are built into everyday life.

Through this character, Lu Xun reverses the idea of sanity and insanity. Those considered "normal" are actually morally blind, while the madman is ethically aware. His madness becomes a form of resistance against social conformity and inherited traditions. In this way, *Diary of a Madman* suggests that true awakening is painful and lonely, but necessary for social and moral change.

### **Trauma, Children, and Cultural Renewal:**

The madman's final plea, "Save the children," is one of the most important moments in the story. Children represent hope and the possibility of change because they have not yet fully absorbed the oppressive traditions of society. By calling for the children to be saved, Lu Xun suggests that cultural renewal can only happen if future generations are protected from harmful moral teachings.

This appeal shows that awareness of trauma leads to responsibility. Once the violence hidden in tradition is recognized, it becomes necessary to break the cycle. Through the image of children, Lu Xun expresses his belief that a healthier and more humane society can be created by reforming cultural values and educating the next generation differently.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is often inherited and repeated rather than directly experienced in one moment. In the story, the madman realizes that the cruelty embedded in traditional moral systems has been passed down through generations. His fear reflects an awakening to this inherited trauma, showing how cultural traditions can silently shape psychological suffering.

Dominick LaCapra also distinguishes between individual trauma and structural or historical trauma. Structural trauma refers to suffering produced by long-standing social systems rather than specific events. Lu Xun's portrayal of Confucian morality as "cannibalistic" fits this idea, as the trauma in the story arises from everyday ethical practices such as blind obedience and moral conformity. The madman's breakdown occurs when he becomes conscious of this structure, suggesting that awareness itself can be traumatic.

The transmission of trauma across generations is central to the madman's final plea: "Save the children." This moment can be understood through Pierre Nora's concept of cultural memory, which explains how societies preserve and transmit values, beliefs, and behaviors over time. Lu Xun suggests that if children continue to be educated within the same oppressive moral framework, trauma will persist.

Finally, from a Foucauldian perspective, the labeling of the madman as insane reflects how societies silence disruptive voices. Michel Foucault argues that madness is often defined by those in power to exclude dissent. The madman's concern for children represents resistance against this silencing, as it shifts focus from individual suffering to collective responsibility and future change.

### **Conclusion**

*Diary of a Madman* is one of Lu Xun's powerful works using the figure of madness to expose the deep cultural and moral crises of early twentieth-century Chinese society. It delineates that madness in the text is not a sign of individual psychological failure but a form of awakening that reveals the traumatic foundations of traditional social structures. By presenting trauma as a collective and culturally produced condition, Lu Xun transforms personal suffering into a broader diagnosis of social illness. However, it functions as a profound cultural diagnosis that links madness, trauma, and

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awakening. Lu Xun's use of psychological disturbance as a narrative strategy reveals the hidden violence of tradition and calls for ethical renewal rooted in awareness and responsibility. The enduring relevance of the text lies in its ability to connect individual psychological suffering with collective cultural critique, reminding readers that true social change begins with the courage to question inherited norms and to imagine a more humane future.

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### About the Author

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He was felicitated for academic excellence by Justice Dipak Misra, former Chief Justice of India, and by Justice Bidyut Ranjan Sarangi, former Chief Justice of the Odisha High Court, as well as by the Rotary Club of Cuttack, Odisha. He has teaching experience at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and has qualified UGC-NET and WB-SET in English.

His research interests include Literary Theory and Criticism, Feminism, Gender Studies, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Postmodern Literature, and English Grammar and Language. He has published research articles in peer-reviewed international journals, including works on ecofeminism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and caste consciousness in the writings of Bama. He is also actively engaged in creative writing, particularly poetry, and regularly participates in academic seminars and research activities.

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