

TRAUMA, MADNESS AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN SANDHYA MARY'S *MARIA JUST MARIA*

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Abstract

Sandhya Mary's *Maria Just Maria*, translated from Malayalam by Jayasree Kalathil, is a psychologically intricate novel that follows an unconventional narrative approach. By presenting the nuances of trauma, insanity, memory and female subjectivity, this novel investigates the politics of abnormality. Narrated largely through the fragmented consciousness of the central character Maria, the text incorporates multiple perspectives of varied characters. The novel is a continuous discussion on the conventional binary between normalcy and deviance. Maria's shattered self and mental instability are rooted in her childhood trauma. This paper evaluates the novel through the lens of childhood trauma, with an argument that Maria's descent into madness was the consequence of her childhood experiences, such as emotional neglect, displacement and insecurity. Drawing upon trauma theory and psychoanalytic perspectives, this paper reads the novel as challenging the conventional understandings of insanity. The novel is also examined in relation to its portrayal of female subjectivity.

Keywords: insanity, trauma, displacement, female subjectivity

Introduction

Mental health has been portrayed in Malayalam literature from varied perspectives. *Maria Just Mariya* unravels a unique and empathetic presentation of the central character's fragmented consciousness. The novel depicts the deeper dimensions of Maria's seemingly small life. It begins with Maria's days in a mental asylum. The narrative of her life unfolds through the writings she composes during her stay at the mental health centre. Even after finishing the novel, Maria's life lingers in the reader's mind as an enigma. It is hard to distinguish between reality and imagination, since many events in her life are creations of her imaginative mind. By rejecting the traditional mindsets and moral values, she leads a life only she can understand. Mirroring the instabilities of a traumatised mind, the novel also follows a non-linear narrative structure. At the beginning of the novel, Maria explores the reasons for her mental instability by presenting her own opinion, as well as the opinions of others, including Aravind, Mathew, and her doctor. In the second part of the novel, readers are introduced to Maria's village, its people, and her life at *Kottaram* house.

Maria's Childhood and the Roots of Isolation

The reasons for her fragmented self can be traced to the trauma caused by emotional neglect from her parents, later displacement from the *Kottaram* house to her parents' home, an unstable caregiving environment, and her encounter with the death of her grandfather, who was the only emotional anchor she had. Maria lived with her grandparents during her childhood, while her three siblings stayed with her parents. This arrangement created an exclusion and emotional distance between Maria and her parents and siblings. In her brother Mathew's words, "Maria was always an outsider in my home, even though she was a member of our family just like the rest of us" (Mary 26). This physical and psychological displacement created a deep sense of abandonment in Maria. She led a carefree life with *Appachan*, to whom she was deeply attached. However, due to the undisciplined nature of her life there, she was later sent back to her parents. This transition was deeply traumatic, as it distanced her from the emotional security and warmth of the *Kottaram* house.

In contrast, she found life with her parents unfamiliar and uncomfortable. She did not consider it her own house; for her, *Kottaram veedu* was her true home. This forced second displacement proved far more traumatic, as she was separated from everything she enjoyed and from the only relationship that had provided her emotional stability. Trauma theory emphasises that when a child is separated from a primary emotional attachment figure without consent or emotional preparation, the experience registers as loss and betrayal (Bowlby 47). At her parents' house, Maria

experienced intense emotional isolation. Her siblings treated her as unequal, and her parents failed to recognise her vulnerability. She felt like an outsider in her own home, which led her to believe that she belonged nowhere. Her sense of selfhood had been shaped at her grandfather's house, where she experienced love, freedom, and companionship. In contrast, life at her parents' house focused on discipline, emotional distance, and constant comparison, leading to a profound emotional rupture.

The Role of Appachan: Emotional Bonds and Security

Appachan's (grandfather) death can be seen as the single catastrophic event that shatters Maria's emotional stability. Unlike other familial relationships in her life, *Appachan* represents unconditional emotional security, attachment, freedom and meaning. According to 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" (Mary 19). Her trauma started even before the physical death of *Appachan*. She experienced intense anticipatory anxiety thinking about *Appachan's* death and her resultant isolation. This anticipation reveals her deep awareness that *Appachan's* absence would leave her unprotected in a world already marked by parental neglect. Trauma theorists argue that such anticipatory grief intensifies the psychological impact of loss, as the mind begins fragmenting before the event itself occurs (Rando 24). The moment of *Appachan's* death initiated Maria's emotional instabilities. She imagines herself accompanying him to the other world as an act of coping with reality. But she found that world as cold and dismissive, especially by *Mathiri Valyamma's* rejection, resulting in an emotional disillusionment in her. Maria's behaviour during the funeral explains the intensity of her trauma. She oscillates between extreme grief, vomiting, sudden hunger and hallucinations. People around gave more attention to her rather than the dead person because of her behaviour.

Ammachi tried her hardest to get me to sleep but I ignored her, and as soon as she left, I got out of the room and walked to the rubber plantation. I climbed to the top of the cashew nut tree where, as a young child, I used to sit looking out for Kuttappayi, my childhood heartthrob. People going by to pay their respects to Appachan looked over their shoulder at me in puzzlement. (Mary 25)

Instead of being comforted, she was judged and observed. Her trauma and ultimate loss were misread as madness, and the root of her trauma was never addressed. Later, she resorts to silence as a coping mechanism. She was later hospitalised, but it is not clear whether her real trauma was addressed there. As Maria herself reflects, madness becomes society's convenient explanation for pain that is too uncomfortable to confront.

The novel aligns perfectly with the Trauma theory. The term 'trauma' was derived from the Greek word *trauma*, meaning 'wound'. It originally referred to a physical wound, but later Sigmund Freud defined it as "harm inflicted not on the body but on the mind" (Caruth 3). According to Cathy Caruth, "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon" (Caruth 11). In *Maria Just Maria*, it can be evaluated that Maria's trauma was not the immediate, visible result of an incident. Instead, it emerged through emotional experiences accumulated over time, specifically the emotional neglect during childhood, displacement and the death of her grandfather. As Caruth states, trauma cannot be processed at the moment of occurrence, since it is too overwhelming. This is visible in Maria's response to *Appachan's* death; she was unable to grieve in a conventional manner. Her mental illness was the delayed response to this unprocessed trauma, which appeared later in distorted and repetitive forms. Her disjointed thoughts, hallucinations, and blurring of the boundaries between reality and imagination were the results of her emotional turmoil. Maria's madness is interpreted not as conventional insanity, but as the lingering effect of trauma. It represents the mind's attempt to process an overwhelming experience that defied full understanding at the time. Certain fixations and habits of Maria can be traced back to her traumatic experiences. For instance, even as an adult, Maria found happiness in picking things up from the floor to eat them. "Maria is picking up the bits of mixture that had fallen on the floor and eating them. She is not doing it because she is drunk; she feels genuine happiness in picking things off the floor and eating them" (Mary 144). This behaviour can be traced back to her childhood, particularly after she was sent back to live with her parents. Feeling like an outsider in their home, Maria's pride prevented her from accepting food or snacks

directly from her family. Instead, she chose to eat snacks discarded by her siblings, picking them up from the ground and consuming them.

John Allen states that a traumatic experience has two components in it: the objective and the subjective.

It is the subjective experience of the objective events that constitute the trauma... The more you believe you are endangered, the more traumatized you will be... Psychologically, the bottom line of trauma is overwhelming emotion and a feeling of utter helplessness. There may or may not be bodily injury, but psychological trauma is coupled with psychological upheaval that plays a leading role in the long-range effects. (Allen 14)

Maria's suffering does not result from some evident violence or brutality, but from her experiences of abandonment, emotional insecurity and loss. *Appachan's* death is the central objective event that caused Maria's trauma. But the traumatic force lies in Maria's subjective response to it. *Appachan* is not merely a grandfather; he is Maria's emotional anchor, the one figure who provides her with stability, affection, and a sense of belonging. When he dies, Maria experiences not just grief but an overwhelming fear of absolute helplessness and orphanhood. The danger and insecurity she experienced were more psychological than physical. The novel powerfully illustrates Allen's assertion that trauma's lasting damage stems not from what happens to the body, but from how the mind experiences, interprets, and survives events marked by loss, fear, and helplessness.

Maria's instability in regulating her mental state is evident from various events presented in the novel. One of the striking instances is her ongoing conversations with Jesus Christ. These interactions seem real to even the readers because Maria accepts it as reality and hence presents it in a natural way. This difficulty in differentiating between internal fantasies and external reality signals a psychotic disorder in Maria. A continuous refusal to accept *Appachan's* death is visible in her. She imagines him moving away to a different world. By creating the other world, her mind is trying to construct an alternate reality where *Appachan's* presence continues to soothe her soul. She also forgets many things about her life. Aravind, who was in love with Maria, always wanted to know about her first failed marriage. But she couldn't remember anything about that relationship.

Maria's formative years at *Kottaram* house played a crucial role in structuring her emotional and psychological attributes. That house became the source of Maria's emotional security and affection, fostered through her close bond with *Appachan*. While this bond grants her freedom from discipline and social conditioning, it deprives her of emotional plurality and resilience. She experienced unlimited freedom and was free from social discipline. *Appachan*, who was an easy-going person interested in a life outside the *Kottaram* house, never mediated her emotional experiences or couldn't prepare her for loss, conflict or separation. Therefore, even though that house offered her love and freedom, it also developed a sense of emotional isolation, as her emotional attachment was centred on a single figure. Additionally, her companions were the elderly, dying or those on the margins of sanity. This leads Maria to develop a different emotional and cognitive system.

So, these were Little Maria's friends and companions: a grandfather, Geevarghese, who spent most of his time in toddy shops and gallivanting around the village, taking his granddaughter along; a great-grandfather, Kuncheriya valyappachan, who was over ninety years old and at death's door; a great aunt, Anna valyamma, who was in the grip of dementia; an ancestor, Chirammel Kathanar, who was a priest and had died generations ago; other dead family members, including Mathiri valyammachi, from the stories her grandfather told her; and Chandippatti, a dog who philosophized non-stop. Was it any wonder that Maria turned out the way she did! (Mary 39)

Instead of peer relationships that might anchor her to shared reality, Maria inhabits a space where time is fractured, and identities are unstable. Due to the environment in which she grew up, she perceives insanity as a living condition rather than an aberration. It is true that her imagination and empathy deepened because of this space but her psychological stability and emotional intelligence weakened.

Feminist Perspectives: Challenging Traditional Womanhood

By placing emphasis on Maria's inner life, the novel explores female subjectivity. It subverts the traditional notions about the roles and responsibilities of woman like marriage, domestic stability, etc. Instead of depicting a socially conditioned female protagonist, the novel reveals a fragmented, unstable character with imagination and yearning for freedom. Maria's refusal to conform to anything conventional is at the core of the novel. Her choices and lifestyle are often judged by others as madness, but the novel presents it from her point of view, highlighting her emotions, memories and thoughts. Since Maria was outside parental supervision at *Kottaram* house, she stayed away from the confines of normative female discipline. This shaped her imaginative freedom and fostered her yearning for freedom, but left her emotionally unprotected.

Maria embodies a feminist perspective that challenges conventional notions of womanhood. By subtly conveying this stance through lived experiences rather than overt ideological assertions, the narrative achieves greater impact. Maria married a man of her own choice and later got separated from him. The conversation with parents on this matter unravels her disregard for conventions that define a woman.

'What's the problem?'

'This is not what I want.'

'Didn't you know that before?'

'I realized this was not what I wanted only when I understood what this was.'

My husband was also shocked when I told him I wanted out of the marriage. What I really meant was that I wanted out of all marriage, married life in general. (Mary 13)

She rejects not her marriage, but marriage as an institution itself. In contrast, her friendship with Aravind offers an alternative relational model that challenges the patriarchal structure of marriage. This relationship is more grounded on emotional stability, intellectual intimacy and the absence of commitment. Instead of expecting permanence through this bond, she enjoyed a space where she could talk and express freely without the fear of being judged.

Maria's fear of public spaces says so much about gendered violence and abuse. She adds that the fear is not a personal thing, but rather because of her gender. "The reason being that she was born a woman, which was, in itself, a terrible thing. But to be born a woman in this land ... nothing more terrible could happen to a person. Every pig in this land thinks that a woman who steps into the public space is their property" (Mary 149). She is exhausted to be on self-surveillance all the time. "O My Lord, I am sick and tired of having to watch over my breasts and ass" (Mary 149). Her dream is to get the right to be free from being ogled at.

Maria's innocent thoughts and doubts represented a philosophical vision of the world. As a child, she was afraid of the punishment with a cane by her Devaki teacher. She was not bothered about the right and wrong answers and was confused about the necessity of so many questions. She found it difficult to comprehend the idea of examinations and competition. "Maria found school traumatic because she could not understand the psychology behind competitions, exams, being at the top of the class, or why some people were considered smart just because they knew the answers to specific questions asked at specific times. Did knowing the answers to questions make someone smart?" (Mary 34). It is clear that during her childhood, she had some enlightening thoughts and conceptions regarding freedom. She had huge dissatisfaction for the illogical patriarchal standards set by society. When her grandmother asked Maria to lead a normal life like her siblings, so that her parents could be happy and proud of her. Grandmother cited the example of her siblings, Mathew, who is a doctor in America, and Anne and Lisa, "got married at the proper time and had children at the proper time for their parents to enjoy in their old age" (Mary 161). She critiques society's conventional standards, which deem a man accomplished if he holds a job, while equating a woman's success solely with motherhood. In Maria's words, a woman "can go to Pluto and back, and still you won't acknowledge her accomplishment unless she has popped out a few children" (Mary 161). Maria was not willing to get confined in the chains of patriarchal notions.

Conclusion

Maria Just Maria is a novel that redefined the traditional narrative styles in Malayalam. It offers a subtle, empathetic depiction of trauma, insanity, and female subjectivity by portraying the life of a woman with a fragmented self. Maria's instability in regulating her mind is read as an outcome of emotional neglect, isolation, loss, and societal expectations. Her madness is rooted in the cumulative trauma resulting from her initial separation from her parents, when she was sent away to live with her grandparents. Subsequently, she was forcibly removed from her grandparents' home and returned to her parents' house, accused of leading an undisciplined life in the absence of parental oversight. This was more traumatic to her than the initial displacement, as she had to move away from everything she enjoyed. She felt her parents' home to be a strange place and felt like an outsider there. Her parents were never bothered about her vulnerabilities or emotions. The death of her grandfather was a terrible blow that shattered her entirely, and the event led to an intense emotional breakdown. This turns out to be an instance of loss becoming catastrophic when emotional security is not available. Maria's life at *Kottaram* house further complicated her psychology. Even though she had unlimited freedom and imaginative space, she lacked emotional support and preparedness to face life. Constant exposure to aged people, mentally unstable people etc., affected her mental health. The novel thus presents freedom and trauma not as opposites but as coexisting forces that inform Maria's subjectivity. By centering Maria's fear of public spaces, her rejection of marriage, and her feminist reflections on bodily surveillance, the novel exposes how women's psychological distress is inseparable from their lived social realities. The novel also engages in a discourse on gender and feminist perspectives, conveyed not only through the character of Maria, but also through several other female characters. Ultimately, *Maria Just Maria* destabilizes the binary between sanity and insanity by presenting madness as an alternative mode of knowing—one that articulates truths inaccessible within normative social frameworks. Maria's fragmented voice challenges dominant narratives of normalcy and exposes the emotional costs of denying women autonomy, safety, and emotional recognition. In doing so, the novel reclaims female madness as both a symptom of trauma and a form of resistance, making it a powerful feminist intervention into discourses of mental health, gender, and subjectivity.

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