

"It's not my sister who is mad. You are!":
Problematising the Normal in C. Ayyappan's 'Madness'

Niharika Grover

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi
E-mail address: niharikagrover97@gmail.com

Abstract

What makes something right? What makes something true? What explains 'reason'? What is 'normal'? "To get at even a grain of truth about something, at least two persons should look at it, each with their own set of eyes- or spectacles, if you like! That's why it is essential that you give ear to what I say." Krishnan, in C. Ayyappan's short story *Madness*, invites people to validate his emotions. To tell him that it is normal to feel it and he is not mad; to know and explain to him what is 'normal'. The story plays with many layers of norms and structures of the society, associated with madness, gender, and caste. Krishnan's sister is said to have some form of mental illness; she is called 'mad'. Although, she is not the only one in whose context the word 'mad' is used. It is also used as an insult towards the people who want to admit her in the mental asylum and towards Krishnan himself when he refuses to do so. 'Madness' is used as a way to describe someone who is behaving out of the ordinary. The instances, however different, have one similarity. The use of the word 'madness' has always been negative. It is used for a person who is not easily understood, for one who is delinquent and difficult to control. Hence the 'sane' demand the mad to be medicalised, institutionalised, drugged and looked after by professionals.

The paper articulates layers of madness, gender and caste and tries to break down the complex threads that aid the construction of a normal.

Keywords:

normal; madness; gender; caste; confinement; *mad*

What makes something *right*? What makes something *true*? What explains 'reason'? What is 'normal'? "To get at even a grain of truth about something, at least two persons should look at it, each with their own set of eyes- or spectacles, if you like! That's why it is essential that you give ear to what I say." In the short story *Madness*, Krishnan invites people to validate his emotions. To tell him that it is *normal* to feel it and he is not *mad*; to know and explain what is 'normal'. The story begins with Krishnan, a Dalit teacher, narrating the incident where his neighbours collectively come over to his house to ask for his cooperation to send his sister to the mental asylum. Krishnan ignores his sister, who is tied up in the neighbours car and closes the door behind him. Krishnan, revolving around his fear of being put down by his neighbours and his own family because of his caste and being judged for his sister's insanity, spends the rest of the story trying to justify his behaviour. The story plays with many layers of norms and structures of the society, associated with madness, gender and caste. Krishnan's sister is said to have some form of mental illness; she is called 'mad'. Although, she's not the only one in whose context the word 'mad' is used. It is also used as an insult towards the people who want to admit her to the mental asylum and towards Krishnan himself when he refuses to do so. It is used to describe someone who is behaving out of the ordinary. The instances, however different, have one similarity; the use of the word 'madness' has always been negative.

It is used for a person who is not easily understood, for one who is delinquent and difficult to control. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault says that in 18th and 19th century Europe, *Hopital General*, constructed as a hospital and welfare establishment, had nothing to do with any medical concept. Instead, it was an instance of order of the monarchy and the bourgeois society. Madness emerged as a discursive category in response to various economic, social and religious norms consolidated in Europe at the time. It was a carefully constructed structure of knowledge produced by the effects of power within a social order. Therefore, it became the confinement and correction house of the poor, the unemployed, the prisoners, and the insane. The 'sane' demanded the mad to be medicalised, institutionalised, drugged and looked after by professionals.

Therefore, in C. Ayyappan's story, the act of the neighbours raising money to admit the sister in the asylum was in their own benefit rather than the sister's. *Charity* indicates

something done by someone for someone else's benefit. But in this case, the presence of the mad sister in public appears to be an injustice¹ for the neighbours; whether her admission to the asylum was for her benefit or not, is not clear. Krishnan's sister, who had been brought to her brother in a car, was bound in chains. The exclusion of the *mad* is what Foucault describes as an exercise in defining what is normal. "Confinement hid away unreason², and betrayed the shame it aroused, but it explicitly drew attention to madness, pointed to it."- *Madness and Civilization I*, Michel Foucault. To be linked to someone 'abnormal', was a terribly embarrassing thing for Krishnan. For one, he could never empathise with his sister, he didn't even think she recognized him. He feared that people would not leave him alone, point fingers at him and talk about it.

Although the story does not go into depth about what illness the sister is going through, if she has received any treatment or what were the reasons for it, it is pretty clear that she has been neglected. The way in which Krishnan runs away at the sight of the neighbours and his tied up sister, was proof enough. This brings up a series of doubts for the reader. Could the sister be an assertive woman who has been wrongfully labelled *mad* by the psychiatric clinic in order to protect patriarchy?³ Could she have been someone who just didn't fit in the normative feminine role or someone who had had a sexual orientation other than the 'normal' and therefore had been ill-treated? If she is genuinely suffering from a mental illness, has she received any treatment? Did she have a say in it? Bhargavi V. Davar, in her essay- *From Mental Illness to Disability*, tries to bring clarity and sensitivity in the reader towards mental disability. She says that terms such as 'madness', 'mental illness', 'mental distress', etc., not only create new possibilities in the construction of self and identity but also pose poignant questions in the feminist discourse. According to her, there has been a general neglect in terms of how gender plays a role in determining the ability or disability of an individual, the course of treatment adopted for them and their consent, specifically in the case of mental health. "For feminism, 'abnormality' has become both patriarchal and psychiatric labelling leading to the exclusion of women."⁴

¹ Pg 228, *Madness and Civilization I*, Michel Foucault

² absence of reason or sanity

³ Amrita Dhanda's paper highlighted the collusion of the state with psychiatry in protecting patriarchy through the psychiatric labelling of assertive women. It presented case after case — wherein 'insanity' was consistently applied to diminish, discard, divorce or incarcerate women — of the bigamous husband getting rid of an inconvenient first wife; of brothers deserting an unmarried sister; and case after case of men filing for divorce ascribing insanity to the wife who refused to consummate the marriage on the wedding night, the woman who 'acted familiar with strangers despite being warned', the Brahmin woman who did not bathe daily, the woman who put too much salt and pepper in food, the woman who cried during a sacred ceremony before guests, and to the woman who did not properly receive the relatives of her husband. - *From Mental Illness to Disability*, Bhargavi V Davar.

⁴ Bhargavi V Davar, *From Mental Illness to Disability: Choices for Women Users/Survivors of Psychiatry in Self and Identity Constructions*

Krishnan's discomfort with people knowing that his sister is in the mental asylum had a casteist dimension too. He was worried that if people started to visit his sister in the hospital, they might run into his relatives. His relatives, according to him, don't exactly resemble him or his neighbours. The story points out the very visual aspect of how someone identifies caste in our society. The colour of the skin, the condition of the clothes and the way someone behaves become signs of identification. Dr Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste*, speaks about how society needs to work on social reform before addressing political or economic reforms. I think that the circumstances in this story justify Ambedkar's argument to a great extent. Krishnan, now a well-educated teacher, was born in a socially backward caste. His economic status has changed, but he still fears being judged by his neighbours and his wife if they meet his relatives. He fears that he will be looked down upon or treated differently. He says "There may also be a complaint that since I now have a respectable job and a beautiful, salaried wife in hand, I have forgotten my place." Even after the economic upliftment, the burden of caste falls upon him, preventing him from being empathetic towards his sister. Having said that, I am not trying to contest his insensitivity towards his mother. When she visited his daughter for the first time and the daughter treated her rudely, he blamed his mother for being unclean and of a darker skin tone. This brings up questions like who gets to be clean? Who gets to afford new clothes? Who gets to smell good? In his own words, Krishnan has compared his relatives as "unkempt peoples who devoured the meat of dead cows" by whom his wife and daughter are revulsed, to dark-skinned beggars and Tamil migrant labourers.

On the other hand, he also says that his daughter's friends have "looks and colour of those 'angels on earth' who adorn the display windows of the massive textile store in the city." There is some amount of internalisation of the casteist gaze in him. He carries the assumption that he must adopt ways of the Savarna if he wants to be upwardly mobile. Yet, he is also aware, through his experience, that if people find out he is trying to act like a Savarna, he can be pulled down in a moment and shown his place. This is the maddening dilemma of a Bahujan body.

Krishnan's wife, even though she was also born in a lower caste family, rejects her husband's family. All of his relatives repulse her. Krishnan doesn't see it as being 'morally deficient.' In its descriptive sense, "morality" refers to personal or cultural values, codes of conduct or social mores from a society that provides these codes of conduct in which it applies and is accepted by an individual. It does not connote objective claims of right or wrong but

only refers to that which is considered right or wrong.⁵ Certain derogatory behaviour toward the lower caste population is so vastly justified within the caste order that it is seen as morally acceptable behaviour. In the past, the argument which used to follow the line of purity and impurity has now taken the aid of science to reiterate division in terms of clean and unclean.

P. V. Jagadisa Aiyyer, in his monograph *South Indian Customs* (1925), says, "In general the so-called pious and religious people are generally most scrupulously clean and hence contact with people of uncleanly habits is nauseating to them...people living on unwholesome food such as rotten fish, flesh, garlic, etc., as well as the people of filthy and unclean habits, throw out of their bodies coarse and unhealthy magnetism. This affects the religious people of pure habits and diet injuriously. So they keep themselves at a safe distance which has been fixed by the sages of old after sufficient experience and experiment." Aiyyer not only fails to acknowledge the caste system, he invites science to validate caste pollution. In C. Ayyappan's *Madness*, it didn't take a minute for Krishnan to justify his wife's disgust or his daughter's behaviour towards his mother. He has internalised the bias and disgust so much so that it makes him see this behaviour as morally right.

The norm or the normal created by society does not simply exist. There is a constant effort that goes into maintaining it. Be it through reinforcing gender stereotypes, ideas of morality, perception of the lower caste or the idea of madness. None of these categories is simply present in society as separate entities. They are rather a structure of complex threads that intersect and intervene with each other at different levels. Therefore, we need to keep questioning these structures to develop a more inclusive society through our art practices.

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morality>

Works cited

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization I, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1965. Print.

Davar, Bhargavi V. *Disability Studies in India*. Routledge India, 2013. (Part V, ch 14).

Ambedkar, B. R. (Bhimrao Ramji), 1891-1956. *Annihilation of Caste : an Undelivered Speech*. New Delhi :Arnold Publishers, 1990.

Davis, Lennard J., 1949-. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London ; New York: Verso, 1995.

Ayyar, P.V. Jagadisa, *South Indian Customs*; Madras: Diocesan Press, Vepery, 1925.

Pandian, M. S. S. "One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 18 (May 4-10, 2002), pp. 1735-1741

Author's bio-note

Niharika Grover is a Delhi-based freelance artist and designer who has done a bachelors in Fine Art(Painting) from College of Art, Delhi University and an MA in Visual Art from Ambedkar University. She is incredibly passionate about feminist and queer issues. She has made a number of interactive and public art-works around the same issues. Her major interest lies in the research and performative aspects of contemporary art and politics.
