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(In)sanity as Resistance: A Critical Study of Sandhya Mary's *Maria, Just Maria*

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Abstract:
Sandhya Mary in *Maria, Just Maria* charts the trajectory of the growth of Maria, a Syrian Christian girl, in Kerala. First published in Malayalam in 2018, the novel was later translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil in 2024. It is in the psychiatric hospital that Maria begins to shed others' opinions about her and begins a journey into herself. This paper seeks to interrogate how Maria's presence disrupts the traditional notions of gender and sexuality, and questions the constructed nature of 'reality' and 'sanity'. Section I of this article investigates the textual/sexual politics of the novel. Section II interrogates the ways in which Maria's presence disrupts physical, familial and relational spaces. Donna Haraway's concept of 'significant otherness' is a theoretical framework used in reading the relationship between Maria and her dog, Chandipatti. Section III explores the ways in which (in)sanity is used as resistance against delimiting hierarchies and oppressive belief systems against the theoretical framework of J. Jack Halberstam's notion of the 'productive failure'.

Keywords: madness, Indian fiction, otherness, gender and sexuality, translated literature

Introduction

Sandhya Mary in *Maria, Just Maria* charts the trajectory of the growth of Maria, a Syrian Christian girl, in Kerala. First published in Malayalam in 2018, the novel was later translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil in 2024. It is in the psychiatric hospital that Maria begins to shed others' opinions about her and begins a journey into herself. This paper seeks to interrogate how Maria's presence disrupts the traditional notions of gender and sexuality, and questions the constructed nature of 'reality' and 'sanity'. Section I investigates the textual/sexual politics of the novel. Section II interrogates the ways in which Maria's presence disrupts physical, familial and relational spaces. Donna Haraway's concept of 'significant otherness' is a theoretical framework used in reading the relationship between Maria and her dog, Chandipatti. Section III explores the ways in which (in)sanity is used as resistance against delimiting hierarchies and oppressive belief systems against the theoretical framework of J. Jack Halberstam's notion of the 'productive failure'.

I

This section seeks to investigate the textual/sexual politics of the text by undertaking a historicization of both the text and the author. The novel begins with Maria's ruminations at the psychiatric hospital that she is admitted to. "Madness is often an easy solution for writers to conclude a story, especially stories with a hero or heroine in the grip of an existential crisis. And in comedy films, with some added exaggeration, it provides materials to make the audience laugh. This, in short, is the world's relationship with madness" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 7). Madness often becomes a trope to marginalize, and sometimes, even villainize characters. Speaking of the representations of madness in the cultural imaginary, in Malayalam literature, art and cinema,

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Jayasree Kalathil, in conversation with Sandhya Mary, observes, "Often, these representations are appalling, discriminatory and downright harmful in the way they depict the world and human experiences as a dichotomy of sanity/insanity or normal/abnormal. Even much-celebrated stories like M. T. Vasudevan Nair's 'Iruttinte Athmaavu' (The Soul of Darkness) or the film *Thaniyavarthanam* depict madness as a curse that follows one through generations, something that is all-consuming, from which there is no escape, something to be hated, feared" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 222). Bildungsroman novels, often, shy away from dealing with this theme. Madness undercuts the illusion of childhood innocence and adulthood stability that such novels, usually, try to depict. However, Maria's madness transcends binaries and boundaries. It spills out of the pages and interjects itself in her relationship with the world. The non-linear narrative structure reveals how growing up is never a linear process. It also reflects the unstable nature of memories. Maria moves back and forth between different timelines and people. Her memory, like her ability to transcend societal norms, is unrestrained and chaotic. However, from this chaotic narrative structure emerges a different worldview that challenges traditional gender norms and conventional ideas on (in)sanity.

Breaking the traditional bildungsroman structure, Sandhya Mary lets Maria run wild through the pages. Even objects, such as Kottarathil Veedu, her grandparents' house that she spent her childhood in, and animals, such as, Chandipatti, her dog, become significant for the development of the character of Maria. The narrative voices in the text too become forms of resistance to the traditional narratives that center around 'mad' people. As Sandhya Mary observes, "Narrating the story of madness from the point of view of the person deemed mad is not that common in our fiction" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 223). However, in *Maria, Just Maria*, as Kalathil states, "the story is told from the perspective of Maria and Geevarghese, undoubtedly the 'maddest' of the characters" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 225). This decision of letting the 'mad' person tell her own story challenges the idea of 'mad' people being helpless and passive entities. For Maria, her mind works perfectly well for herself. It is the world that fails to understand her due to its own preconceived notions on (in)sanity. Her narrative voice interrogates the power structures that determine who is sane and who is not. Her ability to look at the world beyond given definitions and frameworks opens up new possibilities of thinking, knowing and being. While Geevarghese, her grandfather, tries to preach the importance of embracing normalcy, to Maria, on his deathbed, Maria resists such a way of thinking till the very end of the narrative.

Maria's childhood is defined by unconventional relationship dynamics. The spaces she inhabits are marked with fissures. The non-linear, fragmented narrative of the novel reflects the instability in the mind of Maria. From the stable structure of bildungsroman emerges Maria who disrupts the normativity and coherence of the text. Most of the story is told from the perspective of a young Maria. This deliberate choice of giving the narrative voice to a child, one who is deemed mad, opens up new horizons of challenging and subverting traditional societal norms and discussions around (in)sanity. The author reveals, "Placing a child, Little Maria, as the main narrative perspective, gave me immense creative freedom. The issue with grown-ups is that they think in a certain way, behave in a certain way. You should have a rational, logical explanation

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for everything. Children don't have to fit into anything. They can be wild, crazy, make up things… (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 227). This trope of having a child as the narrator and seeing the world through her eyes reveals the constructed nature of both 'reality' and 'sanity'. Maria challenges the social dictums that others conform to. However, her being a child and later being perceived as mad open up opportunities for her to exercise her agency in ways 'normal' people are not allowed to.

The Suryanelli incident, where a 16-year-old girl was kidnapped and raped for 40 days, has been a lingering presence in the collective memory of the people of Kerala, and of India, at large. In an article published on *Outlook*, Shahina K. K. writes, "In January 2005, the Kerala High Court cited lack of evidence and procedural errors in the investigation and acquitted all but one of the accused. This acquittal was met with public outrage and criticism, particularly of the judge's remarks about the survivor. "The girl is not normal, she is deviant," Justice Basant had said while expressing that the case was one of child prostitution." This comment reveals the deep-rooted hypocrisy of society regarding women choosing to assert their sexual freedom. It also reflects the general idea of children having to be 'good', 'innocent', and 'pure' to be deserving of care and justice. Sandhya Mary's protagonist, Maria, refuses to conform not only to the gender norms, but also to the societal expectation of being a 'virtuous' woman. Her resistance is not overt. Rather, it lies in her ability to make decisions for herself. She muses how she used to wait for her crush, Kuttappayi, as a child. Later on, in life, she has relationships with men as she pleases. She marries and divorces her husband on her own terms. Her feelings for Aravind remain steady in her heart. That she exercises romantic and sexual freedom and bodily autonomy as a woman in Kerala goes against the stereotypical representation of a 'virtuous' woman in popular media.

The personal views of the author are reflected in the way Maria decides to live in the world. In an interview with Mahika Dhar, for *Scroll.in*, Sandhya Mary remarks, "I think in everyday life we see many people branded crazy, even though they're all living happily with brilliant lives. Intellectual gems of persons taken to hospitals just because they were slightly different. I didn't fit into that particular society. You are expected to marry, have children, have a good job and everything else. I never went for all those things. I just lived my life according to what I wanted. I was never considered mad, but I was an outcast." Maria's ability to take her own decisions and live her life on her own terms make her a threat to the compliant attitude of society. She does not let others' judgement direct the course of her life. Being perceived as mad grants her the agency to topple the hierarchies and institutions thought to be 'natural', 'stable', and 'fixed'.

The translation process and linguistic choices add to the resistance that Maria exerts against easy definitions and delimiting belief systems. Jayasree Kalathil comments, "With *Maria*, as with my other translations, my effort was to understand and capture your intention when you made up words or played with words. This I understood primarily as a way of giving Maria a unique voice to match her unique way of being in this world, what you call in the novel her 'Marian' way of being. For instance, Maria likes to use the word 'bhayankara', which can translate into English in many different ways depending on the context, as terrible, terrific, super, awesome, fearsome and

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so on. Given that Maria has a certain colloquial Americanism in her speech, I chose to retain 'super'. There are other colloquial or made-up words – 'dookly' and 'kundappanatti', for example – I've chosen to retain these as they are because, well, the idea that others learn words and make them part of their speech is how a language acquires new words" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 229). In a world that increasingly wants to simplify lives and remove the complexities of thoughts, Maria chooses to retain the cracks and fissures in her mind. She embraces the messy parts of her existence that do not fit into neat boxes. Her resistance is, thus, both textual and figurative.

In the interview with Mahika Dhar, Jayasree Kalathil points out, "It's also a very political story that asks complex questions about things like normal and pathological, what a society should be like, what we allow people in the society to be, and how we disallow certain kinds of people to be. It's also an interrogation of patriarchy and religion. At the same time, it's not told in an overtly political voice, unlike other stories in Malayalam. *Maria* brings politics into it in a very embedded way, with a gentle touch in terms of where the politics lie because Sandhya is really telling the story of this child and her family and her community. Still, within that, you find all of these different layers." Political awareness in Kerala is higher than in most other states of India. While *Maria, Just Maria* does not comment on the political situation directly, the author's usage of humour reveals the deeply-entrenched conservative beliefs even in a state like Kerala. The gods in the novel are not kept on a pedestal. Rather, they have human-like emotions, such as, joy, sorrow, anger etc. Geevarghese Sahada, the patron-saint of the land after whom Maria's grandfather is named, is an entity with socialist inclinations. He puts the first ideas of a socialist land in the minds of the people through dreams. He makes them dream of "a land where no one is below anyone else" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 64).

II

Besides the textual/sexual space, Maria's presence also disrupts the other spaces that she inhabits. This section shall interrogate the ways in which Maria's presence disrupts physical, familial and relational spaces. "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" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 34). Maria did not like structures nor did she like to be stifled. The questions she asks reveal the limits of the education system that fails to take into account the diverse nature of students and their abilities. The only place she could be herself was at Kottarathil Veedu where Maria's companions were "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 Chandipatti, a dog who philosophized non-stop" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 39-40).

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Maria growing up in her grandparents' house presents an alternative family structure seldom represented in Indian literature. She embodies the idea of 'freedom' in Kottarathil Veedu. The people and the house itself influence the way she learns to look at the world. However, after a series of misfortune events, it is decided that she has to be returned to her parents. At this crucial juncture, she reflects how "hearing about the decision, Maria made a decision of her own – that it was time to grow up" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 139). When they arrive to take her back, he refers to them as the parents of her siblings. She says, "Mathew and Lisa and *their* [emphasis added] papa and mama arrived. Anne wasn't with them" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 143). This reflects the emotional distance that she felt towards them. Her relationship with her parents is taut with strangeness and unfamiliarity. Her emotional anchorage lay with her Appachan who she is separated from. This narrative shift breaks the illusion of continuity in the journey of one's growing up. It reveals the fissures and fractures that often mark pivotal moments in one's life. Moving away from the continuous and linear narrative of bildungsroman novels, *Maria, Just Maria* shows how children are not passive vessels. Rather, they are agents engaged in a constant negotiation with the world around them.

Maria often visited the local toddy shop with her grandfather. In those days, as Geevarghese mentions, these places were not frequented by upper-caste people (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 98). Maria's presence here as a girl belonging to an upper-caste family destabilizes both the gendered and casteist notions of society. Maria also spent a lot of time on the cashew tree in front of her house, playing "'bus driving' and sit waiting for Kuttappayi" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 55). It was while sitting on this tree that Maria would see Kuttappayi again after several years. Through her inhabitation of such spaces, she challenges the inside-outside binary and subverts the traditional notions of both girlhood and womanhood.

The psychiatric hospital that she is admitted to becomes a space for her self-realization. It is here that she starts her journey of getting at the core of who she is – not as someone's daughter or wife or granddaughter, but as Maria, 'just' Maria. She remarks, "Despite being surrounded by mad people, this hospital is a good place to live. It is only the sense of calmness that pervades the place that would make you wonder whether this was a psychiatric hospital. I can live here comfortably as long as my brother Matthew continues to pay the bills" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 13). She reveals to Chinnamma that she had stopped speaking after her grandfather died because she did not want to speak, not because she could not. It is at this hospital that she began to write as if "she was possessed by some kind of madness" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 25). The usual idea behind getting 'mad' people admitted to psychiatric hospitals is to bring them back to a 'normal' state of being. However, Maria uses this opportunity to strip away the layers of society's opinions that had accumulated around her and get to the root of her true being.

The relational spaces that she inhabits equally challenge the heteronormative and traditional ideas of family and relationships. Her relationships with those around her, especially those she loves, are queer. While she is not portrayed as non-heteronormative in her romantic and/or sexual preferences, the way of living that she embraces is queer. She refuses to be bogged down by the conventional idea of relationships. Her grandfather is her confidant. He is her "anchor" (Mary,

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2018/2024, p. 15) in life without whom she feels orphaned. Even after he dies, she interacts with the spirit of her grandfather as if "Appachan's spirit was something embedded in his material body" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 16). It is he who told Maria that "the problem was not with us but with the world" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 216). He is the one who gives Maria the space to assert her individuality.

Maria's relationship with her dog, Chandipatti, is also marked by a queer sort of companionship. They not only interact with each other through words, but Chandipatti also puts forward his opinions on events happening around them. He challenges the anthropocentric worldview through his presence and ability to articulate thoughts that question human superiority and dominance. When Maria tells him that Shajan Chacha says that Chandipatti has "blind colourness" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 135), he replies, "Who are you humans to make these decisions for us? For us, green is this colour, right here." He says so while pointing to the orange Nutrine sweet and continues, "You humans think everything you say is right. In our world, what we say is right. Who told you that the lion was the king of animals? … You all cut down our forests and turned them into your agricultural land. And now when we walk through there, you say, oh look, animals have destroyed our crops! Did we ask you to plant your crops in our homes?" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 135-136). Donna Haraway, in her *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003), discusses about the co-constitutive nature of the bond between humans and dogs. Haraway writes, "There cannot be just one companion species; there have to be at least two to make one. It is in the syntax; it is in the flesh. Dogs are about the inescapable, contradictory story of relationships – co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all. Historical specificity and contingent mutability rule all the way down, into nature and culture, into naturecultures" (Haraway, 2003, p. 12). The relationship of mutual respect and communication between Maria and Chandipatti reveals such a possibility of natureculture companionship that challenges the anthropocentric notions of human-animal relationships. Chandipatti is never placed hierarchically beneath Maria. Rather, they are both agents, constructing their own realities.

Maria's relationships with men transcend the traditional notion on romantic love. In chapter 18, the reader is given a glimpse into what Maria thinks about love and relationships. "Maria is under the impression that she is deeply in love, not with Aravind but with someone else. The honest truth is that Maria is confused about who she is in love with at any given time. This person, that person or that other person? By the time Maria thinks about it and comes to a conclusion, this person, that person and that other person will all have gone their own way" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 195). However, by the end of that same chapter, Maria wonders "what if I marry Aravind?" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 204). When recounting her past married life, she says, "I shocked my parents, first by getting married to a man I loved. Then, when they had begun to accept the fact, I shocked them again by getting divorced" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 9). When asked what the problem was, she says that she has realized this was not what she wanted. When asked why, she replies, "I want to be happy" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 204). She subverts the societal

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expectations placed on marriage as permanent, and reveals the fluid nature of relationships that people often shy away from talking about. To her, marriage does not guarantee happiness. She also does not want to remain married at the cost of her happiness just to please her family. She is not afraid to embrace change. The clarity that she displays in her decision reveals a whole new layer to her character. She asks questions that reveal the constructed nature of institutions such as marriage and family. Sandhya Mary, in conversation with Jayasree Kalathil, observes, "Maria, though not deliberately, is trying to deconstruct the existing family system. Society, her family, all expect her to live a normal life, to get married in a conventional way, to have kid, to fit in. I have always wondered, why is it that everybody is living the exact same life? Society should be full of wonderfully different people, living diverse lives" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 225-226).

III

This section explores the ways in which (in)sanity is used as resistance against delimiting hierarchies and oppressive belief systems against the theoretical framework of J. Jack Halberstam's notion of the 'productive failure'. J. Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) argues how failure can be productive and a powerful form of resistance against delimiting machinery such as capitalism and heteronormativity. Though not explicitly non-heteronormative in her romantic and/or sexual choices, Maria displays and embraces a queer way of living, thinking, and knowing. She creates embodied knowledge through her experiences in the world. This knowledge is not determined by pre-existing societal norms and regulations. Rather, it is defined by her ability to exist in liminal zones and embrace uncertainties and failure. Maria embodies Halberstam's notion of 'productive failure'. This helps her to subvert the societal expectations placed on her.

Maria's (in)sanity makes her invulnerable to the question of conforming to societal norms and standards. She marries the person she wants to and then divorces him when she pleases. She remembers the stories of her ancestors but forgets the incidents that she does not want to remember. "Aravind had once asked Maria about her short-lived married life, and she said she didn't remember anything. When Aravind pressed her, she said, 'Honestly, I would tell you if I remembered. My marriage is a file that has been permanently deleted from my brain" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 193). Her forgetfulness surrounding her own marriage reveals how insignificant this episode is, even though it is given such importance in the society. On his deathbed, Geevarghese wishes to make Maria understand the importance of living a 'normal' life because there might be no one to look after her one day. To this, Maria asks, "Why should anyone look after me? Can't I look after myself?" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 217) Her grandfather, however, is not convinced. "Geevarghese wishes to open her eyes, tell her that she is incapable of looking after herself, that he, Aravind, Aisha and others are the ones who looked after her, paid her rent and bought her the things she needed. Then, he thinks, with a great deal of sorrow, that Maria will not understand any of it" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 217). Such childishness and stupidity characterize Maria in the eyes of others. However, to Maria herself, her story would end with "And Maria lived happily ever after" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 217). Touching upon the conventional idea of success and how Maria destabilizes it, Sandhya Mary remarks, "I wanted to touch upon the

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notion of being 'successful' in life. Every human being is under so much pressure to be successful. We always hear, 'Don't waste your time!' What if I don't want to use it? What if I just want to go through it? I think *Maria* is ultimately about being *verum* Maria – *just* Maria. Maria is also about a just world. At one point in the novel, in her conversation with Karthav Eesho Mishiha, Maria demands a world that is fair to all human beings. At another point, in lashing out at human beings and their behaviour, Chandipatti demands that they make a just world for all animals" (Mary, 2018/2024, p. 226).

Halberstam remarks, "Stupidity is as profoundly gendered as knowledge formations in general; thus while unknowing in a man is sometimes rendered as part of masculine charm, unknowing in a woman indicates a lack and a justification of a social order that anyway privileges men" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 55). However, "in relation to the theme of productive failure, stupidity and forgetfulness work hand in hand to open up new and different ways of being in relation to time, truth, being, living, and dying" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 54-55). What is perceived by others as Maria's madness becomes a tool for her to interrogate traditional systems of knowledge. It also becomes a way for her to create epistemological knowledge around the concepts of 'reality' and 'sanity'. Both these notions are usually understood to be definite, inflexible and rigid. They add to the illusion of stability that human beings try to create in their everyday existence. However, Maria reveals the cracks and crevices in such an understanding of the world. She opens up new possibilities of embodied living that transcends delimiting perceptions.

Conclusion

Maria's presence is chaotic, unconventional and disruptive. She does not shy away from asking questions nor does she let people put her in boxes. She creates her own definition of 'sanity' and envisions a world that is just to all. To her, relationships are fluid and ever-evolving. While other characters like Geevarghese and Kali remain on the periphery of their madness, Maria's madness takes the centre-stage in the narrative. She reveals the fissures in our conceptualization of what is real and what is not. Her ability to exist in liminal zones and interrogate the norms create different ways of knowing and being that transcend binaries and boundaries.

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