

Transition to modernity: the madman in Lu Xuns a madmans diary essay samples

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Human ability to adapt to change has been a subject matter of great contention. History shows that people have fought wars and caused great social disharmony to resist change. For instance, the Crusades that were wars that lasted for centuries to resist the growing power of Islam in the Western World. The idea of change, a new religion was too threatening. Moreover, literature is rife with stories that illustrate the problems created because of characters' inability to accept change. For instance, it is believed by many that Shakespeare's Hamlet is actually a story about the titular character's inability to accept change, that is, the change instigated by his father's death. This incapability not only ruined and killed Hamlet but also that of his friends and fiancée. This paper discussed the impacts of change in literature by considering Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary* and the Madman character in the book. The character's inability to accept change not only brings great disharmony into his own life but also that of others around him. However, this incapability to transcend change is also a symbol of the factors that block positive social changes—in this case, the feudalistic practices in China.

Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary* was first published in 1918, and it was a parable on the feudalistic practices that were practiced in China then. The story is narrated by a person, who visits his ailing friend, and is given a diary to read. This is the diary written by the friend, whose symptoms—delusions, hallucinations, and thought disorders—sound like that of a schizophrenic. Once, the story provides a reading of this diary, the language transitions from classical to vernacular Chinese. It reflects the obsession and paranoid ideas of the friend. However, such ideas and thoughts are symbolic of the

manner in which feudalistic practices and social norms actually oppress the society. Since it is mentioned in the story that the friend suggested the title of this story, the idea that a one has to be a “ madman” to survive is the society propounded in this story. Furthermore, this is further illustrated by the fact that the story was obviously inspired by Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman*. This paper attempts to illustrate that the Madman in Xun’s *A Madman’s Diary* is an allegorical illustration of a person unable to survive in a society that was becoming increasingly feudalistic. Another aspect of the Madman’s inability to accept change is in the cannibalism illustrated in the story. The Madman is obsessed and paranoid about the idea that almost everyone around him plans to eat him. This also includes his beloved brother. He also thinks that his brother cannibalized his sister, who had died at 5 years of age, and he himself had inadvertently eaten her flesh, albeit unknowingly. The Madman compares human beings to wolves that eat their young in order to survive. He even decides to start with his brother if he turns into a cannibal himself: “If I’m going to curse cannibals, I’ll have to start with him” (Xun and Lyell 36). Under feudalism, the peasant class, to which the Madman belonged, was among the lowly social classes. This class suffered the maximum brunt of calamities like famines and droughts, while the upper, feudalistic classes lived far easier lives. In fact, ancient Chinese writings suggest—although there is inadequate information to corroborate this—so much was the suffering in such circumstances, that children were often killed and eaten by families (Yue 260). The Madman makes a reference to this fact when he expresses his fear of being eaten. Clearly, the Madman’s words symbolize how he cannot accept the manner in

which the feudalistic society has gradually destroyed the way of life of the peasant folks.

Finally, it can be seen that even in the Madman's return back to sanity, there is a symbolization of an inability to accept change. Toward the end of the story, the narrator mentions that the Madman overcomes his psychological problems and even acquires a government job in another region. However, to become sane, the Madman has to refuse the truth in the thoughts that characterized his madness. He had to refuse that the feudalistic practices had been increasingly exploiting the lower classes. He also had to join hands with this class and accept a government job. This is a top level government job—the very government that he construed to be cannibalistic in his “insanity.” This itself is an indication of the fact that even though he accepted the society as it is, his ability to change did not mean he transcended the problems instigated by the change of a society to a feudalistic one. He simply became complacent to the world around. The story thus suggests that is the only mental state for people to survive in when they live in a society that develops feudalistic practices. Notably, the story ends with the statement, “ Maybe there are some children around who haven't eaten human flesh. Save the children” (Xun and Lyell 41). This symbolizes the fact that while feudalism has made animals out of humans, the children, who are still innocent and have not become inhuman because of their experiences with deprivation, must be saved. The Madman's inability to transcend the change brought into the society because of feudalism is thus something that keeps him human.

This paper showed how the Madman character in Xun's 1918 story A

Madman's Diary experienced the challenge as the world he lived in became more modern. His intellectual and social needs were constantly thwarted by the feudalistic Chinese society. Unable to accept such changes, he becomes the "Madman." However, as his experience during this time of transition is reviewed, it becomes clear that only by becoming insane he can escape the throes of the feudalistic world, where his human needs are continuously thwarted. While the feudalistic practices were ingrained into the society overtime, as the Western ideas of liberalization and democracy reached China, the idea that people need not suffer under feudalism became more prominent. It must be recalled that China's transition to communism was inspired by anti-feudalistic sentiments that emerged in the early twentieth century, and works like these inspired such a change.

Works Cited

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