

Changes of human mentality and construction of the physical body: diary of a madm...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Lu Xun and Kafka's utilization of the physical body allows for the presentation of personal criticisms towards aspects of modernity and the social, political and economic changes of the movement. Modernity, due to its nature of bringing about change, encourages the development of thoughts and feelings across the 'body' of humanity, which in turn is reflective on the personal mentality of each individual. Kafka and Lu Xun, by creating protagonists which show such stark physical, through physiology and behavior, invite their readers to think about the changes for themselves, and not only how they reflect on the mentality of the characters but also on themselves as 'victims' of modernity - relating to the victimization of thousands through recent war, uprising and revolution. Kafka's own introduction to his text, 'Metamorphosis', portrays the need for internalized mentality to be brought out through the physical in order to make it plain and understandable. He writes: "I cannot make you understand. I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me" ¹ - as if he cannot find a way to explain the changes of modernity in relation to himself - it would be difficult to convey such a feeling through thought alone, so there is a need for physicality to explain fully. Interaction with the environment is both physical and mental, and Lu Xun and Kafka as modern authors try to emphasize this and present change as a response to modernity.

Consumerism, as a modern ideology, having emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, enforced the development in the production, acquisition and trading of goods that allowed for gross economic growth of modern nations. Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' encompasses this ideology in reference to culture through Cannibalism - that one strand of culture may be

consumed by another due to economic pressure. Lu Xun's protagonist, when reading the theories of Confucius, describes how he "began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words - Eat people" 2. This statement can be read by Lu Xun's audience on two levels: one being the actual Chinese tradition of Cannibalism, as the supposed "madman" relates, "my brother told me that if a man's parents were ill, he should cut off a piece of his flesh and boil it for them" 2. The realism of the practice in traditional Chinese medicine is particularly relevant here, since the consuming of one body by another for the purpose of appearing as "good" becomes a metaphor for the social bodies and political strands, such as the rise of Capitalism in the West, Communism in the East must, in order to gain power, metaphorically consume the other, by ingesting and then digesting, therefore destroying its influences. The diarist, upon examination by his doctor, speculates that "he simply used the pretext of feeling my pulse to see how fat I was; for by doing so he would receive a share of my flesh" 2. The diarist in this case is no more than a victim of the consumerist society of the West and its influences in China - he is aware of his nature, being used in a social "pretext", that will ultimately lead to his destruction in order for the rise of others. Lu Xun's construct of the social acceptance of Cannibalism by seemingly all accept the madman, who is convinced within the boundaries of a "persecution complex" 2 and therefore aware of potential harm, could be seen as representative of the collective mentality of modernism that is believed by a particular 'body' of people. The idea of the physical body, whether that be personal or collective, is required in this way to categorize different strands of modern politics. As Oswaldo de Andrade argues in the 'Cannibalist Manifesto', "The spirit refuses to conceive without <https://assignbuster.com/changes-of-human-mentality-and-construction-of-the-physical-body-diary-of-a-madman-and-metamorphosis/>

a body. Anthropomorphism” 3. Lu Xun plays with the idea of literal consumption of human body to show this mental change, or corruption, from popular modern idealisms - questioning the stance of China in the development of modernity.

Moreover, much alike the malleability of society and the ease of social change and reformation shown through Cannibalism in Lu Xun’s ‘ Diary of a Madman’, Kafka’s ‘ Metamorphosis’ displays a similar changeability of the social norm through the presentation of the human body - anthropomorphic traits are lost in the development of social mobility, as if the general hierarchy of all beings is broken down - an unknown and unidentified body is instead given to those who are consumed by the idealisms of modernity.

Kafka suggests that the human body is trapped within the limitations of the society it is part of - his protagonist, Gregor Samsa, is recognized as being “ the boss’s creature, mindless and spineless” 1. His body is completely controlled and defined by his society, he himself does not have a “ mind” to be able to think freely, or a “ spine” to be able to argue for his rights. In essence, he is no more than a creature, easily manipulated, constrained and owned by society. Kafka comments on the nature of modern confinement through the body which becomes “ mindless and spineless”, a “ creature” - losing all human features which allow for freedom of thought or movement so that the body is trapped. Kafka’s protagonist has a deep understanding of the problems within modern society, recognizing that “ they had just gotten used to” him working, “ the family as well as Gregor, the money was received with thanks and given with pleasure, but no special feeling of warmth went with it anymore” 1. The modern world, in which Gregor is

forced to work without the “ slightest negligence” 1 for fear of the “ gravest suspicion” 1, is cold and alienated. The emotion that used to be felt before the changes of modernity has been lost, and since emotion is more commonly associated with humanity as a species, it renders an image of humanity being “ condemned”, trapped within the limitations of society, rather than having the freedom of “ pleasure”. As Lillian Robinson argues in ‘ New Literary History’, “ Modernism denies us the possibility of understanding ourselves as agents in the material world” 6 – any sense of what is personal, agency in general, is removed for humanity to become “ mindless and spineless” like the “ creature” in Kafka’s ‘ Metamorphosis’. This strange body is the image of social reformation and political change.

Breaking away from human naturalism, the idea of the unnatural is prevalent within the modern era because of changes within society – Lu Xun’s presentation of artificial Cannibalism emphasizes the idea of the unnatural being prevalent within the modern era because of its strangeness, like Cannibalism is to contemporary Western Civilisation, despite its welcome in Eastern medicinal practice. All that is new seems unnatural – and just as Kafka’s animalistic body, Cannibalism and what it represents in terms of the Chinese identity is unnatural to Lu Xun’s modern readers because it does not happen in their society. The madman questions whether Cannibalism has been accepted into to his village, a microcosmic portrayal of wider Chinese culture, so readily “ because it has always been like that” 2, and wonders whether it was he than had been “ in the dark” 2, away from a reality where the corruption of the body was normal. Xiaolu Ma’s ‘ Transculturation of Madness’ suggests that there is a “ belief that his insanity allows the

madman to reveal the truth, and that Cannibalism does play a significant role in the Chinese national character” 4. Ma Xiaolu argues that madness, a phenomena of transculturation during the modern era, is effected by the geographical placement of the sufferer, and allows for varying manifestations of madness to occur in literature. In Lu Xun’s ‘ Diary of a Madman’, that manifestation lies within the corruption of the physical body, and is relevant within China throughout the slow break away from the dynastic eras and towards a time of republic. The unnatural nature of cannibalism, or at least how western society perceived it, is the basis for Lu Xun’s questioning but also glorification of the tradition; it becomes a weapon against the post-colonial European nations attempting modernization of the East as it becomes representative of the European body attempting to consume, receiving a “ share of flesh”, taking over the physical Chinese body by changing their mentality to better suit that of modern Europe. The action in Lu Xun’s novella appears as wholly physical, however, despite the clear mental reaction to it. This physicality may be suggesting the grotesque nature of the body of modernity so clearly seen in ‘ Metamorphosis’.

Behavior, such as madness, as a representative for the ‘ strange’ is exchanged in Kafka’s text by the appearance, the physical body, of his protagonist – although from this a series of strange behaviors evolve, it is the transformation in itself – the ‘ Metamorphosis’ as Kafka so aptly describes it. The animalistic body of Gregor is used to show the grotesque nature of modernity in physicality. Kafka describes the creature, after a run in with his father, as having a “ pathetic and repulsive shape” 1, a “ serious wound, from which he suffered over a month – the apple remained embedded in his

flesh as a visible souvenir since no one dared to remove it" 1 - the apple is left behind as part of his body after the incident, as described by Kafka as a "souvenir", a reminder of the ugly confrontation between the radicalized body of Gregor who, having understood the constraints of society, has broken away from them through his transformation and his father as his opposite illustrates the tension between the oppression of tradition and the rise of modern thinking. Vladimir Nabokov argues, in one of his series of lectures about literature that " the Samsa family around the fantastic insect are nothing else than mediocrity surrounding genius" 5. The actual act of "metamorphosis" in Kafka's novella allows for thought beyond the body, and Nabokov invites us to think about the mind and the meaning behind construction in this way. Gregor's physical body makes him "genius" because he is able to break away from what is seen as "normality", whereas those around him remain the same throughout the story. The unknown creature's body is easily unrecognizable to us in comparison with a typical human figure, and possesses an aura of strangeness about it - much like the escapism of modern life that Gregor seeks; his modern world becomes unrecognizable as he attempts to run away from what is deemed as normality - it consumes him so much mentally that his physical body changes. Later, Kafka describes his protagonist as "completely covered with dust; he dragged along with him on his back and along his sides" 1, and the reason for this is "his indifference". Kafka is making use of visual reminder, as is clear with the apple, to explain the mentality of certain characters and the possible parable of his tale, his own hidden comment on modernity. In this way, the physical body becomes an example - something that makes Gregor's stand out from the rest as a genius not only in his mind-set, his

<https://assignbuster.com/changes-of-human-mentality-and-construction-of-the-physical-body-diary-of-a-madman-and-metamorphosis/>

difference in physicality and break away from anthropomorphism is more effective.

Similarly, Lu Xun's use of the persecution complex allows for him to subtly comment on the nature of Chinese politics without fear of harming his reputation in any way – steering clear of being seen as radical. The use of primitivism and use practice of Cannibalism is what allows Lu Xun's commentary regarding traditions of the East to work in this way. Xiaobing Tang argues that “ the human body is subjected to direct inscription of social meaning” 9 – agreeing that the physical body can often comment on its surroundings, and that the body of Cannibalism relates directly to Lu Xun's meaning in writing ‘ Diary of a Madman’ as part of the New Culture Movement – perhaps to break away from traditional Chinese values by presenting them as unnatural. The changing mentality of modernity through generating fear about Cannibalism acts as an allegory for the changes that those who were part of the New Culture Movement believed in; their most apt cause was in the disillusionment of Chinese culture. The disillusionment is continued in Lu Xun's novella through the loss of human identity, and the relation of humanist qualities to those of animals, as Kafka attempts in ‘ Metamorphosis’: “ the fierceness of a lion, the timidity of a rabbit, the craftiness of a fox...”, “ some men have changed into fish, birds, monkeys” 2 – different men have been transformed into different animals, perhaps representative of different social standing and culture, but all are constrained by the tradition of Cannibalism, never hoping “ to face real men” 2, the men of modernity because they are primitive in thought. Those who surround the protagonist, however, relate to him as if he is clinically mad as

they are unable to see his type of insight, his rage and therefore radicalism against the naturalistic and traditional Chinese way of life which the generalized villagers are stuck in. He refuses to be consumer by the cannibals on two levels: literally, and metaphorically being consumed into the beliefs of the main ' body' of society - the madman in like Kafka's genius creature.

Comparing the anthropomorphic and animalistic bodies similarly allows for a commentary to be made by Kafka on modern society; having a family dynamic which is recognizably human penetrated by a creature which is alien and other reflects the differences between traditional and modern values by presenting a comparison, similar to how Lu Xun shows the disillusionment with traditional Chinese values by mocking them. It is not until looking closely at the description of Gregor that it can be realized how drastically different he is from human form: " hard, as it were armour-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes" 1. This description of the creature's body, how the body has morphed, the nature of human physiology is clearly shown to either match or mismatch with ones surrounding society - showing an externalization of changing internal ideals, bringing inside adaptations out by constructing a body that is totally alien, and alienated, to represent internalized ideals of the same standards. In Kafka's text, his fascination with morphology and the act of metamorphosis acts as a representative of the

change that modernity brings - those who are stuck in tradition cannot understand this change, they are stuck within their ways and therefore cannot adapt. Despite Gregor's change making him appear "helpless", once he has gained command over his body his feat can be described as nothing less than spectacular - having the ability to move with ease, climb both floor and wall and transforms the tiny bedroom into his own world of exploration. As his body develops to the "savage" world around him, his mind becomes open to endless possibilities.

Madness is the mental manifestation of modernity. The obsession faced by Lu Xun's protagonist, stuck within a persecution complex - convinced of ill-treatment at the hands of others - despite facing nothing but help from his brother and doctor, and fascination from others, proves the diarist's madness. If Cannibalism is what he fears of the past, then madness is what he fears from the future - knowing that the villagers have already labelled him as a "madman", he worries about his transformation through madness. The language used by Lu Xun to describe the physical manifestations of madness relates his protagonist to "a hound gone wild that assaults, without distinguishing them, his master and his master's guest" 9, as described by Xiaobing Tang, shows the madman to be more like an uncontrollable animal, with great physical wildness, rather than a mentally ill human being. Again we are given animalistic imagery in relation to the madman's mind: "I could not tell whether the slippery morsels were fish or human flesh" 2 - he slowly is less able to distinguish between the body of tradition and the body of modernity, but as an audience that makes us more aware of the struggle occurring between them. Although the physical is not directly linked with

madness in Kafka's novella, the surreal, recognised by Freud through his theory of dream logic, is a key link between the bodily imagery of Gregor and his thought processes, and in turn makes links with modernity. The thought process of Kafka's protagonist often differs greatly from those which we would call normal in subjective terms. His reaction to his change, the way in which he responds and his initial fight and then succumbing to his new found animalistic, radicalised ideas show us many different viewpoints in regards to modernity. We are invited to think about just the mind in Kafka's novella since the normal body is removed, all emphasis is placed on the mind and the decisions made, the changing thought processes and the adaptations of Gregor. Lillian Feder describes madness as, in her study of 'Madness in Literature' as "a state in which unconsciousness processes predominate over conscious processes" 11. Feder argues that madness in literature is actually representative of many things other than just itself - madness can reflect on a multitude of cultural problems and can even be read as a rejection or breaking away from these social norms; the physical state of madness is representative of a personal domination over the surrounding realities, and this is how Kafka is able to draw connections between his physical representation of Gregor and his mentality towards modernity. His unconscious processes, the thoughts that go on behind what we see as the obvious - the animalistic body - are what reveal insight and truth, as was often thought of those classically who were deemed mad. Lu Xun's society would have believed that madness was an illness that was strictly related to physiology and not mentality, as explained by Xiaolu Ma, "Madness in traditional Chinese medicine is explained in terms of disharmony and imbalance of the body" 4 - Kafka may too be using this basis also to <https://assignbuster.com/changes-of-human-mentality-and-construction-of-the-physical-body-diary-of-a-madman-and-metamorphosis/>

comment on the changing construction of modernity and the acceptance, even welcoming, of the mad, the strange and the unnatural.

In conclusion, both Kafka and Lu Xun are able to manipulate the presentations of the body in order to slowly reveal details about the internal thoughts and feelings towards modernity of their character, which are also reflective on their own beliefs as members of changing societies. Alexander Bain argues: “ there is no example of two agents so closely connected as body and mind” 10 – this idea is most definitely utilised by both authors who use mind to represent the body, and body to represent the mind interchangeably throughout their texts.

Works Cited

1 Kafka, Franz. “ Metamorphosis”. Penguin Classics, 2015. pp. 83-145

2 Lovell, Julia. “ Lu Xun: Diary of a Madman”, The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun. Penguin Classics, 2009. pp. 21-31

3 De Andrade, Oswaldo. “ Cannibalist Manifesto”. Latin American Literary Review. Vol. 19, No. 38. 1991. pp. 38-44

4 Ma, Xiaolu. “ Transculturation of Madness: The Double Origin of Lu Xun’s ‘ Diary of a Madman’”. Literature and Medicine. Vol. 33, No. 2. 2015. pp. 348-367

5 Nabokov, Vladimir. ‘ Franz Kafka (1883-1924): ‘ The Metamorphosis’’. Lecture of Literature, Edited by Fredson bowers, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980. pp. 275-308

<https://assignbuster.com/changes-of-human-mentality-and-construction-of-the-physical-body-diary-of-a-madman-and-metamorphosis/>

6 Robinson, Lillian S. and Lise Vogel. "Modernism and History". *New Literary History*. Vol. 3. 1971. pp. 177-199

7 Vuilleumeir, Victor. "Le Corps Souffrant chez Lu Xun : Allégorie Muette de L'obstacle et Appropriation de la Modernité ". *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*. 2015. pp. 47-84

8 Lee, Chia-Yi. "Beyond the Body: Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Gibson's *Neuromancer*". *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*. Vol. 30, No. 2. 2004. pp. 201-22.

9 Tang, Xiaobing. "Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian". *Post-Contemporary Interventions*. Duke University Press, 2000.

10 Bain, Alexander. "Mind and Body: The Theories of Their Relation", 2nd edition. London: Henry S. King, 1873. pp. 2-4

11 Feder, Lillian. "Madness in Literature". Princeton UP, 1980.