



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“I Would Prefer Not To” Eat: A Literacy Narrative of My Mad Self

Satyendra Singh

BITS Law School, Mumbai

Abstract

Growing up as a queer child in a lower-middle-class family in a small town in India in the late 1990s and early 2000s, violence — physical, structural, emotional, psychological, sexual, and epistemological — has been an intrinsic part of my coming-of-age. Unable to comprehend the violence then, I responded to it by withdrawing from food, among other forms of active self-harm/survival. Until literature entered my life like a saviour! This write-up is part autoethnography and part survivor memoir in the form of a *literacy narrative* of how I came to understand my mad self through the humane lens of literature. The literacy narrative focuses on my journey with a range of literary texts that have come to shape my understanding of my madness and eating habits. In doing so, the narrative keeps the clinical gaze of psychiatry at bay and develops a literary and “lived-experience framework” to understand eating habits. Such a framework contains the potential to conceptualize eating (dis)orders beyond the hegemony of psychiatric discourses; and seeks to share how they are situated in contexts of loneliness, alienation, gender violence, sexuality, and suicide.

Keywords

Critical eating dis/order studies, eating habits, suicide, madness, loneliness, self, violence, sexuality, queer life, literacy narrative

History

Received: 22 July 2024
Revised: 21 December 2024
Accepted: 23 December 2024

Writing the Self: A Prologue

How to tell the story of the self? How to tell a cohesive story of a fragmented self? If the self is ineffable and language elusive, how does one string together a word concave to house the shape-defying fragments?

To spin a narrative of the self is to swim back and forth between time present and times past. The hope is to establish a logical continuum between the past self as it *was*, the past self as it is recollected and remembered *now*, and the present self. The swimming takes

place between these islands precipitated by memory but separated by tides of forgetfulness. The forgetfulness is both natural and enforced, a necessity as well as an excess. The forgetfulness is both the trauma and the refuge — a violent core surrounded by splintered spheres of saccharin sweetness.

The present self dives into the dark mass of water, swims back to its past phantoms as it remembers them, only to discover the disquiet of recognition and relief of disavowal. Swimming in the dark under the yoke of remembrance, land and water become treacherous terrains capable of interchanging. What was believed to have been forgotten can change into a flashing light bulb memory; and what was hitherto visible as a crystallized island memory can sink and diffuse into the tide of forgetfulness. Writing the self, thus, becomes an absurd interplay of memory and forgetfulness in which truth, fact, and fiction become actors who slip into each other's roles.

This triad of actors with their dissolving boundaries together perform the textuality of the self — a palimpsest¹ in constant need of critical interrogation, rewriting, and reinterpretation. The actors enact various moods, thoughts, and emotions by donning appropriate masks, like scenes from *commedia dell'arte*. Every mask simultaneously reveals and conceals the elusiveness of the inchoate self. Behind the constructed coherence of the masked self are undercurrents of conflicting forces: trauma and survival, violence and healing, silence and speech, and shame and self-discovery. How aware can the actor be of the masks they have chosen to put on and the ones left behind in the green room? What happens to the actor when the truth of masks is revealed and the conviction to put them on is lost? What happens when the simmering undercurrents rip apart not just the socially sanctioned masks but also the face that was supposed to wear them?

The self — both a noun and a verb² — is a composite of multiple forms. It is as physical and corporeal as it is social, political, cultural, linguistic, philosophical, epistemological, and

¹ This idea of the self as a palimpsest text in constant need of reinterpretation and re-writing (or written over by one's ever-changing consciousness) informed by poststructuralist and postmodern conceptualisations of the self and subject. Poststructuralism distrusts "the idea of the human being as an independent entity, preferring the notion of the 'dissolved' or 'constructed' subject, whereby what we may think of as the individual is really a product of social and linguistic forces — that is not an essence at all, merely a 'tissue of textualities'" (Barry, 2008, p. 65). The postmodernists view the fragmentation and fluidity of the self as "an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief [grand/meta narratives]" (p. 84). Several postmodern literary texts also function like a palimpsest because they attempt to rewrite/write over older canonical literary texts from the novel perspective of characters who were silenced or marginalised in them. Such postmodern conceptions of the self, subject, and text align with the spirit of Mad Studies and its impetus on rupturing the grand narratives that surround rationality, psy knowledge, and sanism.

² While debates on the nature of the self are age-old, most arguments broadly fall into two categories: the essentialist and the social constructionist schools of thought. The self as a verb alludes not only to the dynamic nature of the self always in the process of becoming, but also to its performative nature (the actor, the mask, and the performance). This performance of acts of being — the self as a verb — is animated by the self's self-consciousness of itself in the moment (the self as a noun in that moment). The self-consciousness, in turn, is a function of the extent to which the self as a subject is aware of its interpellated nature.

discursive. A compound of the body and the mind, the self is both a physiological and a psychological entity. The swimming-in-the-dark-mass-of-water-self also experiences the physical sensations of hunger and thirst; the actor-donning-their-mask-self also craves sleep and physical human contact. The body's rhythms and habits shape the mind's inner life, and vice-versa. A delectable plate of dinner cooked with care by a loved one can be as potent a catalyst for self-realization as a powerful poem. The memory of a kind wink by a stranger at the crossroad can, at times, be as effective as a sleeping pill during nights of insomnia. The physical, the emotional, and the psychological form an intermeshed complex in which the self can be located and understood.

The self is both the actor and the acted upon — a subject as well as an object. Made largely (if not completely!) of socio-cultural and linguistic elements, a consciousness of itself makes the self seek to transcend that which forms it — like a teenager eager to outgrow the influence of their parents. Heidegger would trace the source of the uncanniness of being to this eagerness. The struggle to define the self as a self-conscious subject with agency and authenticity is performed against socially ordained scripts. The script is often as binding as the deterministic influence of environment and heredity on the fate of characters in naturalist drama, while the self wrestles against these forces for survival and self-expression. But once the actor self exceeds or escapes the script, however momentarily, what do they escape into? Does the self have blood and bone of its own outside the social fabric?

Among the various social scripts that seek to control how the self is supposed to dress, think, feel, love, and be so as to be regarded as 'normal', the socio-culturally ordained script of eating orders forms an undetectable touchstone. Undetectable like the strings of a puppet because eating orders are routinely and discursively 'normalised' in the social fabric; a touchstone because any tension in the strings, however minute, is bound to have an impact on the puppet's performance. The self's relation to hegemonic eating orders pulls at the core of the puppet: it keeps the puppet straight (pun intended!) and upright. A slight shudder in *any* part of the puppet self is bound to have a bearing on this core string. Given that the puppet strives to be the puppeteer — the author of its performance, how adept can the puppet be in the balancing act? Trying to seek control from the puppeteer, how does it preclude the possibility of inevitable falls? In moments of fall, how does the puppet get back on its stringed feet? And if to live authentically is to operate permanently in this zone of liminality — of negotiation with power, how long can the core string remain wrinkle free?

Thankfully, the puppet is made of resilient material! Most knockouts are only temporary setbacks before the performance is resumed — even if the memory and impact of the knockout linger in some form. Thankfully, the self is also a thinking subject capable of introspection and growth. The stimulus for growth comes from multiple sources: books, films, people, travel, internet, and the memory of lived experiences — even those of the fall — falling into new patterns. In the presence of certain favourable conditions, the self

continues to gain literacy of itself and the world, and of its position in that world. The cracks-from-the-fall become conducive to self-knowledge. This self-regenerative elasticity of the self makes the self itself a narrative — a literacy narrative rather, provided the puppet has been lucky to survive the fall.

A literacy narrative chronicles the process of the self's acquisition of knowledge of itself and the world, and of the relation between the two. It documents a journey of self-transformation and changed self-consciousness in the wake of encounter with *new* ideas, books, narratives, people, discourse community, knowledge systems, experiences, and environments — all of which may act as agents of the self's literacy. In doing so, a literacy narrative often charts the hopes, aspirations, difficulties, disillusionments, and transformations undergone by the learner. The changing subjectivity of the learner becomes as important as the new knowledge that they strive to gain/produce for themselves. At the heart of the genre of literacy narrative is the concept of "*critical literacy*": a literacy that goes beyond information acquisition to development of a critical and epistemological consciousness of the self and the world. Akin to some of the core principles and goals of Mad Studies, critical literacy entails "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). By using words to interrogate the world, critical literacy aims to question "power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 2). Or to borrow from Paulo Freire, critical literacy is "a dream of a new society against the power now in power" (p. 2). Thus, a literacy narrative documents the self's journey of gaining critical literacy.

This is a literacy narrative of my mad self that was fortunate to survive and gain a critical literacy of itself and the hegemony of sanist eating orders. This narrative can also be described as a survivor autoethnography presented in the form of a literacy narrative of the two distinct phases of my life. The *first* section, entitled "Semicolons of Fall," documents my puppet self's strained relation with food and life during its teenage years (my 13- to 18-year-old self). The *second* section, "Elastic Ellipses," recounts my gaining critical literacy of my semicolons of fall (a mad defiance of eating orders) during my early adulthood (my 18- to 25-year-old self), with the help of select literary texts.

This literacy narrative keeps the clinical gaze at bay and deploys a Mad Studies approach to develop a lived-experience framework to understand eating habits. Costa and Ross' (2023) insistence on the "historicity" of Mad Studies praxis, especially the early genealogy which can be traced to the antipsychiatry writings of the 60s and 70s, informs my use of the Foucauldian lens in the literacy narrative. If "Mad Studies praxis centers Mad peoples' voices and knowledge(s)", this personal literacy narrative aims to contribute to that pool of voices and hopes it to be "emancipatory" in its discursive dismantling of sanism (pp. 5 - 6). The reliance on literature to interpret and conceptualize my madness is informed by Mad Studies being "an interdisciplinary and multi-vocal praxis" (LeFrançois et al., 2013, p. 13) — "there are many ways to take up a Mad analysis" (Poole & Ward, 2013, p. 96). By reading

my mad defiance of eating order using the lens of intersectionality (of gender, class, region, colonialism, and heteronormativity) specific to my social context, this narrative aims to disrupt the “essentializing” of Mad identity/discourse and demonstrate how “madness is shaped by a complex system of power relations” that affect the workings of psychiatry (Diamond, 2013, p. 71). In India where the term “mad” largely continues to remain a “reviled term” owing to the hegemony of Western psy discourses, this literacy narrative’s embracing of the term by its mad and queer subject is “an expressly political act” (LeFrançois et al., 2013, p.10). Taking these cues from Mad Studies genealogy and praxis, this literacy narratives strives to develop a framework which contains the potential to conceptualize eating habits beyond the hegemony of psychiatric discourses and beauty norms, and situate them in contexts of loneliness, alienation, gender violence, sexuality, and suicide.

Attempting to write a literacy narrative of a mad self is, to borrow a metaphor from Nicholas of Cusa, akin to expanding the number of sides of the mind’s polygon with the impossible hope of arriving at a circle (1990, p. 8). One is back to the questions one started with. How to tell the story of the self? How to tell a cohesive story of a fragmented self? If the self is ineffable and language elusive, how does one string together a word concave to house the shape-defying fragments? One can take refuge in the modernist enterprise of capturing the effervescence of moments,³ or the postmodern motifs of pastiche⁴ and palimpsest. Even the symbolic suggestiveness and abstraction of poetic forms can be of some help. One can try.

Semicolons of Fall

Growing up as a queer child in a lower-middle-class family in several small towns of India in the late 1990s and 2000s, violence — physical, structural, verbal, emotional, psychological, and sexual — has been an intrinsic part of my *bildungsroman*.⁵ This was the time when the

³ At the heart of the literary and cultural movement of modernism was a frantic oscillation between memory and desire, precipitated by the fragmentation of traditional socio-political and philosophical categories. *Memory* or nostalgia for the older social order before the fragmentation had become an unavoidable reality; and *desire* for hope and new meanings to overcome the hopelessness induced by the fragmentation. While the modernists looked for new ontological and artistic truths, the turn towards the idea of the moment for all its transient and effervescent (nevertheless potent) beauty, hope, and meaning became central to the modernist aesthetics. In the absence of overarching grand narratives, the moment (whether epiphanic or mundane or of nostalgia) acquired new significance. This turn towards the idea of the moment can be seen in the of works most modernist writers, most notably in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and *Waves*, and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Henri Bergson’s philosophical musings on time was central to this new outlook on time and the moment.

⁴ The term pastiche is used to describe a work of art or literature that borrows heavily and self-consciously from other works or deploys extensive intertextual references. Pastiche “may have a humorous, satirical, or serious purpose” (Murfin & Ray, 1998, p. 270). Postmodernism’s impetus on rupturing the grand narrative of literary conventions and canon often led to a playful use of pastiche intertextuality.

⁵ The term *bildungsroman* is used for a narrative “that recounts the development (psychological and sometimes spiritual) of an individual from childhood to maturity, to the point at which the main character recognizes his or her place and role in the world” (Murfin & Ray, 1998, p. 31).

first mobile phones had just been introduced in India. Internet was a luxury which only the rich had in their homes. In the sleepy town of my early teenage years, most families lived an ordinary life trying to make ends meet. Any life-force that the town exhibited was mostly derived from the dehumanizing norms of gender, caste, class, religion, and heteronormativity. The world of the internet with its repository of information on counter-discourses was inaccessible. The beauty of literature, art, and progressive discourses was mostly absent in our world. We were running low on all forms of cultural capital. Economic necessity and utilitarian reasoning governed our world.

An acutely emotional and sensitive adolescent struggling to find acceptance and self-understanding in this violent social order, my disconnect from life manifested in the form of cutting myself periodically and being suicidal. At times actively but most of the time, like taking a slow poison, through withdrawal from food. Starving myself for days, skipping meals, secretly throwing away the food I was supposed to eat, even going without water for days at times — my 'anorexia' was a compound of my loneliness, self-alienation, guilt, shame, and trauma. My eating 'disorder' was supposed to be a gateway to my much-desired self-annihilation. The weight of tumultuous emotions which I failed to understand then, induced a certain lightness of being which sought the repose of death. My puppet self without a language to comprehend or articulate itself, was forced to create a visceral language of its own: a razor-sharp tongue in which it could create a semblance of control over the body and the mind. It was a language of silence, punctuated with semicolons of my first falls.

Mornings are deceitful in the sleepy town; the cool morning breeze breathes hope into dusty lanes; compromised-back-mother arduously prepares breakfast for brother-cloud and the 14-year old puppet self before they leave for school; the sight of the plate prepared with love wells up the puppet's eyes; but the puppet is adept at performing tricks; amid the cluttered walls of the house that leave no room for privacy, the puppet is able to sneak the food into a poly bag, to be tossed into the dusty lanes; the hungry puppet feels full; mornings are deceitful but satisfying in the sleepy town;

Noons are indecisive in the sleepy town; when the school bell announces lunch-break, students rush out of classrooms towards the canteen like a cauldron of bats; the 14-year old puppet self trails behind them; the hungry bats gorge on their lunch boxes or delicacies purchased from the canteen amid a cacophony of shared laughter; the deceitful puppet had bellowed at home to convince his compromised-back-mother to not give him a lunch box; hungry now, the puppet is tempted to break its fast; memory of the anguish of a full-stomach as opposed to the relief of an empty-stomach defeats the temptation; noons are indecisive but masochistically delightful in the sleepy town;

Afternoons are suffocating in the sleepy town; while the sun blazes overhead, the industrious workers of the town lull themselves into a siesta between their shifts; the 14-year old puppet self returns home from school; the pit in the stomach sends shivers down the limbs; father-cloud and compromised-back-mother are taking a nap, brother-cloud is gone for tuition

classes; nobody wakes up when the dutiful puppet comes back home; weakened limbs weaken resolves; the puppet takes his plate of cold food from the kitchen; the chapatis have hardened and the lentil soup has congealed but the puppet doesn't mind them much; the puppet eats; having to eat is to accept defeat and a reminder of other defeats; it's time to join the town's siesta; muffled cries in the pillow gradually give in to sleep; afternoons are suffocating but somniferous in the sleepy town;

Evenings are dreary in the sleepy town; as darkness swallows the town, young birds and children are rushed back to their nests; father-cloud is still at work, brother-cloud is out with friends, compromised-back-mother is occupied with her hour long evening worship ritual; the 14-year old puppet self sneaks out of his cold nest to go to a nearby grocery store to buy a new Wilkinson blade; the old ones at home will not be efficient; the walk back home feels different; the weight of the blade in the pocket has already started cutting through the heaviness inside; a good 30 minutes before anybody would start looking for him; the puppet self is perched on a stool in the washroom; the bucket of cold water waits eagerly to form kaleidoscopic patterns; a trepidation of fear delays the pattern by a few seconds; fear is soon replaced with hope of deliverance; a few surface dives before the Wilkinson plunges into the radial artery; the pattern starts with a rhythmic rise and fall at the source and forms tangled spools of red thread before dissolving away; the fountain show lasts for about 15 minutes; it takes another 5 minutes to clog the fountain with a rag; the crimson bucket water is drained away; now that there is a mark, the plunge will be easier the next time; the puppet will eat well and sleep well tonight; evenings are dreary but cathartic in the sleepy town;

To sociologically unpack my semicolons of fall is to be confronted with ethical conundrums since it involves family members who continue to be part of my life. It may also entail the blunting of one's critical gaze because the abyss to be evaluated is one's own contradictory emotions packed into a bundle of trauma. Every memory, every emotion, every fall, warrants the question of why. "But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*" (Morrison, 1999, p. 4).⁶

*

I am tired of queer narratives tracing the roots of their discord to unhappy childhoods or some unresolved 'daddy issues,' and I wish (I really do!) I had a different story to tell. But then, that

⁶ The voice of adult Claudia, at the very beginning of Morrison's novel (1999), recalls and recounts the tragedy she witnessed during her childhood: Pecola's rape and impregnation by her father, the stillbirth, and the final mental breakdown of Pecola. The young Claudia and Frieda, concerned for the well-being of their friend Pecola's baby and in their innocence, plant marigold seeds and offer their prayers over it; but "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (p. 3). This section ends with the adult Claudia's narratorial reflection, "There is really nothing more to say — except why. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*" (p. 4). Claudia, here, raises an important ontological question about the human propensity for violence, so deeply 'normalised' in the social milieu. But being unable to come up with an easy answer for the *why*, seeks refuge in narrating the *how* of Pecola's tragedy. However, Morrison's adept narrative, much like my attempt in this literacy narrative, ends up answering the *why* in explaining the *how*.

is where most mad, queer puppet selves encounter their first fall. So please indulge the stereotypes my story may have!

My grandfather was a farmer. We had (still have) a lot of land in our ancestral village and there never was a food-shortage that my ancestors faced. We belong to an upper caste group, so my ancestors have always enjoyed social respectability in our village ecosystem. But behind this veneer of feudal status, they were always cash-strapped — I have been told. At the dawn of economic liberalization of India in the late 1980s, my father was the first in our family to migrate to a town with aspirations of economic mobility. Armed with a little education, immense resilience, big dreams, a quasi-bourgeois morality, and baggage of the trauma of his own cash-strapped (if not poverty-ridden) childhood, he moved to a small town and started his family. By the time my brothers and I (the youngest of the three) were in school, our family had made it to the lower-middle class of the small-town-90s-India whose quintessential characteristic (at the risk of generalizing) was an inexhaustible utilitarian calculus. In our world, children were little more than long-term investment plans. And despite best intentions, parenting was mostly limited to providing nutritious meals and quality education with a tempering of moral values and an overdose of the pressure to excel academically. The aim of the detour in this paragraph is not to give in to the reductionist Marxist logic of ‘all struggles are essentially class struggles.’ It is, rather, a feeble attempt at humanizing and contextualizing my family and the environment in which I grew up.

The ethos of my home and school were united by common looming shadows of oppressive heteronormativity and violent masculinity. My school, run by Franciscan Fathers and Sisters, was considered the best in town. It churned out high-scoring toppers who got through prestigious engineering colleges and were celebrated as heroes in the local newspapers. The education system was heavily tilted in favour of mathematics, sciences, and athletic masculinity; while the humanities and social science subjects, along with the emotional and mental well-being of the students, were relegated to the margins. School was a ruthless Darwinian world where the game of survival of the ‘fittest’ was structurally and systemically enabled. Violence in the form of bullying, use of sexual expletives, and abuse was common. Most of the male students exuded a toxic masculinity that went unchecked. And boys like me who wouldn’t participate in the misogyny and sexism laden performances of masculinity — a rite of passage into a heterosocial and heterosexual order, were easy targets of gender violence. Most girls, survivors themselves, either tolerated or giggled at these antics of masculinity; some even participated to get popular among the ‘cool’ boys. The worst: our teachers also looked at us through the lens of gender norms and because they failed to understand why some of us were *different*, they chose to be indifferent to us. “We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils” (Morrison, 1999, p. 188).⁷

⁷ In recounting Pecola’s tragedy, the adult Claudia stresses on the community’s indifference to the child’s suffering — the veil — stemming primarily from their internalisation of racial beauty norms and its intersection with class structures. Even Pecola’s school teachers are disgusted by her blackness: “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at

My ambivalent adolescent self with its 'masculine' physical appearance but 'soft' personality and demeanour posed a challenge to the looming shadows. The 'logic' of gender binary is easy to confound. My easy unclassifiability perhaps saved me from the more serious forms of bullying; but my refusal to join the 'cool' groups' performance of the socially sanctioned scripts of masculinity was often rewarded with snide homophobic remarks and expletives. When I force myself to think of those last three years of High School, the image which surfaces is of my 14–15-year-old puppet self walking down the school corridor. Its lowered head and drooped shoulders are the most unpleasant to recollect. The image is not a memory of a specific moment but of several encounters that seem to have fused into this breathing memory. The silhouette walks as close to the wall as possible, brushing against it every few seconds, hoping to avoid certain faces because it fears that a humiliating signifier would be uttered in its ears as they would cross. Uttered softly enough for only the two of us to hear in the bustling corridor; but loud enough to carve a void of shame inside — lodge itself to the damp walls and reverberate there forever. The ambivalence and unclassifiability were, after all, mere subterfuges and not armours of defense.

The looming shadows at home had their foundation in a skewed gender ratio: we were a family of four men (my father and us three brothers) and one woman (my mother). While my eldest brother mostly grew up and lived at our relatives' places, my father and older brother colluded to form the looming shadow at home. The shadow was more like dark grey monsoon clouds that eclipse the sky. A too-sure-of-itself, loud, and overconfident rumble — even when communicating about everyday, routine matters — was our everyday 'normal'. The only way to get heard in my normal was to roar louder than brother-cloud and father-cloud. At times, my desperation to get heard on certain matters bellowed out from me — as if a dollop of the cloud had entered my lungs. This bellowing, although performative, was needed for survival. For instance, one day when brother-cloud discovered my suicidal queer self by reading my diary without my knowledge, his cloud-nature convinced him that he could make sexual advances on me. I could, thankfully, bellow out a cloud smoke of resistance, almost instinctively, to save myself.

The lashings of father-cloud fell on a different substance altogether. Don't get it wrong — father-cloud wasn't nasty like brother-cloud! Even though father-cloud would often indulge in corporal punishment and my brothers and I grew up with his slaps, punches, and kicks, these beatings were never more than minor inconveniences. Also, there were other fathers in our extended family and neighbourhood who were a lot more violent towards their children; so, in comparison to them, our father-cloud seemed like a lamb who would only occasionally metamorphose into a tiger. I, anyway, received the least beatings from him in comparison to

school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk . . . Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond" (Morrison, 1999, pp. 43–44). Most of my schoolteachers wielded a similar veiled look of indifference towards my budding queer mad self; a few of the teachers exhibited an impotent and condescending pitiful gaze, which only made me feel worse; and then, there were those for whom we were convenient targets to fulfill their repressed fantasies of power.

my siblings because my dutiful puppet self was relatively better-behaved. Ironically, the physical blows inflicted by father-cloud bothered me the least. What truly made him the cloud was how his voice always carried an abrasive undertone: it was not as much about what he had said but *how* he had said it. Even routine, everyday conversations with him could not last for more than ten seconds without the undertone revealing itself like a curved talon. So suddenly and unexpectedly that before the puppet could even think of dodging the claw, its skin would already be ruptured. The memory of growing up is replete with such ruptures that gradually pushed my puppet self into a well of silence.

Children react in unexpected ways when they receive violence from those who are supposed to care for them. I reacted by oscillating between intense hatred for father-cloud and a desperate desire to be loved by him. Hating him was easy; what was not easy was to let go of the fantasy of the talons getting replaced with wings of paternal warmth. Is this how mad, self-destructive, delusional, and masochistic selves are produced in the factories of home and school?

In the absence of meaningful association with other selves, the self may start feeding on itself. My existence was a mute spectacle of absolute loneliness. There were no friends to share the weight of my being. No adult voice to explain what I was experiencing. No internet, books, or films to act as role models or teachers. No discourse on mental health existed in my sleepy town. Even the words “gender,” “gay,” “mental health,” and “queer” were unknown to me. My puppet self was an agglomerate of violent and implosive ‘signifieds’, devoid of anchoring ‘signifiers’, making any kind of self-knowledge impossible. As my existence spiraled out of my control, the only semblance of comfort and control I could create was by starving myself. The mind had deflected the violence towards the body, through channels of eating habits (or the lack of it). And then, there was a night of climax that nobody (including the doctors) could fathom.

Nights are promising in the sleepy town; the industrious workers are fast asleep after a day of gratifying labour; the dead silence has chased away the prowling nightmares; the 15-year old puppet self stays awake staring at the ceiling fan; it can't remember when or what it had last eaten; it remembers gorging greedily on a medley of colourful pills it could lay its hand on in the house; life gradually recoils, first from the limbs and then from the rest of the body; the mind succumbs slowly but the last; a sweet coma slumber of 24 hours; the puppet wakes up in a hospital room with tubes, needles, and an oxygen mask; the sleepy doctors of the sleepy town have no explanation; the puppet becomes a bit of a medical mystery; only the puppet knows that it was a hypoglycemic coma but acts innocent; nothing changes after the nightmare-free night except the puppet's realization that it is possible to disappear; nights are promising but miserly in the sleeping town;

*

As a grown-up with an understanding of the workings of power structures and social norms through interpellated human subjectivity, it is impossible to blame my family without experiencing guilt and self-doubt. “They didn’t know any better. What about their own struggles? Maybe it was all my fault. Maybe I was the needy one for whom nothing was ever enough. Look at your own brothers — they turned out just fine in the same environment ...” The more I try to engage with the subjectivity of the violent manufacturers of my mad self, the more difficult it is to hold them responsible. Critical thinking and empathy can help us humanize our perpetrators and see the real culprit — the power structures operating behind them. But in the process, it can further undermine the already corroded foundations of the survivor’s self. When the text to be evaluated is our own survivor puppet self, forgiveness, empathy, and criticality do not come easy.

I sometimes wonder where my self-destructive but also self-preserving resistance in the form of my intolerance for violence and my ability to love and feel excessively beyond the socially mandated “Love Laws”⁸ came from (Roy, 2002). There was always the risk of becoming the cloud that I was bellowing against. While father-cloud and brother-cloud never melted into any rain, my performative bellowing would always precipitate in me tears of shame, guilt, and regret. Looking back, I am grateful for the shower that accompanied my bellowing for it prevented my puppet self from emulating their violence. “How sweet. That rain. How something that lives only to fall can be nothing but sweet” (Vuong, 2017, p. 15).

Madness and queerness, with all their hardships, also bring in a repository of pure tenderness — like a quivering yellow-green tendril planted in tough, cracked soil. The tendril, while resilient, needs a supporting twig to help it survive. Looking back, the only twig I had was my mother’s limited yet limitless, unadulterated, soft love — an ode to the nurturing female superpower. My mother tirelessly performed the ideal femininity ordained by patriarchal gender norms — an ideal wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. She has been an ideal victim of patriarchy (with or without a consciousness of it), the burden of which has (literally) compromised her back. Her material reality never allowed her to break out of the constricting circle; but her compromised-back-love was enough to instill in me a sense of beauty, wonder, purity, and love — a soil in which literature could thrive.

Elastic Ellipses

I survived those last five years of my school life. For college, I moved out of the sleepy town to a metropolitan city in 2007. I joined a premier public university in New Delhi to pursue a BA Honours degree in literature. Yes, literature! In an ironic twist of fate, father-cloud’s utilitarian judgment had clouded when he decided that I should pursue literature before going for an

⁸ Arundhati Roy uses the term “Love Laws” in her novel *The God of Small Things* (2017) to refer to traditions and norms that seek to control *who* we can love, *how*, and *how much*. The structures of caste, class, gender, region, religion, ethnicity, sanism, and heteronormativity often intersect to formulate these unofficial yet powerful Love Laws in Indian society. Then to be able to love beyond these shadow lines itself becomes a political act: an act of transgression and resistance.

MBA. Little did he know that once I would taste the forbidden “goblin fruits” of literature, there would be no coming back for me (Rossetti, n.d.). The start of college life was a turning point — the looming shadows got left behind and light entered in the form of literature. The literacy of my mad puppet self was about to begin.

My journey with literature started with classics like Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, and George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*. The repressive Victorian regime in which characters like Maggie Tulliver, Jane Eyre, and Sissy Jupe struggled to self-actualize was a mirror to my sleepy-town-past. Their passionate, emotional, and sensitive nature, struggling to find acceptance, made them my twin flames. The metamorphosis of the hunger, rage, and rebellion of young Jane and Maggie into a subterfuge of negotiation as they grew up and learned the art of survival was a vital lesson in living. And then there was the mad Bertha Mason’s spectral presence whose ‘animal-like ferocity’ had refused to give in to the racial-patriarchal order of Victorian England; this mad woman in the attic would find her voice only much later in Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I was learning how crucial the politics of literary and cultural representation was when it came to understanding madness. We deployed postcolonial, feminist, and critical race theory perspectives to read the madness of characters like Bertha Mason/Antoinette Cosway.

The classroom discourse ruptured the hegemony of Western psy knowledge and rationality which had developed in the wake of the European Enlightenment and was then imposed on colonial societies (and subjects like Antoinette). In these interpretations, the sanist discourse on madness emerged as socio-cultural constructs that were furthered by the Victorian institutions of psychiatry, colonialism, and patriarchy. This is also where the genealogy of Mad Studies has been traced: in the “early epistemological transformation” which started with the anti-psychiatric discourses of the 60s and 70s and which sought to rupture the psy grand narrative of “‘patient’ under carceral, colonial, and medical authority” to create a praxis of “consciousness-raising, patient liberation and ... conceptual and practical alternatives to psychiatry” (Rose as cited in Costa & Ross, 2023, p. 3). I was beginning to think of my own positionality as a postcolonial subject in reading and using these texts to understand my madness. Those initial college years were when I first became cognisant of the need to be mindful of contextual difference in borrowing from mad discourses that had originated in the West — even though they had personally been empowering and liberating. However, it was only much later and through my own research that I was able to develop a more robust postcolonial understanding of madness in the Indian context — a furthering of the epistemological transformation. I was able to discover some of the inclusive, alternate, and Indigenous understandings of madness that had existed in India, especially in the realm of folklore and Sufi and Bhakti traditions, before Victorian psychiatry (transplanted onto the Indian soil through colonialism) relegated them to the margins.⁹

⁹ This literacy narrative does not elaborate much on this postcolonial perspective for two reasons. *First*, because I was able to gain a cogent literacy of this epistemological perspective only much later. *Secondly*, the

Coming back to the heroines of nineteenth century literature caught in the cultural “gender asymmetry” of madness as “a female malady,” I was also learning how the ambivalent truth of madness can only be discovered by deflecting the clinical gaze and paying attention to the socio-familial milieu in which madness is culturally manufactured (Showalter, 2014, p. 4). These mad heroines, after all, were bellowing against Victorian familial and social ideals through their emotions, feelings, desires, and imagination. Listening to the voice of the mad — however fragmented — was the first crucial step towards understanding madness. In listening to these mad heroines of literature, I was learning to listen to (and understand!) my own fragmented self.

Every literature class in college became a new home away from home. Every discussion seemed directed towards a part of my self that had hitherto seemed alienated, submerged in a sticky dark mass of unfamiliarity, and which I had struggled to comprehend. Like a charged sponge, I sat mutely in the classroom and absorbed the multitude of ideas the Professors played with like seasoned jugglers. I was gradually acquiring a lexicon of signifiers to name and process my inner reality and lived experiences. True knowledge, after all, is nothing but a gentle reminder of our forgotten humanity and all the beauty we are capable of.

One of my Professors played a crucial role in the literacy of my mad self during the first two years of college. She was the first other mad self I had met in my life. Much like queerness, when you are yourself “touched with fire,” you can instinctively smell the madness in those around you, almost like a sixth sense (Jamison, 1993). This warmth of recognition, of discovering an ally, can have an uncanny pull. An adjunct faculty member living with bipolar, she and her lectures became my first mad-ally. I was fortunate to be introduced to the academic discourse on madness through someone who was also living it. She taught us texts like *Paradise Lost* and *Halfway House*, but the references she included in her lectures ranged from Captain Ahab and Foucault to Eric Clapton and Princess Diana.

Milton makes Lucifer the most charismatic character in his epic poem, he indeed belonged to the Devil’s party . . . What kind of god denies a child the joy of eating a piece of cake? Oscar, abused since childhood, was bound to have a doomed romance with Lucinda . . . Savitri knew that all men are alike yet her self-destructive quest for love makes her move from one man to another . . . Ahab’s mad quest for revenge is propelled by his suicidal self . . . Did getting into the skin of the Joker push the already frail Ledger over the edge? . . . Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven . . . Nothing chastises human pride like suffering . . . Is art impossible without agony? . . . Foucault asks, if the so-called-sane need to incarcerate the ‘insane’ to be sure of their sanity, aren’t the ‘sane’ more insane than the ‘insane’? . . .

Wearing a gorgeous off-white cotton sari and stunning silver ethnic earrings, my mad-ally Professor’s glinting eyes would often drift away to some unknown land during the course of the lecture. Beauty, terror, power, and vulnerability co-existed harmoniously in that spectacle.

scope of this literacy narrative is my initial few years with literature and how it helped me transition from the darkness of “Semicolons of Fall” to the dawn of “Elastic Ellipses.”

While my classmates found her lectures to be ‘off-topic’ and ‘too-morbid,’ I would sit there hypnotized by this spectacle of the birth of mad knowledge. This was a new transgressive knowledge in which the binaries of the world fell apart: happiness and sorrow, life and death, reason and unreason, madness and sanity, and god and devil. This knowledge had a new perspective on madness to offer: one that combined epistemology and ontology. In this knowledge system, madness was not merely a disease or an illness but an ambivalent fact which also had certain positive meanings. Madness was linked with non-conformity, rebellion, protest, knowledge, and art:

This knowledge, so inaccessible, so formidable, the Fool, in his innocent idiocy, already possesses. While the man of reason and wisdom perceives only fragmentary and all the more unnerving images of it, the Fool bears it intact as an unbroken sphere: that crystal ball which for all others is empty is in his eyes filled with the density of an invisible knowledge.

(Foucault, 2009, p. 19)

In this knowledge system, the mad weren’t *certain* individuals to be classified as ‘weak invalids’ but the world was acknowledged to be maddening, and the germ of madness was to be found in *every* human, in fact, at the very core of human nature. “[Madness] insinuates itself within man, or rather it is a subtle rapport that man maintains with himself ... In fact, only “follies” exist — human forms of madness: ‘I count as many images as there are men’” (Foucault, 2009, p. 23). Foucault revealed to me how the emergence of psychiatric discourses on madness with the onset of the Enlightenment would push this humanist and ambivalent truth of madness into oblivion, on the charge of romanticization and pathologization of madness. “In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman . . . The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence” (p. xii). This transgressive knowledge on madness would later be identified as the foundation of the genealogy of Mad Studies.¹⁰ But back in 2007-9, I was already living and using it to understand my own madness. I was beginning to situate and understand my puppet self’s strained relation with food within this framework.

Two literary texts played a crucial role in shaping my literacy of my eating habits during those early college years. I read Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* in the year 2008 and remember the resonance and perspective it induced. I was reading it during summer vacation when I was back in the folds of the looming shadows at home. Gregor Samsa’s violent and domineering father who failed to understand his son’s metamorphosis and inner world was a replica of my

¹⁰ Later, I would discover that Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* was one among the several anti-psychiatric texts that emerged in the 1960s and 70s, “a golden age of antipsychiatry and Mad liberation.” This early genealogy or “historical legacies” of Mad Studies also included the works of Thomas Szasz, Erving Goffman, R. D. Laing, David Cooper, Phyllis Chesler, and Franco Basaglia, to name a few (LeFrançois et al., 2013, pp. 3 – 9).

father-cloud. Gregor had been the sacrificial son for his family for years until one day he could not take it anymore. Kafka lays bare the hollow utilitarian core of family relations by tracing the changing attitude of the Samsa family towards Gregor, after his metamorphosis — this was the stuff of my nightmares! The aspect of the novella which produced the strongest horror of recognition in me was Gregor's changing relation with food. The new vermin body, probably a metaphor for his self-alienation, had already changed his diet to rotten vegetables and moldy cheese. But as the family's attitude gradually changes from anger and concern, to violence, indifference, and shame, we witness Gregor's gradual withdrawal from food. While the apple thrown by the father lodges itself in Gregor's back and rots, Gregor chooses to gradually starve himself to death. Nobody even noticed that he had stopped eating until he was a corpse. "Just look how thin he was. Of course he didn't eat anything for such a long time. The food came out again just the way it went in" (Kafka, 1996, p. 40). Each time I would step out of my room after reading a part of Kafka's novella and see my family in the living room, I would wonder that if I were Gregor, would they have treated me any differently? Is this why I too had withdrawn from food when I was at home because I was tired of being the sacrificial, dutiful son who dared to desire more? Like Gregor, was I also seeking a gradual death through starvation? I soon dived into the world of Kafka's diaries and letters and discovered that much like my adolescent self, Kafka too spent his life yearning for his father's love and validation. "My writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast" (*Letter to His Father* as cited in Kafka, 1996, pp. 52–53). Would Kafka have liked an ending similar to Gregor's — succumb to the father's fatal blow? My puppet self would have.

The second text, which I read during the summer of 2009, was Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street." One of the most enigmatic characters in literature, Melville's scrivener haunted me for days after I read the short story. Bartleby's refrain of "I would prefer not to" has been interpreted variously: ranging from a Marxist defiance against the self-alienating nature of labour within capitalist systems, to nihilist and existentialist refusals to participate in the absurd drama of life. But what truly haunted me was the image of the scrivener, "a motionless young man . . . pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" (Melville, 202, p. 9). A skeleton of a man, he works copiously during the initial days of his employment but gradually gives in to his "dead-wall reveries," staring blankly at "the dead brick wall" outside the office window (p. 18). More than a victim, Bartleby seemed to me a powerful character whose resilience came from his solitude. His calm demeanour which had disarmed the narrator, also disarmed in me any possibility of feeling sympathy for his condition. If I ever dared to feel pity for him, a scornful voice would ring in my ears: "I would prefer not to." Here was a spectacle of calm fortitude that emerged from melancholy and solitude, much like my puppet self which had befriended loneliness and stopped seeking human company. And while we were both comfortable in our mute solitude, we were also simultaneously drifting away from food. "He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even

vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts” (p. 13). Soon after his confinement to the Tombs, Bartleby, too, much like Gregor, chooses to starve himself to death.

As my journey with literature continued, I kept discovering books that would gently untangle my knotted puppet self — one strand at a time — and bring in the light of self-discovery. I chanced upon Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in the year 2010 and was fascinated by the surgical precision with which she had uncovered the process of internalization of racial beauty norms by the most vulnerable member of African American society. Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of the novel, is a 14-year-old black girl from a poor, dysfunctional family. In a culture that celebrates the beauty of white girls like Shirley Temple, Pecola is shunned by the adults for her blackness. She grows up with the desire to have blue eyes because she thinks it would make her ‘beautiful’ and desirable. In the climax of the book, her twisted desire finds an ironic fulfillment through her madness which convinces her that she has finally gained blue eyes. Pecola’s madness is precipitated by her incestuous rape at the hands of her broken-and-alcoholic father who can only love violently; and a pregnancy and stillbirth that follow the rape. When Cholly Breedlove rapes Pecola, she feels loved and desired for the first time, convincing her that she has gained blue eyes. At the risk of romanticizing madness, as a reader I could not help but also feel relieved when Pecola’s madness sets in because it prevents her from registering the nature and intensity of violence that had been performed on her. Her madness provides her with protection, escape, the feeling of being loved and desired, and a friend (however illusory!) — otherwise impossible for her to gain from the social milieu she inhabits. Morrison’s broken characters and bleak narrative break the binaries of love and violence, of reason and unreason, and of sanity and madness.

It was curious to observe how Pecola’s mad puppet self also had a twisted relation with food. During her short stay at a foster home, much to her benefactress’s chagrin, the *black* Pecola ends up drinking three quarts of *white* milk from a cup which has the *white* image of Shirley Temple on it. “We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (Morrison, 1999, p. 21). Pecola also loves to eat the sweet Mary Jane candies not for their taste but because the wrapper displays a pretty white face with blond hair and blue eyes. “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (p. 48). What we eat, how we eat, and how much we eat, after all, are functions of the mad self’s lived experience from which it derives its sense of being. If madness is both “a means of self-identifying” and “a point of entry into the fields of power” for the mad subject; the mad eating habits of Gregor, Bartleby, and Pecola are both: a form of agency as well as their final answer to the ontological question of being (the ultimate self-identification!) in the language of defiance of eating orders (LeFrançois et al., 2013 , p. 9).

A few years later I would read Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* and find myself shaken by the *tour de force* of her narrative. Yeong-hye’s childhood trauma of witnessing the brutal killing of a dog whose meat she was then forced to consume resurfaces several years later when she decides to give up eating meat. What starts off as a simple choice of vegetarianism soon turns

into a profound philosophical rumination on the essential human condition: the inevitability of violence at the core of all human endeavours, even when they are directed towards the creation of beauty and art. The inevitability of violence at the core of human existence, rather! To live, to survive, to eat, is to participate in the cycle of violence. Yeong-hye's mad and humane quest to distance herself from this inevitability of violence results in her refusal to eat altogether. What follows is a cascade of psychiatric violence in the name of 'curing' her. Her shrinking body with its now-sharp edges reminds her of weapons of violence. The only violence-free form of being she can imagine is to inhabit a plant-self. And that's where her madness-induced-metamorphosis takes her: "Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands . . . they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly . . . yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide . . ." (Kang, 2015, p. 127).

To read *The Vegetarian* was to be reminded that there is always a method to madness. It was to realize that the mad puppet self distances itself from food because it wishes to distance itself from the violence it has been exposed to. The novel laid bare how our relation with food is affected by our unprocessed traumas. And sometimes, our defiance of the socially-mandated eating order is the self's protest against the unjustness of violence that it has experienced. But *why* does the puppet-self enact its mad agency in the language of eating (dis)order? What relates the violent core of our trauma with the act of eating/consumption? To read *The Vegetarian* was to realize that to survive/live is to somehow reconcile oneself with violence at some fundamental level — at least with the violent act of eating (whether meat or plants), without which living is impossible. The novel acknowledges and engages with the consequences of the violent food chain (both natural and social) that we are all part of. The only other option available is: "Why, is it such a bad thing to die?" (Kang, 2015, p. 157). In raising this question, Han Kang alerts us to the inevitability of the violence of death for both: the *humans* who need to consume to stay alive (and yet they eventually die), and the *non-human species* which are consumed to keep humans alive. By confronting and acknowledging this violent truth of our being, the novel deterrorises death and creates room for embracing life.¹¹ This is also the truth of madness which allowed the Renaissance humanists to overcome the medieval fear of death:

Then in the last years of the century. . .the mockery of madness replaces death and its solemnity . . . Madness is the *deja-la* [precursor] of death. But it is also its vanquished presence, evaded in those everyday signs which, announcing that death reigns already, indicate that its prey will be a sorry prize indeed. What death unmasks was never more than a mask; to discover the grin of the skeleton, one need only lift off something that was neither beauty nor truth, but only a plaster and tinsel face. From the vain mask to

¹¹ I am thankful to one of the reviewers of my literacy narrative for providing this perspective on the ethical conundrum raised by the text. The idea, "to deterrorise death is to embrace life" came from them.

the corpse, the same smile persists. But when the madman laughs, he already laughs with the laugh of death; the lunatic, anticipating the macabre, has disarmed it.

(Foucault, 2009, p. 13)

The texts discussed above constitute only a small part of the catalogue that acted as the agent of my literacy narrative. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I grew up with these mad characters whose semicolons of fall (madness engendering pauses) filled my puppet self with elastic ellipses (at once empty and full, like the empty belly fullness,¹² or like the ambivalent truth of madness) of resilience. They helped me understand my adolescent eating habits not as a psychiatric ‘disorder’ but as both: a socially conditioned response to the violent norms of masculinity and heteronormativity that I was submerged in, as well as a form of protest against them. A response to the melancholic loneliness which had become my constant companion, and which I had stopped minding. A response to the structural violence built into the fabric of my family, school, and sleepy town. A response to the illusory fantasy of love in which I had started seeking refuge, knowing fully well that the bubble would burst one day. A response to the death-wish that my puppet self had started nurturing both consciously and subconsciously. Literature made me view my madness as not merely a ‘disease’ in need of a ‘cure’ but as an *ambivalent* force that shaped the good, the bad, and the ugly in me. I gained literacy of my mad self not through the stifling annals of psychiatric discourses but through the humane and empathetic gaze of literature.

My literacy through literature, coupled with a change in material reality, had a therapeutic effect on my eating habits. Being away from home and in the sanctuary of literature helped me turn towards food and strike a better relation with it. Many of the old struggles got replaced by new ones while I also found friendship, love, and academic success in the “city of djinns” (Dalrymple, 2017).

Balancing Question Marks: An Epilogue?

Fast forward by a few years. I have gained a PhD in Literary Studies. I have been teaching for more than 11 years now. During my 8-year teaching stint at one of India’s leading Liberal Arts universities, I taught a self-designed course on “Madness in Literature and Art.” The course was rooted in the politics of Mad Studies and, at the same time, was my love letter to literature (much like this literacy narrative). How teaching this course for 8 years transformed me and the 200+ postgraduate students who went through it is a topic for another literacy narrative. But to put it in a nutshell, I learned to transform the experiences of my mad self and the journey of my literacy into a pedagogic tool to empower the young minds that wandered into my classroom out of curiosity or fascination. With literature as our guiding star, this

¹² I am thankful to one of the reviewers for this fantastic interpretation of elastic ellipses in the context of my literacy narrative.

indirect sharing of the dark light of madness made madness more humane and bearable for all of us.

I have come to understand our relation with food to be a dialectic of our interpellated puppet self on one hand, and our desire for agency against the hegemony of reason and sanity on the other.¹³ There are days when I wake up reveling in my accomplishments and survival; and then there are dusks of self-doubt, dissociation, anxiety, numbness, alienation, and feeling like an impostor. Food continues to remain the litmus, as I find myself oscillating between binge eating and bouts of self-starvation. Battling a series of health complications in my 30s now, I find food to be both my refuge and my doom. I try to rebel and define my agency through my eating habits; but my self-destructive self also relies on food for its expression. The boons and the banes of my life converse with my self through the language of food.

For better or for worse, last year I left Delhi (my home for 16 years) and moved to Mumbai for a tenured teaching position. The anonymity of the coastal city promises a new beginning, a new hope. But touched with fire once, the madness lingers. *Does it ever go away completely? Do we ever truly want it to go away completely? Maybe I would prefer not to . . .*

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all my teachers and students who have shared literature with me over the years. The literacy and survival of my mad self would not have been possible without them. Special thanks to Nicole, Julia and Debra for their love and support through the process of writing and revising this article—I could not have asked for kinder editors.

Statement of Integrity

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest to the best of his knowledge.

References

- Anderson, G. L., & Irvine, P. (1993). Informing Critical Literacy with Ethnography. In C. Lankshear & P. L. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern* (pp. 81–104). SUNY Press.
- Barry, P. (2008). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Viva Books.

¹³ The German philosopher Hegel explains a dialectic “as a process whereby a *thesis*, when countered by an *antithesis*, leads to the *synthesis* of a new idea” (Murfin & Ray, 1998, p. 85). However, the synthesis/new idea is *not* absolute because it is attained by somewhat transcending (not eliminating) the tension between the thesis and antithesis. The self’s relation with food, therefore, can be seen as an ever-changing dialectical system/synthesis in which the thesis is the socially-mandated script of eating order, and the antithesis is the self’s defiance of that script to define its agency.

- Bergson, H. (2014). *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bronte, C. (2006). *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Classics.
- Carey, P. (2015). *Oscar and Lucinda*. Faber & Faber.
- Costa, L., & Ross, L. E. (2023). Mad Studies Genealogy and Praxis. *International Mad Studies Journal*, 1(1), 1–8.
- Clapton, E. (1992). "Tears in Heaven." *Rush: Music from the Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Reprise/Warner Bros. Records, YouTube. (n.d.).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxPj3GAYYZ0>.
- Dalrymple, W. (2017). *City of Djinn: A Year in Delhi*. Bloomsbury India.
- Dickens, C. (2017). *Hard Times* (M. Williams, Ed.). Worldview Publications.
- Diamond, S. (2013). What Makes Us a Community?: Reflections of Building Solidarity in Antisocialist Praxis. In B. A. LeFrançois, R. Menzies, & G. Reaume (Eds.). *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* (pp. 64–78). Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Eliot, G. (2003). *The Mill on the Floss* (A. S. Byatt, Ed.). P. R. H. India.
- Foucault, M. (2009). *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (R. Howard, Tr.). Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (2014). *Introduction to Metaphysics* (G. Fried & R. Polt, Eds.). Yale University Press.
- Jamison, K. R. (1993). *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. Free Press Paperbacks.
- Joyce, J. (2011). *Ulysses*. Penguin Classics.
- Kafka, F. (1996). *The Metamorphosis*. Translated and edited by Stanley Corngold, W. W. Norton & Company.
- Kang, H. (2015). *The Vegetarian*. Translated by Deborah Smith, Portobello Books.
- LeFrançois, B. A., Menzies, R., & Reaume, G. (2013). Introducing Mad Studies. In B. A. LeFrançois, R. Menzies, R., & G. Reaume (Eds.). *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* (pp. 1–22). Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Melville, H. (2002). "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street." In D. McCall (Ed.), *Melville's Short Novels* (pp. 3–34). W. W. Norton & Company.

- Milton, J. (2020). *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Gordon Teskey, W. W. Norton & Company.
- Morrison, T. (1999). *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage.
- Murfin, R., & Ray, S. M. (1998). *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Bedford Books.
- Nicholas of Cusa. (1990). *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* (J. Hopkins, Ed.). Arthur J Banning Press.
- Poole, J. M., & Ward, J. (2013). "Breaking Open the Bone': Storying, Sanism, and Mad Grief." In B. A. LeFrançois, R. Menzies, R., & G. Reaume (Eds.). *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* (pp. 94–104). Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Proust, M. (1998). *In Search of Lost Time* (D. J. Enright, Ed.). Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, Modern Library.
- Rakesh, M. (1999). *Halfway House*. Translated by Bindu Batra, Worldview Publications.
- Rhys, J. (2000). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Penguin Classics.
- Rose, D. (2017). Service User/Survivor-led Research in Mental Health: Epistemological Possibilities. *Disability & Society*, 32(6), 773–789.
- Rossetti, C. (N.d.). *Goblin Market*.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44996/goblin-market>.
- Roy, A. (2002). *The God of Small Things*. Penguin India.
- Shor, I. (1999). What Is Critical Literacy? *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*, 1(4), 1–32. <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol1/iss4/>
- Shor, I. & Freire, P. (1987). *A Pedagogy for Liberation*. Greenwood.
- Showalter, E. (2014). *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*. Virago.
- Vuong, O. (2017). *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Jonathan Cape.
- Woolf, V. (2000) *To the Lighthouse*. Penguin Modern Classics.
- Woolf, V. (2000). *The Waves*. Penguin UK.