



The 'Insane' Scapegoat: Society And Madness: With Reference To 'The Psychiatrist' By Machado De Assis

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ABSTRACT

No literary work stands on a trans-historical plane. It has got to reflect all the historical and cultural conditions. All the ideological patterns are embedded in the work concerned. The present paper makes an analysis of the text, 'The Psychiatrist' (1882) by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, a Brazilian writer, showing how the then ideological paradigm is expressed through its narrative. According to Foucault, the state is interested in creating 'docile bodies', the conformists, abiding by the rules. But, whosoever is unwilling to do so will be punished by the state that often stigmatizes one either as 'leper' or 'insane' as stated by Foucault, in his 'Madness and Civilization'. The text under survey, 'The Psychiatrist' redefines the concept of madness in Foucaultian terms. The present text also focuses light on the relation between the state power and the medical doctors, treating insanity.

KEYWORDS

New Historicism, power-structure, strategy of punishment, madness.

1. Introduction

Literature, needless to say, is a product of the society, having to reflect, inevitably the life of the time, of which it is the offshoot. It has got to be true to the era. What a literary artist does is reflect or totalize his / her time by generating its 'social energies' (to use a phrase by Stephen Greenblatt)⁽¹⁾, putting focus on its ethos, all the basic tenets, associated with an age, out of which it is born. No literary work, therefore, stands on a trans-historical level, for it is inextricably linked with its time, its governing ideological bases, and all the principal impulses of the age concerned. In Greenblatt's opinion, "There can be no transcendental or timeless or unchanging representation." Viewed from the perspective of 'New Historicism', it is foolish to try to analyze texts in isolation, for all the historical and cultural conditions have to be inevitably there in the literary work concerned. History does not stand as a mere background, but it is embedded in the work. Therefore, text and history are never in isolation. The 'historicity of texts', a phrase coined by Louis Montrose, has got to be found with any level-headed analysis of a literary text.⁽²⁾

A text is expressive of the basic ideological patterns. Actually, it is a subordination of the minor ideologies by those of the powerful ruling class. A literary text manifests the power-structure and power-relation, showing how they govern the key concepts in a given era and how the bases of hierarchies are formed through the literary discourse. The discourse determines what would be considered 'knowledge' and 'truth' or 'good' or what would be designated as 'wrong' or 'criminal' or 'insane'. An art-work, in other words, is an appropriation of the main impulses of the age, negotiated between the literary artist and the readers. All

the basic economic, political and social forces are pivotal in the making of a literary text, all the diverse ideologies – orthodox and subversive - being reflected in it. So it is the historical situation, that involves all the cultural and socio political forces, which are inevitably reflected in a text.

2. Literature Review

The present piece of writing is an analysis of a literary text, called 'The Psychiatrist' (1882), a satirical novella, written by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839-1908), a Brazilian writer, flourishing in the latter half of the 19th century, when Brazil was a colony of Portugal. The present piece follows, at the time of analysis, certain key concepts, given by Michel Foucault (especially in his 'Madness and Civilization', 'Archaeology of Knowledge' and 'Discipline and Punish'). Foucault is of the idea that literary language itself is a source of thought, in addition to being an instrument for the expression of the thoughts or ideas, which the writer wants to convey through it. The powerful ruling class would not simply express its ideological paradigm through its discourse, it would encourage a particular kind of thought-process, that would be in favor of the state in addition to putting constraints on certain thoughts. The state has got to keep its absolute dominance running on its subjects, being interested in creating some 'docile bodies', who would abide by rules of the state. And whosoever denies to do so, has got to be punished by the same, through the agents of its power-mechanism (such as, the police, the military, law courts). A study of the French philosopher's 'Madness and Civilization' reveals the fact that the state would not hesitate to stigmatize its 'defaulter' as 'leper' or 'insane' as strategy of punishment. Which is why, the nexus between the doctor, treating insanity and the state is inevitable.

In this connection it would be relevant to mention a phrase by Greenblatt, "... a return to the text itself", meaning thereby the efficacy of the text to reflect society, its basic impulses, the common practices and strategies of the state-power. An artist has the capability to 'totalize' society in which he / she writes. Greenblatt writes :

... What does it mean to pull back from a notion of artistic completeness, on the one hand, and totalizing power, on the other? It can mean a return to the text itself as the central object of our attention We do experience unmistakable pleasure and interest in the literary traces of the dead, and I return to the question how it is possible for those traces to convey lost life. Over the past several generations this question has been addressed principally by close reading of the textual traces, ... But... I propose something different : to look less at the presumed center of the literary domain than at its borders, to try to track what can be glimpsed as it were, at the margins of the text...⁽³⁾

From the above passage, I pick up two phrases ---- 'traces of the dead' and 'lost life', as such ones as having immediate relationship with our present text, 'The Psychiatrist', written by Machado de Assis in 1882 in Brazil, now a Portuguese colony. The novella does not have any particular time to refer to as he begins his story by stating that the incidents, narrated, took place long back, though as the spatial reference, we know that it is Itaguaí, a Brazilian town which is the location of incidents. 'The Psychiatrist' is a satirical representation of a medical doctor, treating mentally ill patients. It is a very bizarre representation, often to the point of being melodramatic, with lots of apparent farcical elements. But how are we supposed to find the 'traces of the dead' or 'lost life', reflecting a life, expressive of the ethos of a culture. A level-headed study would reveal how the present novella reflects how history is inextricably associated with the work, for it focuses on the entire ethos and strategies of the European politics, practised by different states to keep its absolute power or how the state-machinery works through its agents, such as the police or law courts or hospitals etc.

3. Theoretical Discussion

Before we start making an analysis of the text 'The Psychiatrist', let us see how Europe has been looking at madness at different times of history and how the concept of 'sanity' is associated with the power-structure, for it is the state-power that determines 'sane' as opposed to the 'insane' with reference to one's obedience and disobedience to the state. Let us see what Michel Foucault has got to say in his 'Madness and civilization' as regards the same. Foucault begins his book by stating how the leprosariums multiplied their numbers from the High Middle Ages to the end of the Crusades. During now, more than ten thousand could be seen in different parts of Europe, leprosy being a disease of great concern. But with the end of the Crusades, leprosariums became reformatories for young criminals especially towards the close of the fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century. Leprosariums disappeared but the stigmatized image of a leper, a cursed creature, remained in society. Foucault writes;

A strange disappearance, which was doubtless not the long-sought effect of the obscure medical practices, but the spontaneous result of segregation and also the consequence, after the Crusades, of the break with the Eastern sources of infection. Leprosy withdrew leaving derelict these low places and these rites which were intended, not to suppress it, but to keep it at a sacred distance, to fix it in an inverse exaltation. What doubtless remained longer than leprosy, and would persist when the lazar houses had been empty for years, were the values and images attached to figure of the leper as well as the meaning of his exclusion, social importance of that insistent and fearful figure, which was not driven off without first being inscribed within a sacred circle.⁽⁴⁾

It is seen that the leper disappeared but it gave way to the madman. In the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, certain things were started to be done with madmen, such as, often they used to be arrested by the municipal authorities in various parts of Europe. Many of them were found wandering in different places, especially in various shrines, often mercilessly being driven out of the cities. It was also a common practice that the authorities would hand them over to boatmen to rid the city of madmen. Many cities of Europe would see ships carrying 'ships of fools'. Foucault writes:

It is possible that these ships of fools, which haunted the imagination of the entire early Renaissance, were pilgrimage boats, highly symbolic cargoes of madmen in search of their reason.....⁽⁵⁾

The attitude of the Renaissance people to madness is that it is something at loggerheads with reason, a different form of human existence, scarcely its rejection. In some of the Renaissance treatises such as 'In Praise of Folly' or the dramas (especially Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies both) it is seen to be having ironic conversation with reason or madmen are endowed with such insight as is not to be found in the reasonable ones. The attitude changes in the 17th century, the Classical Age according to the French. Madness and unreason become synonymous, a kind of animality, having no human connection. And the modern view is remarkably different from what it was in the Classical Age. Though they are returned to the city to be treated in places, reserved for them, but they are treated as moral offenders, who should be guilty for and ashamed of their condition ---- a matter of great social stigma. Such is a very, very short summary of what we find here, with innumerable subtle nuances, which need very detailed consideration.

4. Analysis of the Text

Now, let us zero in on what happens in 'The Psychiatrist' by Machado de Assis. Long ago, in Brazil, Simon Bacamarte was born. He got educated in the Universities of Padua and Coimbra (Portugal) and at a very early age, distinguishes himself as a great doctor. Dr. Bacamarte decides to settle himself in the Brazilian town of Itaguaí, though the king of Portugal requests him to settle in Portugal. Dr. Bacamarte's sole aim, he declares, is to dedicate his life for the service of the medical science and society. He marries a widow, Dona Evarista, neither beautiful nor graceful, keeping eye on her good power of digestion, good eye-sight, normal blood-pressure etc. He decides to research on Psychiatry, a field not so much trodden, being obsessed with

the desire to find a method of curing mental ailments. Dr. Bacamarte establishes an asylum, called the 'Green House' by the permission of the municipal council, providing him with financial assistance, being accepted by everyone that it is a great attempt, unprecedented, with gleeful enthusiasm. Soon afterwards, the psychiatrist's asylum starts getting full of mentally ill ones, all his time being spent there, Dona Evarista considering herself a widow as she was before her marriage with the doctor. Dr. Bacamarte has more and more insane people in his mad-house and he concludes the number of the insane ones is far more than he imagined or anybody could ever possibly imagine. Which is why, he goes on imprisoning people, whosoever he considers mad and the authority of the municipal council is always in full support of him. Among the people admitted to the mad-house are : one Signor Costa, who is considered mad because he lends money without any interest or at times without any prospect of having got them returned, is admitted to the asylum. One in-law of his, a lady goes to the doctor to ask the reason why he is considered mad, the doctor arrests her too. There is a bridle-seller, having made a lot of money, is admitted to the mad-house because he dresses like a dandy. People think that the doctor is driven by anger, jealousy etc. One evening, Dr. Bacamarte throws a dinner party at his home, where a young man Martin Brito praises Dona Evarista. Considering his praises to be something over-done, the doctor admits him to the asylum. People are scared, fearing conspiracy and many of them start leaving Itaguaí because the doctor is seen to be admitting people without sufficient reason. The barber of the town, Porfirio is one, who starts being vocal against the psychiatrist. Soon, some others, about thirty people, join him in his revolt against Dr. Bacamarte. They send a written complaint against the doctor to the Municipal Council, whose authorities immediately nullify that, stating that Dr. Bacamarte is a great man, serving the society. But Porfirio declares that they want the destruction of the 'Green House', which they consider 'the Bastille of human knowledge'. The comparison of the 'Green House' with Bastille is to be noted as it stands a symbol of exploitation, standing for the state-power itself. Porfirio is seen to be marching towards Dr. Bacamarte's house with some three hundred people now, with the slogan 'down with the Green House' and 'kill Dr. Bacamarte'. When Dona Evarista's maid servant sees that she tells her that they want him dead, she thinks that they must be a group of drunkards and instead concentrates on her costly dress, reflected in the mirror. Here a parallelism is drawn between Dona Evarista and Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI's consort. When the doctor comes to know why they have been here, he reacts to the revolvers nonchalantly. The revolvers emphasize the fact that the present plight of the people of Itaguaí is because of the whim of Dr. Bacamarte, but he replies that it is a great service that his rendering to the nation and he is answerable to none but God and gets back inside. The revolvers are confused, seeing such a nonchalant attitude of the psychiatrist and now they start marching towards the Municipal Council with the slogan, 'Dismantle the Municipal Council'. Now, it is seen that a great part of the army join the revolvers and Porfirio, the barber is declared the ruler of Itaguaí. But to everyone's surprise, as soon as he becomes the ruler, he does not say anything negative about the psychiatrist. On the contrary, the very next day, he goes to Bacamarte's with a friendly gesture, the doctor also greets him with respect, stating that he does not want to be at enmity with the ruler, who also stretches out hand of cordial relationship with the psychiatrist. The people of Itaguaí has no limit of surprise, thinking what is happening there and they consider Porfirio to be a cheat, who toys with the emotions of the citizens and the doctor, in full support of the ruler, Porfirio, the barber goes on admitting people to his mad-house as and when he deems it proper. Now another barber, Juan Pina, with a number of people with him, revolts against the Municipal Council, ruled by Porfirio and deposes him, but whenever he is in power, a good relationship is established between the ruler and the psychiatrist. Among the people admitted to his mad-house by the doctor, now, are: I. such people who speak against the ruler, II. dandies, III. lovers of cross-word puzzles, IV. Prostitutes, V. his own wife, who was obsessed with good dresses. A time comes when four fifths of the population of Itaguaí are found imprisoned in the 'Green House'. Eventually, this new state of affairs compels Bacamarte towards new theories, that, those who are considered mentally (the maximum number of the populace) are all right, well-balanced. Therefore, the wise, the modest, the patient, the loyal have got to be admitted to the mad-house to bring them back to equilibrium. And the doctor himself, the most balanced one, in his opinion, is in need of urgent treatment. He, therefore, locks himself in his asylum and dies there some seventeen months later. His funeral is attended by the multitude with great solemnity and with great show.

5. Conclusion

What 'The Psychiatrist' reveals is the relation between the state-power and the medical doctor, treating insanity. The nexus between them is inextricable in order that the state may impose its absolute power on its subjects. Which is why, in 'The Psychiatrist' it is seen that whenever someone appropriates the authority of the state he is on friendly terms with the doctor. The text reveals (overtly though) that the state has to make use of strategies as disciplinary measure against those who question the legitimacy of any step, taken by it, one of them being stigmatizing one as being insane, a morally degraded one ---a practice running in Europe and all over the world against those who deny being 'docile bodies'.

References :

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