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Everyday Fragilities in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

Our objective in this article is to compare two approaches to the theme of madness through novels from Algerian and Quebecois literature. While the two authors approach this theme differently - the former focusing on the character designated as mad, and the latter opting for the description of the consequences of madness on those around them - both highlight the psycho-affective content, interpersonal relationships, and the constraints of social structures imposed by a certain order of discourse. Finally, through the differences in treatment and the points of intersection of this theme in the two novels, madness proves to be a vector of social criticism that takes indirect routes.

Keywords

madness-identity-order of discourse-language-social criticism



Introduction

Whatever the time and place, certain literary themes possess a degree of universality. Madness is one of these timeless topics, evolving with literature and varying according to the manner and perspective from which it is viewed. Whether in oral or written literature, 'the madman', referred to by a variety of different names, is at the core of many stories. Whether he is named mad, possessed, alienated, mentally ill, or referred to in more modern terms such as psychotic, neurotic, schizophrenic, paranoid... this character, through the strangeness of his behaviour and words, attracts, questions, intrigues, and in short, gives free rein to the imagination of writers. Particularly, the latter excelled in the fantastic genre by covering the theme of madness in 19th-century literature, where the character had its moment of glory, notably with writers like Maupassant and Zola.

Through its description of the various forms, variations, and perceptions of madness, this fertile theme has also interested contemporary writers. According to Michel Foucault, there is no society without madness; we are exploring the representations of madness. These relationships can be collective or individual; they involve the feeling of otherness, the break with common sense, and the tearing between two or more modes of thought.

Therefore, we are analysing how this theme has been approached in two contemporary literatures from two different geographical areas, through the Algerian novel *Une valse* written by Lynda Chouiten and the Quebecois novel *Contrecoup* written by Marie Laberge.

How do these authors represent madness, and from what points of view do they approach this theme, often linked to the unspeakable and the ineffable?

Considering Charaudeau's (1988) view, how does madness become integrated within a given social order when the construction of social and individual identity is founded on collective identity?

Considering that social discourses are never far from any fiction the writer elaborates, but that the production contexts differ according to the places where the events are supposed to take place, our analysis takes into account, in its theoretical presuppositions, both the social and psychological points of view in the principles of the relationship to otherness - two conceptual frameworks in which contexts play a major role in the shaping of identities and discourses.

It is essential to recognize that the principles, norms, and values of any society have an impact on individuals' lives and their paths. Relationships with oneself and the world are significantly influenced by relationships to the collective; individual sufferings are linked to the functioning and fractures of the community. We also aim to examine how madness is represented in the processes relating to oneself and to others, depending on the contexts influencing the individuals' development within these two novels, considering the differences and contrasts carried by the different societies represented in the novels in question.

Dynamic and audacious, both literatures do not hesitate to challenge taboos, which leads them to intersect with the theme of madness, a complex theme because of the difficulty in grasping and communicating psychological ill-being, and consequently penetrating its depths to better observe it.

Mental illness is indeed a universal phenomenon, differently perceived depending on societies and cultures. Each author can draw from her representations (individual and collective) and opt for writing



strategies marking differences or points of convergence in the way this theme is approached.

We considered it necessary to present very succinctly the way this disease has been perceived in each of the reference societies, and then to evoke significant texts related to this theme in each of the two literatures.

The profound meanings related to this theme, leading us to consider madness as a factor of violence and misunderstanding in relations with others and oneself, constitute the second phase of the analysis of both novels. The next phase seeks to establish the role of the motif of madness in its relationship to social collective discourses.

1. History of Madness and Literature

In the Algerian novel, madness may have been perceived as a factor of wisdom or election, aligning with traditional societies that regard *the madman* with benevolence, convinced that he is an exceptional being and that within him shines a light of intelligence of the world that common mortals do not possess.

In earlier times, the *mad* were left free to move about and were often even consulted like oracles. In popular wisdom, providing them with food and care was a sign of respect for the life of these exceptional beings and was considered an act of charity and gratitude.

We also find this function of election in Mohamed Dib's novel, whose eponymous title character, Habel, through his love for Lily, a psychologically disturbed young girl, ends up losing his own mind. This deeply meaningful novel does not allow the reader to escape the moral suffering experienced by the main character. Habel, in the course of his misadventures and painful experiences, concludes that he himself is an elected being for having endured so many trials, not least of which was exile. Thus, exile and madness are linked in this novel.

Among the new generation of writers, we also note the stories of Mustafa Benfodil in a play, *De mon hublot utérin, je te salue humanité et je te dis, Blablaba*. Exile and madness are also intertwined in the context of the *Harga*. The madness of a mother whose only son disappears at sea while trying to leave the country is staged to evoke the phenomenon of young people from Southern countries who want to reach the North despite the barriers.

It is in a different context that Lynda Chouiten situates her novel, *Une valse*, preferring to portray a young woman whose dreams and aspirations have been diverted.

While the Orient viewed its *mad* as inspired with a particular intelligence, the Occident, before the era of psychoanalysis, confined the mentally ill, beat, and chained them.

On the other hand, in Quebec, "Like the vagrants of XIXth century Quebec, rooted in the medieval era, *the mad* has the right to citizenship despite his marginality, his strangeness, and his feeble-mindedness" (Krègle, 1993, p. 66).

In the 1970s, numerous tales and novels on this theme were written by Jacques Ferron, a Quebec general practitioner who had worked in a psychiatric asylum, which inspired him to paint numerous portraits of alienated women.

In Quebec literature, the psyche is often solidly linked to family and social structures, as in the famous *Les fous de Bassan* by Anne Hébert, where the entire community of a small village is under the sway of a heavy and mysterious atmosphere due to the disappearance of two young girls, who, towards the end of the novel, are revealed to have been murdered by their cousin, seized in a fit of murderous madness.

These few examples from both literatures indicate that different points of view concern the motif of



madness in literature. This diversity opens a wide range of figures of madness and confirms that the discourses presented by these examples are to be linked with a historical, psychological, or ideological order; however, the social aspect is always present, as we observe in the following narratives.

Une valse is about the story of a young dressmaker who qualifies to participate in a design competition. Chahira is preparing to go to Vienna to compete. However, she suffers from identity dissociation disorders. She is inhabited by many characters, like Mohand and Nacer, as well as *merquouchettes*, female characters who provoke her with their sudden manifestations. She also suffers from olfactory and tactile hallucinations occurring at sensitive moments. Nevertheless, she persists and ends up achieving her dream: going to Vienna to participate in the competition for the presentation of her creation.

Contrecoup is not precisely the story of an individual's madness, but that of the consequences of his act of madness: a shooting provoked by this character whose behaviour evokes that of a narcissistic pervert. These consequences on his immediate and distant environment - his family and people who are strangers to him - are examined by the narrator, who portrays the character, Rock, as an excessive, dominant, manipulative, and violent being.

The shooting that took place in a women's clothing store left four victims: the two saleswomen, Juliette and Carolane, who died, as well as a customer, Sophia. Brigitte, Sophia's friend, was in a fitting room during the shooting. She suffers from severe post-traumatic sequelae.

In both texts, the prevailing narrative point of view employs a third-person narrative with moments of direct speech and others of free indirect speech. The respective narrators are in a position of omniscience. The predominantly internal focalization introduces a discourse of sympathy towards the victims, who are Chahira (*Une valse*) and Rock's twin brother, Eloi (*Contrecoup*).

2. Relationship with oneself and interpersonal relationships

In psychology, it is believed that the individual maintains affective relationships with himself and with others, which determine his identity and his singular status. In that respect, Lipiansky considers identity as an organized set of representations, experiences, and future projects relating to oneself (in Camillieri & alii, 1990, p. 173–211).

In fact, the subjective element is preponderant in the concept of identity: the expression refers to the feeling of one's individuality - *I am myself*; of one's singularity - *I am different from others and I have such or such characteristics*; and of continuity in space and time - *I am always the same person*.

Furthermore, identity can be made up of multiple components: identity for oneself and identity for others; self-feeling - the way one feels about oneself; self-image - the way one sees oneself, the way one imagines oneself; self-continuity - the way one feels similar or changing; intimate self - the one that one is internally; social self - the one that one shows to others; ideal self - the one that one would like to be (Edmond, 2016).

Chahira, in *Une valse*, is described in a presentation that highlights a progressive movement of self-formation. Her identity is inscribed within a temporal unit defined by two events: the cessation of her studies and the emergence of the Problem.

Her parents forced her to interrupt her studies during her high school graduation examination. Despite her bitterness, she has maintained high self-esteem and her cultural competences. She quotes writers (p. 66), she tried her hand at writing. She has firm ideas about the world around her. Very sensitive to the physical appearance of her body and its transformations, approaching forty, she scrutinizes in the mirror the effects of time on her.



Since the emergence of the Problem, Chahira's relationship with herself has been exacerbated by the presence in her psyche of alters she calls her ghosts, with whom she talks and sometimes, unwillingly, fights. She constantly feels watched and attacked by them. Her sense of self is split between strength, self-confidence, and self-loathing, ashamed at the time of her attacks when she thinks she's become malodorous.

A fervent admirer of the famous Egyptian singer Esmahane, whom she identifies with, Chahira would have liked to resemble her and live a life as rich as that of her idol.

Her relationships with her family members are described as unbearable. She hates her family, who do not accept her illness, taking refuge in solitude and her art of creation to design new models; then, in an act of desperation, she leaves the family home to rent an apartment and live alone.

Contrecoup also takes on a psychological and social dimension and provides a representation of the members' emotions in the different described families. Each family affected by the shooting represents a different case where the relationships to oneself and to others contribute to portraying an image of the functioning of the society in the novel. The focus is more on the effects of Rock's act than on the character himself.

However, the image representing him is that of a living being confined in the furnished basement of the family home, surrounded by computer equipment and "addicted" to video games. Apart from his family, the character had no social relations. With a high sense of self-esteem, he exerts real control over the rest of the family - mainly, his mother. His twin brother, Eloi, eventually ceases all links with his family.

The killer's family environment, already marked by the twins' disagreement, completely breaks up following Rock's act.

The relationships within the Marcoux family are conflictual. The malaise has been present for a long time. And what the characters feel is described in relation to the emotions expressed by each one. Delivered to the dictatorship of an impulsive, jealous, possessive twin brother, Eloi leaves the family home without leaving an address. He takes an apartment and moves in with Juliette, a young student who herself was living in a shared apartment with Carolane. In the aftermath of the shooting, Eloi describes his impressions about Rock by writing on his computer the words of the novel's incipit:

“He arrived first. And he stayed. All his life, until today. By rage, through blackmail, by force, by all means” (p.18).

He thus implicitly expresses his own frustrations because of Rock's behaviour, which suffocated him, leaving him no choice but to leave.

As for Ginette, the twins' mother, she feels guilty - not for having shown more attention to Rock than to Eloi, but because she believes that Rock resembles her in the excess of her character. She feels responsible, guilty for having passed on to him her own weaknesses, including impulsiveness. Also, she overprotects him, unconsciously amplifying Rock's already excessive self-esteem.

Powerless, Eloi is in shock when he learns that his ex-fiancée was Rock's target: “He withdraws and remains silent” (p. 24) since the tragedy. Overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness, unable to



understand how Rock located him and ended up killing Juliette. Lonely, locked in his home. In his misfortune, he finds another ally: Juliette's father, Guillaume.

Thus, the evil seems to have taken root in the mother's relationships with the twins and the rivalry between Rock and Eloi. The former overestimates himself; the latter was forced to live in his shadow.

The father, for his part, is an effaced person. Following this event, Jean Daniel Marcoux, unhappy in his marriage, is thinking of moving into an apartment to live on his own. The pejorative adjectives he attributes to himself - "lax, flabby, inconsistent and dishonest" (p. 23) - indicate his low self-esteem. In his internal discourse, the presence of numerous formulas expressing dysphoric feelings such as "baseness, despicable, contempt, repugnance... cowardice, opprobrium" shows an unhappy state of mind. He has only one idea: "leave, settle alone, abandon everything" (p.23). This negative portrayal of the father seems to be an effect of feminist ideas that refuse paternal power in the social order.

The second family, that of Eloi's ex-fiancée, Juliette Hébert, also suffers the repercussions of the slaughter. Since her divorce, experienced as a failure, Hélène Foisy, Juliette's mother, works like an automaton during the week, letting go to her despair on the weekends. Juliette, suffocated by her mother after her parents' divorce. In both families, mothers play an essential role, their personality dominating in the couple.

The third family, that of Carolane, whose parents were about to divorce, remains united around the youngest on the condition that they no longer mention the deceased. Once again, the bonds of marriage are fragile.

Lynda Chouiten and Marie Laberge undertake to describe a slow and gradual process by tracing back to the origins of relationships among family members. They establish a reflection on the configuration of relationships within families in the respective relationship of one to another.

They highlight the intersubjective relationships binding together the different family members through the exposure of intimacy and the involved personalities. Interactions within families often indicate a desire for control of one over the other that ends in rupture and flight.

For Chahira in *Une valse*, what is revealed in the mother's violence is her concern to shape her daughter's personality at her convenience:

"But the mother, a volcano herself, grabbed her by the collar and hit her several times on the head" (p.76).

Regarding Eloi in *Contrecoup*, Rock will be the source of influence; he exerts it on his mother as well. However, the mother herself has a strong influence on Jean Daniel, her husband. This allows the two fictions to place a significant portion of the responsibility for the events on various elements composing the relationships within each family.

The writers show that each of the characters has needs, desires, and aspirations different from those of the others, which is the origin of misunderstandings between couples and parents and children. Over time, this process gradually affects family cohesion and breaks it down.

Relying on an emotional discourse, the narration deploys a range of different feelings - including love,



hate, jealousy, despair, a feeling of powerlessness, and that of loneliness - to generate vulnerability, unease, concern for independence, and a desire for distance...

However, the perspectives on families also grant no concessions to the lifestyles of the respective societies where actions are taking place - the first presented as austere and closed to change (*I*), the latter open to great freedom and multiple abuses (*C*).

3. Madness, cultural identity, and the stake of social discourse

Both novels are immersed in a discourse likely to provoke a reflection on the text's societal structures. Each of the protagonists is seized by the fiction at a specific moment when their life, which belongs to a collective subject (family, origin, culture, social class, activity...), is disrupted. They find themselves immersed in a setting where values and worldviews circulate that are in contradiction with their idea of how to organize their communication with others, as well as their inner life. This creates a lack in relation to the ideal image that the individual subject has of themselves. The misalignment between the image they have of themselves and the one reflected back by the collective subject is the source of the misunderstanding created between the group and them. This misalignment generates the psychic alteration of the individual subject.

Thus, the discourse emanating from the novel *Une valse* targets the social position of women, whose behaviour is at odds with the values of the group to which she belongs. How society views Chahira is based on a dominant, conformist discourse. To her mother, who threatens to intern her in a psychiatric asylum, Chahira retorts: "Poor you, you would never dare to do that! You would be too afraid of what people would say about having a daughter in an asylum! People; you know, those for whom you live!" (p.76).

This pre-existing discourse, which inspires the "right thinking," stigmatizes the unmarried young woman. "Those who are your age are not mothers but grandmothers" (p.76), Chahira's mother reproaches her.

Like the characters in *Contrecoup* (Eloi, Juliette, Carolane), Chahira leaves the family structure to live alone in an apartment. An attitude that indicates, in both novels, that the family - as the first collective subject - is the first representative of the social order called into question by the individual subject.

Chahira, in a word, does not conform to the norms established by the society in which she lives. The manifestation of her psychological troubles is a form of response - the manifestation of her revolt.

It is necessary to note that none of those who left their parents reproduce the model they just rejected: marriage. Chahira chooses celibacy; Juliette lives as a couple with Eloi but leaves him as soon as she feels that this couple is threatened by Rock.

The frequency of shootings in public places in modern societies is a phenomenon that caught the attention of the author of *Contrecoup*, who dates the narrated events to April 2018.

The intra-textual discursive set highlights the dangers of a freedom whose limits are increasingly pushed back in an open world.

The society in the novel, subjected to the dictatorship of new communication technologies, generates gaming addictions and facilitates contact between individuals - including dangerous characters. It



should be noted that Rock was able to find Juliette via the internet to destabilize the couple and be the cause of the breakup between Eloi and Juliette, before killing her.

The novel presents various dangers arising from this mode of communication - a place of various predations - such as journalists in search of sensational articles and dishonest detectives exploiting the credulity of fragile people like Gisèle.

Among the harmful effects of new technologies, the novel highlights the confusion between the real and the virtual, which leads to committing crimes in real life, reproducing actions performed in video games.

Freedom, experienced as a necessity, highlights the loss of values and human feelings. It is this same aspiration for more freedom that pushes the men (Eloi, Jean-Daniel, and Guillaume) to flee the family home. This freedom engenders individualism and leads to selfishness and the denial of responsibilities. This is how Brigitte's parents offload the care of their daughter - who was being treated by a psychiatrist - onto the mother of the third deceased victim, Sophia.

Teresa, mourning her daughter Sophia, shows more humanity towards Brigitte than Brigitte's own parents. It should be noted that in the contemporary world, individualism is becoming an ideology that Teresa - originally from a group that lived according to a different social order - escapes.

Thus, we note that the effects of various ideologies in the social discourse of this novel are made evident by the situations and the described events. The most relevant are that of feminism (which grants a predominant role to the place of women in the family at the expense of the father), that of individualism (sometimes pushed to the point of selfishness that incites parents to reject their sick daughter), and that of the new imposed modes of communication.

Furthermore, these effects condition reactions and influence subjectivities (feelings of constraint, the desire to assert oneself through the virtual, violence, indifference that dehumanizes society...), creating a fracture between self-awareness, ethos, and individuals' actions.

Society is fragmented, and this fragmentation leads to misunderstanding and an alteration of the scale of values.

Literature, as a social production, is the result of a collective shaping, as it is based both on "*the subjectivity of the creators and the objectivity of sociological constraints*" (Meizoz, 2004, p.24). These sociological constraints are manifested through the motif of madness. They are articulated to the subjectivity of the authors to construct effects of meanings to be related to social values, released following a negotiation between the novels themselves and the discourses that form their matrices.

Thus, the choice of the psychological and sociological aspects reflects our intention to weave the text-context relationships. Since Alain Viala, it has been known that the relationship between the text and the context is mediated through different prisms, the first of which is that of language.

Language constitutes a context insofar as the referential world must pass through language to become text. We note that in both authors' works, other languages are incorporated into the French text. These include the lyrics of a Kabyle song about the death of a "*hero-singer*," in *Une valse*:

«semhey-akiimettawen-iw
semheyaynehkeyfell-ak...» (p.28)



This singer is not named; however, he is easily recognizable. He constitutes a significant episode in Algeria's contemporary history. He is Matoub Lounes, who was assassinated. The text also includes Kabyle terms related to clothing, such as: 'Fouta' and 'l'amendil', the translation of which appears at the bottom of the page (see p.42).

Lyrics from the diva Asmahane's song come back as a leitmotif to recall Chahira's dreams:

Layali El Uns fi Vienna

Nasimhamin hawael ganna... (p.13)

These words are transcribed from Egyptian Arabic. While an insult in Algerian Arabic - 'Dindjeddek' (p.49) - is uttered by Chahira.

Taking into account this mixture of several language varieties allows us to highlight the particular colouring given to the French language - indications of the linguistic reality of the society in which the novel is set.

In the same way, in *Contrecoup*, a novel written in academic French, the author chooses to use an oral language specific to Quebec for certain dialogues:

Comment je vais faire pour savoir comment tu vas pis ce que tu fais?

- *Tu vas lire mes textos.*
- *Aye! J'ai-tu une poignée dans le dos? T'écriras rien pis on le sait. J'ai dit à ton père que j'tais là, avec toi.*
- *T'as pas menti, man. T'tais là, pis je te remercie.* (Laberge, 2022, p.136)

From this example, we note linguistic particularisms - markers of Quebec cultural identity.

The introduction of other languages in both novels indicates a transculturality, allowing the everyday languages to be transported into the language of writing and thereby transposing a form of reality into the fictional text.

Language indeed constitutes a prism through which the reader can see the referential context reflected. This "observation makes the internal textual and the external contextual unthinkable separately" (Meizoz, 2004, p.50).

Through these two novels, the role of the linguistic prism is outlined - which is not just a reflection, but which acts on the reader as an indicator of reality and influences their reading in favour of a cultural identity delivered in its raw state.

Consequently, the values defended in the texts and the social behaviours are reflected back in the reference societies. Although the narratives are written in the third person, their impact on the reader inscribes them within a discourse of truth about the contexts.

This authorizes us to say that the theme of madness is a pretext to describe a society at a specific moment in its history, for each of the novels.

Conclusion

The two authors approach madness in an absolutely different way. Lynda Chouiten describes madness from the inside, while Marie Laberge presents it in an almost implicit manner, preferring the



description of its consequences. This does not exclude the fact that both novels make a transposition of the reality of their respective reference societies. Events from reality inspire fiction - for example, the described popular uprisings or the assassination of the singer in *Une valse*, or the frequency of shootings in public places, a too frequent news item recurring in modern societies, taken up in *Contrecoup*.

By drawing from reality, we, as authors, unfold a series of situations and events that, through a prismatic effect, bring into phase the sociality of the texts and a certain everyday reality, whose stake is the exposure of the dysfunctions of real societies.

In both writers, we distinguish a desire to disturb the order of discourse without overtly displaying this desire, taking the theme of madness as a pretext. The first takes the path of derision in a text imbued with humour. The second is situated in the accumulation of examples (the Marcoux case, the Hébert family, Carolane's family, and finally the case of Teresa and Brigitte's parents) to better strike minds.

Through the prism of writing, a thin line between the fictional and real universes tends to blur, giving way to social criticism. The theme of madness is the place where the novels' testimonial value is played out to carry a social criticism on the world in which each of the two writers evolves.

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