

Book Review: Xinran Yang, *A Poetics of Minds and Madness: Fiction, Cognition and Interpretation*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023; xxiii + 278 pp.: ISBN 978-981-99-5248-9, \$93.45 (hbk)

Lin Wang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of English, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

Correspondence: Lin Wang, No.1 Dingfuzhuangnanli, Chaoyang District, Beijing, China.

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### Abstract

Cognitive literary studies, in its various forms, is burgeoning into an important interdisciplinary research paradigm. This field attaches much importance to the actual reader's engagement, emotional and cognitive. While many cognitive literary studies focus on the normal mind in literature, few attend to the abnormal. Against this background, Xinran Yang initiates a cognitive narratological study of the madness-narrative nexus with special reference to Ken Kesey's magnum opus *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published by the Viking Press in 1962. Yang's efforts on fictional madness have theoretically and methodologically blazed new trails in cognitive narratology, cognitive poetics and madness narratives, enlightened the normality from the abnormality, and offered insights for future cognitive literary studies. This article first reviews and then re-evaluates the relevant issues.

**Keywords:** book review, Xinran Yang, cognitive narratology, cognitive poetics

Madness, a universal yet unique human experience, enjoys a long history in literature and constitutes a peculiar subject in all forms of cognitive literary studies covering cognitive poetics, cognitive stylistics, and cognitive narratology. Admittedly, cognitive literary study features the actual readers' cognitive and emotional engagement with and reaction to literary texts. While current academic exploration on fictional madness departs from the outside (from the real to the fictional), Yang takes to the road less trodden by addressing madness narratives in the other way round—from the fictional abnormal to the actual normal. How is the investigation conducted? And is it successful?

Having weighed up different disciplinary emphases on madness in psychiatry, sociology and others, Yang argues that they all depart from the same core in essence and thus integrating both in her working definition of madness. In view of the "anatomical accuracy in the description of the brain and artistic experience of the ineffability of the minds" (p. 8), Yang refers to the American writer Ken Kesey's masterpiece, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, as the primary text of investigation. The book starts from the narrative structures and mental representation of fictional madness, which the study proceeds as a measure to the fathom of madness in nature and eventually, terminates in the depth of the mind-narrative nexus. The review unfolds accordingly.

Succeeding the prelude Chapter 1, the formal study dawns in Chapter 2 where Yang seeks the way to regard from narrative structures to fictional mad minds. Her adoption of focalization as a viable way to mental representation originates from the discovery that "focalization and mental representation are both considered as construal processes and have cognition and emotion within their capacity of investigation" (p. 12). Specifically, their relationship operates as "the structural property of focalization is the textual manifestation of mental representation, providing an access to fictional minds" (p. 20). This theoretical integration underpins Yang's succeeding investigation.

Yang's analysis sets off from the typical perspective of Chief Bromden, who primarily represents Gennet's (1980) internal focalization in the novel allowing and giving credence to the eccentric behavior of Bromden. Meanwhile, investigation from Rimmon-Kenan's (2002) model uncovers more intricate facts of the story world in three facets: perceptual, psychological and ideological. The perceptual facet accounts for the "where" and "when" of the world constructed by Bromden, whereas the psychological and ideological facets help to understand "why".

Especially interesting is Yang's deft instantiation of the ideological aspect of focalization where Yang replays one

of the especially exciting scenes in the novel—the staff conference on McMurphy’s baseball riot. It is revealed that Kesey directs this scene with “an embedded camera lens focalization, i.e., external focalization (Genette, 1980), within the general pattern of internal focalization” (p. 56). By way of Bromden’s ideological position, the staff conference is focalized as “a conspiracy to corner a non-conforming soul like McMurphy under the disguise of psychiatric expertise” (p. 58). As the scene unreels, it displays not only the ideological madness of McMurphy, but more essentially the madness of the medical staff who are under constant pressure to pass the ball by accusing McMurphy of a certain misbehavior as if no one dares to misplace the ball or misplay the game under the chief referee of the Big Nurse who ideologically embodies the Combine as the norm.

What is more, Yang explains Kesey’s idiosyncratic use of tenses by resorting to Talmy’s (2000) windowing of attention theory, based on which she proposes the hypothesis of focalization windowing. It uncovers that *Cuckoo’s Nest* exhibits three types of attentional windows for readers: the interactional, evidentiary and concurrent. Consequently, the unpredictable shifts of tenses in the novel find a predictable regularity in attention windowing, meanwhile, the semantic theory survived the narratological touchstone as focalization.

So far, the theoretical brainstorm tentatively comes to a rest. The focalization modes together with the classical and cognitive facets constitute a multi-dimensional representation of fictional madness as a prism with each surface reflecting a peculiar motivation shaping Bromden’s mental world, all of which complete the fictional character of Bromden as a real and alive madman of Bromden.

The multi-dimensional perspective of the mad minds prepares the theoretical ground for the practical examination of real fictional mad minds. Chapter 3 initiates from an intramental dimension to address the fiction-cognition nexus from the internal perspective of Bromden. Resorting to the American Psychiatric Association (2013) and Frith (1992), Yang keenly observes that Bromden’s symptoms agree with the psychiatric diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia and cognitively reflect the dysfunction of metarepresentation on a deeper level. Diachronically, through the lens of force dynamics (Talmy, 2000), it looks into the progression of Bromden’s consciousness and concludes that the visible symptoms revealed by the synchronic study follow a clear pattern of progression from the severely psychotic towards the conscious state influenced by the intermental war between the patient and the Combine units. In a word, the Keseyian madness is dynamic, and a madman’s recovery proceeds towards consciousness under various force interactions.

How is the defective mind represented in narration? Synchronically, there are two focalization strategies: psychological focalization in the disguise of perceptual focalization due to the reality-monitoring deficit and embedded focalization for a disguised focalizer rendered by the mentalizing deficit. Diachronically, the contrasting mental states are presented either in concatenation or concurrence. Kesey’s masterful depiction of the character’s mental states is vividly revived by Yang in the triangulate relationship of tense, focalization and mind while contributing concurrently to both the novel in particular and narratology in general.

Chapter 4 switches the lens to an intermental dimension with the prototypical group mind of the “Combine” as the subject. For a start, intermental madness is considered in this study as “people’s thought of madness and how such a thought functions in society” (p. 127). This “society” is mainly realized as two opposing social groups, the Combine dominated by the Big Nurse and the patient unit led by McMurphy. The two units constitute a binary relationship actualizing the intermental madness and determining the storyline.

Synchronically, it uncovers two social bases for Kesey’s construction of intermental madness. For one thing, the fiction criticizes the unprofessional subjective nature in diagnosing mental illness in Kesey’s time. For the other, the Keseyian madness forms as a resultant force via both the treatment from doctors and the ontological insecurity in the patients. Against these two social bases, Yang explicates Kesey’s satirical undertone towards the Kraepelin-type psychiatry. In particular, Kesey’s criticism over Kraepelinian psychiatry aims at its highly subjective nature as a professional doctor through sheer words and fancy technologies can “materialize” a patient out of thin air, and its overtly objectifying attitude conceptualizing human beings as merely soulless machines, which is never truly medicine but truthful insanity exposed by the condescending society. Yang stresses, in this sense that “the Keseyian madness further enriches the existential literature” (p. 154). Diachronically, the intermental madness parallels the intramental madness in their relationship with consciousness and the nature of dynamicity.

In *Cuckoo’s Nest*, the various “dialogic relationships” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 40) between the intermental units present an ensemble that either puts a spurt on or an end to the Combine mind. How their mental “seesaw” develops is delineated indispensably through Kesey’s three focalization strategies: embeddedness, juxtaposition and substitution. All of these focalization patterns interweave into a single force in contrast to the once loose and covert intermental madness. Both the underlying narrative structure escapes from our eyes and the intermental

madness most direct to our senses are genuine portraits of the madness in essence simply differing in perspectives.

With broad theoretical vision and insightful practical analysis, Chapter 5 formulates a social cognitive understanding of minds and madness in four aspects. First, the Keseyian madness is both a polysemous concept and a scalar phenomenon. Rather than a single sense, Kesey's adroit multi-focalizations reflect various senses of madness. Instead of the orthodox binary opposition between sane and insane, scalar madness enables a diversified depiction of human beings. As a result, through the prism of focalization, we see madness as particularized in the schizophrenic Bromden, homosexual Harding, stuttering Billy and so on. Through a truthful restoration of the human mind, Kesey enriches the concept of literary madness.

Second, *Cuckoo's Nest* proffers "a testing ground for the cognitive theory of consciousness" (p. 198). Kesey's masterful narrative strategies cognitively take the metarepresentation mechanism to advantage which prophetically resonates with Firth's theory on schizophrenia 30 years later. Not only does it add a truthful property to the novel, but also testify that the novel illuminates cognitive theory by experimenting with both the authorly construction of characters' impaired minds and the readerly construal in a sound cognitive mechanism.

Judged from cognitive and social matters, Yang holds that the novelist Kesey is, in many ways, comparable to a psychologist and his novel of cuckoos a sourcebook of psychology. The psychologist qualities of Kesey can be discerned in his prophetic treatment of madness as a defect of metarepresentation, and his humanistic standpoint as indicated in the therapeutic effect in the novel. Particularly, Kesey's creation of McMurphy corresponds with Roger's (1980) person-centered approach as a practical therapist and Kesey a non-pathologizing humanist. Similarly, the novel's psychological significance is twofold. For one thing, the width and depth of the novel's psychological coverage renders the novel the analogy of an "encyclopedia" of psychology. For another, the novel exerts a therapeutic effect of "catharsis laughter" in both fictional characters and actual readers through the chemical effect of mirror neurons. In accommodating the subjective and practical aspects of psychology, Kesey "makes science and art one and the same" (p. 245).

After all the intellectual hardships, Chapter 6 signifies the end of the book. What do madness narratives offer to cognitive science? Yang recapitulates and reflects upon the research and reaches a twofold answer: "Fictional representation of the mad minds can be an object of reflection, while cognitive literary studies of madness can be a valid approach to developing a comprehensive theory of the mind" (p. 252). Beyond madness narratives, Yang asserts that "cognitive literary studies of madness narratives can be an important field of cognitive literary science" (p. 261).

Chapter 6 marks the final curtain call of the current mindful journey. Yet, instead of a good riddance to the enigma of madness in a cognitive literary study, it would rather be a promising start for a more enlightening field of cognitive literary studies. Incorporating cognitive and literary studies, Yang has probed into the nexus of cognition and fiction and finally perceives, beyond varying narrative constructions of characters, physically sound and mentally vigorous human beings who are humanly complete and alive. Acknowledging the tremendous achievements of cognitive scientists in laboratories, Yang has proved with her (cognitive-literary-study) "language" that language (of literary artists) could speak to the same end of human minds equally to, if not extraordinarily than, cognitive scientists.

Comparable to Jakobson's aphasic study connecting verbal regression with linguistics, Yang has bridged madness narratives with cognitive science. As literary artists who serve as part of her research subject, her primary "weapon" is also linguistic. Through her academic yet amicable language, once fictional characters revive in the light of science while the once mushy and automatic emotions of readers finally see the daylight of reason. Thus, Yang's academic monologue shares features of literature in Shklovsky's sense that "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life" (1917, p. 2). I personally am satiated and confidently believe that future readership will be entertained with the curiosity for human minds and the most profound quest of who we are in this "MAD" journey led by Yang.

Enough for the reminiscence of the appreciative review, it would be only doing more harm than good if this review ends in the absence of critical reflections. Yang's research has certainly constructed and contributed much, but definitely left more to be contemplated, if not reconditioned. Considering Yang's inspiration of Roman Jakobson's endeavor in linking aphasia and linguistics, there are at least two points worthy of reconsideration. Firstly, the analysis of the mad mind in literature illuminates the career of psychiatrists and neurologists, but would not it be more far-reaching having explored in the scholarship of psychiatry and neurology? Secondly, adopting an indirect empirical method, the investigation is built on fictional entities, yet will the picture of the fictional figure be more well-rounded having real humans considered? My suggestive sentences in transition are

footed in Feng's subjective mood in the FOREWORD of Yang's book. I believe these constructive imaginations hidden in the subjective mood are to be expected as indicative facts in the future testifying and furthering Yang's fruition in cognitive literary study.

In all, madness narratives have much to offer in not only madness itself as a common yet controversial experience but also other cognitive experiences and narrative phenomena as an object of reflection and a valid approach. In other words, what madness narratives offer to cognitive science indeed is exactly what Yang has contributed the most, as indicated in the book title, a poetics of minds and madness.

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