

Madness in the Novel *Racun Puan* by Ni Nyoman Ayu Suciatri: A Literary Psychological Analysis

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Received 13 October 2024; Revision 20 April 2025; Published 20 April 2025

Abstract: This research delves into the theme of madness in the novel "Racun Puan" by Ni Nyoman Ayu Suciatri. The story is set in Bali Province, an area with a high incidence of mental illness. In "Racun Puan," multiple characters, a family comprising a father, mother, and child, grapple with madness. The study aims to explore the psychological challenges faced by the characters and the author's perspective on these issues. To conduct the research, a Literary Psychology review was employed, drawing from Jacques Lacan's Psychoanalysis theory, which explores the formation of the self through the real, imaginary, and symbolic orders. The research applies Lacanian Psychoanalysis to analyze the characters' psychological journeys, beginning with their traumatic experiences (real order), followed by their development in the imaginary order or mirror stage during childhood, and culminating in the symbolic order as they strive to fulfill unmet desires from the real order. Additionally, the author's viewpoint on the characters' psychological struggles is presented as a critique of the patriarchal culture and social caste system in Balinese society, indicating that these systems are no longer relevant in contemporary society and can contribute to mental health issues. The study's findings highlight the psychological impact of Balinese society's patriarchal culture and social structure, which manifest as mental disorders, particularly madness.

Key words: *Racun Puan*, Jacques Lacan, Psychoanalysis Literary Psychology.

Introduction

In his thesis, *Paranoid Psychosis and Personality*, Lacan posits that madness is fundamentally a phenomenon of the mind (Lacan, 2006, p. 132). Madness, he argues, arises when the means of self-expression fail. Since human behavior is articulated and legitimized through language, madness can also be interpreted through language—indeed, individuals deemed insane continue to communicate, both

verbally and in writing (Lacan, 2006, p. 137).

In psychiatric hospitals across Indonesia, approximately 70% of patients are diagnosed with schizophrenia or other forms of severe mental illness. According to a study conducted by the Indonesian Ministry of Health, out of every 1,000 households, around six have a family member suffering from a mental disorder. The highest prevalence is found in Bali Province, with a rate of 11.0 per 1,000 households, while the lowest

is recorded in Riau Province at 3.0 per 1,000 households (Jaya, 2022, p. 8).

Within society, mental illness is often perceived as a condition that does not require medical intervention and is instead believed to be curable through non-medical means, such as consulting shamans, religious figures, or spiritual healers. Many people associate mental disorders with supernatural entities such as *jinn* or spirits. In reality, however, mental illness is a serious medical condition that requires professional treatment. Appropriate medical care can help individuals understand the root causes of their illness and develop coping mechanisms to manage potential relapses.

Several literary works feature characters who experience mental illness. Burhanuddin (2020), in his study of *Chemistry* (2018) by Ahmad Sekhu, identifies a character named Aura who suffers from severe schizophrenia, leading to frequent hallucinations. Aura's schizophrenia is triggered by false accusations that result in her being publicly whipped and exiled for a year. Due to her vulnerability to stress, she undergoes a month-long treatment regimen that eventually proves effective.

A similar portrayal appears in the novel *Ibuku (Tidak Gila)* (2014) by Anggie D. Widowati. In the analysis by Pratama et al. (2019), the story centers around a mother

institutionalized for mental illness after her son murders his sister. Each time she sees her son, she experiences uncontrollable emotional outbursts. As he grows up, her son embarks on a journey to uncover the truth behind his mother's psychological breakdown.

Hendriwanto (2017), in his study of *Naga Kuning* (2011) by Yusiana Basuki, discusses the character Lily Kho. This Chinese-Indonesian woman developed a mental illness after suffering physical and sexual violence during the 1998 riots. Her condition eventually improved after receiving treatment abroad. Another example can be found in *Pintu Terlarang* (2004) by Sekar Ayu Asmara. Musaroh (2010) identifies Damar as a character who is admitted to a psychiatric hospital due to frequent hallucinations stemming from years of childhood abuse at the hands of his parents—whom he ultimately kills. Damar later perpetuates the same abuse on his child.

These literary analyses suggest that mental illness in fiction often stems from trauma, and typically, only one character per novel is afflicted. However, in *Racun Puan*, an entire family—mother, father, and child—succumbs to mental illness, making it a uniquely compelling subject for scholarly inquiry. This unique portrayal in *Racun Puan* not only provides a fresh perspective on the theme of madness but also sheds

light on the societal implications of family mental illness. Moreover, the novel's setting in Bali, the province with the highest reported prevalence of mental illness in Indonesia, enhances its relevance. Published in August 2023, *Racun Puan* offers fresh material for analysis and was shortlisted in the 2021 Jakarta Arts Council (DKJ) Novel Competition, as reported on dkj.or.id.

This study examines the theme of madness in *Racun Puan*, a novel by Ni Nyoman Ayu Suciatri. The narrative focuses on three characters—Aruna (mother), Kawa (father), and Samudra (son)—all of whom experience mental breakdowns as a result of various personal and familial conflicts. These conflicts, which are deeply rooted in their personal histories and societal pressures, lead to their mental breakdowns, inviting the reader to empathize with their struggles.

Racun Puan tells the story of a Balinese woman pursuing perfection as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. However, Aruna finds herself unable to meet these expectations. Her relationships are strained—she frequently clashes with her husband and in-laws, while her son, Samudra, becomes increasingly distant. Aruna was raised in a low-income family. Her parents' marriage between different castes—her father being a *Ksatria* and her mother a *Sudra*—led to social and economic

hardship. As a result of marrying a lower-caste woman, Aruna's father was forced to leave his family estate. Although he inherited land as a *ksatria*, he lost it all to gambling. These experiences shaped Aruna's obsessive desire to succeed in her household. Her marriage to a man of a lower caste resulted in her caste status being diminished. Throughout the marriage, Aruna faced constant judgment and criticism from those around her, which severely impacted her mental health, altering her thoughts and behaviors until she eventually required psychiatric care. This narrative invites the reader to empathize with Aruna's struggles and the toll that societal judgment can take on an individual's mental health.

The setting of this novel is in the province of Bali. Most Balinese people adhere to Hinduism, which profoundly shapes the region's social and cultural systems, particularly in preserving tradition and customary practices (Sadnyini, 2010, p. 1). Within Balinese society, a social structure is based on caste. Social structure refers to the arrangement of social relationships within a community, encompassing interpersonal connections and individuals' social ranks (Brown in Dharmadiatmika and Kohdrata, 2020). In Bali, social rank is traditionally determined by the *catur varna* system based on one's professional expertise. Today,

however, the system is more commonly understood in terms of caste, comprising the Brahmana caste (expertise in religious knowledge), the Ksatria caste (historically aristocrats, currently those engaged in governance and administration), the Waisya caste (skilled in commerce and economics), and the Sudra caste (relying on physical and spiritual labor) (Damayanti, 2020).

This caste system has generated societal controversies, particularly in matters of marriage, resulting in restrictions on choosing marital partners. When a woman from a higher caste marries a man of a lower caste, the marriage is referred to as *asupundung*, requiring the woman to undergo *nyerod*, or caste descent, which brings with it significant social consequences. For instance, during the marriage proposal process, the groom must discreetly retrieve the bride without a public ceremony. The bride's family is prohibited from holding a wedding celebration, and her parents are not allowed to attend the ceremony (Oka, in Devi and Nurchayati, 2021). Furthermore, the bride must refer to members of her family of origin using honorifics such as *Tu* or *Ratu*, is forbidden from returning to her original caste, and the marriage must be accompanied by the *Pati Wangi* ritual, which symbolically erases the spiritual "fragrance" of the original caste (Martha, in Devi and Nurchayati,

2021). Although the *Pati Wangi* ritual has officially been banned due to its contradiction with humanistic values, it continues to be practiced today (Hadriani, 2022).

The issue of inter-caste marriage is portrayed in *Racun Puan*, a novel by Ni Nyoman Ayu Suciatri. Born on 11 April 1990 in Dusun Abang, Karangasem Regency, Bali, Suciatri is an active lecturer in the Hindu Theology program at the State Hindu University I Gusti Sugriwa, Denpasar. She was appointed as a National Language Ambassador representing the province of Bali and remains actively engaged in initiatives promoting the development and preservation of the Indonesian language and regional pieces of literature. Her work includes short stories, opinion pieces, articles, cultural and educational essays, and novels. Her published novels include *Mimpi itu Gratis* (2016), *Biang* (2022), and *Racun Puan* (2023). She has received numerous accolades, such as the Telkomsel Awards' "Most Indonesian Writer" category in 2014, the Kompas Young Writers Award in the feature category in 2011, special recognition from the Jakarta Arts Council (DKJ) in 2021, and her novel *Biang* won the Unsapress Novel Competition and was also nominated for the Ministry of Education and Culture's 2022 Literary Award in the Best Novel category.

This study explores the theme of madness experienced by the characters Aruna, Samudra, and Kawa. It examines the psychological issues embedded within these characters concerning the author's perspective. The analysis employs literary psychology through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Lacan's theory is particularly relevant to this study as it emphasizes language as a medium for analyzing madness. According to Lacan, individuals with mental illness express themselves through speech or writing (Lacan, 2006, p. 137). His psychoanalytic framework places considerable emphasis on social dimensions to the extent that the individual and the social become inseparable, thereby creating meanings that are both socially constructed and psychologically impactful (Bracher, 2009, p. 20). Thus, Lacanian psychoanalysis is an appropriate analytical tool for this research, as it aligns with the social and psychological themes in the literary work under examination.

This study employs the Lacanian psychoanalytic method, focusing on the subject. The subject is understood as originating from the formation of the ego, which itself emerges through unconscious processes. The primary technique utilized in this research is psychoanalysis, which must be subjected to dialectical analysis.

Data were analyzed using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, which categorizes data into three domains: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The analysis further considers the author's desire or worldview, as contextualized within the socio-cultural structures of Bali—the setting in which the work was produced. The interpreted data are then synthesized and presented informally in written form as a coherent narrative.

Result and Discussion

1. Character Analysis in Racun Puan within the Register of the Real

The Real is conceptualized as an unnameable, traumatic, and unsettling experience. It is encountered in danger, catastrophe, and death—phenomena that rupture the stable boundaries between being and non-being, conceptual categories, and the laws of identity. The experience of the Real brings awareness to the illusory nature of both Imaginary and Symbolic identities. Desire for identity thus emerges as an escape from the Real (Bracher, 1997: xli).

In *Racun Puan*, the register of the Real manifests in the traumatic experiences of Aruna, Samudra, and Kawa.

a. Aruna and the Register of the Real

Aruna's traumatic moment occurs when she fails to embody

the ideal roles of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. This perceived failure leads her to internalize blame and experience a profound sense of guilt. Aruna sees herself as a failed mother and engages in acts of self-harm.

b. Samudra Bening and the Register of the Real

Samudra Bening's traumatic experience stems from constant pressure from his mother, who demands perfection and forbids mistakes. When Samudra does make mistakes, Aruna responds with physical violence and refuses to hear his explanations.

c. Komang Kawa Suganda and the Register of the Real

For Kawa, trauma emerges with Aruna's death, which triggers an overwhelming sense of guilt. He feels complicit in her passing and belatedly realizes the depth of his love for her.

2. Character Analysis in *Racun Puan* within the Register of the Imaginary

The Imaginary refers to a psychic phase in which the child projects their idea of self through mirror images. It is a domain of conscious or unconscious imagery (Bracher, 1997: xxi). This phase includes the mirror stage, the conception of the Other, and the gradual comprehension of alterity as a structuring principle. Eventually, this process gives rise

to formulating the notion of 'self.' However, this 'self' is essentially the Other, misrecognized in the mirror as 'I,' even though what is perceived is merely an image (Bracher, 1997: xxvii).

a. Aruna's Experience and Perspective within the Imaginary

Aruna's engagement with the Imaginary began in early childhood when she lived with her parents. At this stage, she faced significant pressure from her family and traditional Balinese society. These early experiences of constraint and surveillance shaped her psychic development, laying the foundation for her later descent into madness.

b. Samudra Bening's Experience and Perspective within the Imaginary

Samudra's Imaginary register provides early insight into his psychological condition. The relentless expectations and demands placed upon him lead to depression and mental health struggles. This is especially significant, considering Samudra is a medical student specializing in psychiatry.

c. Komang Kawa Suganda's Experience and Perspective within the Imaginary

His early identification with his father shapes Kawa's behavior. As a child, Kawa observed his father's refusal to participate in domestic tasks and internalized a

rigid gender binary regarding men's and women's roles. This early exposure influenced Kawa's later relationships and worldview.

3. Character Analysis in Racun Puan within the Register of the Symbolic

The Symbolic order concerns the deferral of desire, wherein the subject's longing never fully reaches its object. As the child begins to differentiate between ideas of alterity, they enter the Symbolic. The Other's position constructs and perpetuates a permanent sense of lack, which Lacan identifies as desire. This desire is not merely to possess an object but to become or embody the Other, represented by the phallus. The phallus, in Lacanian theory, is not synonymous with the penis—it is not the possession of an individual but a function of language and symbolic structure. It governs the entire system and represents what everyone seeks to attain but can never fully access. This is the unfulfilled desire to become the central structuring principle of the symbolic order (Bracher, 1997: xxiii–xxv).

a. Aruna and the Register of the Symbolic

Aruna desires to achieve a perfect life: to be the ideal mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. However, the impossibility of fulfilling this desire leads her to self-harm and hallucination, culminating in her

institutionalization in a psychiatric facility. Her mental illness deteriorates to the point where she no longer recognizes herself and begins to accuse her child of insanity. Eventually, her condition leads to her death.

b. Samudra Bening and the Register of the Symbolic

Samudra desires autonomy over his life choices and aspires to become an artist. When these desires go unrealized, he attempts to satisfy them through daydreaming and hallucination, ultimately experiencing dissociation. This condition, known as Dissociative Trance Disorder (DTD), is characterized by a disruption in awareness and perception of reality. According to Siswanto (in Rachman and Rahardjo, 2020), DTD is a psychiatric response—a dissociative reaction—to extreme physical and mental stress, resulting in a loss of connection with the external world.

c. Komang Kawa Suganda and the Register of the Symbolic

Kawa's desire centers on establishing a happy family and being a good husband. When this desire remains unfulfilled, he resorts to hallucination as a compensatory mechanism.

4. The Author's Perspective on the Psychological Issues of the Characters

Ni Nyoman Ayu Suciatri, the author of the novel *Racun Puan*, belongs to the Sudra caste, the lowest caste in the Hindu-based *catur varna* system, in which an individual's status is determined by their skills: Brahmins (religious scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and merchants), and Sudras (laborers and service providers who rely on physical and spiritual strength). Suciatri is also a feminist, and her novel *Racun Puan* strongly critiques the deeply embedded patriarchal culture within Balinese society.

Bali has a patrilineal kinship system, where lineage, inheritance rights, obligations, and customary laws are passed down through the male line. This patriarchal structure has led to social inequality. The roots of the patrilineal system in Balinese society stem from Hindu religious teachings prioritizing men's role within the family. Balinese customs and norms perpetuate gender inequality (Ayu et al., 2022).

The author's opposition to patriarchy is reflected in the following excerpt:

"I had barely caught my breath after giving birth when words, sharp as poison, once again pierced me. On the other end of the phone, your family was once again asking about the sex of the baby I had just delivered. They were

obsessively fixated on the word 'girl.' So what if I gave birth to a daughter? Are not your mother, your sister-in-law, your younger sister, and your wife all women too? Does having a daughter mean I am not a real mother yet?" (Suciatri, 2023:114)

"Since childhood, I was never taught how to communicate, negotiate, or express my thoughts. My mother always withdrew and said 'no' without first trying to understand the issue. Her behavior and words made me feel that women's lives were always being boxed in." (Suciatri, 2023:128)

"A woman must accept things as they are," said my mother. But I refuse to surrender simply. I must break free from all this poison." (Suciatri, 2023, p. 129)

As a member of the Sudra caste, the author bravely challenges the caste system that classifies individuals based on professional expertise—Brahmins (religious and philosophical knowledge), Kshatriyas (formerly aristocrats, now associated with administration and governance), Vaishyas (trade and economics), and Sudras (manual labor and spiritual resilience) (Damayanti, 2020).

Her disagreement with this caste system is evident in the following passage:

"I desperately want to shed the cloak of caste from my life because it simply does not fit me. It weighs me down. Lately, I have realized that caste is merely a label attached to a name. Many people from high castes now work as drivers, parking attendants, or factory laborers. Meanwhile, people from lower castes—Sudras—can become officials, ministers, or civil servants. These days, respect is no longer about caste; it is about how people treat and are treated by others. Life has moved far beyond that. Life has changed so much."

The author's rejection of the caste system is a progressive view that deserves our support. This excerpt reveals the author's belief that the caste system no longer aligns with modern realities. She asserts that everyone should have the right to pursue any profession, regardless of caste. The caste system is outdated and burdensome. The author also rejects the prohibition against inter-caste marriage. In Balinese society, women from higher castes are not allowed to marry men from lower castes, a practice known as *asupundung*, which forces women to *nyerod* (descend in caste) to erase the "fragrance" of their

original caste. Conversely, when a man marries a woman of a lower caste, the woman assumes her husband's caste (Oka in Devi and Nurchayati, 2021).

This critique is expressed in the following excerpt:

"Among those who looked at my mother with pride, some commented that she had a privilege as the daughter of a Kshatriya family—an advantage that supposedly made everything easier for her in the past. Few acknowledged what my mother achieved due to her hard work. These people assumed that she lived a life of ease when, in truth, she relied only on God and her bitter resolve. Relatives, friends, and the community looked down on her. They said she should not have pursued a high level of education if she would only end up in the kitchen, raising children. According to societal expectations, she should have married a wealthy merchant or at least a landowner from her caste—not someone from a lower caste" (Suciatri, 2023:62).

The author strongly opposes the caste-based restrictions on marriage, particularly the requirement for women to *nyerod* (descend in caste) and the belief that women from high castes must marry wealthy men of the same caste. The ritual of *Pati Wangi* is

performed to equalize the social status of a husband and wife, ensuring harmony and equality in both the physical and spiritual aspects of marriage (Sudiana et al., 2019, p. 7).

In conclusion, *Racun Puan* is the author's literary manifestation of her rejection of patriarchal traditions that restrict women's autonomy and a critique of Bali's outdated caste system. The "madness" portrayed in the novel symbolizes the absurdity and rigidity of both patriarchal and caste-based social structures in contemporary Balinese society.

Conclusion

The theme of madness in *Racun Puan* is examined through Jacques Lacan's theory of subject formation, which encompasses the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic. This study analyzes the characters' psychological experiences, particularly their imaginary encounters, which fail to satisfy their desires in the real order. As a result, these unfulfilled desires manifest within the symbolic order as an attempt at resolution.

The psychological analysis of the characters begins in the imaginary order, which corresponds to early childhood and the mirror stage. In this phase, the character Aruna experiences intense psychological pressure rooted in the traditional customs of Balinese society. The stigma

resulting from her parents' inter-caste marriage subjects her to social consequences, while her father's patriarchal behavior reinforces a perfectionist tendency within her. Aruna internalizes this pressure, striving to live an idealized life but also subtly rejecting the societal norms that oppress her. Similarly, Samudra, shaped during the imaginary order, faces psychological constraints imposed by his mother's demand for perfection. Her insistence that he must never make a mistake traps him in an ideal he cannot embody, prompting his rejection of becoming a reflection of her. In contrast, Kawa reproduces patriarchal behavior modeled by his father, becoming a mirror of his influence and rejecting the possibility of change. These rejections are psychological and societal, invoking a sense of rebellion in the readers.

In the real order, the characters confront traumatic experiences from their failure to meet these idealized expectations. Aruna's inability to attain perfection leads to deep self-blame. Samudra, paralyzed by the constant pressure from his mother, finds himself incapable of making autonomous life decisions. Kawa, on the other hand, suffers from profound regret over the death of his wife, a trauma that lingers in his psyche.

The characters' unfulfilled desires in the real order prompt a

turn toward the symbolic, where these repressed experiences find distorted expression. It is within this symbolic realm that manifestations of madness emerge. Aruna experiences hallucinations and engages in self-harm as she desperately attempts to fulfill her unmet desires. Samudra suffers from depression, hallucinations, and dissociative trance disorder, while Kawa also experiences hallucinations driven by guilt over his wife's death. These attempts to fulfill their desires, even if distorted, are a cry for help, a sign of the urgency of their psychological struggles.

The author's depiction of psychological distress in these characters reflects a critical stance against the repressive patriarchal

culture that pervades Balinese society. Thus, *Racun Puan* functions as a literary critique of a "mad" social system that generates psychological turmoil and pushes its characters toward the brink of madness. This study, which applies Lacan's theory of subject formation to Ni Nyoman Ayu Suciatri's *Racun Puan*, also aims to interpret the author's perspective through her portrayal of characters experiencing psychological disturbances. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for future research, encouraging deeper exploration into the relationship between literary works, authorship, and readership, particularly in the context of gender, identity, and sociocultural critique.

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