

Becoming Non-Human: Narrative Sovereignty and the Production of Bare Life in Lu Xun's *The Diary of a Madman* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Zhenni Kuang

Department of Sociology, Jilin University, Changchun, China

Email: kuangznjl@163.com

Manuscript received July 4, 2026; accepted August 1, 2026; published August 26, 2026

Abstract—The relationship between literary form and political power has long been a central concern of comparative literary studies. Dehumanization, as a recurrent theme across modernist fiction, has been examined extensively at the level of content, yet its formal dimensions remain underexplored. This paper discusses the function of narrative structure itself in Lu Xun's *The Diary of a Madman* (1918) and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1912) as a means of dehumanization. Based on Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life" (*nuda vita*) and Gérard Genette's narratological theory, this study claims that the uses of Agamben in literary works have been limited to the level of content, which analyzes the social exclusion of the characters, but overlooks the structural level: the frame narrative is itself a sovereign mechanism that produces the protagonist as *homo sacer*. In both texts, a narrative voice that is hierarchically higher has "narrative sovereignty", the authority to name, enclose, and eventually destroy the subjectivity of the embedded narrator. But the two texts engage in opposing terminal operations: Lu Xun's frame brings about an "inclusive exclusion" with the cure and reabsorption of the madman into the symbolic order, while Kafka's narration is an "abandonment" that throws Gregor's viewpoint out after his death. The comparative analysis is a narratological supplement to Agamben's biopolitical theory, which shows that literary form is not simply a medium for depicting bare life but is a place where bare life is produced.

Keywords—narrative sovereignty, dehumanization, Lu Xun, Kafka, Agamben

I. INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka wrote a story in 1912 about a man who wakes up as vermin. Six years later, Lu Xun published a story where a man realizes that all those around him are cannibals. Both of these stories, characterized by their extremely different cultural backgrounds (twilight of the Habsburg Central Europe and the convulsions of late-Qing-to-Republican China), have striking structural homology, namely a disintegration of the human subject, which occurs through a narrative apparatus that frames, contains, and eventually silences the voice of the protagonist. The thematic similarities of the two texts, such as alienation, modernity, and the crisis of the individual, have been commented on by existing comparative scholarship [1-3]. However, these studies have mostly been content-analytic, focusing on what the texts say about dehumanization and not how the formal structures of texts do dehumanization [4].

This paper suggests an alternative way. In light of Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life" (*nuda vita*), the life that is part of the juridical order only by being excluded from it, this study argues that the frame narratives of both texts are a form of "narrative sovereignty", a structural position from which

the framing narrator can determine the human or non-human, sane or insane, living or dead status of the embedded protagonist. In this way, this concept moves Agamben's biopolitical theory into the realm of narratology, showing that literary form is not just a representation of the production of bare life but is also a part of it. The contribution of this paper is thus twofold: it is a formal-comparative reading of two canonical modernist texts, and it suggests a theoretical micro-concept, the concept of narrative sovereignty, that supplements Agamben's apparatus and demonstrates that the structure of the narrative can serve as a sovereign mechanism.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM BARE LIFE TO NARRATIVE SOVEREIGNTY

Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) points to a fundamental paradox in Western political thought, which is that sovereign power emerges and establishes itself by creating a type of life that is both included in and yet excluded from the law. The *Homo Sacer* (from archaic Roman law) is someone who can be killed without it being homicide, but who cannot be sacrificed in a religious ceremony. This figure is in a "zone of indistinction" between law and nature, between political life (*bios*) and mere biological existence (*zoé*). But, for Agamben, the production of bare life is not an aberration but rather the originary operation of sovereignty itself [5, 6].

Scholars have successfully used this to analyze Kafka's juridical parables, especially *Before the Law* and *The Trial* [5, 7, 8]. These readings, however, continue to have as their main focus the thematic content of Kafka's legal allegories: the arbitrary law and the inaccessible court, not the narratological positioning in which the text places its protagonist. There is still a disconnect between biopolitical theory and formal literary analysis: scholars read for the sovereign within the story and not for the sovereign of the story. At the same time, Agamben's framework has been virtually ignored in the context of modern Chinese literary works, even though there are obvious parallels between the concept of bare life and Lu Xun's madman, who is a member of the social order precisely because he is designated as mad.

To fill this gap, this paper proposes the notion of "narrative sovereignty." Drawing on the distinction between narrative levels (extradiegetic, the outermost level of narration, and intradiegetic, the embedded narrative) made by Genette [9], this study argues that the hierarchical relationship between these two levels of the narrative can be analogous to the sovereign relation between political authority and bare life. The extradiegetic narrator is in the framing position and so

has the authority to determine the ontological and epistemological status of the embedded narrator's discourse. When this power is used to discredit the subjectivity of the embedded narrator, for instance, by suggesting that it is madness, animality, or pathology, the narrative structure itself is a sovereign apparatus that creates the protagonist as Homo Sacer. This is not a metaphor but a structural homology: as the sovereign has the power to rule on the exception that makes up bare life, the framing narrator has the power to rule on the epistemic exception that makes up the embedded voice as non-credible, non-rational, non-human.

III. THE FRAME AS SOVEREIGN APPARATUS

The *Diary of a Madman* and *The Metamorphosis* make use of a structural device where the subjectivity of the main character is surrounded by another narrative frame. This frame is expressed explicitly in Lu Xun's text as a classical Chinese (wenyan) preface, which is written by an unnamed first-person narrator, introducing himself as a friend of the madman's older brother. This preface carries out three sovereign and crucial operations. First, it identifies the condition: the diarist was a victim of "a form of persecution complex" (pihai kuang). Second, it states the cure, "he has long since recovered." Third, it gestures towards the reabsorption of the subject into the social order as he has "gone elsewhere to take up an official post." These three speech acts, namely diagnosis, cure, and reinsertion, are a sovereign decree, which preordains the manner of reading of each of the diary's words [10]. Before readers can even begin the madman's vernacular Chinese testimony, its epistemic validity has already been preemptively undermined.

The language dimension adds to this structural violence. The preface is written in wenyan, the classical register, which in 1918 still held cultural authority, institutional legitimacy, and access to the symbolic order of Confucian civilization. The language of the diary is baihua, a vernacular that was being promoted by the New Culture Movement as the true language of modernity, truth, and lived experience. However, in the structure of the text itself, the baihua diary is subordinate to (literally contained within) the wenyan frame. The language of purported truth is within the language of institutional power. It is an accurate rendition of Agamben's inclusive exclusion: the madman's voice is included in the text, but it is included as already excluded (as the ravings of a diagnosed madman who has since been cured). The diary is in a "zone of indistinction" (as Agamben would describe it): it is part of the text and outside the realm of believable discourse.

The madman's own entries are doubly inflected against this frame and vertiginous. As soon as he writes, "Everyone's eyes are strange and fearful, they seem to want to eat me," the reader is faced with an undecidable decision: does it arise from paranoia, as the preface states, or is it a real social pathology, as in the "cannibalism" of Confucianism denounced by the New Culture Movement? Instead of this ambiguity being resolved, the narration frame constructs it as an immanent power difference. First and last words are in wenyan voice. It is offered from a recovered, rational and institutionalized location. The voice from within a condition, which is already considered to be temporary and pathological, is the Baihua. This is an asymmetry that is the narrative form

of sovereignty.

The sovereign frame functions in a different way in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, but with a similar strength. The narration is in the third person and, for the most part, very close to Gregor Samsa's thoughts, in the technique of free indirect discourse [11-13]. The reader can hear Gregor's thoughts, his worry that he's going to miss his train, his worry about how his family's debts will affect him, and his sadness that his sister's violin playing isn't better. The monothematicity of the work is the basis for a strong impression of subjectivity, a consciousness which, in the body of the monster insect, has the entire human emotional experience. The reader is asked to empathize with a creature, which is considered to be abominable by the other characters.

But at the very moment of Gregor's death, the sovereignty of the frame of the narration becomes apparent. The focalization in the last few pages of the story suddenly and permanently moves from Gregor to the family. There is no emotional reaction to his death: the charwoman discovers his body, "completely flat and dry." No dragging out the story, no inside scoop on death, no moaning. The main character doesn't have a final thought, or a last perception, or a deathbed scene, in the story. Instead, the focus of the story is upon the happiness of the surviving family, the father's letter to the landlord, the family's tram ride, and, most tellingly, the comments of the parents that their daughter has "bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure." The sister's maturing body takes the place of the dried-up corpse of the brother. The omniscient narrator's control of Gregor's inner thoughts is lost at the end, for no apparent reason or explanation. Not only is Gregor discarded by his family, but by the story as well.

Both texts show, therefore, that the frame story cannot be a neutral container for content but is an active sovereign apparatus. Lu Xun's wenyan preface is a preemptive, sovereign declaration that cancels the madman's testimony before it can even start. The third-person narration in Kafka's text is a retroactive sovereign revocation, a receding of the subjectivity given to Gregor, only to be taken away when he becomes dispensable. Both operations generate the protagonist as bare life, a life whose voice is heard but does not count and whose subjectivity is granted but not guaranteed.

IV. TERMINAL OPERATIONS: INCLUSIVE EXCLUSION VERSUS ABANDONMENT

While both pieces create their protagonists as bare life through the use of narrative sovereignty, there are key differences in how they end this condition. These two different endings reflect two modalities of sovereign power that Agamben distinguishes but that are not systematically differentiated: inclusive exclusion (the ban) and abandonment (the absolute withdrawal of sovereign attention from a life that has become expendable).

The first modality is performed in Lu Xun's text. The madman's "cure" is the most subtly crushing fact of the whole narrative, the very fact that it is spelt out so nonchalantly in the preface, before the diary even starts: He is now cured and holds an official post. The revolutionary subject who saw the cannibalistic truth in the Confucian classics, who shouted, "Perhaps there are still children who

have not eaten men? Save the children!” He has since become part and parcel of the very bureaucratic system he wrote against. This isn’t liberation; this is the sovereign operation accomplished. The madman is not excluded as a madman but re-included as a functionary. But this re-inclusion is the most thoroughgoing form of annihilation, for his critical consciousness, the consciousness that might see between the lines of the classics and read “eat people”, has been extinguished. In Agamben’s terminology, this is the structure of the ban, that is, the sovereign relation that “does not simply place the one banned outside the law” but “maintains itself in relation to him by withdrawing from him” [5]. The madman’s subjectivity has been withdrawn from within while he remains in the social order. He is counted in as emptied. The diary is the only textual trace left from a subjectivity that has been ingested and digested by the sovereign frame: a bitter reminder of the very cannibalism that the madman was trying to expose.

The second modality is present in Kafka’s text. Gregor’s death is not a reabsorption; it is an expulsion. His dried-up body is carried away by the charwoman, who brushes it with a long-handled broom; his room is aired out; the three lodgers are sent off; the family goes away on a tram ride to the countryside. The last paragraph of the story is dedicated to the parents’ comment on how their daughter has “bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure”, a phrase that contrasts with the desiccated husk that was Gregor. Gregor’s fate represents sovereign abandonment: once he is no longer economically useful, he is discarded like waste, and the narrative itself erases his interiority by abandoning his perspective and leaving only the family’s indifferent view.

These two terminal operations contrast to highlight a more fundamental structural difference between the two texts’ encounters with modernity. Lu Xun’s inclusive-exclusionism is characteristic of the functioning of a cultural-political order, encompassing the Confucian tradition, the bureaucratic state, and the system that the madman describes as “four thousand years of cannibalism”, which does not eliminate dissent but incorporates and neutralizes it. The madman’s cure is the system’s final victory: the most radical critic is the system’s most loyal servant. The idea is similar to what the Chinese intellectual tradition has long understood as the power of zhao’an, which is the imperial practice of appeasing rebels by offering them official posts. Kafka’s abandonment, on the other hand, is the logic of capitalist modernity, which considers the value of a life based on its productivity [14, 15]. Gregor is accepted by his family only while he serves as the breadwinner; once he can no longer work, he is gradually rejected and discarded, revealing an economic logic of utility and disposal embedded in narrative sovereignty.

V. CONCLUSION

The frame narratives of Lu Xun’s *The Diary of a Madman* and Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* have been shown to be sovereign apparatuses that produce their protagonists as bare life, at both the thematic level of social exclusion and familial rejection and the structural level of the form of the story itself. The idea of “narrative sovereignty” proposed here is a way of thinking through the hierarchical relationship between narrative levels as a formal analogue to the biopolitical relationship between sovereign power and bare life. These

two texts produce contradictory terminal operations: Inclusive exclusion in the madman’s cure and abandonment in Gregor’s death, both of which suggest different kinds of sovereign violence that are coded in literary form.

This analysis can be used on other texts. If the apparatus of narrative is a sovereign one, formal decisions of framing, focalization, and narrative hierarchy are never politically innocuous. In each frame story, the question arises: Who can keep another’s voice on what? The process of changing focalization is a micropolitical move on which side of what is fully human is the interiority? Narrative sovereignty, then, refers not just to the act of narrating bare life, but also to the manner in which the study of literary texts (from various historical and cultural traditions) deals with the production of bare life, both through the representation of such life and by enacting it in the very structure of narration. The present analysis is also an occasion to consider the limitations of Agamben’s framework more generally: categories of sovereign power can be transposed into the realm of narrative theory, revealing aspects of sovereign power that don’t rely on juridical decree or physical violence but rather on the more insidious forms of voice, credibility, and epistemic authority. In this sense, literary form is not extraneous to but integral to political life, and it helps to shape the conditions of the possibility of speaking some lives into existence while inarticulating others.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- [1] D. Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- [2] M. Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990.
- [3] X. Ma, “An object in between: The past and present of Lu Xun’s ‘The Diary of a Madman,’” *J. Asian Stud.*, vol. 83, no. 1, pp. 41–61, 2024, doi: 10.1215/00219118-10875328.
- [4] X. Ma, “The missing link: Japan as an intermediary in the transculturation of the Diary of a Madman,” *Front. Lit. Stud. China*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 331–346, 2014, doi: 10.3868/s010-003-014-0016-4.
- [5] G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- [6] J. G. Finlayson, “Bare life and politics in Agamben’s reading of Aristotle,” *Rev. Polit.*, vol. 72, no. 1, pp. 97–126, 2010, doi: 10.1017/S0034670509990982.
- [7] J. Clemens, N. Heron, and A. Murray, Eds., *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life*. Edinburgh, U.K.: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- [8] B. Nedoh, “Kafka’s land surveyor K.: Agamben’s anti-muselman,” *Angelaki*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 149–161, 2011, doi: 10.1080/0969725X.2011.621230.
- [9] G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- [10] X. Lu, “The Diary of a Madman,” in *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China*, J. Lovell, Trans. London, U.K.: Penguin, 2009.
- [11] S. Ryan, “Franz Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung*: Transformation, metaphor, and the perils of assimilation,” *Seminar*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 1–18, 2007, doi: 10.1353/smr.2007.0020.
- [12] S. Corngold, *The Commentators’ Despair: The Interpretation of Kafka’s Metamorphosis*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1973.
- [13] F. Kafka and S. Corngold, *The Metamorphosis: Translation, Background, and Contexts, Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.
- [14] M. Vatter, “In Odradek’s world: Bare life and historical materialism in Agamben and Benjamin,” *Diacritics*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 45–70, 2008, doi: 10.1353/dia.0.0064.

- [15] S. Prozorov, "The appropriation of abandonment: Giorgio Agamben on the state of nature and the political," *Cont. Philos. Rev.*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 327–353, 2009, doi: 10.1007/s11007-009-9115-z.

Copyright © 2026 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](#)).