

## Reflective Piece

### ***The Night Nurse: A reflection on *On Being Sane in Insane Places* by D. L. Rosenhan (1973)***

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#### ABSTRACT

In this poetic reflection, *The Night Nurse* draws inspiration from D.L. Rosenhan's influential 1973 study to probe the complex relationship between personal identity and the structural confines of higher education (HE). The poem presents a rich tableau that contrasts indigenous knowledge with Western educational paradigms, shedding light on the friction and marginalisation that arise at the intersection of these worldviews. It embodies the struggle for self-definition amidst a backdrop that often favours uniformity and compliance. By examining the similarities between psychiatric labelling and academic evaluations, the narrative challenges the reader to consider the authenticity of understanding and the significance of diverse perspectives in scholarly environments.

## Preamble

51 years ago, in 1973, psychologist D. L. Rosenhan conducted a seminal study titled *On Being Sane in Insane Places*. The experiment involved “pseudo patients” (healthy individuals) who feigned auditory hallucinations to gain admission to psychiatric hospitals. Once admitted, these individuals behaved normally, providing truthful life histories and claiming that the hallucinations had ceased. Despite this, all were diagnosed with psychiatric disorders, and some were confined for weeks. The study illuminated the challenges and ambiguities in distinguishing sanity from insanity and underscored the profound impact of labels in psychiatric settings. Rosenhan’s work highlights the deep-seated biases and assumptions present in institutional settings and raises poignant questions about the nature of understanding, the power dynamics inherent in diagnostic processes, and the nuances of human perception.

In a world where historical narratives, cultural understanding, and identity often intersect, it becomes paramount to acknowledge the myriad voices that contribute to the fabric of our stories in the Global South. As we navigate the complexities of heritage and the limitations placed upon us by societal definitions, we find ourselves in a constant dialogue with the past, present, and future. The poem below delves into the intricate dance between one’s indigenous roots and the overarching narratives often imposed by Western perspectives in HE. By juxtaposing these two vantage points, it invites the reader to reflect on the nuances of understanding, belonging, and the eternal quest for self-definition.

The title, *The Night Nurse*, evokes images of care, surveillance, and control, much like the confinements of a psychiatric facility. It serves as a metaphor for the oversight and constraints present in HE, where, often, an individual is dressed in a discourse of academic ‘sanity’ but feels confined by invisible restraints—a symbolic straitjacket. Just as Rosenhan highlighted the entrenchment of certain viewpoints in psychiatric facilities, HE has its own entrenchments. The overshadowing of African thought by Western viewpoints, especially following the influx of science and religion that marginalised African beliefs, mirrors the marginalisation of patients in a psychiatric facility. Furthermore, the performative nature of academia, marked by a relentless competitive drive for publications and recognition—sometimes at the expense of genuine scholarship—parallels the performative behaviours observed in psychiatric settings. These institutions emphasise metrics and labels, be it the ‘sanity’ of a patient or an academic’s National Research Foundation (NRF) rating. The prevalent deficit discourse further reinforces these parallels, where staff and students are seen more

for what they lack than for their intrinsic value or potential. This setting, like the cold and sterile environment of a psychiatric facility, demands conformity, often at the expense of true understanding and empathy.

**Poem: *The Night Nurse***

I, standing at the nexus  
of indigenous lore, tremble.  
While you, with Western tomes in hand,  
sketch boundaries  
that define, confine, and often malign  
the roots from which I sprang.  
I, voicing my ancestors, falter.  
Breathe, a leaf in the wind.  
You and I clash over  
tangled tales, seeing only  
I in my land and you in your grandstand.  
You ask of my heritage.  
It was there, but not where  
I, could trace a lineage  
In the fragmented tales that  
You, weave into a singular narrative  
With a colonial flair.  
Book bearer, history stealer.  
I have heard the griots, elders, storytellers.  
Did they speak to you? It's hard to discern.  
You a scholar of Whose? Which? Why?  
Questions that challenge my essence.  
To define my place in the diaspora.  
To categorise my soul's dance.  
I rise, scholar-like, and traverse a continent on ancestral paths,

meeting you at its heart, both lost.  
You attempting to grasp my narrative,  
Yet still entrenched in your own gaze.

### Acknowledgements

This work is inspired by the profound reflections presented in *Mental Status Extrication (MSE)* (2015) by Prof. Thirusha Naidu (Department of Behavioural Medicine, Nelson R. Mandela Medical School, University of KwaZulu-Natal / King Dinuzulu Hospital). Through her poetic exploration of self-awareness, diagnostic processes, and the complexities of understanding, Naidu delves into the human psyche and the interplay between personal experience and external perceptions. The poem's rich tapestry of imagery and sentiments provided a foundational canvas for this piece, resonating deeply with the broader themes of identity, understanding, and the dance between the individual and the observer. Gratitude is extended to Prof. Naidu for her evocative insights which illuminated this path of poetic inquiry. Further acknowledgment is given to Sherwin George, an intern clinical psychologist who first made me aware of the initial experiment in one of his class presentations.

### References

Rosenhan, D. L. 1973. On being sane in insane places. *Science*. 179(4070): 250-258. [DOI: 10.1126/science.179.4070.250](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.179.4070.250)



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