

Madness and Society: A Foucauldian Approach to Madness in Reading

Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*

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Abstract

This paper adopts a Foucauldian perspective to examine the idea of madness and its societal constructiveness on the basis of Paulo Coelho's novel *Veronika Decides to Die*. This analysis explores the power relationships, disciplinary practices, and social constructs surrounding madness by drawing on Michel Foucault's theories. It looks at how Veronika's decision to embrace madness questions accepted ideas of sane and conformity, ultimately problematising the foundation of social conventions. This paper emphasises that madness is not simply a personal experience but also a result of societal control and repression by analysing the oppressive nature of the mental asylum represented in the novel. Additionally, it addresses the paradoxical nature of madness as a tool for societal control and a way of liberation, demonstrating the complex relationship that exists between the concept of madness and power. Employing this Foucauldian approach, the paper aims to reveal the intricate contours of madness in *Veronika Decides to Die*, showing how societal structures shape and impose constraints on people's experiences with mental health, highlighting the possibility for resistance and systemic change.

Keywords:Madness, Society, Civilisation, Mental asylum, Genealogy

Introduction

The paper addresses the complex relationship between society and madness in the light of Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*. The study explores the intricate ways in which madness is perceived, experienced, and regulated in society. It draws inspiration from Michel Foucault's foundational work on the history of madness and the creation of psychiatric institutions. This research questions preconceived views about madness and invites readers to critically consider the implications of such categorisations by focusing on the character of Veronika and her journey through an asylum. This inquiry, which uses a Foucauldian

framework to examine the relationship between personal experience, social structures, and the construction of reality, provides a unique perspective on the themes of sanity, conformity, and autonomy in Coelho's novel.

Review of Literature

Some insightful studies have already been produced in the field which deals with different aspects of madness and psychological problems addressed in Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*. In such a study, undertaken by S. AncyJebaSundari and M.R. Rashila, examines the emotional wounds and the harms done to modern individuals that cause them to view social norms and values with a cynical attitude. This idea is developed in the study taking the case of Veronica who negotiates her existence between life and death. The paper by Manjima George and Dr.SreenathMuraleedharan analyses the character of Veronika as a woman who suffers from clinical depression. They believe that persons who suffer from this illness will lose interest in the monotonous activity. A person will begin to feel down, hopeless, and cut off from everything around them as time goes on. In the study by AnisZulfiAmalia examines how Paulo Coelho's novel *Veronika Decides to Die* depicts the hegemony of the concept of insanity and how it impacts the social lives of characters. The study draws on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to analyse the novel. All these studies, taking Veronika as a case in point, address questions like alienation and emotional wound of modern individuals, suffering from clinical depression and the working of Gramscian hegemonic ideas on insanity.

Thesis Statement

In this paper, in addition to the already produced studies in the area, an attempt is made to read *Veronika Decides to Die* on the basis of Foucault's conceptualisation of madness and civilisation.

So, this study argues, on the basis of Paulo Coelho's novel *Veronika Decides to Die*, that there is a reciprocal relationship between the concept of madness and societal conceptualisation of it.

In other words, the study proposes that the Foucauldian idea of the inter-relationship between madness and the societal construction of it could be seen in Paulo Coelho's narration in *Veronika Decides to Die*.

Research Method

This study draws on Foucault's conclusions from the genealogical approach towards madness. The textual reading of *Veronika Decides to Die* is undertaken drawing insights and theoretical frames from Foucault's idea of *Madness and Civilisation* in order to establish the reciprocity between madness and societal discourses.

Literary Analysis

A comprehensive examination of the connection between madness and society through different phases of history is provided in Michel Foucault's work *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. The work questions popular ideas about mental illness by suggesting that madness is not a concept that is universal and timeless

but rather a reality that is socially produced and reflects the dominant power structures and ideologies of a particular society.

In order to encourage critical thought and prompt changes in how society views madness, Foucault's examination of madness and society uncovers the historical and social factors at work in the formation, control, and treatment of mental illness. According to Foucault, the concept of madness is historically situational rather than a predetermined, universal category. From the Renaissance to the present, he examines the development of Western society's understanding and management of madness. He does this by demonstrating how societal norms and power structures determine how mental illness is seen and dealt with.

Capitalism and Madness

In *Veronika Decides to Die*, most of the incidents take place in Vilete, Slovenia's notorious asylum for the insane. Vilete's enigmatic quality is that once entered there, it is extremely challenging to escape. The reputation of the asylum is further disgraced by the frequent news of its mistreatment and abuse of its inmates. However, the press personnel have never been allowed to visit the site to observe the real situations inside the asylum. The public could not get any access to the conditions in Vilete as they did not maintain any transparency on its functioning, providing required information about it. Even though the government orders numerous inquiries into the asylum, the capitalist nature of the institution, with its powerful shareholders, prevents any substantial evidence from being collected.

Foucault places a strong emphasis on how language and discourse shape how society considers madness. He looks at how discursive practices, including psychiatric classifications and diagnoses, generate and reinforce ideas of normality and abnormality, thereby defining and excluding individuals who are labeled as insane. The power relationships that play a role in the control of insanity are demonstrated by Foucault. He is of the view that institutions such as asylums employ a system of power-knowledge to control and regulate those classified as mentally ill. Similarly, Vilete, the lunatic asylum in Slovenia, also has its own narratives and discourses regarding its inmates.

People were taken to mental hospitals in general and Vilete in particular for various reasons: being an extrovert, having unusual behavior, being shy and eccentric, or aspiring to become an artist, among others. The people with different problems living in Vilete contribute to a complex environment where different forms of insanity coexist. When Mari approaches Dr. Igor, he addresses her supposed question, "Am I cured?" Taking up the question, Dr. Igor responds by asking, "Cured of what?" This interaction highlights the societal conceptualization of madness as distinct from an illness.

The novel problematizes the incongruity between the word "asylum" and the treatment of patients in Vilete. As people conceive, Vilete is conceived as a place from which no one has ever escaped, where individuals accused of madness are indefinitely confined. There are many complaints regarding the mental asylum, such as ill-treatment and abuse of its inmates, yet the lack of access for press personnel and the absence of evidence prevent any concrete investigation.

There are two types of people living in Villette: those who have no chance of returning home and individuals who have fully recovered but choose to remain and feign madness. This dual existence of permanently institutionalised individuals and those pretending to be mad creates a complex dynamic within the asylum. Veronika, despite not suffering from any mental disorders, finds herself in Villette solely because she attempted suicide. Her desire to leave the asylum demonstrates her yearning for freedom even in her final moments. Veronika's actions also include singing songs for Eduard, a schizophrenic in the asylum, reflecting her empathy and attempts to bring joy to her fellow inmates. Another character, Zedka, has also endured inhumane treatment, specifically Insulin shock therapy, during her time at Villette.

The involvement of capitalist interests becomes evident in keeping Mari as an inmate in the asylum. Although Mari's problem is panic disorder, Dr. Igor realises that it is not madness but rather a condition that could be addressed with treatment or possibly even cured. Despite suggesting that Mari should return home, she expresses her unwillingness due to difficulties in her married life. Dr. Igor's decision to keep Mari as a patient aligns with the shareholders' interest in maintaining the hospital's full capacity. When Mari approaches Dr. Igor about the possibility of leaving the mental asylum, his response reveals the bourgeoisie/capitalist nature of the institution. He states, "you can leave whenever you want and come back whenever you want, because your husband has enough money to keep you in an expensive place like this." This demonstrates the power of capitalism and the bourgeois order, which play a significant role in perpetuating the oppressive system of Villette, as the shareholders threaten to hinder international investment in Slovenia.

Surveilling the Mad

Foucault considers the establishment of the asylum as a key in the control of insanity. He criticises how the asylums isolate and control people who are considered insane, abstaining them from society and subjecting them to different sorts of punishment and monitoring. Foucault argues that the asylums create an atmosphere of imprisonment and constant surveillance, contributing to the oppressive nature of these institutions.

Foucault provides such an anecdote of a maniac in the asylum who has been made submissive through close observation of the asylum keeper:

One day while he was walking in the garden of the asylum with the keeper, this patient suddenly entered a phase of excitation, moved several steps away, picked up a large stone, and made the gesture of throwing it at his companion. The keeper stopped, looked the patient in the eyes; then advanced several steps toward him and "in a resolute tone of voice ... commanded him to lay down the stone"; as he approached, the patient lowered his hand, then dropped his weapon; "he then submitted to be quietly led to his apartment." "Something had been born, which was no longer repression, but authority (*Madness* 251).

In the novel, Villette, the mental asylum, is established to isolate and ensure a constant vigilance on the inmates. In order to create an ambience of imprisonment and condition for constant surveillance, they establish bars on the windows and put small bright lights throughout. These architectural features and measures serve as physical reminders of the inmates' confinement and constant observation.

Such is the experience of Veronika, who realizes that “all the beds were occupied by sleeping people...there were bars on the windows. At the end of the ward, there was a small bright light that filled the place with strange shadows and meant that the ward could be kept under constant vigilance” (27). The presence of occupied beds, barred windows, and the eerie illumination accentuate the oppressive nature of the asylum, leaving Veronika with a distinct feeling of confinement and surveillance.

Due to this constant surveillance on the inmates, Veronika believes: “this is a prison” that is the reason why “there’s a prison warder pretending to read a book”(58). Veronika's perception of the asylum as a prison is strengthened by the presence of a prison warder feigning leisurely activity, further emphasising the controlling and oppressive environment within the institution.

Madness and the Medical Approach

Foucault examines the role that medicine, and particularly psychiatry, plays in identifying and treating the mad. He critiques the medical model of mental illness, arguing that it often pathologises and stigmatises people, reducing their experiences to mere symptoms that require medical intervention. This medical approach of considering the patients only through a medical angle is observable in the mental asylum as represented in the novel. The medical personnels of the mental asylum employ strange medical customs and practices in the asylum. The treatments at Villette were so strange that there weren't enough studies done on them, and the treatment in practice was outlawed in psychiatric hospitals due to the irreversible damage it could cause to patients. They conduct unhealthy medical practices like electric shock and overuse of sedatives. Dr Igor recommends/prefers to use the term "electroconvulsive therapy" (150) instead of using "electric shock," which he believes may provide the impression that they are a band of barbarians. If the inmates of the asylum become reactive or assertive in their arguments, they are given sedatives. Eduard is such a character who has been compelled to take sedatives on several occasions.

The nurse informs Veronika that the mental asylum does not need more security as they dole out sedatives when the situation goes out of their control, relying on medical solutions to problems instead of using violent methods of force. When Eduard begins talking, saying Veronika's name, it was unbelievable for her, as a schizophrenic is speaking. Soon, with the intention of calming him down, he was given an electric shock, the process of which lasted around one hour.

In the novel, characters like Veronika also undergo the sedative treatment. Under the impact of a sedative, Veronika forgets about her suicide plan. When she comes to her mind, she wonders when she may escape the mental hospital. She develops a strong urge to wander across Ljubljana. However, it was a shocking realisation for her that she cannot escape from the mental asylum. The response that she received was stunning: "You decided your own fate... so you had better know the consequence of your actions: during the coma brought on by the pills you took, your heart was irreversibly damaged... and soon it will stop beating altogether" (25).

The torturous experience at the mental asylum confuses characters like Veronika whether they have been imprisoned or hospitalised. The nurse's response to Veronika's question "Is this a prison?" "No, it's a mental hospital," illustrates the predicament of people there. "But I'm not mad," Veronika argues, before asking, "What does it mean?" (28) in reaction to what the nurse said. The nurse instructs her to go to bed and sleep as she continues to inquire, and then gives a warning that if she disobeys the order, she would give her a sedative whether or not she wants to. The patients' lack of agency and control inside the mental asylum is shown by this power exchange between the nurses and the patients.

Madness a Construct

Social norms are crucial in deciding the normal and abnormal state of an individual. People who deviate from societal norms are dubbed as mad. The notion of normality and abnormality is a matter of consensus, hence it is a subject of societal conceptualisation of it. The term 'mad' is used very ambiguously, as the novel makes it clear: "What did it mean to be mad? She hadn't the slightest idea, because the word was used in a completely anarchic way: people would say, for example, that certain sportsmen were mad because they wanted to break records, or that artists were mad, because they led such strange, insecure lives, different from the lives of normal people" (29). In the novel, Zedka is referred to as mad, but she has a very philosophical way of speaking.

This ambiguity demonstrates the subjective nature of labeling individuals as "mad" and raises questions about the criteria used for describing normality. Society views the propensity to stand out as a severe issue. Dr Igor states his ideas in his thesis on madness, "each human being is unique, each with their own qualities, instincts, forms of pleasure, and desire for adventure. However, society always imposes on us a collective way of behaving"(153). If any individual questions this societal consensus and conventions, the possible reply will be "You're mad"(153). The idea that Mari gets from Dr Igor is that the desire to be different is a serious illness. God has created everything differently, but society tags individuals with distinctiveness as mad and brings them to mental asylums like Villette.

This societal pressure to conform to a normative way of behaving creates a conflict between individual uniqueness and societal expectations. The case of Eduard substantiates this insight. Eduard's passion for painting, which evokes his desire for enrolling in the course of art, makes his mother depressed and agonized. When Eduard starts learning color and perspective, his mother misconceives his fascination for art as a token of madness, she

complains to her husband: “Our son is mad”(168). But her husband, an ambassador, informs her of this as a result of his youthfulness.

The conflict between Eduard's artistic pursuits and his mother's perception of them as madness demonstrates the conflict between individual passion and societal expectations. As time passed, “Eduard’s room became an improvised studio, full of paintings that made no sense at all to his parents: circles, exotic color combinations, and primitive symbols all mixed up with people in attitudes of prayer”(169). Soon his friends in the field of art started to crowd at his home, appearing with untidy hair and bad dress, listening to horrible music. His grade in school was also getting low. Out of mother’s compulsion, he had been medically tested which proved that he is not abnormal. When his father inquires about his mother’s worry about his marks getting worse, he responds that his marks in art school have significantly improved.

The growing disparity between Eduard's artistic expression and societal norms becomes more apparent through his non-traditional lifestyle and the disapproval of his parents. As time passed, his devotion to art increased. To make the situation worse, he had been expelled from the American College for arguing with a teacher about the existence of saints. All these made his father have an emotional encounter with Eduard, mainly to keep him away from his craze for art and painting. Though he confessed to his parents that it is the result of his youthful fascination and stopped his plan of pursuing art and painting as his life mission, soon he was seen in his room confused, “gazing up at the sky” without any response. Soon the medical personnel identifies a rare form of schizophrenia.

Perceptions on Madness

Foucault urges for tracing alternate perspectives on madness, emphasising the need for a more comprehensive and alternative viewpoint on mental experiences. He calls for a shift in focus and draws attention to the possibilities for resistance while challenging the prevalent narratives enforced by psychiatric institutions. By doing so, he intends to encourage a broader conceptualisation of madness and its subjective nature.

Zedka shares a story with Veronika to establish that the world is as we look at/perceive it. This is a story about a King whom his people consider mad, emphasizing the subjective nature of perception. The main reason for considering him mad is that he tries to impose an order which is beyond the comprehension of his people. This illustrates how differences in perspectives can lead to the labeling of madness.

Dr Igor writes a research paper, aiming to submit it to the Slovenian Academy of Science, with a similar impact of DrPinel’s view to shed light on the necessity of understanding the idea of insane. The proposal he believes revolutionizes the medical discourse on madness. Showing the difference in perspectives between the sane and the insane, Dr Igor problematizes the conventional understanding of madness. He gives an example of a tie, how it is viewed by a sane and insane person. An insane person would consider it as ridiculous and colored stuff which may even prevent air from entering an individual's lungs. But a sane person would simply identify it as a ‘tie’. Providing this piece

of information, he asks who is right in their perspectives. This underscores the notion that perspectives decide the perception of reality.

Mari, being a lawyer, does not plan to return to that profession again. She considers her companionship with the mad as a better experience than her professional companions from law. Mari reflects whether Vilete is the right place for her, thinking whether she should avoid the legal profession and join the company of the mad who do not consider themselves as mad. She wants to lecture people about the truths she has discovered in her life. Despite the fear of being called mad, Mari recognises the necessity of expressing these truths and realises that her current residence in Vilete provides her with the freedom to do so.

Eduard approaches Mari and takes her hand. During their conversation, Mari says: “I can make new friends and teach them how to be mad too in order to be wise”(138). Mari believes she can instill them an awareness on how they can follow their desires, take up adventures, and make sense in their life, even if it means deviating from societal norms.

Characters in the novel also realise how madness is associated with freedom. Veronika, treated as mad, uses the license of madness to play piano at the mental asylum. This showcases how madness can provide space for creative expression and liberation from societal constraints. It was then another mad person, Eduard, a schizophrenic, appears. Instead of feeling fear, both have warmth in each other’s presence and exchange smiles. Their collective experience of madness builds a connectivity and a sense of understanding among them.

Veronika begins opening up her mind to the silent Eduard, who comes to listen to her piano. She expresses her regained passion for life and begins enjoying natural things like the sun and mountains, as well as different emotions like hatred and love. She confesses to Eduard her strong desire to be mad, as she would “allow [herself] to be mad because everyone is, indeed, the maddest are the ones who don't know they're mad” (86). Veronika makes use of the freedom that madness offers as the mad can act as he wishes. An example of Nasrudin (from Middle), a Sufi, who was called mad as he had enjoyed the freedom to act and speak whatever he likes. This anecdote stresses Veronika's belief that madness can liberate an individual from societal constraints.

Conclusion

In order to examine the issue of madness in Paulo Coelho's novel *Veronika Decides to Die*, this paper adopted a Foucauldian framework. This study shed light on the oppressive nature of Vilete, the mental asylum in the novel and the ways in which society categorises and marginalises people thought to be “mad” by looking at the power dynamics, institutional practises, and societal conceptions around madness. This analysis enriches our knowledge of the intricacies of mental illness and its relation to societal control by drawing on Foucault's concepts of discipline, surveillance, and normalisation. As a conclusion, this Foucauldian approach underscores the necessity for a critical analysis of institutional structures and societal norms in order to combat the stigmatisation and mistreatment of people with psychological issues.

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