

**PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA  
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH**

**MOULOUD MAMMERI UNIVERSITY OF TIZI OUZOU  
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND LANGUAGES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**



**FIELD OF STUDY: English Language  
OPTION: Literature and Civilization**

**A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment for the  
Requirements of a Master's Degree**

**Title:**

**Insanity in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1973) and  
Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* (1998):  
A Thematic Study**

**Presented by:  
Farid FERRAH  
Melynda ABIDI**

**Supervised by:  
Dr. Nadia NAAR/GADA**

**Board of examiners:**

**Chair: Mr. Mouloud SIBER,  
Supervisor: Mrs. Nadia NAAR/GADA,  
Examiner: Mrs. Sadia SEDDIKI,**

**Professor, UMMTO.  
M.C.A, UMMTO.  
M.C.B, UMMTO.**

**Academic Year: 2020-2021**

## **Declaration**

We here in declare that this dissertation has been composed solely by our personal efforts and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where it states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely our own.

Farid FERRAH

Melynda ABIDI

## **Acknowledgement**

For the completion of this research work, we, first and foremost, would like to express our sincere appreciation and recognition to our supervisor, Dr. Nadia NAAR/GADA for her guidance and encouragement during the whole period of our research. It would not have been possible to complete our dissertation without her constructive feedback, her criticism, and her unlimited support with new ideas, suggestions as well as research documents.

We appreciate and we are so grateful to all the members of the jury who have accepted to read and evaluate our modest work. Our thanks go also to our teachers that have shared with us their valuable knowledge during our academic years.

Lastly, we express our sincere gratitude for our families and friends for their unconditional love and support.

## Abstract

The present dissertation is a contribution to Comparative Literature and Disability Studies through a comparison of Bessie Head's *A Question of power* (1973) and Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* (1998). This is carried out under ideas about insanity developed in Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1988). First, the study investigates how Bessie Head and Paulo Coelho's personal lives inspired them to write *A Question of power* (1973) and *Veronika Decides to Die* (1998) respectively, as it is reflected in the two narratives. It also examines the way in which insanity is portrayed in the two novels, and why madness is a recurrent theme in both novels. The study proves that though Michel Foucault's ideas about madness are closely related to the study of the history of the Western world, his ideas about madness are also relevant in other spaces of the world such as Slovenia in Central Europe and Botswana in South-West Africa. The major findings of our research demonstrate that Foucault's notions about madness are very relevant in places other than the Western world, regardless of the fact that they were mainly constructed by only studying the history of the Western world.

**Key words:** Bessie Head, Comparative Literature, Disability Studies, Madness, Mental Illness, Michel Foucault, Paulo Coelho.

# Table of Contents

DECLARATION .....	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	II
ABSTRACT .....	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	IV
<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>- 1 -</b>
1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	- 2 -
2. ISSUE AND WORKING HYPOTHESES .....	- 5 -
3. THE STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION .....	- 6 -
END NOTES .....	- 7 -
<b>II. METHODS AND MATERIALS .....</b>	<b>- 8 -</b>
1. METHODS:.....	- 8 -
A. “Insanity” Through the Lenses of Foucault’s Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason .....	- 8 -
B. The Relevance of Foucault’s Concept to the Study:.....	- 15 -
2. MATERIALS:.....	- 16 -
A. Summary of Head’s <i>A Question of Power</i> .....	- 16 -
B. Summary of Coelho’s <i>Veronika Decides to Die</i> .....	- 17 -
END NOTES .....	- 18 -
<b>III. RESULTS:.....</b>	<b>- 20 -</b>
<b>IV. DISCUSSION:.....</b>	<b>- 21 -</b>
1. CHAPTER ONE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE TWO AUTHORS’ EXPERIENCE OF INSANITY .....	- 21 -
A. Section One: Historical Background .....	- 21 -
a) Bessie Head’s Biography:.....	- 21 -
b) Paulo Coelho’s Biography:.....	- 22 -
B. Section Two: the Correlation between the Two Authors’ Lives with their Fictions .....	- 23 -
END NOTES .....	- 31 -
2. CHAPTER TWO: COMPARABLE THEMES IN THE TWO NOVELS.....	- 32 -
A. Madness as a Social Construct .....	- 32 -
B. The Two Authors’ Critique of Inhuman Methods Used in Psychiatry ...	- 38 -
C. The Aspects of Alienation in the Two Novels .....	- 43 -
END NOTES .....	- 50 -
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>- 54 -</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>- 56 -</b>

## I. Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century, and for the greater part of the twentieth century, the people who suffer from psychiatric illnesses have been placed in mental hospitals to be cured of their disorder when the illness proved particularly difficult to deal with; or to be safely looked after. In these specialised institutions, the mentally ill have been attended by those who have a particular expertise in dealing with this distinctive disorder. In terms of both institutional provision and medical care, the mentally ill have been treated as a distinct population. It was also believed that the most effective way of dealing with their disorder was to isolate them from the wider community. Not long ago, both the principle of segregation and the very concept of mental illness have been challenged by some serious questioning. One of the most known individuals that put madness under scrutiny is the French historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault. The latter examined how prior to the nineteenth century, those who were labelled as “mad” were perceived as frightening and unreasonable individuals who threatened the reasonable ones. Historically, the mad had been exiled, locked up, mocked on, silenced, abused, degraded, and alienated. In his historical analysis and criticism of mental institutions, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Michel Foucault exposed the questionable standards of society to label someone as mad and the confining nature of the madhouses. However, Foucault built all his ideas about madness studying only the Western world. In so doing, he failed to pay attention to other parts of the world.

Many literary works outside of the Western world have talked about madness; two of them are *A Question of Power* (1973) by Bessie Head and *Veronika Decides to Die* (1998) by Paulo Coelho. These two literary works are semi-autobiographical novels that talk about the authors' personal experiences with madness, and how it affected their lives.

## 1. Review of Literature

Previous studies had been made about the novels that we are dealing with. However, the two texts had never been studied alongside each other. *A Question of Power* has been studied by various scholars. First, in his paper, “The Marxist Aspect in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*” which was published in *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* in 2016, Mohamed Fathi Helaly uses the Marxist theory to focus on racial inequality between social classes and the struggles of women in the apartheid system as it is reflected in the book. Dr. Helaly's work is also a deep message to the readers, that a person should adapt in this world no matter what are the difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

Next, some scholars focus on the female consciousness present in the text. In her paper “Decolonizing female consciousness in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*”, which was published in *Journal of the African Literature Association* in 2017, Mary Louisa Cappelli explores the socio-cultural, racialized and gendered political stories that shaped the female identity during the times of political transition. Cappelli also shows how Bessie Head uses Elizabeth to create a space for the readers, that there is a place in their mind where they can live in a “new world order rooted in the ordinary and nurtured in integrity, human dignity and reproductive renewal”.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the novel was studied from the perspective of absurdism by Dr. Hyginus Chibuike Ezebuilo and Theodor Ojiako. In their paper titled “Confronting the Absurd: An Analysis of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*”, which was published in *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews* in 2016, Dr. Ezebuilo and Ojiako explore the journey of Elizabeth's struggles with the existential absurdities of life and how she fought to be balanced mentally in order to be happy. The researchers argue that the end of the novel

is absurd. They add that although Elizabeth survived the hallucinations and the visits of the imaginary figures, the reason of her madness still exists. They argue that Elizabeth at the end felt a sense of belonging with her village of Motabeng, but Elizabeth's cause of madness in the first place was South Africa rather than Motabeng. Therefore, as long as Elizabeth never feels a sense of belonging with South Africa, she will never find peace.<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, the focus on trauma through the traumatic experiences of Elizabeth is studied by Michela Borzaga. In her paper, "'The Rediscovery of the Extraordinary': *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head", published in *Werkwinkel* in 2010, Borzaga criticizes the way trauma has been conceptualized in the Western world and argues that Elizabeth is not insane but traumatized. Borzaga argues that Head's *A Question of Power* shows how trauma can become a whole world, how a person can be enduring a double trauma from the outside and the inside, from the apartheid system and from the internal figures that live inside Elizabeth's head.<sup>4</sup>

In the same manner, *Veronika Decides to Die* has also been studied under different perspectives. To begin with, the novel has been studied from a psychoanalytic perspective. In her paper, "A Psychoanalysis of The Protagonist in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*" which was published in *The Journal for English Language and Literary Studies* in 2016, R.C. Vasuki applies Sigmund Freud's notions of Repression, Depression and Death Drive on the protagonist of the novel, Veronika, in order to explain her actions and reactions throughout the story.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, there are scholars who focus on the complex of narcissism such as Calogera Augello. In her paper entitled "The Complex of Narcisism Brings Veronika to Suicide? A Travel to the Discovery of the Intelligence of the Heart", which was published in *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* in 2017, Augello examines the motivations which led the protagonist of the novel, Veronika, to think about committing suicide. By analyzing the themes of narcissism and conformism through Veronika's



psychological journey, Augello's paper argues that Veronika's reasons for losing interest in life were more emotional than intellectual. In her study, Augello reveals that, throughout the story, the more Veronika was better at controlling her emotions and how to express them, the more ~~that~~ she felt less suicidal and regained her passion for life.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the focus on concepts such as psychological depression, feminism, and self-realization within the novel, is made by the scholar Kumar Gaurav. In his work, "Psychological Depression, Feminism and Self-Realisation in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*" which was published in *A Journal of Composition Theory* in 2019, Gaurav evaluates critically how Coelho uses the elements of psychological depression, feminism, and self-realization within the novel. In his paper, Gaurav claims that Veronika has a conflict inside her head; she suffers an imbalance between her death and life instincts. And that her daily boring life formed her psychological depression. For the concept of feminism, Gaurav argues that the liberation of the female characters from the asylum Villette represent the dreams of feminism in the liberation of females from the patriarchal society. Finally, Gaurav studies the theme self-realization in the long journey of Veronika's transformation from being a depressed woman, to becoming a woman with huge passion for love and life.<sup>7</sup>

It appears from the above review of literature that so far, and to our knowledge, no study has been conducted on comparing the two novels and not under the lenses of Michel Foucault's notions about madness. Hence, what follows will contribute to the existing research by adding a comparative analysis of the two novels which focuses on the theme of madness using, as already mentioned, Foucault's conception of "Madness". Madness is seen as a sickness that is often difficult to see for most individuals. Thus, there is a general lack of understanding about it. *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head and *Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho are semi-biographical novels which portray madness or insanity in a very realistic way.

## 2. Issue and Working Hypotheses

It is important to point out that madness, though very common among individuals, remains a topic that is hardly addressed by the people or discussed in public. Hence, it seems important to investigate the ways insanity is portrayed in literary works. Our dissertation is devoted to the way insanity is addressed by Bessie Head in her *A Question of Power*, in comparison to Coelho in his *Veronika Decides to Die*. The main questions that we seek to answer in the course of the dissertation are: how “Insanity” is presented in the two novels; what the main factors are, what leads to madness reflected through the two main characters, and how this pathology is healed in the end of the two narratives. In other words, we will seek to demonstrate how madness is interpreted in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* and Paulo Coelho’s *Veronika Decides to Die* and the extent to which Foucault’s ideas are relevant in both of the novels.

In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head shows how social disadvantage can contribute to the onset of insanity through her character Elizabeth. For his part, in *Veronika Decides to Die*, Paulo Coelho displays many aspects of insanity and the role that society plays in the protagonist’s mental health. The analysis of the two texts aim to compare the two novels in terms of themes and characters, it also intends to demonstrate the similarities between the authors and their characters.

The main theme in the two novels is madness as the characters in the texts make madness come to life. Besides, their actions and reactions give the readers a better understanding of insanity, and how it is closely related to society. We observe in the novels that society plays an important part in shaping the characters’ lives and their struggles with insanity. This dissertation also illustrates the deep connection between the authors and the novels. Although the two texts are very different in terms of time and space, the way Bessie Head and Paulo Coelho convey their experiences into their writing is comparable in many

ways. For instance, both authors went through and experienced mental illness. They also shared the same experience of being detained in a mental institution. Head's writings cover many aspects of her personal life as well. Elizabeth, the protagonist of her novel, is a character that represents Head. In *A Question of Power*, the author examines the state of madness of a female character during the political revolution in South Africa. She illustrates her painful journey and explains how social problems can drive someone insanity.

Similarly, Coelho reflects his personal life in the characters Veronika and Edward. *Veronika Decides to Die* depicts a clear image of Coelho's struggles with madness and mental asylums. The characteristics of the characters are also a reflection of the author. The Brazilian author is known for incorporating elements of his life into his works. His focus is on the individuals whom society considers to be abnormal and the methods of treatment in the psychiatric system which he opposes.

### **3. The Structure of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized following IMRAD method, which starts with an Introduction, Method and Material, Results, and finishes with a Discussion. In the introduction, we shall briefly present the theme of madness and its significance in the previous century, we shall also provide a literary review for the two novels of our study, and finally we shall state the research questions and hypothesis. In Methods and Materials, we shall provide a detailed analysis of Michel Foucault's notions about madness in his book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* in the method section, and then we shall provide the summaries of the Head's *A Question of Power* (1973) and Coelho's *Veronika Decides To die* (1998) in the Material section. In the Findings section, we shall state the major findings of our dissertation. And in the discussion part, we shall study Head and Coelho's personal lives in relation to their characters in the novels in the first

chapter, and then we compare the two novels in terms of themes and characters by applying Foucault's notions about madness in the second chapter. We shall conclude the study by listing the similarities and differences between the novels. We shall also have answered the research questions based on the findings of the comparison.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Mohammed Fathi Helaly, "The Marxist Aspect in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*". *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 5, no. 7 (2016): 101-109, doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.7p.101. Accessed 14 Aug 2021.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Louisa Cappelli, "Decolonizing Female Consciousness in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*". *Journal of the African Literature Association* 11, no. 2 (2017): 159-168, doi:10.1080/21674736.2017.1375655. Accessed 15 Aug 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Hygius Ezebuilo and Theodor Ojiako, "Confronting The Absurd: An Analysis of Bessie Head's *A Question Power*", *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews* 6, no.3 (August 2016): 130- 137, doi: ISSN: 2276-8645

<sup>4</sup>Michela Borzaga "The Rediscovery of the Extraordinary': *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head". *Werkwinkel* 5, no. 2 (2010): 27-42.

<sup>5</sup>R.C. Vasuki, "A Psychoanalysis of The Protagonist in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*". *The Journal for English Language and Literary Studies* 6, no. 1 (2016): 32-36, doi: ISSN 2249 – 216X. Accessed, 22 Sep 2021.

<sup>6</sup>Calogera Augello, "The Complex of Narcissism Brings Veronika to Suicide? A Travel to the Discovery of the Intelligence of the Heart". *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 4, no. 3 (2017): 25-30, doi:ISSN 2356-5926. Accessed 19 Sep 2021.

<sup>7</sup>Gaurav Kumar, "Psychological Depression, Feminism and Self-Realisation in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*". *Journal of Composition Theories* 12, no. 12 (2019): 133-138, doi: ISSN: 0731-6755. Accessed 21 Sep 2021.

## **II. Methods and Materials**

### **1. Methods:**

As the main theoretical framework, this thesis uses *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* by Michel Foucault. In this book, Foucault traces the cultural evolution of madness through various periods of history. He examines how Western society has viewed, defined, and dealt with those who were deemed insane, and he describes the process of treatment of the insane. Assuming that the basis of our comparison of Head and Coelho's and selected novels is built on the concept of "Madness", it seems then necessary, in this section, to devote few lines to the explanation of the key concepts according to what we have understood from Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. The task is not only to explain Foucault's ideas in his selected work, but also to try to prove their relevance to our comparative study. It is necessary to understand Foucault's work as it will be vital to the comparison of the two novels in the discussion section.

#### **A. "Insanity" Through the Lenses of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason***

In his book entitled, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Michel Foucault studies the cultural evolution of madness in four eras: the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Classical Age, and the Modern era. Within these historical periods, Foucault explores how each time and place differ in respect to how people perceived madness, talked about it, reacted to it, and institutionalized it in social structures. As such, madness is not natural and unchanging but rather constructed on the economic, intellectual, and political structures of the society. Through the book, Foucault demonstrates how over time the insane have been driven from being free and respected to being isolated and treated like an object of study. In the first chapter of *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity*

*in the Age of Reason*, which is called “StultiferaNavis” (Ship of Fools), Foucault claims that the social problem that most affected Europe during the Middle Ages was leprosy. Houses for lepers, known as Lazar houses, were built throughout the European countryside, and whenever a leper was discovered within city limits, they would be expelled and made to live in one of these houses. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, hundreds of Lazar houses that were built throughout Europe, “But as early as the fourteenth century they began to empty out;”<sup>1</sup> Leprosy declined significantly because of the tactic of social distancing and soon many Lazar houses turned empty. With the disappearance of leprosy, the Lazar houses became buildings with no function. However, the Lazar houses were transformed gradually into houses for the poor or hospitals.

In the Renaissance era, Foucault states that madness was given a passionate place in society and especially in art. A huge amount of the artistic pieces was linked with madness, and many artists were considered as mad. Madness was viewed as something that was inherent in human nature. It reflected in each individual, and furthermore, in society as a whole. When it comes to the handling of the insane, although confinement existed for the mad, they were given the “...privilege of being confined within the city gates”.<sup>2</sup> The insane were not totally isolated from society; there was still a considerable amount of interaction. At the worst-case scenario, the mad were loaded in boats and sent to other cities or ports in which Foucault described these events as the Ship of Fools. It was an exile, a marginalization, but not a total exclusion. Indeed, the insane themselves were rejected, but insanity was not forcefully rejected from society. However, according to Foucault, the Renaissance was the only era where the mad were allowed to explore the world as they are:

Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained. Often in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated, strangely similar two or three centuries later. Poor vagabonds, criminals, and "deranged minds" would take the part played by the leper, and we shall see what salvation was

expected from this exclusion, for them and for those who excluded them as well<sup>3</sup>

Arriving to the dawn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the empty Lazar houses became places of confinement. In “The Great Confinement” which is the second chapter of the book, Foucault talks about how the confinement was seen as a general tool for removing those viewed as “undesirable” from society. Since there were plenty of “undesired” people, aside from Lazar houses, other buildings for confinement were necessary. In France, these were known as Hospital Generals, and their residents included not just madmen, but also beggars, criminals, blasphemers and those outcastes by their families for whatever reason. At some point, 6000 people, roughly one percent of the population of Paris, were either willingly or forcibly held in these houses of confinement. Even though it is called Hospital General, don’t think of it as a hospital in a sense that we have today, a medical establishment, it was more like a prison, if a person could not find work, they could sacrifice their freedom and the hospital would feed them and house them. On the surface, the confinement of the “undesired” was a chance for them to reverse the path of their pity lives, but in reality, and according to Foucault, the real function of the confinement was an economical one; houses of confinement began to serve as sources of cheap labor. It’s therefore no wonder, as Foucault notes, that the first houses of confinement came up in the most industrialized parts of Europe: England, France, and Germany. “Confinement acquired another meaning. It was no longer merely a question of confining those out of work, but of giving work to those who had been confined and thus making them contribute to the prosperity of all”<sup>4</sup>. The confined had to work most of the time, and in exchange, they would be paid a quarter of the value they created.

According to Foucault, this economic dimension was one of the issues that led to the eventual separation of mad people from the other “undesired” ones. “By a strange act of force, the classical age was to reduce to silence the madness whose voices the Renaissance had just liberated, but whose violence it had already tamed”<sup>5</sup>. Because that mad people were not useful

for much work due to the manifestations of their mental illnesses, they were a source of derangement to the other people they were locked up with, and they were, most importantly, a source of scandal, the argument was made that the mad are unreasonable and should be separated. So, a division was made between the “undesired” and the “insane”. This division was the key point in the change of the perception of the insane, from humans that are undesired by the society, to unreasonable animals that must be disciplined.

In the fourth chapter, “The Insane”, Foucault’s depiction of madness during the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, is deeply disturbing. During this period, mad people were treated like animals they were caged, chained and put on public in the zoo or the circus. Since the Enlightenment placed such a high privilege on reason, society regarded persons that are unreasonable as subhuman and treated them abusively. This treatment was cruel, compared to the acceptance of madness in The Middle Ages and the curiosity about it during the Renaissance. Soon, hospitals had to abandon their homely, comfortable atmosphere and create cells for the unruly residents; These cells were placed outside so that workers could monitor their every move. Overnight, madmen ceased being “undesired” and became “animals” that needed to be disciplined. “Those chained to the cell walls were no longer men whose minds had wandered, but beasts preyed upon by a natural frenzy”<sup>6</sup>. Madness was not linked to medicine or correction; it was thought that the only way to treat animality was through “discipline and brutalizing”.<sup>7</sup>

In the following chapters, “Aspects of Madness” and “Doctors and Patients”, Foucault explains that without humanity attached to madness, mad people needed to be redefined. This brought doctors to the general hospital to study and diagnose mental illness. Foucault noticed that in every instance the doctors described mental illness; They used negative language, which meant mental illness was due to even more cruelty by the places claiming to offer salvation. In the Middle Ages, Leprosy was seen as a punishment for being a sinner;



Mental illness adopted a similar thought process. Doctors first theorized that madness was animal spirits possessing the human body. Then, they believed it was a product of the person's guilty conscious about the sins they committed. And finally, they settled on the idea that mental illness came from a weak body which allowed demons to possess the mind. All of their treatments were based on the previous beliefs. Melancholia (depression), mania (overexcitement), hypochondria (unrealistic fear of becoming ill), and hysteria (unstable emotions) are "...the specific faces by which madness was recognized in classical thought".<sup>8</sup>

In his chapter "Passion and Delirium", Foucault explains how from Ancient Greece and onwards, the most popular belief of understanding the human is Humorism, which is the belief that there are four "humors" in our body which are black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. These "humors" are responsible for every change of mood or illness that emerged in our body. Early treatments for mental illness concentrated on several ways to control and understand the four humors such as: nutritional therapy, fresh or seawater baths, and cold showers. It was at this moment of history that madness has become the object of scientific exploration, and little by little, the more science diagnosed, categorized, and medicated people that society labelled to be insane, the more it dehumanized these people and transformed them into objects that their existence is just for the sake of its own study. They are seen as objects of study rather than human beings. The more that science worked to find more about these "objects" and turn them from something to "normal" human beings, the more it put these people or "objects" through torture and pain.

In Chapter seven, "The Great Fear", Foucault talks about a great fear that concerned hospitals and houses of confinement in general. There was "a fear arose-a fear formulated in medical terms but animated, basically, by a moral myth. People were in dread of a mysterious disease that spread, it was said, from the houses of confinement and would soon threaten the cities"<sup>9</sup>. People started to worry that the houses of confinement were breeding evil, and that

society might soon be infected by the bad evil things that were raised there. Therefore, a new effort emerged to reform hospitals, especially to get rid of the evil that is confined inside.

In Chapter eight, “The New Division”, Foucault argues that as society became more advanced, the definition of madness changed. People no longer thought it made sense to confine mentally ill people with criminals and other undesirables. Instead, they needed to be confined in other buildings because others were afraid of them and did not want to get near them. If the insane were sick and contagious people, then it was the prisoners who had to be protected from the sickness. Thus, the mad were separated from the blasphemers, the vagabonds, and the criminals. Madness knew a new divergence as it became a new danger, a special danger that needed a special confinement.

In the last Chapter of the book, “The Birth of the Asylum”, Foucault claims that due to the advancement of the field of medicine, madness shifted from being studied as a physical disease to being studied as a mental disorder. Therefore, the first mental hospitals were built. Foucault finished his study with an analysis of two innovative doctors: Samuel Tuke and Philippe Pinel. Foucault here focuses on the reforms that took place under Tuke and Pinel. They were both doctors who wanted to have ultimate authority over the asylum and treat madness with new methods. They have both put an end to the previous painful, cruel methods of trying to cure madmen. From the end of the eighteenth century, any facilities accommodating mentally ill patients were required to have a medical certificate. “On the admission of patients, the committee should, in general, require a certificate signed by a medical person.... It should also be stated whether the patient is afflicted with any complaint independent of insanity”<sup>10</sup>. Doctors now played a vital role in these modern institutions. Studying madness wasn’t advanced enough to be considered as a new field of medicine. It was until the asylums were built, that psychiatry was able to grow as a new science:

from the time of the Greeks, it had been no more than a chapter of medicine, and we have seen Willis study madness under the rubric

“diseases of the head”; after Pineland Tuke, psychiatry would become a medicine of a particular style: those most eager to discover the origin of madness in organic causes or in hereditary dispositions would not be able to avoid this style.<sup>11</sup>

However, Foucault argues that in the asylum, the doctor cured not by honesty of scientific knowledge but by the righteousness of moral authority. Although most people interpret these reforms as great humanitarian progress in the treatment of the insane, Foucault sees it as a disguised will to repress the mad in new and distinct ways:

It is thought that Tuke and Pinel opened the asylum to medical knowledge. They did not introduce science, but a personality, whose powers borrowed from science only their disguise, or at most their justification. These powers, by their nature, were of a moral and social order<sup>12</sup>

According to Foucault, Tuke was a quacker (a member of a protestant group), and his treatment of madness was guided by religious principles. Although the mad were no longer subject to brutality, chains, and confinement, they were now subject to the impositions of a religious morality. In other words, the mad were not allowed to be themselves, they were expected to follow certain social and religious accepted standards of morality. For Foucault, this marks not the liberation of madness from chains, but the mastery of madness by the standards of society.

In contrast to Tuke, Pinel never used religious morality to treat the mentally ill; however, he did impose bourgeois moral code. Pinel's morality came from his own social background, being a good citizen and a productive labourer in society; he conceived madness as a social failure. Pinel followed three methods to bring back the mad to adopt the bourgeois morality: leaving the madmen in silence so that they can think about their social failures and confront them, helping the insane to see their “bizarre” behaviour by holding up a mirror for them, forcing them to recognize that they are mad by convincing them that the other madmen are men, and dominating the patient by exalting the doctor to a divine status. Foucault summarizes Pinel's practice:

The asylum of the age of positivism, which it is Pinel's glory to have founded, is not a free realm of observation, diagnosis, and therapeutics; it is a juridical space where one is accused, judges, and condemned, and from which one is never released except by the version of this trial in psychological depth—that is, by remorse. Madness will be punished in the asylum, even if it is innocent outside of it. For a long time now, and until our own day at least, it is imprisoned in a moral world.<sup>13</sup>

In short, Foucault argued that what was presented as an unbiased, indisputable scientific discovery that madness is a mental illness was in fact the outcome of questionable social and ethical commitments.

Altogether, from our study of Foucault's book, we can say that Foucault believed that madness is not a constant, unchanging phenomenon; it is a subjective concept that changes in accordance to the standards put by a giving society. Also, we can see that Foucault linked madness with alienation throughout the whole book. The way the mad people were exiled and expelled from society had grown in them a sense of alienation that contributed later in labelling them as mentally ill individuals. Last but not least, Foucault's criticism of the inhuman methods used against the insane is very clear. He was highly critical of the way society, and later on the field of psychiatry, tamed madness through discipline and brutalizing according to religious and ethical morals.

#### **B. The Relevance of Foucault's Concept to the Study:**

Michel Foucault's thoughts about madness are widely used for investigating experiences of madness and mental illness. In our study, both *A Question of power* and *Veronika Decides to Die* have madness as their main theme. Just like Foucault's investigation of the history of madness and its relation with alienation, and his scepticism for the asylums and the psychiatric field, the novels are written about the authors' personal experiences as they question the meaning of madness and the truth about the psychiatric field. Both novels celebrate individuals who do not fit into society's standards, because in a society, people are

usually expected to behave in a particular way or follow a certain pattern, and those who do not fit into society's standards are deemed to be mad and unreasonable. Also, just like Foucault's work, both of the novels question the standards that society has imposed to label someone as insane. In his work, Foucault proclaims that the boundary of reason and unreason is not something inherent and essential but an artificial demarcation imposed by society's standards of each era, sanity or insanity is a label to exclude the other. In both of the novels, the characters are the representation of the authors experience and also of the unheard stories of many individuals who have been excluded from society for being deemed as insane.

## **2. Materials:**

This section presents the summary of the two selected novels, *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head and *Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho. It is necessary to provide a summary for the two selected novels before moving to the discussion section.

### **A. Summary of Head's *A Question of Power***

*A Question of Power* by Bessie Head follows the life of Elizabeth; a South African colored woman whose life is filled with troubles. After facing racism, discrimination, abuse, and patriarchy in her home country, she decides to move, together with her son, to a small village in Botswana called Motabeng, where she finds a job as a teacher. However, life does not get better for her in Motabeng village as she starts having a series of strange hallucinations. She gets visited several times at night by imaginary characters called Sello, Dan, and Medusa who torment her to the point where she can't sleep or eat anymore. Elizabeth loses her job and she joins the Motabeng secondary project as a volunteer gardener. She makes new friends at the farm including a woman named Kenosi, and a man called Tom. She experiences two nervous breakdowns in Botswana, which lead her to be admitted to a mental hospital. The novel ends with, Elizabeth finally being able to sleep again after she

succeeds in defeating her hallucinations. She feels a sense of belonging to the world after her journey with her evil, imaginary characters end.

## **B. Summary of Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die***

Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* follows the story of Veronika, the protagonist, a twenty-four-year-old woman from Slovenia, who seems to have everything someone dreams of in life. Yet, she is never satisfied because she feels that something is lacking in her life; therefore, she decides to die. On the morning of November 11, 1997, Veronika tries to commit suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills, hoping to never wake up again. However, she fails to put an end to her life as she ends up surviving. Her failed attempt and her mysterious reasons for wanting to die lead her to wake up in Vilete, a lunatic asylum situated nearby. There, she is informed by one of the hospital medical staff, Dr. Igor, that she has only seven days to live. The imminent death is caused by her damaged heart due to the excess of medication she had taken.

After some time spent in Vilete, and by meeting several other patients, her view on life changes, she starts reviving the passion to live and realizes through a series of events that she never allowed herself to live to the fullest in the past. She is convinced that the act of suicide is never the good option. Adding to that, during her stay in Vilete, Veronika meets lot of patients; she becomes a friend with Zedka, a patient with chronic depression who becomes Veronika's first companion in the asylum. She is also introduced to Mari, a former lawyer who suffers from panic attacks. Mari is a senior and the leader of the Fraternity circle inside Vilete. Veronika then meets Edward; a schizophrenic who does not talk much; his only passion is art. Therefore, he likes listening to Veronika when playing the piano. Due to Veronika's influence, people in Vilete start to question the reasons that keep them inside the asylum. Zedka is the first to be released from the institution; she leaves Vilete and returns to live with her family. Mari writes a letter to the fraternity group before leaving to pursue her

dream of helping the needy in Sarajevo. Veronika and Edward escape from the facility. The novel reveals, eventually, that Dr Igor, the psychiatrist in charge of Vilete, tricked Veronika by letting her believe that she is going to die while, in fact, her heart was never damaged from taking the sleeping pills. It was all a part of an experiment that Dr. Igor has carried out in order to find out the causation of madness. According to him, the main cause remains a substance called Vitriol. The novel ends with Veronika and Edward celebrating their freedom by leaving Vilete, which meant that Dr Igor's experiment is successful.

It appears from the two novel summaries that the two main characters are women, they passed through similar experiences. By the end of the two narratives, both Elizabeth and Veronika succeed to go beyond their disturbed state of mind. Both are healed from their mental disorder and are reintegrated in their societies as active members.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 5, Z Library.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 7.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 51.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 38.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 72.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 75.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 117.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 202.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 270.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 275.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 271-272

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 166.



### III. Results:

This section contains the major findings that have been established throughout our comparative study of Head's *A Question of Power* and Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* under Foucault's theoretical conception of madness.

First and foremost, by studying the author's personal lives and by linking them to the two novels, we have seen that there is as strong personal connection between the authors and their characters, and how each of them reflects on and interprets madness in their own way. Moreover, by establishing parallels between the two narratives, characterization and themes, we found out that many similarities exist between the novels in terms of their experience with madness. We discovered that Head and Coelho use their characters to depict their personal experience with madness, and to be critical of the way society labels them as mad individuals.

Besides, by comparing the two novels under Foucault's notions about madness, we have established many similarities and a few differences. We can say that Foucault's of madness as a social construct, his criticism of the inhuman methods used in the psychiatric field, and his concept that madness is more of a sense of alienation rather than a mental disease, are all very relevant in the two novels that we have studied. Regardless of the fact that Foucault's notions about madness in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* were mainly constructed by only studying the history of the Western world, we have seen that Foucault's concepts are very relevant in places other than the Western world.

## **IV. Discussion:**

### **1. Chapter One: Historical Background and the Two authors' Experience of Insanity**

This chapter starts by providing a short introduction to the personal lives of both of the authors. Afterwards, we investigate the impact of the Head and Coelho's personal lives on their novels by also stating the importance of madness in the two novels, and why madness seems as a recurrent theme.

#### **A. Section One: Historical Background**

##### **a) Bessie Head's Biography:**

By reading Kevin Hodder's article "BESSIE HEAD (1937-1986)" which was published in 2011, we can say that Bessie Head is a South African writer, born on July 6, 1937, in Fort Napier mental institution in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. She is the daughter of a white mother, Bessie Amelia Emery, and an unidentified black father. "The birth itself was a criminal act, since at that time, extramarital sexual intercourse between blacks and whites was illegal. Thus, Head's biracial identity would come to occupy much of her future writings"<sup>1</sup>. Head had a tough childhood because she was placed in a foster family. Her mother was hospitalized and did not have the right to take care of her. As an adult, Head got married, however her short-lived marriage "came to an end in March 1964 when she and her son acquired one-way exit visas to Serowe in neighbouring Botswana."<sup>2</sup> Living in Botswana, Head worked in different jobs such as teaching and farming in which she "acquired the collection of experiences that provided her with material for her first two published works: *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) and *Maru* (1971)."<sup>3</sup> Bessie Head continued to write and publish despite suffering from signs of mental illness and by the late 1970's, she became the most famous novelist in Botswana. Head had been granted citizenship by the government of Botswana in

1979 partly because of her fame. She “continued writing up until her death from hepatitis on April 17, 1986, at the age of 48.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **b) Paulo Coelho’s Biography:**

In his book, *Paulo Coelho: a Warrior’s Life: the Authorized Biography*, the Brazilian author Fernando Morais wrote about Paulo Coelho’s personal life in a very detailed manner. In the book, we find that Paulo Coelho is a well acclaimed Brazilian author. “Paulo Coelho de Souza was born on a rainy night on 24 August 1947, the feast of St Bartholomew, in the hospital of São José in Humaitá, a middle-class area of Rio de Janeiro.”<sup>5</sup> He attended a Jesuit school as he was raised by Catholic parents. His father was an engineer who wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. However, “From a very young age, Paulo showed that he had an original way of thinking”<sup>6</sup>. Coelho dreamed of becoming a writer. “It was apparently at this time, when he was thirteen or fourteen, that Paulo showed the first signs of an undying *idée fixe*, a real obsession that he would never lose – to be a writer”<sup>7</sup> However, while his parents could not understand his desire of making a living as an artist. Therefore, they decided to transfer him to a mental asylum against his own will. Once there, he underwent electroconvulsive therapy. Meanwhile, he registered in a law school just to please his parents. Nevertheless, he was not interested in studying law and “he never fulfilled his parents’ dream”<sup>8</sup> of becoming a diplomat. Coelho’s love for writing grew bigger and bigger. So, he decided to drop out of school and decided to visit various places. Throughout his travels, he took up different jobs before he, finally, decided to devote all his time and efforts to his passion, which is writing.

## **B. Section Two: the Correlation between the Two Authors' Lives with their Fictions**

While reading the two novels, readers are easily able to spot the similarities and establish the links between the authors and their characters. The two short biographies of the selected authors reveal another important analogy that the characters of the two novels are heavily linked to Bessie Head and Paulo Coelho.

By reading Bessie Head's *A question of Power*, many parallels can be drawn between the author's own personal experiences and her third novel. Our reading of *A Question of Power* reveals that it can be considered as a semi-biographical novel, which is inspired by the different phases of psychological growth Bessie Head went through. The use of Elizabeth as the protagonist aims to illustrate the struggle to emerge from the difficult social situation that she found herself in. Head endured a life of poverty, racism, discrimination, abuse, patriarchy and mental illness which inspired her writings in general and her third novel in particular.

In his paper, "Review of *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*, by Randolph Vigne", Daniel Gover reviewed Randolph Vigne's book *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*, which contains personal letters that were written by Bessie Head to Randolph Vigne. Gover claims in his paper that: "Written in states of isolation and siege, Head's letters are filled with the same intense passion one finds in her novels *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. They reveal exactly how personal her fiction is both as autobiography and psychological fantasy".<sup>9</sup> There are many similarities between Head and Elizabeth such as their rejection from society, their bitter experiences of racial discrimination, and their struggles with mental illness. Head believes that her devastating destiny is a result of the fact of being born in a mental hospital. Being a child of a white mother and a black father, Head struggled with different types of discrimination as she portrays the difficulties of being a colored woman. All her difficulties as a woman (product of a mixed marriage) in South

Africa, during the apartheid time, appear persistently in the portrayal of her main character, Elizabeth.

In the same way as Head, Elizabeth is born in South Africa in the apartheid system. She grows up thinking her foster parents are her real parents until she discovers, as a teenager, that she is the daughter of a white woman and a black stable boy. She got the information about her parents from the principal of her school who says to her that her mother was a mad person who died inside an asylum for breaking the rules of the apartheid system. The union between black and white people in apartheid South Africa is abnormal and thus, Elizabeth's parents were seen as criminals in the eyes of society. Her mother was labelled as mad because of her relationship with a black man. As a result, Elizabeth is rejected from both society and her mother's family, who see her as an embarrassment. She is called an outcast, a doubly marginalized person, being neither white nor black; as a consequence, she is hated by both, black and white people. As a consequence, Elizabeth developed a sense of hatred towards herself and her society. The fact of not being recognized by her society wearied Elizabeth's mind.

More importantly, it appears throughout the novel that Elizabeth gets married with a black man. But her marriage lasts for only a few years. She feels sad and abandoned because her husband had several affairs with other women. Therefore, to escape from this chaotic situation, she decides then to leave South Africa. She gets an exit permit to Botswana and takes her son with her. In Botswana, Elizabeth ends up working in a farm after she loses her teaching job. After she escapes from the racism in apartheid South Africa, her situation does not improve in the land of exile. She faces alienation and isolation in Botswana, mainly due to cultural differences and language barrier of the country. This shows that Bessie Head shapes her character Elizabeth as a reflection of herself. Both went through similar experiences and dramatic events, which contributed greatly to their disturbed state of mind.

Head's experiences with mental illness are also presented in the novel. Like Elizabeth, Head struggled with madness for almost three years. In fact, *A Question of Power* was written just after Head's recovery from a psychotic breakdown. Her first mental collapse happened after she was arrested due to her involvement in the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania in 1960. As a consequence, she fell into a deep depression, which led her to attempt suicide. Her battle with madness continued in Botswana where she was admitted to a mental hospital. Head had suffered from hallucinations, which are displayed in the novel in the characters of Elizabeth, who slips in and out between reality during the day, and dreams and hallucinations during the night. In a period of three years, the main character undergoes two mental breakdowns as it is expressed in the novel: "Oh, you bloody bastard Botswana! Oh, you bloody bastard Botswana! And so, she only opened her mouth in one long, high piercing scream".<sup>10</sup> These sentences illustrate clearly Elizabeth's mental imbalance as she was screaming in a radio shop. Elizabeth's first hallucinatory episode occurs one night when she feels a strange presence in her room. The following excerpt is an illustration of her disturbed state of mind:

She had just blown out the light when she had the sudden feeling that someone had entered the room [...] There was a swift flow of air through the room, and whatever it was moved and sat down on the chair. The chair creaked slightly. Alarmed, she swung around and lit the candle. The chair was empty.<sup>11</sup>

The above quotation confirms the beginning of Elizabeth's encounters with Sello, Dan, and Medusa. The three evil figures Sello, Dan and Medusa are imaginary characters which have no real existence; They are aspects and products of Elizabeth's disturbed mind. Sello, Dan, and Medusa are supernatural beings that represent the power structures of South Africa that Elizabeth tries to oppose. Head portrays Dan and Sello as a representation of the oppressive, patriarchal society of South Africa. Medusa, for instance, stands as a depiction of the relentless hard conditions that people suffer from in society. These imaginary figures

inflict emotional and physical torture to Elizabeth. She suffers from mistreatment, abuse and humiliation by the three of them. After Elizabeth's nightmares and hallucinations worsen with time, she ends up having another psychotic breakdown and was admitted to a mental hospital.

Bessie Head considers childhood experiences as central to the mental condition of the adult. She believes that the factors that led to her madness are traumatic events of her past. Having suffered from a disadvantaged birth, rejection, sexual abuse, failed marriage and an extreme poverty, she could not escape from her trauma. It was impossible for her to not have a breakdown. Head lived in a cruel and unjust system; she experienced racial segregation, oppression, neglect, alienation, mistreatment and exile. She incorporated all these elements in her writing. In Elizabeth's case, she was predisposed to a mental breakdown, her brutal introduction to her biological mother by the headmaster and her filial and societal rejection presents the first stage of Elizabeth's dive into insanity. Elizabeth is triggered by her painful past when she encounters Sello, Dan, and Medusa, as they symbolize the dominant powerful and oppressive people of South Africa whom she is critical of.

If we turn to Paulo Coelho, his inspiration behind *Veronika Decides to Die*, is his own life experiences as he was put into three asylums during his adolescence because he was thought to be different. In the novel, Veronika and Edward represent Coelho's personal life; his goal is to express his emotions and ideas about madness and mental hospitals through these characters. Coelho's long journey of experiences contributed to the writing of his first book, *The Pilgrimage* (1987). From then on, he promised to write about his experiences in the asylums, which led him to write the novel that we are studying, *Veronika decides to Die*, which provides a detailed portrayal of the severe treatment that patients have to go through in mental hospitals.

First and foremost, Coelho and his protagonists share the same family background and their dreams and life decisions. They also experienced mental illness and lived in asylums.

Even the authors' personality features are displayed in that of his characters. As an illustration, Coelho, Veronika, and Edward were raised in the same circumstances. Their parents had the best intentions for them despite the harsh methods they used to make them give up on their dreams. For instance, "his parents were sure that the iron hand of the Jesuits would bring their essentially good-natured son back to the straight and narrow."<sup>12</sup> It is seen from this quote that Coelho's parents wanted him to be successful in life. Veronika is also raised in a loving family that cares about her, even with excess. Her single mother worked hard to provide her with a comfortable life style as her father was not there for her. Edward's parents had nothing but love for him; they also had good plans for his future.

Another important connection between Coelho and the characters is the fact that they are victims of society's standards as they face and go through severe pressures and demands from their parents. Coelho's desire to be a writer is disapproved by his parents who view it as a teenage rebellious phase. They find it difficult to accept that their son would want to be an artist. It is the reason why they force him to change his mind about his life path as it is expressed in the following quote:

At the end of 1962, at his father's insistence, Paulo was forced to enroll in the science stream rather than the arts as he had hoped. His scholastic performance in the fourth year had been disastrous, and he had finished the year having to re-sit maths, the subject at which his father so excelled. In the end, he passed with a 5—not a decimal point more than the mark required to move on to the next year and remain at St Ignatius. In spite of this and Paulo's declared intention to study the arts, his parents insisted that he study engineering and, following his appalling scholastic performance, he was in no position to insist.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Edward is not interested in pursuing a diplomatic career like his father. Instead, he wishes to be a painter, though, his parents were opposed to the idea which they regarded as absurd. In the same way as in Coelho's case, Edward's parents tried their best to make him change his mind about wanting to be a painter. They told their son that it is not an appropriate



profession for him. Their desire for Edward to quit thinking about painting is seen in the following excerpt from the novel:

Then, in the name of the love you have for us, please, do as your mother wants. Just stop all your painting business for a while, get some friends who belong to the same social class as you and go back to your studies. If you really love us, do as I ask. If you don't love us, then carry on as you are now.<sup>14</sup>

The same holds true for Veronika. From a young age, Veronika dreams to be a pianist. Even though her mother pays her lessons to learn the piano, she never wanted Veronika to follow an artistic career. Her response to the reasons why she was against the protagonist's desires is: "To develop your artistic gifts that's all. A husband likes that kind of things in a wife; he can show you off at parties. Forget about being a pianist, and go study law, that's the profession for future".<sup>15</sup> This quote shows that Veronika is forced by her mother to abandon her dream of being a pianist. Coelho portrays, through the character's struggles with their parents, the traditional way of thinking of that time, which goes against having a different profession from the norm.

It is important to notice that the main inspiration behind the novel is Paulo Coelho's experience in mental hospitals. At only seventeen years old, the author was put by his parents into a lunatic asylum because of a series of events. One of them is that he ran over a boy and injured him. However, the main cause for his admission to the asylum was his strong desire to be an artist and his refusal of carrying out his studies. A kind of treatment was used twice on Coelho when he was in the asylum. It was electro-convulsive treatment or ECT, which was said to be more effective than sedatives. Though this type of therapy is quite dangerous, Coelho was treated with ECT even during his second stay at the mental hospital.

Coelho was also badly treated by the doctors and nurses who worked in the asylum, and these treatments compelled him to escape. He was brought back twice by his parents, and his desire to escape remained the same. The desire to escape is shown at the end of the

novel when Veronika and Edward decide to run away from Vilete. They go through the same events as they are sent to a mental institution. They also suffer from the same mistreatment as their creator. If Edward undergoes electroconvulsive therapy; Veronika is mistreated by the nurses and Dr Igor, who injects her with a drug that gives her heart attacks and makes her believe that she will die in a couple of weeks. This causes her to feel pain and deception.

The factors that led to Coelho and Edward's admission to a psychiatric hospital are very similar too. They both never listened to their parents. Both followed their own passions and they dropped out of school. Though this behavior is considered by Coelho to be a normal behavior by a teenager, his parents viewed it as a sign of madness.

Paulo Coelho's first diagnosis at the mental hospital was that, he was schizophrenic. According to his doctors, he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia because of his destructive behavior and hallucinations. Similar to Coelho, Eduard also suffers from the same symptoms of schizophrenia such as, social isolation, absence of communication with others, lack of emotions, and withdrawal from reality. Not only Coelho and Eduard, Veronika also shows some symptoms of schizophrenia, including delusions and hallucinations.

Apart from schizophrenia, signs of depression are also present in the novel, which is inspired by Coelho's own experience with solitude and alienation. Such a state of mind appears in his diary when he states:

I breathe solitude, I wear solitude, I crap solitude. It's awful. I've never felt so alone. Not even during the long bitter days of my adolescence. Not that solitude is anything new. It's just that I'm getting tired of it. Soon I'll do something mad that will terrify the world. I want to write. But what for? Why? Alone, my brain fills with existential problems, and I can only make out one thing in all that noise and confusion: a desire to die.<sup>16</sup>

The above passage reveals Coelho's desire to end his life; it also expresses his depressed state of mind. In the novel, just like Coelho, Veronika is described as having symptoms of a depressed person who thinks that her life is meaningless. She is constantly

bored by her meaningless daily routine and believes that it will only go worst by time. Her lack of enthusiasm and positivity for life motivates her attempt to suicide that narrative voice expresses as follows:

It was time to feel proud of herself, to recognize that she had been able to do this, that she had finally had the courage and was leaving this life: what joy! Also, she was doing it as she had always dreamed, she would-by taking sleeping pills, which leave no mark.<sup>17</sup>

Correspondingly, Edward, like Veronika, feels deeply depressed. After his parents' opposition to the idea of his career as a painter, he fails to see the meaning of this world where a person is unable to do what he wants. The struggles of Veronika and Edward with depression demonstrate the big impact these experiences had on Paulo Coelho as a person and as a writer.

In addition, Coelho endows his main characters with some of his personality features. For instance, through Veronika and Edward, Coelho shows aspects of his personality as being an introvert, superstitious, and antisocial. In his childhood, Coelho did not have friends because he was made fun of and bullied in school. Thus, he preferred to read books instead of interacting with the outer world. Although he was a devoted catholic, Coelho admitted that he believed in superstition. Edward and Veronika are also portrayed as introverts; Veronika prefers living alone and she hates social interactions and physical contact. The same holds true for Edward; he does not communicate with others as he finds the general topics that people often talk about boring and trivial.

Another common characterization between Coelho and Veronika is cowardice. The author was scared of facing the consequences of his actions, at the same time; Veronika is afraid to be herself and lets her parents make decisions for her. All the parallels established above show the close connection between Coelho's real life and his characters, which appears recurrently in his novel, *Veronika Decides to Die*.

Now that we have established the parallels between the two authors and the way they insert fragments from their real lives in their narratives, we shall address the following question: How does madness appear recurrently in the selected novels? The main theme in the two novels is madness, thus it is clear that the authors' experiences with madness had a big impact on their writing as both of them suffered a lot of being accused as mad.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Kevin Hodder, "Bessie Head (1937-1986)" (*BlackPast.org*, 2011)

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Fernando Morais, *Paulo Coelho: A Warrior's Life: The Authorized Biography*. 1St Edition, Harper One, 2009, Z library, 38

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, 39.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, 60.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, 45.

<sup>9</sup>Daniel Gover, "Review of *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*, by Randolph Vigne". *Research in African Literatures* 23, no. 3 (1992): 118.

<sup>10</sup>Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (Penguin books, 2011), 51.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*, 22.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, 53.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*, 67.

<sup>14</sup>Paulo Coelho, *Veronika Decides to Die*. Your Book, 188-189.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, 85.

<sup>16</sup>Morais, *Paulo Coelho: A Warrior's Life*, 141.

<sup>17</sup>Coelho, *Veronika Decides to Die*, 2

## **2. Chapter Two: Comparable Themes in the Two Novels**

In order to investigate to which degree Foucault's theories about madness are relevant in *A Question of Power* and *Veronika Decides to Die*, this chapter deals with three major points: Madness as a social construct, the two authors' critique of the inhumane methods used in psychiatry, and the relation between madness and alienation. What follows is a comparison of the two novels under the scope of Foucault's notions about madness.

Head and Coelho's focus on madness has a deeper meaning as they reveal that the reasons that drive people to go mad are more serious than one could think. In both novels, we observe that the insanity of the characters is justified by the unrealistic standards of society. It derives from the personal experiences of the authors who used their struggles as a key to open up about mental illness. Bessie Head lives in an apartheid system which encourages racial segregation between the whites and the blacks; society forbids any relationship between these two races; therefore, this socio-political system leads ultimately to one's insanity. Meanwhile Paulo Coelho's inability to realize his dream of becoming a writer reflect society's constraints which state that being an artist is an abnormal profession, moreover, people are meant to believe that society is always right, and anyone with a different mindset is considered to be insane.

### **A. Madness as a Social Construct**

"Madness as a social construct" is the concept, which defines madness as not being a natural and constant thing, but rather the definition of madness depends on the society in which it appears or exists in. Various cultural, intellectual and economic structures determine how madness is viewed and experienced within a given society. Therefore, people who break the norms of a given society are, generally, defined as different and labelled as mad in certain

scenarios which results in discrimination and status loss. By reading David J. Rissmiller and Joshua H. Rissmiller article, entitled “Evolution of the Antipsychiatry Movement into Mental Health Consumerism” which was written in 2006, we deduced that alongside the likes of David G. Cooper, R.D. Laing, and Thomas Szasz, Foucault is a pioneer of the idea that madness is a social construct. “It was promoted through the efforts of its four seminal thinkers: Michel Foucault in France, R. D. Laing in Great Britain, Thomas Szasz in the United States, and Franco Basaglia in Italy.”<sup>1</sup> In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Foucault, by studying how the perception of madness changed over time, came to the conclusion that madness is something that is as being located in a certain cultural space within society; the shape of this space, and its effects on the madman, depend on society itself.

In *A Question of Power*, the main character Elizabeth is the one who suffers from social pressures severely. Bessie Head presents Elizabeth’s life as one full of suffering and discrimination, which stem mainly from social oppressive structures. As a child, Elizabeth was raised in a beer-house by a woman who was paid to take care of her. Moreover, Elizabeth never knows the meaning of love as she spends most of her childhood days “sitting under a lamp-post near her house, crying because everyone was drunk and there was no food, no one to think about children”.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, during her thirteen years of life, Elizabeth never knew who her real mother was; it was until she moved from the beer-house to a mission school that she knew from the school principal that her real mother was a woman who was locked up in a mental hospital in South Africa. She learns that “They had kept the story of her real mother shrouded in secrecy until she was thirteen. She had loved another woman as her mother, who was also part African, part English, like Elizabeth”.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, during her stay in the mission school, Elizabeth suffers from discrimination just because she is a colored girl, also because she is the daughter of a mad woman. In the mission school, all the children “could fight and scratch and bite each other,”<sup>4</sup> but if Elizabeth did the same, the principal would lock her and isolate her from the other children for a week. While other children got away with more serious breaches of school regulations, Elizabeth is punished for trivial offences. Recognizing Elizabeth’s “difference”, the other students marginalized her; they always provoked her on purpose because they are aware that if she reacts, she will get in serious trouble. After seven years, Elizabeth visits her foster mother again to confirm her childhood story. Her foster mother confirms to her that she’s not her real mother. She also confesses to Elizabeth that her father was a black stable boy. Due to the apartheid system in South Africa, as already mentioned, Elizabeth’s mother’s family considered her as an embarrassment because she was colored and not white. Her uncle once said: “We want to wash our hands of this business. We want to forget it, but the old lady insists on seeing the child. We had to please her. We are going to leave her here for a while and pick her up later”<sup>5</sup> and this is how Elizabeth ends up being raised by another woman.

As a grown woman, Elizabeth had a disastrous marriage. She meets an ex-convict who told her that he had repented from his dark past and now has an interest in Buddhism. It was a key factor in the relationship that the guy was into Buddhism as Elizabeth too shows interest in Buddhism and oriental religions generally. The pre-marital love affair lasted a week after they finally got married. A month after her marriage, a neighbor tells Elizabeth:

You have a strange husband. Susie was standing outside the door and called to him. He walked straight in and they went to bed. He’s been doing this nearly every day now with Susie. I also once greeted him and he said: ‘How about a kiss?’ And I said: ‘Bugger off.’ What made you marry that thing?<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth discovers that her husband gets involved in unrestrained sexual dealings with several willing women, while he abuses those who are unwilling. Apart from the terrible

marriage experience, Elizabeth suffers from discrimination, racism and sexism in the apartheid system and the patriarchal society in South Africa. She is considered and treated as a colored woman who is socially and naturally inferior to whites in the first degree and to men in the second degree. In a system unifying apartheid and patriarchy, South African society labels everybody behaving against the norms of that society as insane and mad. Therefore, Elizabeth is deemed as a mad person because she does not obey the rules of that given society. Elizabeth never accepts the role of a typical colored woman who is inferior to whites and who is also seen as a sex object to men. Foucault's concept that madness is perceived differently depending on the society that it exists in, is not only related to Elizabeth, but also to Elizabeth's mother. The latter is deemed mad because she, as a white woman, had a sexual relation with a black stable boy. This kind of act is considered against the law and the norms of the South African society during the Apartheid system. Therefore, a person would not be labelled as mad like Elizabeth's mother if they were living in a society where interracial relations are considered as a normal thing.

Comparatively, in *Veronika Decides to Die*, the characters suffer from social pressures and severe constraints the most are Veronika and Eduard, they are labelled as mad due to the fact that they do not comply with the standards of the society they live in. First let us look into the past and present of Veronika, the main character of the novel. Veronika, as already mentioned in the first chapter, is described as a girl of twenty-four who decides to put an end to her life. When we go deeper into the reasons of Veronika's depression, we can say that as a girl, she is not given the freedom to think and to do as she wishes or dreams of in her life. She follows her parents' wishes against her own will, especially her mother's. Veronika's dream since her childhood was to become a pianist. Her piano teacher appreciated her talent and encouraged her to be a professional. But, when she tells her dream to her mother, the latter looks at her with much love and affection and says that no one made a living by playing a



piano. And when Veronika asks her mother why she wanted her to have lessons on piano she replies:

To develop your artistic gifts, that's all. A husband likes that kind of thing in a wife; he can show you off at parties. Forget about being a pianist, and go and study law, that's the profession of the future.<sup>7</sup>

We understand that Veronika did as her mother told her and finished her studies, went to university, got a good degree but ended up being a librarian. She never views her life from an angle of her own passion and desires. Instead, she hires the views and dreams of others, pawns her valuable life for the pleasure of people around her. Veronika becomes a girl who forgets to live for herself as she surrenders to the pressures imposed on her by her parents and ends up living a life that she never desires. Consequently, she becomes depressed due to the constraints put on her by her parents.

Similar difficulties are experienced by Eduard. Just like Veronika, he is raised to fit in his parents' shoes. Born to a rich and a famous ambassador, Eduard is expected to be a successful politician just like his father. However, he neither was attracted nor really wanted to follow a diplomatic career. While he is admitted for a month in a hospital due to a bike accident, a nurse gives him a book, which is about visionaries whose ideas had shaken the world. Reading that book allows him to know extraordinary people like Jesus Christ, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Christopher Columbus, Karl Marx, Teresa of Ávila and so on. He decides then to learn painting and show the world the visions those men and women had experienced. His parents became worried about the life's decisions of their son and his passion and devotion for art over a successful diplomatic career. His father orders him to finish his secondary education, so that he could set him on the path to a diplomatic career. Eduard replies that he does not want to be a diplomat. He rather wants to be a painter. Eduard soon hears the heart-breaking words of his father that turned his life upside down as the following excerpt shows it clearly:

Ever since you were born, we've built up such dreams of how our lives would be. You're everything to us, our future and our past. Your grandfathers were civil servants, and I had to fight like a lion to enter the diplomatic service and make my way up the ladder. And I did all this just to create a space for you, to make things easier for you. I've still got the pen with which I signed my first document as an ambassador, and I lovingly saved it to pass on to you the day you did the same. Don't let us down, son. We won't live forever and we want to die in peace, knowing that we've set you on the right path in life. If you really love us, do as I ask. If you don't love us, then carry on as you are now.<sup>8</sup>

The passage illustrates how Eduard's thought is affected deeply by his father's words. He knows very well that if he gives up his painting, the "Vision of Paradise" would never see the light of day and nothing else in this world could give him the same emotions of happiness, pleasure, and satisfaction. The pressures put by his parents forced him to tell them that they were right, that his enthusiasm for painting is just a youthful dream, and by doing so, Eduard's life was not the same since then. He misses control of his mind. Therefore, is forced to be treated by specialists as he is diagnosed with a rare form of schizophrenia. It is too problematic for the family to look after him. Consequently, they had no choice other than leaving him in Villette.

The foregoing analysis of the two main characters in Coelho's novel, Veronika and Eduard, are labelled as mad for not corresponding to the standards of the society that they live in. When Veronika first wakes up in Villette, she is seen by the medical staff as a mad person because she tries to commit suicide. In most societies, a normal, sane person is someone who is willing to live a happy, successful life. Thus, Veronika's unwillingness to live and her suicidal tendencies become key factors for being labelled as a mad person. In his article, "The Taboo of Suicide", the American psychiatrist Noyes Russell Jr. claimed that suicide was not always seen as an unethical act, and was rarely described as an act of madness. On the contrary, "For most of the ancients suicide was honourable and consistent with their belief in

the dignity of the individual man.”<sup>9</sup> The scholar argues that it is not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that suicide was linked to madness and adds:

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, suicide had become a disgrace, and families were resorting to secrecy in order to prevent the scourge of gossip. When secrecy was not possible, families turned to what they felt to be a lesser evil than disgrace-madness--for justification. Thus the association between suicide and insanity grew closer.<sup>10</sup>

When applied to Coelho’s narrative, we notice that, on the one hand, if Veronika lived in an ancient society where suicide is not something unethical, she would have never been labeled as a mad person. On the other hand, Eduard is labelled as a mad person by his parents for his passion for art over having a successful diplomatic career, and mostly for his anti-social tendencies. The same could be said about Eduard, if he lived in a society where it is generally accepted to follow your youthful dreams and be anti-social, he would have been considered as a normal and a sane person

All in all, similarly, to Foucault, Bessie Head and Paulo Coelho are both very skeptical of how society label individuals as mad people just for the fact of not fitting into its questionable standards. Every society has its own standards, which means that, just like Foucault argued, madness is not a constant, fixed concept; it is rather a concept that is viewed and perceived differently from one society to another.

## **B. The Two Authors’ Critique of Inhuman Methods Used in Psychiatry**

The psychiatric field has always been viewed as controversial by philosophers, sociologists, and even psychiatrists. The reason behind this controversy, are the questionable practices of psychiatry such as: including subjective thoughts during the diagnosis, the use of power of the psychiatric field for social and political control, and the side effects of treatments like electroconvulsive therapy, antipsychotics, and other treatments such as psychosurgery or insulin shock therapy. Foucault is one of the first scholars to criticize psychiatric field.

Heargues in his chapter, “The Birth of Asylum”, that asylums are constructed to collect the deviants; he condemns the use of the asylums as a social control. In these places, the unreasonable people are mentally subdued. They assert a kind of forced “homogeneity”; otherwise, the defiant must be silenced. Moreover, Foucault also criticizes the inhumane treatments and conditions that the inmates lived inside the asylums in his chapter “The Birth of Asylum”.

In *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head, there is a clear criticism of the psychiatric field and its inhumane measures of treating inmates. The author’s disapproval of the use of these inhuman measures is perceived when the main character Elizabeth is admitted to a mental hospital. The first thing that Elizabeth notices when she is admitted to a mental hospital, is the harsh conditions the inmates had to undergo. Just as Foucault argues in “The Birth of the Asylum”, the asylum in Head’s novel is transformed into a place where the unwanted, deviant individuals are confined, isolated from society as the subsequent excerpt from the novel indicates it:

It was a Saturday morning when she arrived at the loony bin. The attendants there greeted lunatics with laughter. She was a bit surprised. It was strictly for poor, illiterate Batswana who were treated like animals. They seemed to be the only people who went insane in Botswana, and because they were poor and illiterate and it was a government hospital, they were provided with no soap for bathing or towels to dry the body. The place had a terrible stench.<sup>11</sup>

From that passage, it appears that inside the asylum, just like all the other patients, Elizabeth had to forcibly work and clean up the place as she is ordered by the nurses. Indeed, all of the patients should wash the asylum’s ward and clean the linen early morning. On top of the forced work, Elizabeth is mistreated by the medical staff, a nurse once tells her: “So you’re a human being? We are calling you wild animal because you’re always so angry.”<sup>12</sup> When Elizabeth asks him to leave her alone; the doctor of the mental hospital takes Elizabeth’s words as an offense since he sees himself as an important psychiatrist while she

remains just a mad patient. The doctor looks upon Elizabeth as an inferior human being. When she refuses his treatment, the only thought that comes to the doctor's mind is "who was she to refuse treatment?"<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Head makes it obvious in the story that there is not any treatment prepared for Elizabeth. During her stay in the asylum, the doctor and his medical staff never care about Elizabeth and her mental breakdown. In this context, Foucault considers the language of psychiatry as a monologue that silences differences. In the asylum, Elizabeth is most of the time in her bed, shot with sedatives every day, and every time she tries to talk about her mental breakdown, she is silenced: "She looked at the nurse and asked: 'You know Sello?'" The nurse shook her head: "The doctor told us not to allow you to talk about Sello"<sup>14</sup>. The doctor also never tries to understand Elizabeth, "Apart from the sedatives and conversations about her son, he never bothered to probe about the causes of her breakdown."<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth, as an individual, who is considered as unreasonable, is held inside the asylum not in order to be cured, but just in order to be excluded from the reasonable society.

The same criticism appears in Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*. Coelho's criticism of the methods used in the psychiatric field is very straightforward as he himself suffered from its negative impacts during his younger days. In his novel, *Veronika Decides to Die*, the criticism of psychiatry is done in different forms. First of all, just like Foucault pointed to the fact that people were held inside asylums against their will, Veronika, Eduard and Zedka are all transferred to Villette unwillingly. Veronika, for instance, is taken to the mental hospital because of her suicide attempt, Eduard is sent compulsorily by his parents because of, as we mentioned before, his passion for art over work and his anti-social behavior. For her part, Zedka is locked in the asylum due to her depressive state. For Foucault, asylums function in accordance with the rigid morality of society. As a result, all of the three characters are held under protect inside Villette for not fitting into the standards of the society they live in. Thus,

Villete becomes a place used for the social control of deviance. It is an instrument for the establishment of norms and social order, via the confinement of those defined as socially, morally, politico-religiously and physically deviant and unreasonable.

Once Veronika, Eduard, and Zedka are confined inside the asylum, they suffer from mistreatment inside the asylum. Veronika undergoes several mistreatments inside the asylum. First, she is tricked by Dr. Igor as he informs Veronika that her heart will stop beating within a week as a consequence of the sleeping pills over-dose she underwent during her attempt of suicide. Despite the doctor's intentions, Veronika is already being lied to about her health condition. Moreover, Veronika is seen as an inferior person by the medical staff because of her suicide attempt. The staff mocks her, mistreats her, and looks at her as a pathetic person several times during her stay in Villete as this quotation proves the point:

The whole group burst into laughter. Veronika assumed an ironic air, smiled, turned and moved off, so that no one would notice that her eyes were filling with tears. She went straight out into the garden without bothering to put on a coat or jacket. A nurse tried to persuade her to come back inside, but another appeared soon after and whispered something in his ear. The two of them left her in peace, in the cold. There was no point taking care of someone who was condemned to die.<sup>16</sup>

It can be understood that Veronika is also injected with a drug several times against her will by the nurse. It turned out at the end of the novel that the drug injection is only a plan by Dr. Igor to cure Veronika. The point is voiced by the narrator in what follows:

Using a drug known as Fenotal, he had managed to simulate the effects of heart attacks. For a week she had received injections of the drug, and she must have been very frightened, because she had time to think about death and to review her own life.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Dr. Igor's intention to cure Veronika from her suicidal thoughts, it is totally unethical for a doctor to lie to his patient just for the sake of an experiment. As we mentioned previously, Foucault points out in his chapter "Doctors and Patients", that the patient inside the asylum is seen as an object of study rather than as a human being. Thus, Veronika

becomes an object of study for Dr. Igor to undertake in his scientific experiments. Like Veronika, Zedka is also mistreated inside Villette. Foucault's concept about the doctor patient relationship could be linked to the experience of Zedka as she becomes an object for scientific study by her doctors, and not as a human being with rights and feelings. Throughout the story, Zedka is put into a dangerous therapy that was used to treat depressed people which is called the insulin shock therapy. Zedka underwent this therapy several times in order to be cured even though some of the doctors of Villette knew that it is a dangerous therapy, which is clearly described in the following quote:

There wasn't much written about the treatment. It had been used for the first time around 1930 but had been completely banned in psychiatric hospitals because of the possibility of irreversible damage to the patient. During one such session she had visited Dr. Igor's office in her astral form, at precisely the moment when he was discussing the subject with one of the owners of the hospital. "It's a crime," Dr. Igor was saying. "Yes, but it's cheap and it's quick!" replied the other man. "Anyway, who's interested in the rights of the insane? No one's going to complain."<sup>18</sup>

Just like Veronika and Zedka, Eduard too is a patient that has suffered from mistreatment inside Villette. As we said above, Eduard is forced to stay in Villette by his parents against his own will, and on top of that, he is caught by nurses every time he tries to leave the asylum. Moreover, every time Eduard gets angry and tries to leave Villette, he is calmed down by the electric shock treatment—or electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). It is a treatment where nurses forced Eduard to lay in bed, put a rubber in his mouth, and connect him with wires to an electric machine. As soon as the one of the nurses settle the machine to 130 volts for 3 seconds and put it to work, "Eduard's eyes glazed over, his body thrashed about on the bed with such fury that, but for the straps holding him down, he would have broken his spine"<sup>19</sup>. Even though the treatment is dangerous and had several side effects, such as memory loss, confusion, and other physical and medical complications, Eduard is put into this treatment by force. Eduard is deprived of his rights as a human being inside the

asylum as the other doctor says about Zedka, “Anyway, who’s interested in the rights of the insane? No one’s going to complain”.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, just like Foucault’s criticism of the methods used in the psychiatric field, we can clearly see that both Head and Coelho are very critical of it too by portraying the pain and the inhuman conditions that the characters of the two novels had to undergo inside the mental hospitals.

### **C. The Aspects of Alienation in the Two Novels**

Michel Foucault, in his book, was primarily concerned with oppressed and deviant groups and his works comprised an historical and cultural critique on madness, mental illness, and the psychiatric field. His analysis spans the history of ideas, the nature of historical change, and the relationship between madness and social alienation. Social alienation is a wide notion used by sociologists to trace the experience of persons or groups that feel detached from the values, norms, practices, and social relations of their society for a diversity of social structural reasons. Those experiencing social alienation do not share the regular, dominant values of society. They do not really fit into society’s groups and institutions. As we have seen previously, Foucault addresses the concept of “alienation” when he examines how the mad are excluded from society. He studies the history and the means of exclusion of those rejected and confined on the basis of a dividing line between sanity and insanity. This division gave the right to many asylums in the seventeenth century, to tame madness and unreason and put them under constraints.

In both of the novels, *A Question of Power* and *Veronika decides to die*, the two main characters, Elizabeth and Veronika, live in permanent states of alienation. They are individuals who feel isolated from their surroundings, society, and the world as a whole. However, there is a difference in the concept of alienation between the African context of Elizabeth and the European context of Veronika. Alienation also fills in the life of the main



character in *A Question of Power*. Elizabeth, throughout the whole story, is in a mission to embrace the world and to be productive in her society. Yet, the world keeps on shutting her down. The world's estrangement from Elizabeth happens in both places, South Africa and Botswana. In South Africa, as we have seen previously, Elizabeth as a child was raised without knowing her real parents, in a world where love is not an existing thing. She is victim of discrimination in the mission school, and is abused and accused of being insane just because her mother had been admitted to a mental hospital. From then on, and as an adult, Elizabeth discovers a harsher reality than the one of her teenage years. Elizabeth lives in a society where racism, patriarchy, perversion, and hatred are the standards of it. Elizabeth suffering is not only from living in that society, but also her resistance and unacceptance to be part of it. The more she opposes her society and its standards, the more she is shut down and rejected by the world. "She hated the country. In spite of her inability to like or to understand political ideologies, she had also lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South Africa, "It was like living with permanent nervous tension".<sup>21</sup>

With the destructive and corrupted standards of the South African society, Elizabeth decided to accept an exit visa to Botswana. This decision is run by Elizabeth's will to escape the South African situation, which she regards as the solution to end disappointing experiences. Elizabeth hopes that in Botswana, she would exist in a society where she is accepted for the simple basis of being a human being, where she can be a normal person who is embraced by the world. Once Elizabeth is in Botswana, and due to cultural differences with the Botswana people, Elizabeth is not able to share her feelings and thoughts with anyone during her early times in the country. It is at that time, when Elizabeth first hallucinatory episode occurred:

She had just blown out the light when she had the sudden feeling that someone had entered the room... There was a swift flow of air through the room, and whatever it was moved and sat down on the

chair. The chair creaked slightly. Alarmed, she swung around and lit the candle. The chair was empty.<sup>22</sup>

Sello, Dan, and Medusa are all imaginary figures that lived inside Elizabeth's head. The more Elizabeth tries to attach herself to the world, the more she is pushed away from it. Elizabeth tries with every way possible to embrace the world and be a productive and an active person in her society, but, the three evil figures work to manipulate her in every way in order to detach her from the things that kept her connected to this world.

In order to be productive, Elizabeth first works as a teacher, but Medusa was already working on making her lose the job. She tells Elizabeth every night that "the Africans will eat you to death"<sup>23</sup> and calls her by disgusting names, such as a woman with no vagina, a dog filth, and a pervert woman. The tension caused by Medusa makes Elizabeth snap and loses her mind inside a grocery store in which she started screaming: "Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana! Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana".<sup>24</sup> This incident that was planned by Medusa, makes the school question the sanity of Elizabeth. The school principal hands a letter to Elizabeth which charges her of many offences as its content illustrates the point:

We have received a report that you have been shouting and swearing at people in public. Such behavior is unbecoming to a teacher. We are doubtful of your sanity, and request that you submit to us a certificate of sanity from a medical officer within fourteen days of receipt of this notice.<sup>25</sup>

Elizabeth refuses explaining herself to the school principal and resigned from her job. Notwithstanding the difficulties that were imposed on her by the world, Elizabeth resists and continues to be productive in her society. She starts a gardening project that was introduced to her by a man that she knew called Eugene. The gardening project is an opportunity that allows her to be close to her society and to be a productive individual. It seems like Elizabeth is finally becoming a part of this world. Yet, the imaginary figures had other plans for her; there was no way that they would allow her to feel as a part of this world. The more Elizabeth gets herself into the gardening project, the more the haunting imaginary figures intensify their

torture. Thus, they force Elizabeth to lose the gardening project just like she lost her teaching job. From just occasional visits, now Dan and Medusa pay a visit Elizabeth every night as they deprive her from sleep and food. Every time Elizabeth tries to sleep, Dan shows up and interrupts her sleep by forcing her to be with him all night long having sexual activities with other women in her own bed. Dan torments Elizabeth all night long and keeps saying to her: “You supposed to feel jealous...You are inferior as a colored...You haven’t got what that girl has got”.<sup>26</sup> And for the food, whenever Elizabeth triesto eat, it is Medusa that shows up:

She held a plate of food in her hands and, offering it to Elizabeth, said: ‘Are you sick? Eat this food.’ Elizabeth accepted the plate. As she raised a spoonful of the food to her mouth, Medusa snatched away the plate and yapped: ‘Don’t eat too much. You’re too fat.’<sup>27</sup>

Due to these physical and mental exhausting traumas, it is only with huge breaks and interruptions that Elizabeth could work in the small garden. If not for other characters such as Kenosi and Tom, Elizabeth is going to lose her garden just like she had losther job as a teacher. Apart from the gardening project, Elizabeth’s sense of motherhood is another element that keeps her attached to the world. Unlike her own mother, Elizabeth loves and takes care of her son. Obviously, the imaginary figures’ next plan is to detach Elizabeth from her son which meant ultimately, detaching her from the whole world. In the following several nights, Dan exhibits his anger announcing in front of Elizabeth the approaching death of her son; he says: “He’s not going to die in five years’ time. He’s going to die this year”.<sup>28</sup> Medusa, Just like Dan, shows up to convince Elizabeth that this world is not worth living and that her son will die eventually, “She looks at Elizabeth and states calmly: ‘You know you are going to die. The day you die you must take your son with you, because we don’t want him here either’”.<sup>29</sup> Yet, Elizabeth remains still hanging on to the world; she takes her son to the hospital to make sure that nothing is wrong with him.

When the plan of the haunting imaginary figures fails, they try one last shot to detach Elizabeth from the realworld, which is to convince her that she’s not worth it and that it is

better for her if she just leaves it. Dan intensifies his visits to Elizabeth even more. He reappears every night, and whispers into Elizabeth's ear: "You are going to commit suicide at a quarter to one tomorrow".<sup>30</sup> At other times, she hears a consistent chant in her ears saying: "Die, die, die". When Elizabeth becomes weak and too depressed, Dan puts into place his last attempt:

Then Dan moved towards her. There wasn't any need for her existence any longer. His hands reached for her head. He'd been doing this for months, opening her skull and talking into it in a harsh, grating voice. When she opened her eyes a few hours later her mind was a total blank. She could not remember who she was, where she was, what day it was. There was nothing in her head. Was this his way of showing her how near the end was?<sup>31</sup>

During all of the years of her torments, and despite the world rejecting her in every way possible, Elizabeth resists and perseveres in her projects. She continues to be a productive individual in her society and engages in establishing links and social relations with people. She takes care of the people that she cared about. At the end of the novel, Elizabeth is finally accepted by the world, "As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. "It was a gesture of belonging".<sup>32</sup>

Unlike Elizabeth's rejection by the world, in *Veronika decides to die*, it is the main character, Veronika, that rejects the world. At the start of the story, Coelho reveals to the readers that Veronika's rejection of the world is due to two reasons:

The first reason: Everything in her life was the same and, once her youth was gone, it would be downhill all the way, with old age beginning to leave irreversible marks, the onset of illness, the departure of friends. She would gain nothing by continuing to live; indeed, the likelihood of suffering would only increase. The second reason was more philosophical: Veronika read the newspapers, watched TV, and she was aware of what was going on in the world. Everything was wrong, and she had no way of putting things right—that gave her a sense of complete powerlessness.<sup>33</sup>

Due to these two reasons, Veronika is in a state of "Meaninglessness" and "powerlessness", which are two concepts of alienation that were studied and examined by the

American sociologist, Melvin Seeman, in a paper published in 1959, entitled “On the Meaning of Alienation”. In this paper, Seeman describes Meaninglessness as “low expectancy that satisfactory predictions about future outcomes of behavior can be made.”<sup>34</sup> This means that the individual does not derive meaning from the things in which he or she is engaged in.

In the novel, Veronika thinks of her daily life as worthless. She finds that her life is mundane and all the materialistic comfort or the love of her family does not make her enjoy it. The mood of depression and melancholy overwhelms her as she does not find any interest in her job as a librarian. She never shares her feelings and the details of her life even with her closest people. She prefers to keep everything for her own. Veronika prefers spending the night alone instead of sharing the events of her daily life with others, because she thinks that it would never bring any difference to the “meaninglessness” of her life and the world as a whole. The period in which Veronika got excited in the novel is when the time of her committing suicide has come. As this passage points it out:

Veronika had decided to die on that lovely Ljubljana afternoon, with Bolivian musicians playing in the square, with a young man passing by her window, and she was happy with what her eyes could see and her ears could hear. She was even happier that she would not have to go on seeing those same things for another thirty, forty, or fifty years, because they would lose all their originality and be transformed into the tragedy of a life in which everything repeats itself and where one day is exactly like another.<sup>35</sup>

Veronika’s state of “meaninglessness” towards the world is the first reason for her suicide attempt. The latter is a symbol for her rejection of this cruel, meaningless world. The same holds true for the second reason of her suicide attempt. It is her state of powerlessness towards the world, which forces her to act in such a desperate way. Seeman’s definition of the concept of “Powerlessness” is linked to the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he

seeks”<sup>36</sup> This indicates that a person can never have authority or control over their own destiny; it is rather determined by external elements or forces.

In Coelho’s narrative, Veronika isolates herself from the world because she believes that the outcome that will take place in her life is outside of her control. No matter how hard she tries to live her youth to the fullest, the suffering from old age will ultimately come, and her life will be miserable and sad. Moreover, Veronika’s alienation is due to her belief that no matter the great efforts she makes to make the world a better place, it will always be a place full of evil and bad things. Therefore, Veronika becomes aware that in order to overcome her sense of meaninglessness and her state of powerlessness, she had to reject the world by committing suicide. She is “almost certain that everything ended with death. That is why she had chosen suicide: freedom at last. Eternal oblivion”<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, throughout the whole story, it is the minor characters that helped Veronika restore her passion to live and to embrace the world as a whole. Veronika never cares about forming a bond of friendship with another person before, but somehow, she pays attention to Zedka and becomes friends with her. She shares her secrets with her and is always terrified when Zedka had to undergo the insulin coma therapies. Veronika did never love someone before; she used to have many boyfriends but never had any feeling towards them. But, somehow, she fell in love with Eduard, as it is expressed by the narrative voice: “Veronika didn’t know why, but the young man had become part of her world, or the little that remained of it”<sup>38</sup>, Veronika also never listens to someone else’s advice or opinion, but with time, she becomes influenced by Mari, who teaches her how far she can go in this life: “Veronika decided to do the exercise, concentrating as hard as she could on discovering who she was. During those days in Vilete, she had felt things she had never before felt with such intensity, hatred, love, fear, curiosity, a desire to live. Perhaps Mari was right”<sup>39</sup> When Zedka, Mari, and Eduard meet Veronika inside Vilete, they all have indirectly influenced her sense

of alienation from the world. Slowly, Veronika had changed her point of view about life, and was able to experience things that she had never experienced before. By the end of the novel, Veronika finally accepted the world and had no longer a desire to suicide.

Just like Foucault's concept about alienation, we can clearly see that both Elizabeth and Veronika struggle with madness is reflected in the feeling of alienation that the two characters had experienced throughout the two novels. Despite the fact that both of the main characters, Elizabeth and Veronika, are alienated from the world, their alienation is quite different. Elizabeth was trying by every mean to embrace the world, yet the world kept on rejecting her on every level. It was her determination and willingness to be an active member of society, that made the world finally accept her by the end of the novel. On the other hand, unlike Elizabeth, Veronika's attitude throughout the story shows that, it was her who rejected the world during her whole life. It was only until the end, that Veronika finally embraced the world.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup>David J Rissmiller and Joshua H Rissmiller, "Evolution of the Antipsychiatry Movement into Mental Health Consumerism" *Psychiatric Services* 57, no. 6 (June 2006): 863-866. doi:10.1176/ps.2006.57.6.863.

<sup>2</sup>Head, *A Question of Power*, 14.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 13.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 15.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 17.

<sup>7</sup>Coelho, *Veronika Decides to Die*, 85.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 189.

<sup>9</sup>Noyes Russell, "The Taboo of Suicide". *Psychiatry* 31, no. 2 (1968): 175. doi:10.1080/00332747.1968.11023545. Accessed 29 Sep 2021.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 178

<sup>11</sup>Head, *A Question of Power*. 176.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 179.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 177.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 179.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 180.

<sup>16</sup>Coelho, *Veronika Decides to Die*, 29.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 127.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 34.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 97.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 34.

<sup>21</sup>Head, *A Question of Power*. 17.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 22.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 44.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 49.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 64.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 123.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 59.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 127.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 85.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 12.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 188-189.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 202.

<sup>33</sup>Coelho, *Veronika Decides to Die*, 9.

<sup>34</sup>Malvin Seeman, "On The Meaning of Alienation". *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6 (1959): 786, doi:10.2307/2088565. Accessed 05 Oct 2021.

<sup>35</sup>Coelho, *Veronika Decides to Die*, 10.

<sup>36</sup>Seeman, "On The Meaning of Alienation". 784.



<sup>37</sup>Coelho, *Veronika Decides to Die*, 9.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 146.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid, 63.



## Conclusion

Throughout our dissertation, we have tried to investigate and relate the theme of madness to two novels, namely *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head and *Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho. In doing so, we appealed to Michel Foucault's theories, specifically, the concepts developed in his book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, we provided a detailed analysis of Foucault's book by putting stress on his notions about madness and his relevance to our study in the method section.

First and foremost, by studying the author's personal lives and by connecting them to the two novels, we have seen that there is a strong connection between the authors and the novels in terms of personal life, and how each of them reflected on and interpreted madness in his own way. Moreover, by establishing parallels between the two narratives, characterization and themes, we found out that many similarities exist between the two novels.

Later on, we have tried to investigate Foucault's relevance to other places outside of the western world. To begin with, by comparing the two novels, we can say that Foucault's idea about madness being a social construct is very relevant as the results indicate that madness is not a natural disease but a judgment of society as observed in both novels. Head presents madness as a result of social pressure and judgment; her experience with a traumatic and painful childhood along with pressure from society leads her to be labeled as insane in the same way as Elizabeth. Correspondingly, Coelho expresses that being different from others can be interpreted as madness, in this sense people are labeled as mad for simply not fitting into society's standards. Moreover, Foucault's criticism of the inhuman methods used in psychiatry illustrates that individuals were forced into mental institutions against their own will and had to go through a series of horrible and inhuman treatments. The same methods appear and are very relevant in the two novels, both Head and Coelho were very critical of the methods used in mental hospitals. Last but not least, In *Madness and Civilization: A History*

of *Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Foucault points out that madness is not a disease, but a sense of alienation over time. Although the relationship between madness and alienation is manifested in both novels, Elizabeth and Veronika both experienced alienation in two different ways. Elizabeth's experience with alienation was different from the one of Veronika. Elizabeth tries by every mean to make the world accept her, even though the world kept on rejecting her by every mean. On the contrary, in *Veronika Decides to Die*, the main character's attitude throughout the story showed that, it was not the world that rejected her; it was her who rejected the world and all of the things in it.

To sum up, our study is, in no way, exhaustive as it represents one among many other perspectives for other researchers to carry on research on the two novels. Thus, students can take this study and build on to it further. Future studies could fruitfully explore the topic of madness further, based on these conclusions expanding the framework addressed in this study by studying other notions of Foucault about madness. Another perspective can be constructed in a new context as there are many other novels that could be studied with the same theoretical framework, for instance, *Nedjma* (1956) by Yacine Kateb, *Norwegian Wood* (1987) by the Japanese author Haruki Murakami, and *The Vegetarian* (2007) by the South Korean author Han Kang. The importance of these topics lies in the fact that, in today's society, it is very important to study madness in literature. Semi-biographical novels can be an interesting way to understand madness as they are written by authors who experienced mental illness. Thus, they can enhance knowledge and comprehension of this illness. As explained in the introduction, there is a general lack of understanding about madness, reading about madness will certainly bring recognition and compassion to those experiencing it and, hopefully, people will perceive madness in a more positive way thanks to the increased number of literary texts that discuss the topic.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Coelho, Paulo. *Veronika Decides to Die*. Your Book.

Head, Bessie. *A Question of Power*. Penguin books, 2011.

### Secondary Sources

Augello, Calogera. “The Complex of Narcisism Brings Veronika to Suicide? A Travel to the Discovery of the Intelligence of the Heart”. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 4, no. 3 (2017): 25–30, doi:ISSN 2356-5926. Accessed 19 Sep 2021.

Borzaga, Michela. “‘The Rediscovery of the Extraordinary’: *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head”. *Werkwinkel* 5, no. 2 (2010): 27-42.

Cappelli, Mary Louisa. “Decolonizing Female Consciousness in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*”. *Journal of the African Literature Association* 11, no. 2 (2017): 159–168, doi:10.1080/21674736.2017.1375655. Accessed 15 Aug 2021.

Ezebuilo, Hygius, and Theodor Ojiako. “Confronting The Absurd: An Analysis of Bessie Head’s *A Question Power*”, *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews* 6, no.3 (August 2016): 130– 137, dio: ISSN: 2276-8645

FathiHelaly, Mohammed. “The Marxist Aspect in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*”. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 5, no. 7 (2016): 101-109, doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.7p.101. Accessed 14 Aug 2021.

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Vintage Books, 1988, Z library.

Gover, Daniel. “Review of *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*, by Randolph Vigne”. *Research in African Literatures* 23, no. 3 (1992): 118-120, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820066>. Accessed 10 Sep 2021.

Hodder, Kevin. "Bessie Head (1937-1986)". *BlackPast.org*.3 (December 2011)

://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/head-bessie-1937-1986/

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Hogarth, 2016.

Kateb, Yacine. *Nedjma*. University Press of Virginia, 1991.

Kumar, Gaurav. "Psychological Depression, Feminism and Self-Realisation in Paulo

Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*". *Journal of Composition Theories* 12, no. 12

(2019): 133-138, doi: ISSN: 0731-6755. Accessed 21 Sep 2021.

Morais, Fernando. *Paulo Coelho: A Warrior's Life: The Authorized Biography*. 1St

Edition, HarperOne, 2009. Z library.

Murakami, Haruki. *Norwegian Wood*. Later Printing, Vintage Books, 2021.

Rissmiller, David. J and Joshua H. Rissmiller, "Evolution of the Antipsychiatry Movement

into Mental Health Consumerism"*Psychiatric Services*57, no. 6 (June 2006): 863-866.

doi:10.1176/ps.2006.57.6.863.

Russell, Noyes. "The Taboo of Suicide". *Psychiatry* 31, no. 2 (1968): 173–83.

doi:10.1080/00332747.1968.11023545. Accessed 29 Sep 2021.

Seeman, Melvin. "On The Meaning of Alienation". *American Sociological Review*24, no. 6

(1959): 783–91, doi:10.2307/2088565. Accessed 05 Oct 2021.

Vasuki, R.C. "A Psychoanalysis of The Protagonist in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to*

*Die*". *The Journal for English Language and Literary Studies*6, no. 1 (2016): 32-36,

doi: ISSN 2249 – 216X. Accessed, 22 Sep 2021.