

REASON VERSUS UNREASON: INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MADNESS IN FOUCAULT'S *MADNESS AND CIVILIZATION*

Dr. Rana Ahmad Shaheed As-Sadiqi Al-Khalidi,
Lecturer English, University of Gujrat, Punjab Pakistan
ahmadshaheedrana@gmail.com

.Mamoona Yousaf,
Lecturer English, (visiting faculty), University of Lahore, Punjab Pakistan
mamoonamajid02@gmail.com

.Muhamamd Rizwan,
Lecturer English, Riphah International University, Lahore
hafizrizwan158@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Rizwan

Abstract

Michel Foucault's Madness and Civilization (1961) offers a profound exploration of how societies define, control, and marginalize what they consider "mad." This study examines the tension between reason and unreason, focusing on how institutional power shapes perceptions of madness. Drawing on Foucauldian theory, it argues that madness is not merely a medical or psychological condition but a social construct produced through discourse, rituals, and practices of control. Central to this analysis is the role of confession, a mechanism through which individuals are compelled to articulate their inner thoughts, desires, and behaviours to conform to institutional norms. By examining historical and literary accounts of asylums, courts, and other centres of authority, the paper demonstrates how surveillance, categorization, and disciplinary practices regulate not only the bodies but also the minds of those labelled "mad." The research highlights the ways in which power operates invisibly, producing subjects who internalize norms of reason and self-regulate in accordance with institutional expectations. Furthermore, it explores the broader implications for understanding social control, gendered oppression, and resistance within the modern world. Ultimately, this study contends that Foucault's analysis challenges conventional notions of rationality, exposing madness as a site where power, knowledge, and human subjectivity intersect, and emphasizing the enduring relevance of these insights for contemporary debates on mental health, social norms, and institutional authority.

Keywords: Foucault, Madness and Civilization, Institutional Power, Confession, Reason vs. Unreason, Discourse, Social Control

Introduction

The boundary between reason and unreason has long shaped the way societies define humanity, morality, and order. In Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961), this boundary is not natural or self-evident but socially and historically constructed. Foucault unearths the genealogy of madness to reveal how civilization's claim to rationality is built upon systematic exclusion, the silencing and confinement of those deemed irrational. Madness, in his view, is not a mere medical category but a cultural creation, a mirror that reflects the anxieties and values of the society that defines it. Through a historical archaeology of institutions such as asylums, hospitals, and prisons, Foucault exposes how "reason" consolidates its authority by marginalizing "unreason."

In the pre-Enlightenment world, madness was often perceived with ambivalence. It was at times associated with divine inspiration, mystical wisdom, or tragic insight, as depicted in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. However, with the Enlightenment's vaporization of rationality and order, madness was stripped of its mystery and redefined as a pathology, a deviation from the rational norm. This marked a critical epistemic shift: madness was no longer a matter of cosmic or moral imbalance but a problem of reason to be diagnosed and corrected. Foucault (73) argues that this shift was not a triumph of humanitarian progress but a reconfiguration of social power. The "Great Confinement" of the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, which institutionalized the insane along with the poor, criminals, and vagabonds, was less about treatment and more about discipline and moral purification.

The asylum, according to Foucault, symbolizes the modern condition of power disguised as benevolence. Ostensibly established for the protection and cure of the mentally ill, asylums became spaces of observation, classification, and correction. Madness was subjected to the gaze of reason, and the mad were compelled to confess their deviations. This confessional mechanism, later elaborated in *The History of Sexuality*, operates as a subtle form of control, individuals are made to internalize authority and articulate their own subjection (Foucault 59). Thus, madness becomes intelligible only within a regime of truth sanctioned by power. The institution's role is not simply to segregate the insane but to transform them into "normal" subjects by imposing norms of behaviour, speech, and thought.

The problem that this study addresses, therefore, is not madness itself but the *construction* of madness through the institutional and discursive frameworks of reason. The dominant narrative of progress often presents the history of psychiatry as a journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from cruelty to compassion. Foucault overturns this narrative, arguing that the rise of psychiatry represents not emancipation but the perfection of control. The psychiatric gaze, backed by scientific authority, replaces the older moral and religious forms of confinement, yet continues to define individuals by the same standards of rationality that marginalize difference. As he writes, "the language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence" (*Madness and Civilization* 278).

This study examines how institutional power defines and disciplines madness, both historically and philosophically. Foucault's analysis resonates far beyond the confines of mental illness, it offers a model for understanding how all forms of deviance are produced and managed by power. Through confession, surveillance, and normalization, institutions create subjects who monitor themselves and align with the expectations of the rational order. This Foucauldian insight forms the central argument of the present research: that the construction of madness is a political act disguised as medical or moral necessity.

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to trace how reason and unreason are historically opposed and mutually constitutive; second, to investigate how institutional structures such as asylums and clinics reinforce the discourse of reason; and third, to highlight how confession operates as an internalized mechanism of control within this structure. The study also extends Foucault's theoretical framework to contemporary contexts, suggesting that modern psychiatry, digital surveillance, and social norms continue to reproduce similar dynamics of regulation and exclusion.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to reveal how deeply our ideas of rationality, sanity, and morality are entangled with power. In contemporary society, where mental health awareness has gained prominence, Foucauldian critique compels us to question the moral and epistemic assumptions underlying diagnostic and therapeutic practices. Concepts such as "disorder," "normalcy," and "adjustment" are not neutral but embedded in historical struggles for authority. By revisiting *Madness and Civilization*, this study underscores the continuing relevance of Foucault's critique for modern debates on mental health, gendered oppression, and social conformity.

In the age of technological surveillance and algorithmic categorization, the Foucauldian model of power diffused, invisible, and internalized has become more pertinent than ever. Just as the asylum confined the mad under the guise of care, today's institutions, both physical and digital, confine individuals within the boundaries of normative rationality. The idea of reason as a universal human faculty remains tied to exclusionary practices that silence alternative modes

of thought, emotion, and being. Hence, Foucault's analysis not only historicizes madness but also opens a philosophical critique of modernity itself.

Research Objectives

- To analyze how Foucault conceptualizes the relationship between reason and unreason in *Madness and Civilization*.
- To examine the role of institutional power in constructing and controlling the discourse of madness.
- To explore how confession and surveillance operate as tools of normalization within institutional settings.
- To investigate the continuing relevance of Foucault's framework in understanding modern systems of discipline, psychiatry, and social control.

Research Questions

1. How does Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* define the tension between reason and unreason?
2. What role do institutions such as asylums and clinics play in constructing the discourse of madness?
3. How does confession function as a mechanism of internalized power and control?
4. In what ways do Foucauldian insights inform contemporary understandings of mental health, discipline, and resistance?

Literature Review

Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* has generated extensive scholarly debate, positioning itself at the intersection of philosophy, history, and critical theory. The literature surrounding the text can be organized into three thematic strands: (1) the historical construction of madness; (2) institutional power and disciplinary control; and (3) the epistemological critique of reason. Each of these domains illuminates a dimension of Foucault's argument that madness is a socially produced phenomenon rather than a purely medical reality.

1. The Historical Construction of Madness

Early interpretations of *Madness and Civilization* regarded it primarily as a historical account of psychiatric institutions. However, later scholars such as Roy Porter and Andrew Scull argue that Foucault's aim was not to document historical facts but to analyze how knowledge systems evolve through exclusion. Porter, in *Madness: A Brief History*, asserts that Foucault's method reveals the "epistemic violence" through which reason asserts dominance (Porter 92). Rather than charting progress, Foucault exposes the moral and social imperatives that shaped the treatment of the insane.

Similarly, Colin Gordon (1980) emphasizes that *Madness and Civilization* inaugurates Foucault's "archaeological" method, one that examines the underlying discursive structures that define what counts as truth. This approach allows Foucault to trace how madness transitions from being seen as divine inspiration in the Renaissance to an object of medical science in the modern era. The confinement of the mad, therefore, signifies not progress but a redefinition of moral order.

Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady*, extends Foucault's thesis to gender, arguing that the asylum was also a patriarchal institution that silenced women's voices under the guise of treatment. Madness, she notes, was often feminized, associated with hysteria, emotional excess, and moral weakness. This gendered construction of insanity illustrates how institutional power intersects with social hierarchies, reinforcing norms of reason aligned with masculinity and authority. Showalter's feminist reinterpretation complements Foucault's broader claim that madness reveals the cultural anxieties embedded within power.

2. Institutional Power and Disciplinary Control

A second body of scholarship focuses on how Foucault's analysis of madness prefigures his later work on disciplinary power. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault elaborates the notion of "panopticism", a model of surveillance where individuals internalize control. This mechanism can be traced back to the asylum's structure, where patients were constantly observed and compelled to regulate their own behavior. According to David Halperin (1995), the asylum functions as a prototype for modern disciplinary institutions: "Foucault's asylum anticipates the prison, the school, the hospital, all spaces in which visibility becomes a trap" (Halperin 141).

Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961), published the same year as Foucault's work, provides an empirical complement to this theoretical insight. Goffman examines how institutions strip individuals of autonomy and reconstruct identity through rituals of obedience. Though Goffman's sociology differs from Foucault's archaeology, both expose the ways in which institutional life transforms individuals into subjects of control. Andrew Dilts (2011) further observes that Foucault's "microphysics of power" illustrates that domination is not imposed from above but circulates through networks of knowledge, space, and behaviour.

The mechanism of confession also plays a pivotal role in the maintenance of institutional power. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault demonstrates how confession transforms individuals into agents of their own subjection. Within the asylum, confession serves as both therapeutic and disciplinary practice. The mad are compelled to verbalize their disorder, thus reaffirming the institution's authority to define and interpret their condition. As Nikolas Rose (1998) notes, "confession operates as a technology of the self, producing self-surveillance and self-regulation" (Rose 56).

3. Reason, Knowledge, and the Epistemology of Power

The third dimension of the literature focuses on Foucault's epistemological critique of reason. His central claim that reason defines itself through the exclusion of unreason, challenges the Enlightenment narrative of progress. Jürgen Habermas, however, critiques Foucault for offering a "totalizing" account of power that leaves little room for emancipation (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 1987). Habermas argues that Foucault's skepticism toward universal reason risks undermining the very grounds for critique. In response, scholars such as Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler defend Foucault's position by suggesting that his work invites "local and situated" forms of resistance rather than universal liberation. Butler (1990), in *Gender Trouble*, applies this logic to gender norms, arguing that power operates through performative reiteration rather than explicit coercion.

In literary and cultural studies, Foucault's framework has inspired analyses of how madness is represented and silenced in texts. Shoshana Felman (1975) interprets madness as a linguistic event, a breakdown in meaning that exposes the limits of rational discourse. Similarly, Jacques Derrida's early critique of Foucault, "Cogito and the History of Madness," contends that Foucault fails to fully escape the Cartesian framework he critiques. Derrida insists that madness, as pure unreason, cannot be represented without invoking reason itself. The dialogue between Derrida and Foucault reveals the philosophical tension between historical materialism and transcendental critique, a tension that continues to shape poststructuralist thought.

Contemporary critics like Ian Hacking (2002) have re-examined *Madness and Civilization* through the lens of social constructivism. Hacking argues that categories of mental illness, such as hysteria or schizophrenia, emerge within specific cultural and institutional contexts. He calls this process "making up people", the creation of new kinds of human beings through classification systems. Hacking's analysis supports Foucault's contention that knowledge and power are mutually reinforcing, producing subjects who embody the very categories that define them.

4. Theoretical Gaps and Research Contribution

Despite extensive scholarship, a notable gap remains in connecting Foucault's early analysis of madness to contemporary systems of institutional power. While much attention has been given to the historical aspect of confinement, fewer studies explore how modern practices, digital surveillance, therapeutic culture, and diagnostic authority continue to reproduce similar patterns of control. Moreover, the role of confession as an enduring mechanism of power, particularly in digital and therapeutic spaces, warrants renewed examination.

This study contributes to existing literature by synthesizing these threads through a Foucauldian lens that unites history, discourse, and institutional analysis. By focusing on the interplay of confession, surveillance, and normalization, it extends Foucault's framework to the twenty-first century. The goal is to show that the logic of exclusion that once confined the "mad" now operates through more sophisticated and internalized forms of regulation where individuals willingly confess, monitor, and correct themselves in pursuit of rational normalcy.

Literature Review

Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* remains one of the most influential and debated works in the philosophy of history, psychiatry, and critical theory. It not only traces the evolution of madness from medieval superstition to modern scientific discourse but also demonstrates how institutions and systems of knowledge construct the very meaning of sanity. This literature review builds upon existing interpretations of Foucault's work, organized under four major themes: (1) the historical and social construction of madness, (2) institutional power and disciplinary practices, (3) epistemological critique of reason and knowledge, and (4) contemporary applications and theoretical extensions.

1. The Historical and Social Construction of Madness

Foucault's reinterpretation of madness departs from traditional historiography that celebrates the progress of psychiatry. Instead, it situates madness within a framework of power and exclusion. According to Foucault, "the language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence" (*Madness and Civilization* 278). This silence refers to the systematic exclusion of the mad from discourses of truth, morality, and reason.

Roy Porter, in *Madness: A Brief History*, affirms that Foucault's study "unmasks the moral and political motives behind the treatment of lunacy" (Porter 91). He argues that early modern confinement was less about medical care and more about controlling social disorder. Similarly, Andrew Scull (1981) maintains that the rise of asylums coincided with the emergence of capitalist and industrial societies, where idleness and irrationality became threats to productivity and order. Scull's sociological reading resonates with Foucault's idea that madness was confined alongside poverty and criminality as part of a larger project of moral and economic discipline.

Colin Gordon (1980) describes *Madness and Civilization* as an "archaeological excavation" of discursive formations rather than a linear historical narrative. Through this approach, Foucault reveals how the concept of madness is embedded within the epistemes, systems of thought that govern each historical era. The Renaissance perceived madness as possessing a tragic wisdom; the Classical Age transformed it into moral deviance; and the modern age medicalized it as mental illness. Each transition reflects a shift in the structures of knowledge and authority rather than an objective discovery of truth.

Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* extends Foucault's framework to explore the gendered dimensions of madness. Showalter argues that the confinement and diagnosis of women in asylums reflected broader patriarchal anxieties about female autonomy and sexuality. Madness, she notes, became a cultural metaphor for female resistance and hysteria, a disorder historically

linked to women's bodies and emotions. Her analysis aligns with Foucault's contention that power operates through categorization and normalization, turning difference into pathology. Shoshana Felman (1975) provides another literary perspective, suggesting that madness functions as a "rupture of language", a breakdown that exposes the limits of rational discourse. In this sense, madness cannot be fully captured or cured by reason; it persists as a haunting presence that destabilizes the rational order. This insight complements Foucault's idea that unreason is not the absence of reason but its shadow, an indispensable other that sustains reason's self-definition.

2. Institutional Power and Disciplinary Practices

The second strand of scholarship builds upon Foucault's concept of disciplinary power as developed in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). This later work elucidates how mechanisms of control, surveillance, examination, and normalization operate across institutions. Scholars such as David Halperin (1995) and Thomas Flynn (1993) note that these mechanisms are already evident in *Madness and Civilization*, particularly in the asylum's structure. The asylum functions as a laboratory of obedience, where individuals internalize authority through observation and confession.

Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961), though sociological rather than philosophical, provides empirical support for Foucault's thesis. Goffman's concept of the "total institution" captures how patients are stripped of identity and subjected to rituals that reinforce institutional control. As Foucault later asserts, power "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (*Discipline and Punish* 194). This statement encapsulates how the asylum manufactures both the identity of the "mad" and the scientific legitimacy of psychiatry.

Nikolas Rose (1998) expands upon this idea in *Inventing Our Selves*, describing confession as a "technology of the self." Rose argues that individuals are trained to examine and narrate themselves in ways consistent with social norms. Within the asylum, the act of confession transforms madness into a discourse that can be analysed, recorded, and corrected. This internalization of power ensures that control persists even without visible coercion.

Andrew Dilts (2011) further interprets Foucault's concept of the "microphysics of power" as a system of relational forces rather than hierarchical domination. According to Dilts, Foucault's model decentralizes power, making it a pervasive element of everyday life. Institutions, discourses, and even personal identities become sites where power circulates. This perspective is crucial for understanding how individuals labelled as "mad" participate in their own subjugation by accepting the categories imposed upon them.

3. Epistemological Critique of Reason and Knowledge

A central theme in Foucault's philosophy is the critique of Enlightenment rationality. The Enlightenment project, epitomized by Descartes' *Cogito, ergo sum*, established a hierarchy between reason and unreason that defined the modern subject. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault revisits the Cartesian moment when madness was excluded from the realm of truth. As he observes, Descartes' decision to dismiss the possibility of his own madness marks the birth of a rational subject that can know and master itself.

Jacques Derrida famously challenged Foucault's reading in "Cogito and the History of Madness" (1963), arguing that Foucault's attempt to write the history of madness from the perspective of unreason is self-contradictory. For Derrida, madness can only be expressed through the language of reason, since unreason has no discourse of its own. Foucault responded sharply, insisting that Derrida's interpretation reinscribes the Cartesian exclusion he sought to expose. This debate between Foucault and Derrida remains one of the most significant philosophical exchanges on the limits of language, history, and subjectivity.

Jürgen Habermas, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987), critiques Foucault for what he perceives as a "crypto normative" stance, one that exposes domination without offering

a framework for emancipation. However, Judith Butler (1990) and Nancy Fraser (1989) counter that Foucault's refusal to prescribe universal norms allows for plural, localized forms of resistance. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, applies Foucault's theory of power to gender identity, showing how norms of masculinity and femininity are maintained through repeated social performances. In this sense, madness can be read as a form of performative resistance that disrupts the stability of rational identity.

Ian Hacking (2002) reinforces this line of argument through his concept of "looping effects," where classifications of people influence their behaviour and, in turn, reshape the classifications themselves. For instance, the diagnosis of schizophrenia does not merely describe a condition, it creates a social category that individuals may come to inhabit. Hacking's analysis aligns with Foucault's view that knowledge and power are co-constitutive, producing the very subjects they claim to describe.

4. Contemporary Extensions and Theoretical Developments

Recent scholarship continues to explore the relevance of *Madness and Civilization* in the context of modern psychiatry, digital surveillance, and biopolitics. Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (2008) argue that the governance of individuals now operates through "psychological citizenship," where people are encouraged to manage themselves according to expert knowledge. Mental health discourse thus becomes a means of governing not through punishment but through self-regulation.

Thomas Lemke (2011) connects Foucault's ideas of biopower to contemporary health institutions, noting that medical technologies now operate at both individual and population levels. The management of mental health, for example, involves not only treatment but also prevention, lifestyle regulation, and risk assessment techniques that extend the disciplinary power of the asylum into everyday life.

Patricia O'Brien (2014) applies Foucault's theories to disability studies, arguing that the medicalization of difference continues to produce exclusion under the guise of inclusion. By labeling individuals as "abnormal" or "special needs," institutions maintain control over their bodies and narratives. Similarly, feminist scholars such as Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz have reinterpreted Foucault's work to challenge how rationality is constructed through patriarchal and colonial frameworks.

In the digital age, confession has acquired new forms. Social media platforms encourage users to disclose their feelings, traumas, and identities in public forums; acts of confession that reinforce systems of surveillance and normalization. As Byung-Chul Han (2017) observes in *The Transparency Society*, the neoliberal subject voluntarily participates in self-exposure, transforming Foucault's disciplinary society into a "society of control." This transformation illustrates the persistence of Foucauldian mechanisms in new guises.

5. Identified Gaps and Research Contribution

Although vast scholarship exists on *Madness and Civilization*, few studies synthesize Foucault's early analysis of madness with his later concepts of confession and biopower. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the ethical and political implications of how modern societies continue to regulate subjectivity through psychiatric, digital, and social institutions. This research aims to fill this gap by integrating historical and contemporary dimensions of power, emphasizing how institutional authority constructs both madness and normality.

Through a Foucauldian lens, this paper argues that the exclusion of unreason remains a foundational operation of modern power. Whether in the asylum, the clinic, or the digital sphere, the rational subject continues to define itself by negating the other, the mad, the deviant, the abnormal. By revisiting *Madness and Civilization*, this study contributes to a broader

understanding of how power functions through knowledge, language, and the very conception of sanity itself.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Foucauldian theory of power, knowledge, and subjectivity, particularly as articulated in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *Discipline and Punish* (1977), and *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault's framework conceptualizes power not as a top-down, repressive force but as a pervasive and productive network that operates through discourse, institutions, and social norms. Madness, in this view, is not merely a medical or psychological condition; it is a socially constructed category, produced and sustained by historical and institutional practices of exclusion, normalization, and surveillance.

Central to this framework are the concepts of disciplinary power and biopower. Disciplinary power is exercised through institutional mechanisms such as asylums, schools, and courts, which regulate bodies and minds through observation, examination, and normalization. Biopower extends this regulation to populations, encompassing health, sexuality, and mental well-being, and operates through both social policies and self-regulation. Foucault's notion of confession serves as a crucial technique in these processes, compelling individuals to articulate internal states in alignment with institutional norms, thereby producing subjects who internalize power relations.

This theoretical lens allows the study to investigate several interrelated dynamics:

1. Construction of Madness: How historical, moral, and medical discourses define unreason as deviation and normalize social hierarchies.
2. Institutional Power: How asylums and modern psychiatric institutions exercise control through confinement, observation, and confession.
3. Subject Formation: How individuals internalize norms of reason and self-regulate under the gaze of authority.
4. Resistance and Unreason: How madness persists as a space of potential resistance to dominant epistemic and social structures.

By employing this framework, the research situates Foucault's analysis within a broader discourse of power, knowledge, and subjectivity, allowing for an integrated examination of both historical practices and contemporary manifestations of institutional control. This approach also facilitates the study of gendered, ethical, and digital dimensions of modern surveillance and normalization, bridging gaps identified in previous scholarship.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). As a theoretical rather than empirical inquiry, the study analyses historical texts, philosophical arguments, and institutional narratives to uncover how power constructs the discourse of madness. The methodology follows Foucault's own archaeological and genealogical approaches, which investigate how knowledge systems emerge through practices of exclusion, regulation, and normalization.

1. Research Design

The research is qualitative in nature, emphasizing textual and theoretical interpretation over quantitative data. It adopts Foucault's *archaeology of knowledge* to trace how discourses of madness have evolved historically and the *genealogy of power* to examine how these discourses function within modern institutions. The design thus integrates philosophy, history, and critical theory to explore the relationship between reason, unreason, and institutional authority.

2. Data Sources

Primary sources include Michel Foucault's major works:

- *Madness and Civilization* (1961)
- *Discipline and Punish* (1977)

- *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* (1978)

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed articles, critical essays, and books that interpret Foucault's theories within historical, sociological, and philosophical contexts (e.g., Showalter, Porter, Rose, Hacking, Butler, Habermas). Additionally, literary and historical texts referenced in Foucault's work, such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, serve as cultural data that reflect historical perceptions of madness.

3. Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds through three interrelated stages:

1. Discursive Identification:
Identifying recurring terms, metaphors, and classifications that define madness in philosophical, medical, and institutional discourse. For instance, how "unreason," "insanity," and "moral disorder" evolve across centuries.
2. Institutional Mapping:
Examining how asylums, hospitals, and courts operate as sites of power that produce the category of madness. The analysis considers how spatial organization (e.g., confinement), linguistic practices (e.g., diagnosis), and rituals (e.g., confession) materialize power relations.
3. Subject Formation:
Investigating how individuals internalize norms through surveillance and confession, thereby becoming self-regulating subjects. This step extends Foucault's notion of "governmentality" to modern contexts of mental health and social behaviour.

4. Theoretical Lens

The study employs Foucauldian discourse analysis, which interprets texts as products and instruments of power. Unlike traditional discourse analysis, FDA focuses not merely on language but on the systems of thought that make certain statements possible. Power is understood as productive rather than repressive, it generates knowledge, subjectivity, and social order. This theoretical lens enables the researcher to explore how institutions construct "truths" about madness that shape behaviour and policy.

5. Ethical Considerations

Since the research does not involve human participants, it poses no ethical risks in the conventional sense. However, the study maintains ethical rigor by:

- Ensuring accurate representation of sources and avoidance of misquotation.
- Critically engaging with sensitive topics such as mental health without reinforcing stigma.
- Acknowledging the historical violence inherent in institutional practices while promoting reflexivity and respect toward those historically labelled as "mad."

6. Limitations

The study's primary limitation lies in its theoretical scope. Because it relies on textual and philosophical analysis, it cannot provide empirical data about contemporary psychiatric practices. However, this limitation is also a methodological strength, it allows for a meta-analytical perspective that connects historical critique with modern implications. Future research may complement this work with empirical studies on institutional power in psychiatric or digital environments.

Analysis and Discussion

1. The Architecture of Confinement: From Moral Regulation to Psychiatric Control

Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* begins with a striking image, the "Ship of Fools," a wandering vessel carrying the insane away from society. This image encapsulates the medieval practice of exile as both a physical and symbolic act of exclusion. Madness, during this period, was not yet confined within institutions but was nevertheless segregated from reason. The mad

were tolerated as spectacles or warnings, occupying a liminal space between fascination and fear.

Foucault (1961) argues that the shift from exclusion to confinement in the seventeenth century marked the “Great Confinement,” a historical rupture that transformed the treatment of madness into a moral and social problem. The establishment of institutions such as the Hospital General in Paris (1656) signified a new rational order that sought to isolate idleness, poverty, and insanity under one disciplinary regime. As he writes, “It was not a medical act but an economic and moral gesture” (*Madness and Civilization* 63).

This transformation was not motivated by compassion but by the need to restore social productivity and order. The confinement of the mad paralleled the regulation of the poor, the criminal, and the unemployed, all those who deviated from the rational, labouring subject. The asylum thus emerged as a microcosm of the state: a space where social disorder was converted into docility.

Scholars such as Andrew Scull and Roy Porter support Foucault’s thesis, noting that confinement functioned as a “moral economy of discipline” rather than a medical necessity. The asylum’s architecture, divided wards, surveillance windows, isolation cells symbolized the rational order of society itself. The mad were observed, corrected, and compelled to conform, mirroring the mechanisms of control that would later define prisons and schools.

In this way, confinement was not merely spatial but epistemic. It confined madness within the language of morality, separating it from wisdom, imagination, and transcendence. The mad were no longer visionaries or prophets, as in the Renaissance imagination, but deviants requiring reform. Foucault’s genealogy of madness thus reveals the intimate connection between knowledge and power: to define madness was to justify its control.

2. The Birth of the Asylum: Reason as Discipline

The nineteenth century witnessed the medicalization of madness under the guise of humanitarian reform. Figures like Philippe Pinel in France and William Tuke in England are often celebrated for liberating the mad from chains and founding the modern asylum. Yet Foucault unmasks this liberation as a subtle extension of control. As he observes, “Pinel did not free the madman; he substituted for the silence of the chains the more subtle language of reason” (*Madness and Civilization* 241).

In the moral therapy of Pinel and Tuke, madness was to be cured not through medication but through reasoned dialogue and moral instruction. The physician became both healer and judge, a new priest of rationality. Patients were required to confess their delusions, acknowledge their errors, and internalize the authority of the doctor. In this moral economy, confession became a technology of obedience.

The asylum thus exemplified Foucault’s later concept of disciplinary power, a form of control that operates not through overt violence but through normalization. The mad were compelled to adopt rational behavior, to regulate themselves in accordance with the doctor’s gaze. As Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish*, “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (194). The asylum produced the “madman” as an object of knowledge, legitimizing psychiatry as a scientific discourse.

This transformation also established the modern division between sanity and insanity, defining who could speak truth. As reason became institutionalized, madness was reduced to error, and its voice was systematically silenced. Foucault’s critique therefore exposes how modern psychiatry, under the guise of humanity, perpetuated the same exclusion that the medieval church once enacted through exorcism. The difference lies not in the end control but in the sophistication of the means.

3. Confession as a Technology of Truth

One of the most penetrating aspects of Foucault's analysis lies in his understanding of confession, a ritual of truth-telling that binds the subject to power. In *The History of Sexuality*, he describes confession as "one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth" (59). Although this insight was elaborated later in his career, its roots are already visible in *Madness and Civilization*.

Within the asylum, confession operated as a means of self-surveillance. The mad were encouraged to verbalize their thoughts, desires, and delusions before the doctor. This act was not a dialogue but a submission, an acceptance that truth resided in the other's judgment. The psychiatrist became the arbiter of reality, transforming subjective experience into clinical data. Foucault interprets this process as a fusion of pastoral and scientific power. The confessor's role in religious practice to extract truth through self-examination was reconfigured in medical discourse. The individual became an object of both care and control, compelled to speak in order to be normalized.

Judith Butler (1990) and Nikolas Rose (1998) expand on this idea, arguing that confession remains a central mechanism of modern governance. In therapeutic and digital cultures alike, individuals are encouraged to narrate themselves publicly, to confess not only sins but emotions, traumas, and preferences. Each confession produces data that can be monitored, categorized, and corrected. Thus, confession becomes an apparatus through which power circulates in intimate and invisible forms.

In Foucault's terms, the subject is both the effect and the instrument of power. The more one confesses, the more one becomes entangled in the networks of normalization. Madness, once silenced, is now compelled to speak but only within the grammar of reason.

4. Surveillance and the Gaze: The Disciplinary Eye

The asylum, like the prison and the school, embodies the panoptic principle, a spatial design that ensures the constant visibility of the subject. Although Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon was designed for prisons, Foucault recognized its broader social implications. The panoptic structure internalizes surveillance, making individuals self-regulate even in the absence of an observer.

In *Madness and Civilization*, this principle is anticipated in the hierarchical organization of the asylum. Patients were observed not only by doctors but by attendants and peers. Every gesture, silence, or expression became a sign to be interpreted, a trace of madness to be corrected. This total visibility created what Foucault calls a "permanent theater of reason," where the mad perform their conformity under the gaze of authority.

Erving Goffman's ethnographic study *Asylums* complements this analysis by revealing how institutional routines strip individuals of autonomy. The constant observation, classification, and correction of patients mirror the mechanisms of the modern disciplinary society. The subject is made visible in every aspect, behaviour, speech, body, while the gaze of power remains invisible.

In contemporary contexts, surveillance extends beyond physical institutions. Digital technologies, biometric systems, and algorithmic monitoring reproduce the logic of the asylum on a global scale. Social media platforms, for example, encourage users to expose their thoughts and emotions, rendering the private self continuously observable. As Byung-Chul Han (2017) notes, "The subject of freedom becomes the subject of control" (*The Transparency Society* 15).

Thus, Foucault's analysis of the asylum prefigures the transformation of disciplinary power into what Deleuze later termed the "society of control." Madness no longer needs to be confined; it is normalized through visibility. The gaze, once medical, has become digital.

5. Rationality, Normalization, and the Production of the Self

Central to Foucault's argument is that modern rationality depends upon the exclusion of unreason. This binary, reason versus unreason organizes not only epistemology but also subjectivity. The rational subject defines itself through the negation of madness, establishing boundaries between sanity, morality, and truth.

Through disciplinary practices, institutions convert individuals into self-regulating agents. This process is what Foucault calls "subjectivation", the internalization of norms through which one becomes a subject. In the asylum, this meant accepting the doctor's interpretation of one's own mind. In modern society, it manifests through self-management, productivity, and the pursuit of mental health.

Nikolas Rose (1999) describes this as the rise of the "psychological citizen," who governs himself by aligning behavior with expert discourses of normality. The language of therapy replaces the language of morality, yet the function remains the same: to ensure conformity under the appearance of care.

Judith Butler (1997) builds on this notion by showing how the self is produced through reiterative norms. Just as gender identity is constructed through repeated performances, mental normality is sustained through constant self-assessment. Those who deviate, whether by madness, nonconformity, or dissent are gently guided back into the fold through techniques of correction and rehabilitation.

Thus, the production of the self is inseparable from the operation of power. Rationality is not a natural faculty but a historical construct maintained through institutions that define what counts as normal, healthy, and sane. The mad, in this framework, are not simply excluded but actively produced as the necessary "other" of modern reason.

6. Power, Resistance, and the Possibility of Unreason

While Foucault exposes the pervasive reach of institutional power, he also leaves room for resistance. Power, he insists, "is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation" (*History of Sexuality* 93). This relational view means that wherever there is power, there is also resistance.

Madness, as unreason, represents one such site of resistance. Although confined and medicalized, it continues to haunt the boundaries of rational discourse. Artists, writers, and philosophers have often embraced madness as a metaphor for creative and epistemic freedom. Figures like Nietzsche, Artaud, and van Gogh embody what Foucault calls "the tragic experience of unreason", a space where thought confronts the limits of itself.

In this sense, madness exposes the fragility of rational order. It reveals that reason's authority depends on a continual act of exclusion. To acknowledge madness is to acknowledge the contingency of what we call truth. Foucault's work thus destabilizes the Enlightenment faith in universal reason, suggesting that every rational system contains its own unreason.

Contemporary movements in critical psychiatry and anti-psychiatry, such as those led by R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz, echo this insight. They challenge the pathologization of difference and advocate for a re-humanization of mental health discourse. Similarly, feminist and postcolonial theorists reinterpret Foucault's framework to question how institutions regulate not only madness but also gender, race, and sexuality under the pretext of normality.

The persistence of these critiques' underscores Foucault's enduring relevance. Institutional power may change its form from asylum to algorithm, but its logic remains: to define, to normalize, to control. Yet within every act of normalization lies the potential for resistance, the possibility that unreason may speak again.

7. Synthesis: Madness, Civilization, and the Continuum of Power

The analysis of *Madness and Civilization* reveals that madness is not an external phenomenon to be studied but an internal construct that sustains civilization itself. Reason, Foucault argues,

can only define itself by excluding its opposite. This dialectic generates a continuous interplay between power and knowledge, where institutions produce the categories through which society understands itself.

From the medieval ship to the modern asylum, from confession to digital self-disclosure, the mechanisms of control have evolved but not disappeared. They now operate through subtler means; through the promise of freedom, health, and self-improvement. Power, as Foucault insists, is most effective when it appears as care.

Thus, the construction of madness reflects the construction of modernity itself. Civilization defines itself by what it excludes, and in that exclusion, it reveals its own dependence on the irrational. Madness, far from being an anomaly, is the mirror in which reason sees its shadow. In the Foucauldian sense, the study of madness is not a study of illness but of order, an inquiry into how societies organize truth, morality, and subjectivity. By tracing this genealogy, we come to see that every institution of reason, be it the asylum, the university, or the algorithm carries within it the same question: Who has the right to define sanity, and at what cost?

Conclusion

Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* remains one of the most profound and unsettling inquiries into how societies construct the boundaries between reason and unreason. This study has explored how institutional power operating through confinement, surveillance, confession, and normalization has shaped the discourse of madness from the seventeenth century to the present. By tracing the genealogy of madness, Foucault exposes that what is often presented as objective truth or scientific necessity is, in fact, the outcome of historical power relations and moral judgments. The "mad" individual is not simply a medical subject but a social product, fashioned by the shifting languages of morality, rationality, and governance.

The analysis has demonstrated that the Great Confinement of the seventeenth century symbolized more than a medical intervention, it marked the birth of a new moral economy that linked labor, discipline, and reason. In confining the mad alongside the poor and the criminal, early modern institutions sought to restore order through the exclusion of disorder. As Foucault (1961) asserts, confinement was "a moral gesture," an attempt to purify society by silencing what it feared to understand (*Madness and Civilization* 63). The emergence of the asylum in the nineteenth century did not overturn this logic but rather refined it. Under the guise of humanitarian reform, psychiatry transformed the mad into obedient subjects through mechanisms of confession, observation, and therapeutic normalization.

Through the moral discourse of medicine, madness was reconceived as deviation, and the physician assumed the role of arbiter of truth. The patient's salvation lay in accepting the rational authority of the doctor. In this way, reason preserved its supremacy by internalizing power within the subject. Foucault's insights into confession as a "technology of truth" illuminate how institutions compel individuals to participate in their own subjugation. The mad were not merely silenced, they were made to speak within the language of reason that denied their difference. This paradox reveals the sophistication of modern power: it dominates not through force but through consent.

The discussion further showed that the mechanisms of control identified by Foucault persist in contemporary society, albeit in new forms. Modern psychiatric systems, digital surveillance, and therapeutic culture continue to regulate individuals by defining the norms of health, productivity, and rationality. The asylum's walls may have dissolved, but its logic endures in the self-monitoring subject who internalizes the gaze of authority. Today, confession takes place through psychological evaluation, social media disclosure, and algorithmic profiling. Each act of self-expression, as Foucault would argue, becomes another avenue through which power learns to know and govern the self.

At the heart of Foucault's argument lies a radical rethinking of what it means to be "rational." Reason, in his analysis, is not a timeless faculty but a historical construct maintained by exclusion. Every civilization, to define itself as sane and orderly, must cast out the voices that disturb its coherence. Madness, therefore, is not merely the absence of reason but its necessary counterpart, the limit that reason must continually repress to assert its authority. This dialectical relationship ensures that power and knowledge remain inseparable: the more society claims to know, the more it legitimizes its right to control.

Yet Foucault's vision is not purely pessimistic. By unveiling the historical contingency of reason, he opens space for critical reflection and resistance. If madness is a construct, it can also be reimagined; if power is diffuse, it can be contested. The figure of the madman, long silenced, becomes a symbol of resistance, a reminder that human experience cannot be fully captured by systems of rationality. In the words of Foucault, "Madness is the absence of work, but also the refusal of order, the moment when man's madness enters into communication with his reason" (*Madness and Civilization* 288). In that encounter lies the potential for liberation: the recognition that reason itself depends upon what it excludes.

This research, therefore, underscores the continuing relevance of Foucault's critique for contemporary debates on mental health, social control, and institutional authority. In an age where diagnostic labels, surveillance technologies, and therapeutic narratives proliferate, his warning resounds with renewed urgency. The challenge is not simply to humanize psychiatry or reform institutions, but to question the epistemic frameworks that define what counts as sanity, normality, and truth. By re-examining the politics of reason, we also re-examine the foundations of our civilization.

Ultimately, *Madness and Civilization* teaches that madness is not the opposite of reason but its mirror, an enduring reminder that every system of order carries within it the seeds of its own unreason. To confront that unreason is not to reject civilization, but to humanize it.

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