

Sex, Desire and Subjectivity in Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*

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Abstract

'Desire' is a sense of longing or hoping for a person, object, or outcome. The same thought is expressed by emotions such as 'craving.' When a person desires something or someone, his sense of longing is excited by the enjoyment or the thought of the item or person. He wants to take actions to obtain his or her goal. 'Subjectivity' on the other hand is a philosophical concept related to consciousness, personhood, reality and truth. It applies to an individual who possesses conscious experiences, such as perspective, feelings, beliefs and desires. This study is aimed to present sex, desire, and subjectivity of the protagonist Maria in Paulo Coelho's novel *Eleven Minutes*. Maria is born in a humble family in a small village of Brazil and dreams of an adventurous life but ends up as a prostitute. It is only after meeting with Ralf Hart, a painter that she understands the meaning of love, beauty, sex and life. She falls in love with him and realizes that he is the person who sees her inner light and wants not her body but her company.

Keywords: desire, subjectivity, adventure, physical love and emotional fulfillment.

Introduction

The question of feminine identity has always baffled and continues to baffle literary and cultural critics alike. In the realm of cultural constructions and literary representation, the character becomes a way to denote one's subjectivity. Being a prostitute doesn't mean that one would want to be one. Legal theorist and Social Historian Lawrence M. Friedman, in his work *The Horizontal Society*, directs us to the crux of this issue of subjectivity – "That tension between choice and illusion, between imposed definitions and individual interrogations of them, and between, old formulae and new responsibilities." (Hall 2) Discussion of female or feminine subjectivity in feminist or gender-based cases only serves to point out our cultural, personal, sociological, and psychological shortcomings. It represents a system whereas Tori Moi points out: "woman has been constructed as man's other, denied the right to her subjectivity and responsibility for her action." (Moi 92). The cultural dynamics of the human set up do not allow women to voice their sexual subjectivities; lest they are termed 'loose.' As Naomi Wolf points out:

"Daily, we discuss important issues such as teen pregnancy and date rape with a lot of name-calls but with too little real-life experience providing a background against which to measure myths and distortions. A lot of media space is devoted to polemics on what, girls don't want, but very little information is available to boys, or for that matter to girls, that illuminates what girls do want, what it looks and feels like and how girls can get it."

Discussion

Traditionally, feminine sexuality was held in great reverence. Wolf cites the examples of prostitutes in the temples of Sumer and Babylon, where “young women from the most aristocratic households” (84) helped the temple income through the ritual of sacred prostitution. This practice was prevalent in Egypt as well as in India when the female desire was respected as the root of holy procreation, i.e., Shakti – responsible for the continuation of the human species on earth. It was only after the consolidation of patriarchy around 2500 BC, that “sexually sacred goddess was demoted to become subsidiary to husbands or brothers” and “political power in women was identified with insatiable desire” (84). Hence that signaled the onslaught of the ultimate male mind conditioning, which prompted the subjugation of female desire as a weapon to control her emotional and physical subjectivity. The modern woman has broken the shackles of conservatism and male dominance and asserted her sexual freedom and preferences often with bold defiance and scorn, which at times hits back at male masochism with ridicule and open disgust. The tender erotic impulse has been unleashed with an open-minded vigor and emotional intensity and is often backed by intellectual sincerity revealing the deeper recesses of the female psyche.

This research article intends to converge on this very aspect of physical desire and its gratification, which combines to make up the subjectivity of the Brazilian heroine of Paulo Coelho’s novel *Eleven Minutes*. We shall try to see the ways which Maria’s desires and choices take her close to the “possibility of agency in processes of self-construction or reconstruction via ‘sacred sex’ – a notion which leads to the completion and fulfillment of human life through love.

Paulo Coelho, the Brazilian lyricist and novelist, was born on August 24, 1947, in Rio de Janeiro. His father was an engineer, and his mother was a housewife. As a teenager, he wanted to become a writer, but his catholic family being strict about religion and faith was against it. He was arrested by the ruling military government because they viewed his lyrics as left-wing propaganda and dangerous. He was married to an artist Christina Oiticia in 1980. In 1986, when he walked the 500 plus mile road of

Santiago in north-western Spain, he had a spiritual awakening which he describes in his autobiographical novel *The Pilgrimage*. (1987) Coelho’s remarkable book *The Alchemist* (1988) is one of the best-selling novels, translated into 81 languages of the world. Paulo Coelho has written luminous stories about the different streams of life including *The Valkyries*, (1992) *By the River Piedra*, (1994) *The Fifth Mountain*, (1996) *Veronika Decide to Die*, (1998) *The Devil and Miss Prym*, (2000) *Zahir*, (2005) *Like the Flowing River* *Brida*, (2006) *The Witch of Portobello*, (2007) *The Winner Stands Alone*, (2008) *Aelph*, (2010) *Manuscript Found in Accra*, (2012) *Adultery* (2014) and *The Spy*. (2016) All his works attempt to tackle fundamental questions relating to the human condition – good versus evil, joy and despair, light and dark.

The story of the novel *Eleven Minutes* is about a young Brazilian girl Maria who looks for some adventure in her life but ends up working as a prostitute in Switzerland. Maria grew up in a remote Brazilian province at the home of a salesman father and seamstress mother, hoping that one day her prince charming will come and take her away. At school, she falls in love four times, but something always goes wrong leading to breakups. At school, she reads her first erotic magazine and develops the habit of writing a diary. She also learns masturbation and her friends teach her new techniques of masturbation, which gives her enormous pleasure. One day Maria loses her virginity when her boyfriend forces her to have sex in the back seat of a car. She concludes that men give pain, frustration, and suffering only. The act of fornication is a sexual misadventure since it is devoid of love, passion and longing and therefore painful and unfulfilling. After completing her secondary education, she gets a job in a draper’s shop with a handsome salary. Maria is conscious of the power of her beauty. After having saved enough money, she decides to spend her holidays in Rio de Janeiro. Maria’s boss expresses his love and promises a house, family, and pay for her parents, but she declines this offer.

At Rio de Janeiro, she works as a samba dancer for three hundred dollars a night, but this job fails. She sends her photographs to a modeling agency hoping to get a chance to work as a model. She

reads magazines in a library and also befriends the librarian. Because she needs money, one night she accepts the offer of an Arab man to have sex with him for one thousand Swiss francs. She writes in her diary that she has no regret after having slept with the Arab because like most of the people she chose what fate decided for her. Maria feels the presence of an invisible woman who looks like the Virgin Mary, who warns that things are not as simple as she (Maria) imagines. It is a projection of Maria's latent guilt because despite all sense of freedom and self-will sex is miserably linked with religion and ethical conduct. It is an act of transgression which is sympathetically shown by the figure of the Virgin Mary – a perfect epitome of purity. She starts working as a prostitute in a night club owned by a Yugoslavian named Milan for three hundred and fifty francs, learns a lot about sex and studies men of all ages, profession and nationalities. Married women are also involved in prostitution to help their husbands, mothers, to buy good homes and lead a better life. Moreover, it is the most straightforward job.

After six months Maria has saved six thousand Swiss francs, fulfills her needs and sends money regularly to her parents. She receives marriage proposals from well to do men, but she avoids these proposals as she has come here to earn money and later write a story of her adventure in the form of a book entitled 'Eleven Minutes' and intends to set up her farm in Brazil. For this purpose, she brings books on cattle raising and farm administration from the library. One day she meets a painter named Ralf Hart and allows him to draw her painting. She realizes that someone in many months is looking at her soul and can see her 'light' which she misinterprets as 'special glow.' Ralf Hart is twenty-nine years of age, twice married, and got separated from his wives. Maria is impressed by his artistic skills and shared knowledge. Maria tells him that she is a sex worker and comes to know that despite the money, luxury, and fame, Ralf feels lonely. He assures that her complete painting will be displayed in an exhibition in Berlin. Later Maria wrote in her diary that she met with a man whose life is entirely different than that of her, who describes her as a 'woman full of light' and didn't try to touch or seduce her yet she

fell in love with him. This is significant because sex becomes fulfilling only when it is accompanied by a feeling of deep love, passion, or attachment towards the paramour.

One day Ralf takes Maria to his two rooms rented a house in Geneva after paying the owner of the night club for the night. Maria is delighted to see the intellectual and artistic atmosphere of his house, which is packed with books and paintings. There is also a garden which he describes as 'his studio,' 'his soul.' Ralf has accepted many challenges in his life, learned everything throughout all these years, and now needs Maria to save himself. They sit before the fire in his living room and drink wine. Maria gifts him a pen with which she used to write her diary and Ralf gifts her his childhood electric train which he never used because his father had forbidden lest it should break. The owner of the club describes Ralf as 'special client' who pays more. One of such clients, Mr. Terene, takes Maria to his hotel room after paying one thousand francs. He wants Maria to experience pain, suffering and pleasure, therefore does sex violently and abuses her during sex. It is not uncommon for people to give vent to their sadistic impulse during the sex act and inflicting pain inflates the male ego with a sense of superiority and control reducing the woman to a status of being an object or plaything. It is a new experience for her because no one had made her feel like the most miserable wretch in the world. Maria is looking for peace in real life because she suffered a lot during the last nine months in Geneva. One day when she visits Ralf's house and asks why he didn't touch or do sex with her that night after having paid for a night, he replies that he desires not her body but her company. Maria is known as the intellectual of the group of prostitutes as she reads books on Economics, Psychology, and farm management. Maria's only goal is to go back to Brazil and buy a farm. Ralf appears in her dreams day and night, but she is happy with 'an absent love' because objectives of life can be achieved through pain or discomfort.

The particular client, Mr. Terene again takes Maria to his hotel room and shows her in a T.V. channel how refugees face many problems. He remarks that the world enjoys suffering and pain, and there is sadism in human outlook and masochism in

conclusions that they do not want to know all this but be happy. He does sex violently whole night, utter obscenities and humiliates her, which leads to loss of desire and self-will for Maria. Ralf shows his paintings of prostitution and narrates the history of prostitution to Maria. Prostitutes appeared in classical texts, in Egyptian hieroglyphs, in Sumerian writings in the Old and New Testament, who were classified based on the tax they paid. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that every woman born in Sumeria was obliged at least once in her lifetime to go to the temple of the goddess Ishtar and give her body to a stranger as a symbol of hospitality. During the Roman Empire, goddess Vesta demanded total surrender from women who served in the temple and expected to attract young men and kings to the path of sexuality. They sang erotic hymns, entered trance-like states, and gave their ecstasy to the universe in a kind of communion with divinity. Extreme sexual pleasure or orgasm is often compared with joy and spiritual bliss in the sense that experiences become one with the experience. In the ancient Tantric lore of Hinduism, erotic pleasure is considered to be the ladder to the highest spiritual ecstasy or Samadhi.

Maria buys a plane ticket to Brazil for the date she has planned and then visits the library to return the books she had borrowed. She is always making plans for the future and has discovered herself through independence, despair, love pain, and back again to love. She never found anything good or bad about herself through sex and not have an orgasm through penetration. She had come to Switzerland with a dream to earn lots of money, buy a farm for her parents and find a good husband. She experienced many things in Geneva, but the only regret she has is, to get separated from Ralf Hart. Ralf takes her to an exhibition and shows the world of artists who look more luxurious than the millionaires. People who are present there, discuss things Maria had never even heard about. She is impressed by these people who appreciate beauty.

Maria's serves supper to Ralf in her room, and declines his request to postpone her journey to Brazil because she is afraid if she doesn't go, her desire to possess him will become a reality. Before supper, they smoke, talk about love, sex, pain and pleasure and indulge in sex two times during which

Maria feels as if she is no longer herself but a 'being' infinitely superior to everything. It wasn't eleven minutes but eternity as if they left their bodies and walked joyfully through the garden of paradise where everything seemed to be silent, and life ceased to exist. It is an experience of emotional and physical fulfillment, which goes beyond all knowledge and textual understanding of life and sex. Maria and Ralf become the symbolic figure of 'syzygy' in Jungian psychology denoting the perfect union of male and female principles to form a complete circle or whole. In Tantra, this is symbolically represented by 'ardhnarishwar' or half Shiva and half Shakti denoted by a unified half male and half female body. Ralf tells Maria that he doesn't want to conquer her body, but her soul, and that is the reason he loves her. Next morning Maria reaches at the airport for her flight, realizing that her parents will be happy to see her back. Suddenly Ralf appears to bid adieu to Maria with a bunch of roses. Maria always took risks in her life, and this time also she does so by going back home and leaving Ralf. Before occupying her seat in the plane, she embraces and kisses Ralf.

Maria's tender and innocent concept of love leave her heartbroken, and she begins to think that "love is a terrible thing that will make you suffer." She believes to be rich and famous in Geneva, but fate and her personal choices (maybe for survival) have decided otherwise, and the young Brazilian girl ends up working as a prostitute. In Geneva, she develops a personal fascination for sex, but yet again her meeting with Ralf Hart puts her on a journey of self-discovery. In this journey, she has a choice to either pursue a path of pure physical pleasure or discovering the possibility of a physical relationship which articulates the 'unspeakable' in her soul in any woman's soul – i.e., love. Unlike what Moi felt, "Coelho breaks the barriers of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' to explore the uncharted terrain of humanity in desire or desire in humankind. He tries to mold a new feminine identity, conjoining the female subjectivity, which encompasses love as well as lust."

Just like 'acculturated good girls', who keep control of their desires, as a "key to keep herself and her emerging identity safe" (Wolf 82) and know the dimorphism within, so Maria, the slut, in spite of

the modern sense that our past must be immaculate, that our ‘promiscuity,’ our being in any way ‘out of control’ can lead us, if discovered into symbolic or actual annihilation” (83), ventured into the prohibited realm of prostitution, which allowed her to accept the “validity of her desire.” (12) However, such an entry into the forbidden was not made, without the secret wish of attaining that emotional fulfillment, which had eluded her all along. The motivation for having started it all was very different:

“My dear, it’s better to be unhappy with a rich man more than happy with a poor man, and over there you’ll have far more chances of becoming an unhappy rich woman. Besides, if it doesn’t work out, you can get on the bus and come home.” (EM 32)

This was Maria’s simple mother’s advice to her young, professionally inclined daughter, unknown to the dangers which the lure of professional success and money had for such uninitiated girls. At the outset of her professional journey, she begins by “accidentally” being laid by an Arab man. This was the same Maria, who: “Dreamed of meeting the man of her life (rich, handsome and intelligent), of getting married (in a wedding dress), having two children (who would grow up to be famous) and living in a lovely house (with a sea-view). (1) It is not that she regretted her choices, “she was running her risks, pushing beyond her limits” (72), but her choices did not give her the time of celebrating her subjectivity. Her story more than being a fable of an innocent princess turned whore, is the story of the metamorphosis of a young girl into a woman. This transition involved the stark realities of life, her choices, her clientele’s desires as well as the entry of her prince charming, whose entry she had long ago stopped hoping. It is he who teaches her the real meaning of being a woman, who sets her culturally free by acknowledging the desire of a woman, denied pleasure instead of selfishly wallowing in it. It is he who makes her attain an orgasm (both emotional and sexual). Wolf says: “You don’t become a woman through sex. Ideally, you become a person first, and then you become a sexual person” (Wolf 138).

As for Maria, long after she had initiated herself into prostitution, she had come to understand that, “sex has come to be used as some kind of drug; in order to escape reality, to forget about problems,

to relax and like all drugs, this is a harmful and destructive practice” (175).

Indulgence in sex for Maria to become a radical way of reclaiming her lost identity (though not her subjectivity which is primarily emotional). In experiencing the “mystery and delight” (150) of sadomasochism with Terence, Maria attempts to cross the “frontiers,” because unlike her emotionally hurt past, where she had offered ‘unwanted gifts’ to men, here, she “was offering herself up as a sacrifice” – this feeling within her soul, introduced her to the latent woman in own self, who “wants to have all the joy, passion and adventure” (153) that life had to offer. Her relationship with Terence was doubly political, in that the latter also looked for a momentary self-elevation, by affording the other pleasure through a cruel and indicting acceptance of the latter’s desires, as well as an attempt to be ‘fascinated by’ his objectivity. He says, “Do you know why I am doing this? Because there is no greater pleasure than that of initiating someone into an unknown world. Taking someone’s virginity, not of their body, but their soul, you understand” (149).

Although emotional, this relationship had the element of sadism, of a victory and a defeat. In this relationship, her “sham abandon, creates new barriers between her and enjoyment; and at the same time, she takes vengeance upon herself using this inability to know enjoyment” (Beauvoir 400). Probably the ‘barriers’ and ‘politics’ that both Beauvoir and Gayle respectively talk about are those involving the egos, which makes it practically impossible to turn sex into the kind of sacred activity that Coelho, wants in to be turned into. It is not until she talks to Hart (who knows the art to ‘undo’ the ego barriers) that Beauvoir has called her “erotic maturation” (400), as a woman takes place and she realizes the truth of the ‘masochistic theatre’ (158). That masochism is just one of the “masks that people wear in order never to experience a real encounter” (158). Many types of research have proved that ‘women’s desire is a resilient force’ and that ‘women’s preoccupation with their desire manage to surmount cultural taboos, life circumstances and even their inner censor” (Wolf 169). This force has been depicted in Maria’s healthy wishes to forge romantic relationships since her teenage years, her disappointment on the failures

of such efforts, her adoption of prostitution in the absence of ‘true love’ and her visits to the Geneva library to look for books on sex, signalling her deep interest in meaningless physical relationships.

Even though Maria’s is a case of crossing the thresholds of varying subjectivities, to attain the ultimate one (that of a woman), and it involved an innumerable number of physical involvements, what she lacked (and craved) was a passionate encounter. In serving her clients, she exercised a mechanical regularity and coherence, something that could never ignite, nor consummate the womanly passion in her — thus giving a single direction to her sex desire. Despite, such fatuous encounters, Maria very well knew that “desire is not what you see, but what you imagine” (162). An excerpt from her daily diary read: “Each day I choose the truth by which I try to live. I try to be practical, efficient, and professional. But I would like to be able always to choose desire as my companion. Not out of obligation, not to lessen my loneliness but because it is good, yes, very good” (167). In any case, the voicing of one’s desire automatically meant entering a slut’s dominion, which presupposed then conscious awareness of having ‘sex’ and being able to talk about it.

Interestingly enough, being the ‘slut’ that she was, did Maria ever consciously ask her clients to satisfy her? Or was she not always paid by clients, to make her please them? She knew, “having sex is about eleven minutes” (88), but her innate subjectivity never “revolved around something that only took eleven minutes” (88). In her heart of hearts, she still was innocent and personified and like every other ‘good woman’ felt that “essential meetings are planned by the souls long before the bodies see each other (140). She always felt that what she needed was not a ‘cultural passage’³ but an emotional one – to enable her to become the woman that she desired, or of acknowledging within herself. Maria sits with Ralf Hart in front of the fireplace, sipping wine and having the following conversation:

“Hart: “I can’t buy your love, but you did tell me that you knew everything about sex. Teach me then or teach me something about Brazil. Anything, just as long as I can be with you.”

Maria: “I only know two places in my own country: the town I was born in and Rio de Janeiro.

As for sex, I don’t think I can teach you anything. I am nearly twenty-three, you’re about six years older, but I know you’ve lived life very intensely. I know men who pay me to do what they want, not what I want.”

“I’ve done everything a man could dream of doing with one, two, even three women at the same time. And I don’t think I learned very much.”

“Do you want me as a professional?”

“I want you. However, you want to be wanted” (128).

In such a situation where sexual pleasure, becomes a token of a respected and satiated subjectivity, comes in what one calls love. A feeling which presupposes the presence of longing or desire due to the acknowledgement of the other person’s difference..... a belief where mutual communion gains over the paradigms of victory and defeat – an attitude where, even a ‘slut’ is considered a person..... and a sense, which response to the call of a woman’s subjectivity. “Profound desire, true desire is the desire to be close to someone.” “..... It is untouched desire in its present state” (135).

Maria’s ambition, desire and fantasy in the beginning is not ordinary yet far from extraordinary at the same time, in the sense that she matures with understanding and experience and comes out of the confines of the drudgery of her profession by giving vent to her inquisitiveness by devouring books with a voracious hunger on the one hand and the other side by seeking to perfect the art of providing pleasure which is a commendable trait in a good prostitute. Maria moves as it were from sensual and physical desire to happiness and stability and finally towards the experience of the bliss of the soul, which results when the ego melts in the exalted state of orgasm. It is the point where all intellectual queries are put to rest because the physical boundaries are transcended and the realm of pure bliss and beauty unfolds itself, and the distinction of male and female bodies disappear along with the desire to appease the partner or seek pleasure for oneself. Ralf Hart is her soul mate, the perfect partner and paramour who brings fulfillment and meaning to her life. It is with him that Maria experiences the total absence of ego for the first time that results in multiple orgasms, which brings a sense of wholeness and fulfillment. She becomes

a complete woman, un-fragmented, secure, and blissful. Even though, as a prostitute, she had been 'in control' with hundreds of men. With Ralf, she had for the first time 'let go' of her emotions and hence experienced a pleasure, hitherto unknown. This resulted in their uniting for life – in marriage, and she felt a woman.

Conclusion

Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* is a novel of immense significance. At the surface level, it deals with the sexual and erotic satisfaction of a woman but shows how orgasmic pleasure can be a springboard to plunge into the depth of pure ecstasy which results only when our ego fades into oblivion, and the physical body submits in total trust and love to the sex act. Coelho's vision of love and sex is like that of John Donne, the celebrated Elizabethan poet who believed that real love is the gateway to divine love and ecstasy, which is beyond rationalization. A person realizes that joy permeates in every pour of body and life itself is a grand celebration.

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