



Beyond the Gender Lines: A Study of Select works of Paulo Coelho



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ABSTRACT

*In this study an attempt is made to read and interpret four novels of Paulo Coelho in the light of feminism. The study analyses how Coelho tries to express the sufferings of women in general, through his female characters Maria and Athena, in *Eleven Minutes* and *The Witch of Portobello* respectively, and how these characters differs from powerful Brida in *Brida* and*

*Pilar, a woman of wisdom and power in *By The River Piedra I Sat Down And wept*. The study focusses on how Paulo Coelho rejects the idea that certain interests are inherently masculine or feminine. The study analyses how Coelho upholds and explore a vision of heroic womanhood.*

“All my life has been governed by feminine energy, by women.”

RESEARCH PAPER

The present study titled “Beyond the Gender Lines: An Analysis of Select works of Paulo Coelho,” examines the novels of Coelho from the perspective of feminism. He is a practical and realistic person who tries to portray women in a new light in many of his novels. His women characters demand complete autonomy in their lives. He tries to stick vehemently against the male dominated society where women are treated as merely sex objects devoid of intelligence and efficiency. He wants to awaken women to a heightened status with greater possibilities as complete human beings. The four novels under study, *Eleven Minutes*, *The Witch of Portobella*, *Brida* and *By The River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, fall in line with a reaction against the dominant male supremacy by highlighting strictly marked male and female roles. My study attempts to read and interpret select novels of Coelho in the light of feminism. Unlike many male authors, Coelho portrays the power, wisdom and strength of women in his novels. Coelho’s works convey to the world that women are not fragile and tenuous and that women should not be suppressed and should be given freedom who would successfully change the world positively. Many male authors characterize females as marginal and subordinate, and represent them either as complementary or in opposition to the masculine desires and enterprises. But Coelho’s women characters are powerful beings and he represents them equal to men. His male characters too support the wisdom and powers of women

Eleven Minutes is based on a true story of Maria, a young Brazilian girl who had to lead a life of prostitution because of fate. Maria was a girl who always hoped for a day, her Prince charming would arrive, sweep her off her feet and take her away with, so that they could conquer the world together. She dreamt of having a pleasant life where all her dreams would be fulfilled as she wished. But she was from a poor family where her mother was a seamstress and her father was hardly at home. She just had an education to get on in life and was looking for someone with whom she could share her dreams of adventure. She was a determined girl, who had fought with all her might to marry the man she loved. Maria loved him so much but she was cheated by him and her heart broke. She longed for love but she was perpetually being cheated and could not find anyone

faithful. After a long time, she came to the conclusion that men brought only pain, frustration, suffering and a sense of humiliation.

Coelho in *Eleven Minutes* says, “a man promises everything and gives nothing” (21) through Maria. This shows that men promise everything to women but give nothing but pain and suffering. In the novel, Mailson, the interpreter-cum-security officer, in charge of foreign tourists, offers Maria dollars, a pair of exorbitantly expensive shoes and a dress straight out of a fairy tale to stand in front of an Arab, who is a widower with no children. This shows that men consider women as an object of pleasure, which is of short duration. She is also asked to learn dance and song to impress men. Maria is just considered as an object of pleasure by men whenever they want, and later to be thrown when they get tired of them.

According to the Marxist school of feminism, as said in *Feminism- A Paradigm Shift*, written by Neeru Tandon posits that “a woman’s position is reduced to that of a commodity meant to be used and disposed...regards the class system of capitalism as the only one cause of women’s oppression” (46). Maria was brought up by her mother saying that money is prominent and nothing else. She was brought up in a society where she believed that she could not live without men. Her thoughts were blinded with money, so she put aside her desire to be an adventurer in search of treasure and she forgot all about the person she used to be in a patriarchal society. She was asked to earn money to uplift her family from poverty. So she was forced to live a life of prostitution, in which she could not live anymore of her life. In many cases, she was under paid, humiliated, used, abused, ignored and disgraced simply for being a female.

Maria was fed up with the world of men. “...all the magazines, the TV programmes, books, girlfriends, everything, ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING, said that a man was essential” (15). Maria found it difficult to live in a world of men where they were dominant and where men approached women just for sex. “I see more clearly how fragile men are, how inconstant, insecure and surprising they are... a few of my girlfriends’ fathers have propositioned me, but I’ve always refused. At first, I was shocked, but now I think it’s just the way men are” (16). This of course is an echo of a patriarchal society. This presents the idea of men wanting to use women for their

pleasure every day. It was absolutely shocking for a seventeen year old girl to realize this true colour of men. Coelho tries to say that men are not even ashamed to approach a girl much younger than them.

Maria had a miserable life as she was the one to uplift her family. She had to sacrifice all that women tried to preserve as sacred. She had to get dressed up and flirt with her boss to get more salary; she was also paid overtime for working late as the boss liked having her around. Here, Coelho focused on the helpless situation of all women who had to sell their body. In the novel, we can see that, men are eventually forgiven for their sexual perversity, whereas the women are left to grapple with issues of sin and penance. Here, Coelho depicts Maria as an example of all women who faces pain and suffering in a patriarchal society, where men does not respect women and sees women as a mere object of pleasure. Coelho tries to depict that women are being used as servants. Many women dreamt of becoming “model and TV stars” (57) but they could only be “housewives and checkouts in supermarkets” (57) as said in Maria’s diary in the novel. This shows that women are not given freedom and their dreams are not taken into consideration in a patriarchal society.

When Maria got agitated with Mailson who decided everything, she said to herself as, “First, he had asked about the colour of her underwear, now he was deciding how much her body was worth” (70). This shows the lack of respect and rights given to women in a society where men are dominant. Women does not even have the right to decide the person they want to have sex with and does not have the right to say how much their body was worth. Maria, herself says that she is two women. “One wants to have all the joy, passion and adventure that life can give me. The other wants to be a slave to routine, to family life... I’m a housewife and prostitute...” (15). This throws light into the fact that, by the concept of being an ‘other’ by men, suppress or force her to be a slave, to lead a life of a prostitute. Maria is a woman, like many other woman who hates what she does because of men. She says that, “It’s destroying my soul, making me lose touch with myself, teaching me that pain is a reward, that money buys everything and justifies everything” (209).

Paulo Coelho depicts the suffering of women through Maria who wants to be free from this slavery but cannot, as they are forced to have a life directed by men. Coelho also says about the

story of a bird that was adorned with two perfect wings and with glossy, colourful marvelous feathers, which was written in Maria's diary. When one day a woman saw this bird, she fell in love with this bird and put it in cage. She looked at the bird every day and slowly she began to lose interest in him and its feathers grew ugly and lost its sheen and one day, the bird died. Coelho tries to say that it was the freedom that made the bird beautiful. So, Coelho tries to say that women should be given more freedom wherein lies a greater amount of beauty and happiness. Though Maria was an innocent, independent woman, she was trapped in a patriarchal society and she wants herself to be liberated. Coelho through this novel points out that the long tradition of male domination has silenced women's voices, distorted their dreams and treated them as peripheral beings.

The Witch of Portobello is a story that revolves around Athena, a mysterious young woman born in Romania, raised in Beirut and living in London. Her life is told by many who knew her well. Athena was a woman of all four traditional feminine archetypes; "the virgin who- search springs from her complete independence; the martyr who finds her way to self- knowledge through pain, surrender and suffering in a patriarchal society; the saint who finds her true reason for living in unconditional love and finally; the witch justifies her existence by going in search of complete and limitless pleasure" (15).

Athena had no interest in reading romantic novels; she was concerned with reading everything especially about the situation in the Middle East. She was not a woman who only dreamed to get married and have children. She was a woman who encouraged herself to give the best of herself. Athena was an orphan adopted by Samira R Khalil. When she came to know this, she wanted to have a child of her own, and married Lukas Jessen Petersen, whom later she left as she felt that he had no love for her child. Thereafter, she had to live a life, with the child all alone. Meanwhile, she went in search for her birthmother. Athena was a woman who had taught others to enjoy music, dance and to be calm and peaceful. Athena was powerful with all knowledge and strength, but she was tortured by the patriarchal society surrounding her. The language of the patriarchal culture imposed the language of silence on her. She experienced a dilemma between personal freedom and social norms for feminine demeanour. She led a life which was relatively

independent and autonomous but yet, had to face various problems. She wanted to teach music and dance as a ritual, which would make one feel calm and peaceful. Even though she suffered from the society, her life was rebuilt into new things like: “from lost to found; from divorce to new love; from working in a bank to selling real estate in the desert” (214). She wanted to live her life as intensely as possible; she wanted to experience the joy and the adventure of being a woman. Athena became famous and received applauses. Some of them threw flowers and the women’s all-around asked her to keep on fighting for women’s freedom and for the right to worship the Mother. There were no aggressive comments, and the meeting that was held by Athena in Portobello passed off as normal, with dancing. Athena spoke in the meeting, held in Portobello, that:

We all have a duty to love.... We cannot and must not be frightened when the power of darkness want to make themselves heard..., those same powers that introduced the word “sin” merely to control our hearts and minds. We are entering a new world in which we can choose to follow our own steps, not that society forces us to take. But no one will silence our voice, our heart. (276)

The above excerpt shows that Coelho wants all women to do things as they like and not to worry about the society but listen to the voice of heart. Such exhortations to instill courage and strength in the hearts of womenfolk abound in this novel. It was Sherine Khalil, who was known as Athena for her strength just like the Greek warrior Goddess, who was stronger than any other Olympian Goddess. Athena has always striven to pursue and act with knowledge and wisdom. She was a woman who fought for her freedom and right, but later she was brutally murdered by the patriarchal society, who could not accept her and her dominance over men. Athena suffered pain and oppression from the society as she had no freedom to express her views and thoughts. Athena was called the witch of Portobello, because in earlier days any woman born with talents and gifts were labeled as witches, and were separated from the society by men, who feared that such women would take power over them, as said in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* as “witches being ducked.”

In the above novels, the patriarchal society sees woman as ‘the other’ where the female or the feminine is set up as the negative, the abnormal, the distorted and the strange. “Patriarchal ideology,” according to Kate Millet, “exaggerates biological difference between men and women, making certain that men always have the dominant, or ‘masculine,’ roles and that women always

have the subordinate, or ‘feminine’ role” (94), as shown in the above discussed novels. The famous remark by Simone de Beauvoir, “woman is a social construct devised by man” can be evinced from the novels under scrutiny. According to Germaine Greer, “the stereotypical female is a sexual objects...she must be completely passive in the sexual act. Thus the ideal woman is a castrated creature, a female eunuch” can also be read into the case of Maria in *Eleven Minutes*. In the novel *Eleven Minutes* Coelho agrees to the point voiced by Kate Millet that, “it is not sex, the prostitutes is made to sell. It is degradation. Male is not buying sexuality, he is buying power over another human being. It demonstrates the relative position of male and female in patriarchal society- he as a master, she as a slave” (93).

Thus through Maria and Athena Paulo Coelho explores women’s oppression and exploitation in the society. Usually, novelists portray women into a few popular stereotypical emotions like care, love, tenderness etc. these caricatures are of a narrow range. In this juncture, the reading of Coelho with his portrayal of women as beings endowed with wisdom, creative spirit, strength, goodness and compassion is pertinent. In an interview on National Public Radio, Coelho once said, “we as a society have been so obsessed with the male figure that we have looked and referred and thought of God as a male figure.” In another interview held by BBC news Coelho said that, “creativity is basically a feminine process...you always use this feminine creative energy to write or to do any type of art or creativity...I’m writing from using this feminine energy.” The argument is voiced against those critics, who enunciate that women are not creative enough to produce an extraordinary work.

His *By The River Piedra I sat Down and Wept* is a story of Pilar, an independent and practical woman, who is frustrated by the daily grind of university life and looks for greater meaning in her life. Pilar is transformed forever by an encounter with a childhood friend, now a mesmerizing and handsome spiritual teacher- and a rumoured miracle worker- who leads her on a journey through the French Pyrenees, a magical landscape that has been home to holy visions and miracles through the ages. This novel also shows the wisdom of women throughout, in the form of the power of Virgin Mary. Mary is portrayed in the novel as the feminine face of God, the Great Mother.

The main character, Pilar, struggles to release herself from the influence of ‘the other.’ Pilar was an ambitious woman who listened to her heart and trusted her instincts. Pilar, recovered what was lost, and she tried not to lose the happiness in her life that she got from her deeds which her instinct asked her to do. She fought for her happiness with power and strength. In the novel Pilar says that, “the mountains are beautiful. Anyone who beholds them has to think about the grandness of creation.... They are not like the rivers, which move and transform what is around them.... They are destined to look at the same scene forever...” (160-161).this shows that Pilar was a woman with sharp understanding about the nature around her. She was a woman who decided not to be a mountain, like other women, who follow the normal conventions of society’s norms and rules, and who does not transform their knowledge. Those women do the same thing, as the mountains are destined to see the same scene. But Pilar decided not to be a mountain but a river which moves, spreads and transforms knowledge around the world.

“Break the glass, please- and free us from all those damned rules, from needing to find an explanation for everything, from doing only what others approve of” (170). This was the thought of Pilar who shows that Coelho wanted each and every woman out there, to break the conventional rules and norms, and he asks every human being to live their life happily without giving any explanation to anyone. The unnamed lover of Pilar, also supports the wisdom, power and strength of women, as he preaches about the wisdom of women by presenting the feminine side of God through the image of Holy Mary. In this novel, we also see the appearance of the character of Brida, who proclaims the wisdom of women through the imagery of Mother Mary to Pilar. “”O mirror of the earth goddess,” Brida was saying, her eyes closed. Teach us about our power and make men understand us...” (14). This shows that there is power in each and every woman and that we are to observe it which men do not understand. The novel shows the power of women and their powerful vision in creation.

Men lived through movement, while we remained close to the womb of the mother. This allowed us to see that seeds are turned into plants, and we told this to men. We made the first bread, and we fed our people. We shaped the first cup so that we could drink. And

we came to understand the cycle of creation, because our body repeats the rhythm of the moon.

Throughout the novel, women are equated to moon and the sun to show the power of women, who can light the evil darkness of the night. And it also shows the energy of women. women are also equated to Cybele, according to the tradition moon which identifies to be the manifestation of the great Mother, who governs the harvest and sustains the cities, which show the power of women.

The novel is especially remarkable for its presentation of a feminine side of God through the imagery of Holy Mary. Through the representation of Mother Mary, the novel employs the archetype of the Great Mother. The unnamed lover of Pilar says that “one of the faces of God is the face of woman” (68). He also says that “she is present in the first chapter of the Bible- when the spirit of God hovered over the waters, and he placed them below and above the stars” (68). This shows the importance given to women. according to Coelho, “water is the symbol of the power of woman, the power that no man- no matter how enlightened or perfect he maybe- can capture” (68). The unnamed lover of Pilar says that “in every religion and in every tradition, she manifests herself in one form or another- she always manifests herself. Since I am a catholic, I perceive her as the Virgin Mary” (69).

When the padre in the narrative speaks of the feminine side of God, he quotes, “and God created man and woman” (84). Through this reference Coelho emphasizes the equivalent position with which both man and woman should be treated. Coelho also portrays the image of “...a serpent and a dove combined into a single fabulous creature” (84). And he also posits that “it’s a sign- masculine and feminine joined in a single figure” (84). This also emphasizes the importance of equality which must be addressed to both men and women. Throughout the novel Coelho depicts powerful women like Saint Teresa who conquered and confronted the church and the state as to perform her mission. Coelho has also portrayed the life of Bernadette in the novel to show the powerful women who listened to her own soul which is considered to be wisdom according to Coelho, “...all wisdom was the result of listening to one’s own soul” (114). Thus, the novel puts

in new areas of thoughts and awareness into the reader's mind, by emphasizing the importance of granting equal position to women, and by relating the power, wisdom and strength of women to moon, sun, Virgin Mary and Saint Teresa which shows the sustaining presence of wisdom and the light in women. Divine wisdom and truth are communicated to the holy heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary which shows the divine wisdom, power and strength, each woman can possess.

In Coelho's novel *Brida*, he tells the story of Brida, a young Irish girl, and her quest for knowledge. On her journey she meets a wise man, Magus, who teaches her about overcoming her fears, and a woman Wicca who teaches her how to dance to the hidden music of the world. Brida was a normal girl who had taken courses in astrology, tarot and numerology. She was a girl who was often not sure of anything, which was the great gamble of her life. She was not satisfied with her life as a woman. She wanted to learn magic and occultism which was only learned by men in those times. Coelho has portrayed Brida as a determined woman who wanted to learn about magic and the wisdom of the nature, the mysteries of the tradition of the sun and the moon. Brida was a girl who was fed up with the conventional life followed by everyone. So, she wanted to learn about all powers. She learned everything and she became a woman of power, wisdom and knowledge. In this great transformation of Brida, Coelho tries to emphasize the wisdom of women in the world. Coelho emphasizes the transformation in this novel. He says that "...knowledge without transformation is not wisdom" (139). Brida is also portrayed as a fearless girl who is not afraid to make mistakes which is a great sign of wisdom, "...the path of wisdom means not being afraid to make mistakes" (29). When Wicca shuffled the cards and spread it on the table, the cards showed a powerful image of a woman forcing open the mouth of a lion which showed that Brida's stronger side was always a woman in previous incarnation, which shows the strength and power of women that cannot be suppressed by any patriarchal society.

When we deeply analyse the character Wicca, we can say that she is also a witch because of her talents, skills and wisdom of nature. She is a powerful woman. She is a great epitome of wisdom, strength and knowledge. Coelho has explicitly proven that women have such powers and wisdom which can be obtained, if they are determined to change. A feminist writer and critic,

Margaret Fuller once said that man's search for truth and harmony will remain flawed until women are allowed to develop themselves. This thought is supported in Coelho's novel *Brida*.

Brida and *Wicca* prove that they are not satisfied with just food, cloth, education and shelter. They wanted more, to understand their innermost desires, thought process and their individuality in the right spirit. Coelho also makes sure that this should not be misunderstood as to give women a higher place than men. The need is to remove the gender bias and to give them equal opportunity and accept their power, wisdom and strength like the Magus, the magician and Lorens, *Brida's* boyfriend in the narrative.

Coelho has supported women not only in his novels, but also in his personal life. He once addressed the difficulties of women in an interview with BBC news that "we have to get the best of ourselves, but how if this possible if we, as women, are denied the means to achieve our full potential owing to unfair laws and a male- biased judicial system?" This comment also underlines his support for women. Coelho also clearly says in the same interview that "to be a feminist is not to reject our femininity, but instead allow us to compete with men on a political, economic and social level.

The novel *By The River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* is portrayed in a Christian background in which women are endowed with power and wisdom. The novel explores the feminine side of spirituality and the novel moves in an unconventional manner by subtly subverting the notions of the Christian faith and the Catholic church in which the author explores the role of Virgin Mary as a Goddess. The novel was published in the year 1994, when women in Brazil were not given freedom even they were allotted with certain privileges. In those times the church and the society gave less importance to Virgin Mary. The picture of Virgin Mary on the cross instead of Jesus Christ creates a great revolutionary notion in the minds of the reader. Depicting women from a Christian background in an unconventional manner was a great thought from the part of Coelho as a feminist writer. The hero in the novel also serves the world in a different way in which he proclaims the feminine Goddess and its divine power. The novel *Brida*

is set in temporal, magical powers unlike *By The River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* which is set in spiritual, divine powers.

Paulo Coelho has insisted on the liberty and equality to women in his novels as well as in public speeches. He has also pointed out in his novel *Eleven Minutes* that, women are often looked and treated as a property of man. He also posits that the class system of capitalism, as one of the main causes of women's oppression as we see this in the case of Maria. In this novel he also tries to say that women's oppression is deeply embedded in existing social and economic structures and also says that equality of opportunity can never be possible in society as long as there is a fundamental difference in wealth, privilege and power. In his novel *The Witch of Portobello* he explores the feminine side of religion, to question why society had tried to block away the feminine side. The character of Athena, with her freedom and courage, was his way to tackle the subject and to unveil the shackles of dogma. In *By The River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, Pilar struggles to release herself from the influence of 'the other,' which is the representation of evil. Pilar possess the power to loosen 'the other's' grip on her life and choose a path towards a better future. Strong references to the supreme and divine power of Goddess Virgin Mary and references to other higher powers like Saint Teresa and Bernadette are characterized in the novel to express the divine power in catholic tradition. It explores the feminine side of God. In *Brida* Coelho explores the occult, temporal powers of women. In these novels the male characters do not overshadow their female counterparts. In the above mentioned novels, Paulo Coelho rejects the idea that certain interests are inherently masculine or feminine, he upholds and explores a vision of heroic womanhood. Therefore he can be inferred as a feminist writer who thrives for equality of woman throughout his novels.

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