



Deconstructing the conventional binaries of society: An in-depth exploration of Maria, the central character of Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*, as the spokesman of Third Wave Feminism

Jabun Nahar

Lecturer, Department of English, BGC Trust University Bangladesh, Bangladesh

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Abstract— Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian novelist and lyricist is best known for his transnational novels. The novel *Eleven Minutes* takes on a new look on the prostitution. Through a mimetic-thematic dimension of narrative, we come to know about Maria's self-actualization journey. The notion deemed by Feminist approach is that a female body is the key to self-liberation. Here, in this novel the feminist approach to the profession of prostitution and novel's expressivism make us think unconventionally about the conventional binaries of life like sacred and profane love. The binary pairs are juxtaposed by Maria's expressive subjectivism. The novel *Eleven Minutes* elevates prostitution to the realm of love and divinity. Maria explores an inner light through the journey of self-transcendence. Her inner light renders a new magnificence to the binary of sacred love and profane love, sensuality and spirituality, fate and will, prostitution and marriage, overall the binary of body and soul. *Eleven minutes* is the sexual act itself between Maria and Ralf that only takes about eleven minutes. *Eleven minutes* is firmly rooted in Western spirituality as it proclaims the myths about the story of a prostitute whose sins were forgiven by Jesus. Coelho takes a taboo subject sex as the main element of the novel. Here in this novel Maria is compared with Virgin Mary. This association between a prostitute and a religious female figure contaminates the symbol of virginity and purity. Consequently this association breaks the binary opposition of purity and impurity. Furthermore, this comparison implies the fact that Maria's faith is sprang from a religious female figure which enhances the sense of female solidarity. This paper deals on how Maria's feministic approach to prostitution re-explores her soul to demolish all the binaries of body and soul.

Keywords— Feminist subjectivism, Binary, eleven minutes, prostitution, sacred, profane.

I. INTRODUCTION

Eleven Minutes depicts the life of a young Brazilian girl Maria. The novel explores her journey from a young girl to a prostitute. It deals with her metamorphosis into a woman. To fulfill her ambition, she moves to Rio-de-Janerio, then to Geneva, Switzerland. The novel opens with Maria a fourteen-year-old girl living with her parents in a village of Brazil. She is modest and simple, and she dreams of having a loving husband and

children. Her father is a travelling salesman and her mother is a seamstress. In her village there are only one cinema and a night club. She is used to write diary and notes down her routine life in it. Though her life is devoid of any extravagance, she has many expectations from life. She is an ambitious girl even after knowing her dreams cannot be fulfilled. Having father as a salesman and mother as a seamstress, her expectations are in vain. She reads erotic magazines at school and develops a fascination toward love, marriage and sex. She falls in love

several times during her teenage but every time it results into break-up. Failures in love direct her to the belief that love is painful and sex is a pleasure. This fascination for sex makes her fall in love again and again that eventually results into break-ups. She deems that love and sex cause pain. Being dejected and frustrated, she decides to leave home and search a new meaning of life. After lots of upheaval in life she ends up joining Copacabana club as a prostitute. An impulsive decision of leaving home directs her to the miserable existence of a prostitute. There she meets with Ralf, a painter who is depressed over his failure in sexual relationship. Maria helps him to shove off his depression as she teaches him to perceive a female body differently other than an object of pleasure. Maria hints at the reverence to the body which makes the bond between two people stronger. An intertwined relationship between body and soul, renders a sacredness to the sexual relation between Maria and Ralf Hart. Consequently, they reach to the state of oneness demolishing the binary opposition of man/woman, sacred/ profane and body/soul. On a broader sense, the experience of their relationship seems to be in line with Coelho's attempt at deconstructing the binary opposites. The author believes that these binary opposites can coexist together by complimenting each other. Thus, he breaks the dichotomies of sacred and profane, male and female, sensual and spiritual etc.

II. DISCUSSION

Paulo Coelho was inspired by an author named Irving Wallace who wrote a novel titled *The Seven Minutes* that outlines the censorship practice of mass media in America which was forbidden by American government. The novel *Eleven Minutes* is categorized by the third wave feminism. It is in deep contrast with second wave feminism. According to third wave feminism a female body empowers a woman and gives her chance to dominate traditional patriarchy of the society. Like the third wave feminist, Paulo Coelho implies the fact that sex trafficking is a choice for women by which they can attain financial freedom like the case of Maria in *Eleven Minutes*. Maria didn't lament for or regret her profession. Instead she plans to be rich. To second wave feminist sex traffic and prostitution are not a choice; they are forced by traditional Patriarchy. As according to Hamilton "Researches have demonstrated that the motivations of migrant sex workers are varied and often cannot clearly be divided into voluntary and forced". For abolitionists feminists who define prostitution as de facto exploitation and sexual abuse and therefore impossible for women freely to choose, these distinctions are meaningless. However, women in third wave feminism likely to have

more freedom than those of second wave feminism. Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* is a female bildungsroman about a young Brazilian girl from a modest background. Illusory nature of love, frustrated relationship and the harsh reality of practical life direct her to willingly drag herself into prostitution. Maria writes diary to document her odyssey of self-actualization. Her transition from childhood to womanhood proves to be a female odyssey of self-transcendence.

From 1979, third wave feminist Ellen Willis was prominent. Her essay "Lust Horizons: Is the Women's Movement Pro-sex?" Originates the term "Pro- sex feminism" Acknowledging Prostitution as a choice, third wave feminism promotes sex as an avenue of pleasure for women. Sex-positive feminism" as advocated by third wave feminists, is an early 1980s' movement centering on the motto that sexual freedom is an essential component of women's freedom. As we have seen through the eyes of Maria that two prostitutes in the brothel were quarrelling over one client to be their own. It encompasses author's view of sex as a choice not forced,

In *Eleven Minutes*, Coelho portrays his typical "inner light" theme though it focuses on Prostitution and Sadomasochism .Maria wants to experience versatile sex due to the effect of Sadomasochism, Being dejected in love at a very early age, she develops a grudge against love. Maria's despair leads here to develop a kind of curiosity towards heterogeneous sexual encounters. At an early age she had experiences with kissing and love making. But what enchants her very much that the pleasure derived from self-sex or masturbation. She deems that masturbation is so much fascinating that it is the alternate of actual penetration. In fact, penetration occurs during intercourse is considered to be painful by her. This kind of sexual experience unburdens her disappointment. However, It keeps her aloof from serious relationship like love affair. Maria's detest for normal sex can be characterized by Sadomasochism. Famous Austrian psychologist Freud calls sadomasochism as - "the most common and most significant of all perversions" (Freud, 23)He implies that an unconscious process can link masochism and sadism in relation to the love object. According to Freud masochism originates in an abusive or neglected childhood while sadism is the manifestation of oral destructiveness with which the child protests his unappeased hunger or anxiety. Freud considers sadomasochism as a sexual love that is both regressive and aggressive. Maria's realization towards love and sex reshapes the traditional binary of pleasant love and pervert love. Her newly invented perception towards love and sex brings her to Rio de Janeiro in pursuit of becoming a model or film star. It drags her away from love and she

enjoys sex experiment under sadomasochism. Her beauty attracts a Swiss man Roger and she is taken to Geneva without knowing that she signed a contact paper. Being rejected by the Swiss man, she ends up working as a high-class prostitute. In her character she assumes an unconventional binary of body and soul. For her these two are not separate rather they are mingled.

Monique Wittig the Feminist theorist, rebels against social constraints which are firmly reinforcing female marginalization. She argues that women should defy the binaries constructed by society and thus women should reach beyond heterosexual contract only to define womanhood on their own terms. Maria's fascination for masturbation and denial of the heterosexuality recalls Wittig's opinion, that heterosexuality serves to perpetuate male dominance and female submission. Wittig further argues that society constructs shallow binary oppositions to justify women's oppression. In *Eleven Minutes*, we have seen Maria challenges these binary oppositions by reaching beyond her single female identity. One of her Clients Terence helps her reach orgasm through sadomasochism. He inflicts pain and humiliation to get her pleasure. Under the influence of pervert love making, she challenges the binary submission/freedom. She expresses their sexual encounter in her diary.....

“When I experienced humiliation and total submission, I was free” (Coelho 191)

To describe this sadomasochistic sex she coins a word by combining two opposites. She writes in her diary sex is a “controlled abandon”. Her character manifests the intricacy of upholding submission and freedom. She is proud to be free while she was totally submitted as a prostitute to her clients. She believes that the celebration of her pride may be justified. By linking pleasure with humiliation to describe her sexual experience with Terence, she challenges the conventional binary of freedom and submission.

Maria attempts to write a diary for making a book about her experience. Maria's diary plays an indispensable role in exposing her - world to the reader. Though the novel is written in the third person point of view, the reader can clearly hear Maria's voice through her diary. Helene Cixous, a French feminist writer writes in her essay entitled "The Laugh of the Medusa" that "woman must Write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies." (875), Coincidentally, Maria's diary can be explored along the same lines as it symbolizes all her efforts in understanding her self-transcendence. This diary documents her odyssey of metamorphosis into a woman. It is also crucial for the fact

that it reflects Maria's bodily experiences as well as her newly found “inner light” of the soul. The diary serves as a linguistic outlet of her own female language. It enables her to challenge all kinds of conventional constructions. This language eventually makes her capable of thrusting off the binary oppositions constructed by patriarchal society. This diary is the embodiment of peoples' adherence to patriarchal hypocritical attitudes towards women.

Thus, we notice that Coelho's views on prostitution are more positive than categories him with the third wave feminist, Maria expresses in her diary that she was not forced into prostitution rather it was her free will. But as the novel progresses, we found that she ends up being a high-class prostitute for survival. It is fate that directs her to prostitution. By stating that she voluntarily chose prostitution she challenges the traditional binary of fate and will. Though she doesn't regret her profession, but we observe her hesitation and desperation working as a prostitute. She wants to be rich and settle her own business in Brazil. According to Hamilton, "The third wave of feminism is sometimes associated with phenomena such as consumerism, independence and individualism. It emphasized on the women's professional achievements, sexual pleasures and material acquisition" (Hamilton 91). Paulo Coelho portrays Maria's materialistic attitude when he states that she earns money by prostitution to settle her new farm business in Brazil. Being influenced by consumerism ideology, she acts like upper middle class, visits libraries, brings books to know about life styles. Buying magazines about celebrities is an example of how she is influenced by consumerism ideology.

Maria through prostitution meets with Ralf, an artist with whom she better understands her body and soul. It was an eleven minutes' sex interact with Ralf that brings out and illuminates her inner light. Maria expresses that-

“then I knew that we were made for each other, because he could be a woman as he was now, and I could be a manand suddenly, a kind of light exploded inside me. I was no longer myself, but a being infinitely superior to everything I knew.... I was woman and man; he was man and woman.” (coelho 260, 261, 262)

Their love makes them merge with each other to that extent that they become sexless. She transcends the boundary of sex-identity. Thus, they juxtapose the binary opposition of man and woman. She elevates herself to the essence of equality where she doesn't feel any obligation to play a certain identity, to satisfy or please her community. To her utter surprise, Maria asks Ralf "What made you fall in love with a prostitute?". Ralf answers – “I didn't understand it myself at the time. But I've thought about it since, and I think it was because, knowing that your body

would never be mine alone, I had to concentrate on conquering your soul" (Coelho 265)

This novel allows us to explore the world of a prostitute by constructing different images and understandings of binary oppositions such as man/woman, decent woman/prostitute and body/soul. The third wave feminism exposes a political critique of traditional binary oppositions forming patriarchal gender categories. Binary opposition is a structuralist term used to describe the differential nature of any signifying system. Man and woman have been imposed by patriarchal society as binary oppositional terms. Consequently, this binary has been repeatedly called into question by feminist theorists. Binary opposition originated in Saussurean structuralist theory. However according to the post-structuralist theory of Jacques Derrida these binaries have to be re-examined to shape a new blend of meaning. Post structuralist view of binaries advocates not the reverse or re-examine only, it affirms a deconstruction of meaning. Here it conforms to the views of third wave feminists that demand a deconstruction of pre-existing binaries of a patriarchal society. This patriarchal society intrinsically favors one arm of the binary over other so that a dominance can be established. So a 'third wave feminist' might challenge binary oppositions as gendered language and ideological constructions and thus calls for a reformulation of these.

A divine plan decides the meeting of Maria and Ralf. The relationship between them transcends the binary of sacred and profane love and Maria turns out to be a sacred prostitute as described by Jyoti Mishra. Through love and sex, Maria realizes that they become one person, no longer they exist as man and woman. This novel portrays the visceral experience of Maria as a prostitute. She uses her 'inner light' to shape her own reality through the pleasure and pain she experiences by working as a prostitute. Moreover, this novel depicts the emotional experience of Maria through body. The dichotomy between sacred love and profane love is demolished when Maria is believed to touch the soul of her clients. Maria seems to possess the power of unburdening the soul of others. Clients talk to her about depression and despair to release their pent-up emotion. In *Eleven Minutes*, Maria dreams of true love. She experiences love and heartaches in her teenage years. She experiences sex and pain by working as a prostitute. After high school she works as a sales girl in a fabric shop in her small town. With a high ambition she goes to Rio de Janeiro for a weeklong vacation. She seizes the opportunity of going to Geneva to work as a cabaret dancer. Her ambition of becoming a model leads her to meet with an Arab gentleman who pays her one thousand francs in exchange of the sexual pleasure she could give. Because of despair, and the desire not to go

home empty handed, she bows to prostitution. She experiences myriad of role playing when working as a prostitute, she plays the role of a courtesan, a mother, a listener, a friend to satisfy the needs of her clients. Working as a prostitute, she doesn't dispossess her inner-light.

Paulo Coelho's novels are seen to portray the theme of fate and will. This interlinked pair of fate and will is a binary opposition which is reevaluated in the novel *Eleven Minutes*. Fate refers to a super natural force that decide events in human life unaffected by human control whereas will refers to a person's ability to control his actions and thoughts, Maria seems to handle fate by her willpower thus diminishing dichotomy between fate and will. She acquires a heart touched and heart-learned lesson that often life offers no second chances. She grapples fate and welcomed her opportunity to work in a foreign country. She clings to prostitution leaving her job as a dancer. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, she assumes prostitution as a stunt and herself to be an adventurer in search of treasure. She seems to control the course of action what fate has allotted for her. We notice here in the novel, she borrows books related to prostitution to enhance her performance to learn ploys to enchant her clients.

The novel also depicts the theme of religion and spirituality. Man's desire to find God is manifested in the binary pair of religion and spirituality. Here, religion operates as an institution and spirituality springs from personalized prayer. In *Eleven Minutes*, Maria, a prostitute is compared with Virgin Mary. It seems that writer contaminates the stigmata or odor of sanctity. A feminine presentation of God is characterized by this comparison of a prostitute with Virgin Mary. This comparison challenges the demarcation between sacred and profane love. Nevertheless, it is one of the major theme of the novel *Eleven Minutes*. Maria assumes the feminine face of God - the Virgin Mary as having her own identity. Though apparently the sexual relation between Ralf and Maria is an example of profane love, but it is shown as the eleven minutes of sacred sex. Jyoti Mishra in her book *Pacelo Coelho's Fiction Existential and Spiritual preoccupation* writes:

"In this gripping exploration of the potentiality sacred nature of sex within the context of love, Maria transcends her present status and views herself as the sacred prostitute of yore the beloved the great mother and the universe (149.)

Here, the term sacred prostitute dissolves the binary opposition of prostitute/decent woman, Sex is considered to be a profanity when sexual pleasure is performed for its own sake and if it is incorporated with

pain and humiliation. It is an evidence of impiety if it derives from masochism and sadism or it involves money in exchange of the pleasure it gives. Contrarily, it is sacred if it derives from love and passion, Maria fights between sacred love and profane love. Ralf helps her to attain an "inner-light. She discovered a whole universe inside her own body. Finally, she realizes that real love comes from inside. The author conveys that sex is after all what-

"Our bodies learn to speak the language of the soul, known as sex. Sex is a manifestation of a spiritual energy called love" (222)

Maria also confesses -

"I don't know how long it lasted, but everything seemed to be silent, at prayer, as if the universe and life had ceased to exist and become transformed into something sacred, nameless and timeless." (Coelho 264)

The novel also sheds light on the historical account of sacred prostitution. Deboreah Anapol's American psychologist in her article "Why sex is sacred?" focuses on the reasons that presents sex as sacred. An enduring bond of reverence which is based on mutual appreciation and longing creates the sacredness of sex. Thus, Maria becomes a sacred prostitute and the relation between Maria and Ralf becomes Sacred sex. The novel *Eleven Minutes* asserts the myths about the story of prostitutes from the dawn of the history. It provides readers with a brief historical account of sacred prostitution. The myths about prostitution were that providing sexual pleasure to strangers is a religious act if it is done in exchange for a donation to a religious organization. According to Herodotus, all the Babylonian women were required to involve in sexual acts, once in their lifetime, with strangers in return for money in the temples of Ishtar. Maria comes to know about the myths of sacred prostitution from the painter Ralf. Ralf also tells her that this practice was believed to be widely spread in the ancient civilization of Persia, Egypt, India and west Asia. Furthermore, primitive Greek people offered women to their guests as a symbol of hospitality. It was believed to unleash the mysterious power of fertility. These practices of hospitality prostitution were considered and highly esteemed to be sacred prostitution. According to myths, prostitution is morally justifiable. In the novel, author denounces a drastic shift in perspective regarding prostitution through Ralf Hart's character. Ralf describes to Maria, how modern patriarchy transforms prostitution into the act of despise and abhorrence. Consequently, prostitution is marked as a social stigma and prostitutes are accepted as a socially marginalized group. This marginalization of prostitution is caused by the growing hegemony of patriarchy.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to explore the world of a sacred prostitute where no demarcation line of sacred and profane exists. Her odyssey of self-consciousness, of profane to sacred, attained through her body, though it is not a straight journey. Complex ways of pain and suffering lead her to the summit of sacredness though the ways are not considered to be a sacrilege. During her journey some actions awaken her body and give pleasure while the other awakens her soul and renders peace. So, the contradictory relation of a binary pair sacred and profane dissolves. Moreover, her odyssey of profane to sacred proclaims that binaries have illusory and superficial meanings. The novel's main character Maria manifests in herself an unconventional binary of body and soul. Body and soul merge together when she asserts "I'm not a body with a soul. I'm a soul that has a visible part called the body" (Coelho 75)

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