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“THE CHALLENGING TASK OF UNDERSTANDING MARIA”

Dr. V.CH.N.K. Srinivasa Rao

Professor & Head
Dept. of English
Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Degree College
Gonda

Amit Verma

Research Scholar & Guest Faculty
Dept. of English
Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Degree College
Gonda

ABSTRACT:

*Having decided to write an article on one of the works of Paulo Coelho, we thought of **The Alchemist, By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept, The Fifth Mountain, The Pilgrimage, The Valkyries, Veronika Decides to Die, The Devil and Miss Prym** and many others as well, but settled ourselves with his book **Eleven Minutes**. After finishing reading **Eleven Minutes** we again toyed with many ideas and thoughts of writing an article on the book, we discussed, we argued and finally arrived at the present title of the article.*

It's no wonder we immediately fell in love with Maria - the protagonist, like many other millions of readers of this work. The blurb of the book says:

“Love is a terrible thing that will make you suffer ...” so says Maria, a young Brazilian girl convinced from an early age that she will never find true love. A chance meeting in Rio takes her to Geneva, but the glittering life she hoped for was a fantasy. The reality – selling herself to survive - is a dehumanizing grind that pushes her further away from real love, towards a fascination with pure physical pleasure.

But when her emotional barriers are tested by a handsome young painter, she must choose between the dark path she is on and risking everything to find her ‘inner light’. Can she move beyond the meeting of bodies to a meeting of minds or even soul – to a place where sex itself is sacred?”

This is quite interesting, isn't it? Hold on a minute please!

Maria's journey has many more twists and turns. Not for nothing, Coelho admits in his dedication of the book that he knows his novel deals with a subject that is harsh, difficult and shocking. Significantly, he quotes the following Hymn to Isis, third or fourth century BC, discovered in Nag Hammadi, in the beginning of the novel:

For I am the first and the last
 I am the venerated and the despised
 I am the prostitute and the saint
 I am the wife and the virgin
 I am the mother and the daughter
 I am the arms of my mother
 I am barren and my children are many
 I am the married woman and the spinster
 I am the woman who gives birth and she

who never procreated
 I am the consolation for the pain of birth
 I am the wife and the husband
 And it was my man who created me
 I am the mother of my father
 I am the sister of my husband
 And he is my rejected son
 Always respect me
 For I am the shameful and the magnificent one

For the writers of this article, this Hymn is in nutshell what Maria is in the novel. The reader astonishes at the startling contradictions described in the Hymn and yet this is the reality we face in our day today lives more or less.

Maria, a Brazilian girl falls in love for the first time when she is eleven, en route from her house to school. She hates studying and her only other distraction in life is television, and her wish is that the school days would pass quickly. When she misses the boy with whom she falls in love, she learns at that moment that certain things are lost forever. She also learns that there is a place called ‘somewhere far way, that the world is vast and her own town very small, (having only one cinema, one night club, and one bank) and that, in the end, the most interesting people always leave.

Great amount of knowledge for her tender age, isn't it?

She studies for the next three years in order to get on in life, at the same time looking for someone with who she can share her dreams of adventure. She associates love more with the person's absence than with their presence. She has the habit of penning down her thoughts in a diary. Here are the lines from her diary as the novelist gives us that have an interesting observation of Maria:

“When we meet someone and fall in love, we have a sense that the whole universe is on our side... Life moves very fast. It rushes us from heaven to hell in a matter of seconds.” (P. 9)

However, her fifteenth year brings with it not only the discovery that one is supposed to kiss with one's mouth open, and that love is, above all, a cause of suffering. She also discovers regarding masturbation.

When she is seventeen Maria makes love with a few boys many times using them as a way of learning, trying in every way she can, to understand what pleasure there is in having sex with a partner. Unable to understand, she thinks that masturbation is much less trouble and far more rewarding. Again from her diary:

“My aim is to understand love. I know how alive I felt when I was in love, and I know that everything I have now, however interesting it might seem, doesn't really excite me. But love is a terrible thing... I see that those who touched my heart failed to arouse my body, and that those who aroused my body failed to touch my heart.” (P. 16)

By the time Maria turns nineteen, she knows how to use a man, without being used by him. She never forgets one thing her mother says: ‘Beauty, my dear, doesn't last.’ After working two years in a local draper's shop, paying her parents without fail every month, she manages to save enough money to go to the picture postcard image of her country Rio de Janeiro, with a dream of earning lots of money, learning about life and who she is, buying a farm for her parents, finding a husband and bringing her family over to see where she lives. Travelling for forty-eight hours by bus she reaches Copacabana.

On the beach with a Swiss man Maria's conversation is very simple; She is questioned by him: “Work? Dollars? Brazilian star?”

It is noteworthy what Maria feels that day as she writes in her diary:

“Everything tells me that I am about to make a wrong decision, but making mistakes is just part of life. What does the world want of me? Does it want me to take no risks, to go back where I came from because didn't have the courage to say ‘yes’ to life? ... And if nothing belongs to me, then there's no point wasting my time looking after things that aren't mine; its best to live as if today were the first (or last) day of my life.” (P.25-26) After all, Maria is a girl from the backlands of Brazil, with no experience of

life apart from a good school, a vast knowledge of TV soaps and the certainty that she is beautiful.

During her second week in Switzerland it is what Maria feels: “I can choose either to be a victim of the world or an adventurer in search of treasure. It’s all a question of how I view my life.” (P.39) Undoubtedly, she chooses to be an adventurer in search of treasure.

Maria enrolls herself in a French course that runs in the mornings. She joins one Mr. Roger’s office for work; she buys a mobile phone, starts eating in Chinese restaurants. She opens her legs to an Arab who pays her a thousand francs. The next day she writes in her diary:

“I don’t feel in the least bit sorry for myself. I am not the only one, even though my fate may put me outside the law and outside society. In the search for happiness, however, we are all equal: none of us is happy- not the banker/musician, the dentist/writer, the checkout girl/actress, or the housewife/model.” (PP.57 & 58)

Later on she also pens down that she has discovered the fact - why a man pays for a woman and readily gets the answer on her own that he wants to be happy. “He wouldn’t pay a thousand francs just to have an orgasm. He wants to be happy. I do too, everyone does, and yet no one is. What have I got to lose if, for a while, I decide to be a ... it’s a difficult word to think or even write ... but let’s be blunt ... what have I got to lose if I decide to become a prostitute for a while?

Honour. Dignity. Self-respect. Although, when I think about it, I’ve never had any of those things. I didn’t ask to be born, I’ve never found any one to love me, I’ve always made the wrong decisions – now I’m letting life decide for me.” (P.64)

However, it is in Rue de Berne she chooses at a random bar with the alluringly Brazilian name of ‘Copacabana’. She keeps on telling herself that she is not a victim of fate, that she is running her own risks, pushing beyond her own limits, experiencing things which, one day, in the silence of her heart, in the tedium of old age, she would

remember almost with nostalgia – however absurd that might seem. She questions herself money is one motivation, but is that all?

Maria experiences a strange sense of pride. Life is teaching her – very fast – that is only the strong survive. To be strong, she must be the best, there is no alternative. From one of the pages of her diary it goes like this:

“I’m not a body with a soul, I’m a soul that has a visible part called the body... But if I don’t think about love, I will be nothing. I need to write about love. I need to think and think and write and write about love – otherwise, my soul won’t survive.” (PP.75-76) These kind of ruminations make Maria’s character a challenging one.

It is after another three months something special, something unusual happens in Maria’s life in the bar. When she hears ‘Hang on a moment’ she is surprised and glances to one side. A long haired boy of about thirty asks her not to go and tells Maria that she has got a special light about her. As he starts drawing her face, she feels that he is seeing her soul, her fears, her fragility, her inability to deal with a world which she pretends to master, but about which she knows nothing and feels uncomfortable. She also feels that she is just like everyone else, she endures her loneliness in silence, tries to justify every she does,. Pretends to be strong when she is feeling weak or weak when she is feeling strong, she has renounced love and taken up a dangerous profession, etc.

This is perhaps the turning point of the novel from where the readers go along with the experiences of the protagonist with more concern and more sympathy.

We come to know that he is Ralf Hart, the famous painter of the day. He explains her that Maria has a glow about her. The light comes from sheer will power, the light of someone who has made important sacrifices in the name of things she thinks are important. It’s in her eyes – the light is in her eyes. It is also revealed that despite everything, fame, money, women, travel, Mr. Hart is unhappy, and has only one joy in his life that is his work.

Look at how Maria tells about her when Hart wants to know about her. She says that there are three of her – the Innocent Girl, the Femme Fatale, and the Understanding Mother.

When Maria expresses her curiosity to see the painting in full, she is told that it is part of The Faces of Geneva, famous people and anonymous people and will be exhibited by for the first time in a gallery in Berlin and then it will tour Europe. She questions herself ‘what is more important in life? Living or pretending to live?’

That day Maria writes in her diary: “Today... a painter, with a life entirely different from mine – threw a pebble into the water...I am aware that there are certain phrases which are not written by me, but by a woman full of ‘light’; I am that woman though I refuse to accept it. ...I at least have gained one very happy day in my life. Considering the way the world is, one happy day is almost a miracle.” (PP.114 &6)

After meeting Mr. Hart a couple of times Maria clearly tells him that she is confronting her own demons, doing exactly the opposite of what she has promised herself and would do. Whether she plays the part of a prostitute or friend or understanding mother, even though in her soul she is a daughter in need of affection.

In the repeated meetings between Maria and Mr. Ralf Hart one doesn’t find the normal kind of courtship, expression of love, affection or anything like that. Even though he is only six years older to her, they speak like two philosophers par excellence. This is what intriguing indeed.

Maria feels that she has met a man and fallen in love with him. She allows herself to fall in love for one simple reason that she is not expecting anything to come of it. She also feels that the really important meetings are planned by the souls long before the bodies see each other. She just wants Ralf Hart to be very happy. She opines that if one is talking in terms of making progress in life, one must understand that ‘good enough’ is very different from the ‘best’.

The philosophical discussions about body, soul, pain, suffering, pleasure and the spiritual or psychic experiences both Maria and Ralf Hart share, exchange in between

them further complex their relationship. We wonder whether they are going to be together or going to depart from each other forever.

The novelist aptly describes the farewell meeting of Maria and Ralf in the following lines:

A time to be born, and a time to die;
 A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
 A time to kill, and a time to heal;
 A time to break down, and a time to build up;
 A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
 A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
 A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
 A time to get, and a time to lose;
 A time to keep, and a time to cast away;
 A time to rend, and a time to sew;
 A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
 A time to love and a time to hate;
 A time of war, and a time of peace. (P.265)

At the end, Maria decides to return to her homeland that is Brazil. She leaves, because she has chosen to leave, and there is no reason to regret. But as it is rightly said by the novelist, “all the determination and willpower in the world not be enough to prevent love from changing the rule of the game from one moment to the next.” Yes, it is in the flight changing in Paris that Ralf Hart encounters Maria again. She kisses him, utterly indifferent as to what happens after the words ‘The End’ appear on the cinema screen in general. This is the complexity of the character of Maria.

We conclude the article with the words of novelist himself who says in his dedication, “Some books make us dream, others bring us face to face with reality, but what matters most to the author is the honesty with which a book is written.”

Mr. Coelho, we would like to tell you it matters most to us too, the readers as well and we profusely thank you for writing *Eleven Minutes*.

REFERENCES

All references are from Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*, published by HarperCollins Publishers 51st impression 2022, Gurugram, Haryana, India.



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