

Strategies to Overcome the Inferior: A Study of Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*

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ABSTRACT

Inferiority feeling can affect the power of decision making and can also strengthen the urge to cope up with the failures in life. Thereby, understanding the psychological aspect of the characters in a novel aids in understanding the novel and its purpose comprehensively. Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* focuses on Maria and her life as the main object. The novel narrates the struggle of the young Brazilian girl who comes to Switzerland for the purpose of betterment of life. Maria's poor financial condition and experiences in childhood and young adulthood, particularly those experiences involving her search for true love, were according to the principles of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology of the nature to induce an abnormal feeling of inferiority. It will point out that those events in Maria's life would have tended to inflict her with a feeling of inferiority reflected in her own psychological dilemma. This paper focuses on her initial failure to satisfactorily adjust to life and then her strategy to deal with problems. Maria wants to be a successful person and she uses her creativity as a strategy to cope up with the problems she faces after becoming a prostitute.

Keywords: *Eleven Minutes*, creative power, prostitute, strategy, psychological approach.

Eleven Minutes, written by Paulo Coelho was published in 2003. It was translated from Portuguese to English by Margaret Jull Costa. Paulo Coelho wrote *Eleven Minutes* with Maria as the main character of his novel. *Eleven Minutes* is an interesting story about the survival journey of a prostitute in Switzerland. The story begins on an interesting note, where the author introduces

Maria as a prostitute in an unusual manner: ‘Once upon a time, there was a prostitute called Maria. Like all prostitutes, she was born innocent and a virgin,...’ (EM: 1). At a very young age, she becomes convinced that love is not meant for her. She gets a chance of leaving Rio to go to Geneva, where she dreams of finding fame and fortune. Before going she is promised stardom as a South American dancer when she reaches Geneva but instead ends up working as a prostitute. Paulo conveys through Maria’s character the meaning of sacred sex, love, struggle, moral, choice and reality. Maria belongs to a poor family and she is the only child of her parents. She lives in a remote area of Brazil. Maria is an innocent beautiful girl who always dreamt of meeting a handsome man, getting married and living happily ever after. Being from a low class society, she is neither able to get proper education nor is she able to find true love. Lack of education and love imparts negativity in Maria’s life but instead of giving up she dares to fight and plan her life according to her will and wish. Maria’s only aim of having a decent life is full of many complicated problems. The research is going to focus on the Maria’s creative power as a strategy to solve her problems in *Eleven Minutes*.

As mentioned above the inferior conditions in the life of a person play an important role in shaping the future. Adler explains in his theories that every person succumbs to disease in that region of the body which has been less well-developed, less successfully functioning, and generally “inferior” from birth (Hjelle and Ziegler, 1992: 141). The inferiority feeling arises as a result of the weakness present inside an individual. In real life, inferiority expresses itself in various ways. Adler suggested the main expression was to seek superiority to make up for feelings of inferiority. Thus, striving to be on top rather than on the bottom in life, striving to be first instead of last, plus instead of minus. The abstract is made concrete in what one does to achieve ones goal Maria develops feeling of being inferior because of many reasons such as low education, weak financial conditions, and her failure to find true love. These negative feelings also

affect her decisions making and increase risk taking. She decides to fight all the odds in her life and dreams of living a decent life. Maria comes from a place that lies in the interior of Brazil and therefore there are no basic amenities. She grows up in the place where folklore, superstitions, and traditional roles for women are woven into culture. She could only get to complete her secondary school. Weak financial condition of her parents compels her to work in order to support them. The lack of proper education and her poor status in the society makes her feel inferior. This inferior feeling develops an urge to improve her condition. Maria's only goal in life was to fall in love, marry, and raise a family. Unfortunately, her first encounter with love was disappointing. She was only eleven when she fell in love with a boy. The first innocent brushes with love left her heartbroken. At a tender age, she becomes convinced that she will never find true love, instead starts believing that true love is rare and makes one suffer. 'But love is a terrible thing; I've seen my girlfriends suffer and I don't want the same thing to happen to me' (EM: 16). At the age of fifteen Maria discovers orgasm through masturbation. This somehow disappointed her because coupled with boys who kept breaking her heart, she was no longer excited about men and she chose to ignore love entirely. Despite all the negativities surrounding her, Maria was different from other girls in her town as she craved for adventure. After she finished secondary school, she found a job in a draper's shop. By now, she knew how to use a man without being used by him. Maria knew that her boss was in love with her therefore this bought her a considerable increase in salary. Maria could save enough money for a small vacation. Maria goes to Rio de Janeiro, where she is approached by a Swiss entertainment businessman named Roger and is coaxed to fly back to Switzerland with him and work in his nightclub as a samba dancer. Maria's sense of adventure lead her to a different path from all the other girls she knew. Because Maria was very beautiful she chose for an employment opportunity in Europe,

an event that thrilled Maria. It could be seen in the Maria's diary statements:

'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 I didn't have the courage to say 'yes' to life? I made my first mistake when I was eleven years old, when that boy asked me if I could lend him a pencil; since then, I've realised that sometimes you get no second chance and that it's best to accept the gifts the world offers you.' (EM: 25-26).

Immediately upon her arrival, Maria learns the truth that she will get less than what she was promised, forcing her into a life style much more restricted than the one she had imagined. Maria chooses not be a victim and views the experience as one she would have never had if she had not come to Europe with Roger. Maria breaks a rule and dates a man. When Roger discovers that Maria has dated a man she had met at the club, she is fired. Fortunately, she manages to get a generous severance package. Maria tries a lot to find work in modelling agencies. Maria signs up at a modeling agency and meets a client to discuss a fashion show, but Maria ends up sleeping with the man for money. This is the beginning of Maria's career as a prostitute, something she does because it yields good money for relatively little investment. Maria writes in her diary:

'....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.' (EM: 2003, 64)

Private Intelligence is the reasoning invented by an individual to stimulate and justify a self-serving style of life. By contrast, common sense represents society's cumulative, consensual reasoning that recognises the wisdom of mutual benefit. When Maria realises that life has not given her many options, she decides to accept her fate and enters into the world of seduction. On reaching her room after the ordeal which did not even bring her a satisfying elevation, she makes a decision of

earning the money through this line of work and takes a walk to Rue de Berne where she enters a night club and approaches the owner requesting for work. She understands the simple system of how the guy approaches her, asking if she would be interested in a drink with him, where she has to order the fruit juice which was the costliest on the menu and accept his further invitation to take her out for three hundred and fifty francs for forty five minutes, which every customer at the bar seems to know. As she continues with her life every single night, she tries to make her services better by making an effort to understand the needs of the guys she offers herself. She realises that the men who come to the club are afraid and are ashamed of they cannot actually satisfy the women they lay themselves in.

Unfortunately, life is not as easy as she thinks as she is finally thrown into prostitution. The creative power to solve problèmes here will explain Maria's manner to get money and stay alive as a prostitute. Her struggle began when she came to Switzerland as Samba dancer and her life changed as she became a prostitute to fulfil some of her needs. She could have accepted fate and spent all her life in prostitution but Maria plans to save money and go back to Brazil. Maria is obviously a very intelligent human being. She always strives to learn, to understand things. She tries to make her life better through learning and her creative power plays an important in the strategy to handle her situation. The curiosity laced with the will and discipline to fulfil it by reading, talking and acquiring knowledge is a great feature to have. According to Adler creative power means the influence of heredity and environments toward a person in overcoming the problem of life. Creative power implies freedom, free to be an individual self. (Hjelle and Ziegler: 150). According to Adler, the creative self is the superordinate construct in Adler's theory, his ultimate achievement as a personalist.

Based on the definitions above, it can be concluded that the aim of individual psychological perspective is to know the personality or individual style of life to realise its direction. When an individual has an expectation or a plan it has to be arranged using a strategy or process. Individual psychological perspective has many ways in a process to realise the direction namely inferiority feelings, striving for superiority, style of life, social interest, creative self and fictional finalism. Adler describes striving for superiority as “the fundamental law of human life, a something without which life would be unthinkable.” (Hjelle and Ziegler: 143) Striving for superiority is the effort of the major character Maria to cover her weakness and to realise the superiority by becoming a successful person. At the time she works as prostitute, Maria wants to save money to plan her future because she knows that prostitution flourishes on glamour. Although she rarely listened to her mother, there was one thing her mother said that she never forgot: ‘Beauty, my dear, doesn’t last’. (EM: 2003, 17). She wants to buy a piece of land for farming, some cows, make her parents happy and stay with them. Maria increases the competence of her communication. Maria enrolls for French course to improve her French. She puts effort to learn French from magazines and listening to the radio at the same time she practices her French with the people surrounding her. Maria tries hard to communicate fluently. She goes to the library too. Maria reads books to improve her knowledge. She becomes a regular visitor in the library. Maria uses her creativity into prostitution and learns to handle her clients sensibly without getting involved emotionally. She learnt the art that she has to control herself to fit into the ideal role after sensing the requirement of her clients. She mastered the art of pretending her involvement with her clients. 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” (EM 175). In dealing with all her executive clients, Maria, was sometimes the, Innocent Girl, who gazes admiringly at the man, pretending to be impressed by his tales of power and glory. Then there’s the Femme Fatale, who pounces on the most insecure, and by doing so, takes control of the situation and relieves them of the responsibility, because then they, don’t have to worry about anything. And finally, there’s the Understanding Mother, who looks after those in need of advice and who listens with an all comprehending air to stories that go in one ear and out the other.

Even, though Maria is a case of crossing the thresholds of varying subjectivities, in order to attain the Ultimate one (That of a Woman), and it involved 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 neither ignite, nor consummate the Womanly passion in her-thus giving a unilateral direction to her sex desire. Despite, such fatuous encounters, Maria very well knew, that “Desire is not what you see, but what you imagine” (EM 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, 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” (EM: 167).

Meanwhile, in Geneva, when Maria developed a personal fascination with sex (not love); but yet again, her meeting with Ralf Hart, a handsome, young painter and a “special client”, put her on a journey of self-discovery. Maria felt this new self-respect because her lover knew about her desire and took care to fulfil it, without, ever her telling him so. In this journey, she had a choice to either pursue a path of pure physical pleasure or discover the possibility of a physical relationship which articulates the ‘unspeakable’ in her soul-in any woman’s soul –i.e. love. Ralf

Hart's search was not for Maria's body but it was for her soul. That is why, when towards the end of the novel they make love, the details written in Maria's diary, appear to have been penned by a lost soul, "when we initiated that joint search for the two lost souls, the two missing fragments needed to complete the Universe" (EM: 262) Even though, as a prostitute, she had not been 'in control', with hundreds of men, with Ralf hart, she had for the first time ever 'let go' of her emotions and hence experienced a pleasure, hitherto unknown. This resulted in their uniting for life – in marriage. Here. It was that she felt a Woman. Thus the journey that Maria took ends on a happy note where her strategy to survive and improve her life earn her self-respect as well as reinstate her belief in true love.

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