



Journeys of the Soul: The Existential Choices of Coelho's Female Protagonists

Marina Joyce Roche¹, Dr. R. Jayakanth²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, St. Joseph's College, Trichy
(Affiliated to Barathidasan University)

Email: marina@sjcc.edu.in

²Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College,
Trichy, (Affiliated to Barathidasan University)

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Abstract

Existentialism can be a compelling lens through which to examine the stories of Paulo Coelho, especially the choices and journeys made by his female protagonists, because of its focus on and emphasis on agency, responsibility, and meaning-making in a seemingly nonsensical world. Coelho's protagonists go through a drastic change with a crucial decision they take; as they grow, they increasingly introspect their lives and have to negotiate with the social norms and gradually carve their path of success. The often high-stakes and tiring process of decision-making and its consequences are bolstered by Coelho's recurring considerations of fate and free will (Sebastian, 2023). Coelho's questions with themes of existence also concern partly subjective experiences that people have while grappling with issues of moral conundrums and contradictory ideologies while making choices (Goyal, 2021). Existential perspectives better demonstrate the depth of profound possibilities of plausible character conflict and transformative power in seeking personal genuineness (Tolstoy, 1886). The female protagonists in the narratives of Paulo Coelho typically undergo a journey of self-discovery, rejecting expectations and norms to develop their sense of self, as these readings also engage wider themes of existentialism with responsibility and freedom (Errita et al., 2022). These personal journeys, whether to the spiritual or materialistic world, expose individuals to a different perspective, which leads them to the road not taken, ultimately allowing them to catalyse profound change and self-realisation. This paper examines the existential experience of Coelho's female characters and how they typically defy social norms to pursue their dreams.

Key Words: existential, responsible, self-discovery, rejection, protagonist, consequences, choice.

Introduction

Coelho's female characters often undertake journeys that break free of patriarchal society's gender roles to know themselves. It is this journey of choices that brings them to Brida, choosing between the mysticism of the Tradition of the Moon and the Tradition of the Sun, or Veronika, who is propelled into self-discovery through a near-death experience. In all cases, Coelho's feminine protagonists illustrate that the voice of the soul is neither feminine nor masculine; it's human, spiritual, and infinite. Existentialism in Coelho's novels is not bleak or nihilistic like Sartre's or Camus's. His novels are affirmatively existential, based on spiritual hope. His characters faced the ultimate choice - whether to conform or to evolve. In many ways, his female protagonists demonstrate what Simone de Beauvoir may call simply the struggle "to become", that is, to remove identities that have been imposed on them in favour of a self that they can freely choose. The notions of fate and free will feature prominently in Coelho's novels. His women are shown to have many directions to take, but it is the protagonist's awareness of freedom, their courage to choose, and willingness to step into the unknown ambiguity that signifies their existential coming-of-age.

In addition, their journeys are certainly compounded by the dimensions of spirituality, mysticism and are woven with metaphors of symbolic trials. The narrative is built around dreams, omens, teachers, and lovers, all of whom serve as instruments for growth. The calling of the soul is depicted as a pervasive whisper - a divine intuition or spirit that compels them forward. It is the effort the protagonists invest in moving forward when confronted with this calling, where we gain a dual reading, illustrating their destinies as much as reflecting our life questions as readers. Paulo Coelho's works often center on the existential journeys of his protagonists, many of whom are women. This research paper will explore the complexities of Coelho's female protagonists,

examining their choices and the existential implications of their decisions. Through a critical analysis of Coelho's works, this paper will argue that his female protagonists embody the concept of existentialism, making choices that reflect their individuality and freedom.

Between Mysticism and Modernity: Brida's Spiritual Duality

In Coelho's novel, *Brida*, the primary character, goes on a significant journey of self-discovery with a set goal and purpose. She seeks profound knowledge, spiritual enlightenment, and authentic love. The central conflict of the narrative is Brida's conflict between her dual personality, one as a burgeoning witch connected to the mystical world, and as a person who is accountable for her actions. Her quest becomes the core element of the narrative. The pull between the internal zest to conquer everything around her and the external pressures of choosing the right identity as per the social norms, turn the table for the protagonist as she does not want to give up her dreams but she wants to become the person she dreams not the one that society expects her to be as she peruses her dreams she forms her own identity beyond the realms of the society, creating a benchmark of her won.

The choices in Brida's life, whether she accepts fate or conforms to rules, are like a deep touchstone in his pursuit of authenticity (Jones, 2020). The implications of his choice resonate through the story, which means that true identity is not given but forged by the act of choosing. Consequently, Coelho illustrates through the difficulties of Brida that existential choices do not only concern the paths taken but also include the deep awakenings that emerge from each decision (Green, 2019). Brida's journey towards the self-discovery is deeply influenced by his mentor, the wise and enigmatic figure of the Magus. Through their interactions, Brida learns about the spiritual dimensions of life that transcend social norms and personal fears. The wizard represents not

mere guidance, but a reflective surface on which Brida contemplates his own truths and existential issues. According to Mayer (2017), the role of a mentor is to facilitate the introspective process of the mentee, allowing them to face their chaos and deliberately navigate their choices. Fascinated by the world of magic Brida peruses magic, after her meeting Wicca her primary mentor, she longs to meet Magus, who taught her about the Tradition of the Sun, Brida's meeting with Magus serves as turning point in her life as he guides her to the world mystical wisdom initiating her to make crucial yet an important choice of her life which would go against the expected norms of the society, Nevertheless the path she chooses aligns with her authentic self, her whole being works towards what she truly deserves and desires.

In 'Brida', the continuation of the knowledge of the titular character leads her to a pivotal choice involving love and her mystical vocation. Guided by her intuition, Brida's decision to embrace her destiny as a witch illustrates a remarkable struggle against societal standards. However, this choice does not come without a feeling of guilt; As she sails in her relationship with the enigmatic Magus, she fights with the fear of abandoning her previous life and affecting those she loves. Coelho (1990) poignantly captures Brida's turmoil when he writes: 'Each choice has a consequence, and each consequence changes the course of his life'. Brida's internal monologues spark the psychological burden of choice, the persistent conflict of to be or not to be, validation by her mentors, and her urging to learn from Magus all culminate in creating a new persona. Furthermore, Brida's attraction towards Magus leads to hullabaloo, until she can channelize her emotions towards her boyfriend. Wicca leads her toward the spiritual awakening through introspection and self-discovery. Brida is finally able to accomplish her dream.

Initially, she idealizes love as a mystical and transformative experience, believing that it

is the last catalyst to understand its purpose (Coelho, 1990). However, while navigating their relationships, particularly with the enigmatic teacher and her lover, Flange confronts the harsh realities that come with intimacy and vulnerability. The challenges he faces in reconciling his idealized vision of love with the complexity of human relationships cause critical decisions about his spiritual identity and journey. This dichotomy underlines the tension between utopian ideals and genuine obstacles of emotional connection, illustrating the transforming power of love as a guiding light and a source of conflict in their life (Mugrib and Zulfah, 2016).

Brida, as a character, emerges from the dualism of tradition and individualism, reflecting the social constructions that often unite women. Her search for spiritual lighting and love prompts her to make empowering but precarious decisions that can alter the course of their existence. Critics have noticed how witchcraft flange exploration symbolizes a recovery of power that defies patriarchal structures (Fahira, 2023). In this sense, flange elections encapsulate a nuanced representation of autonomy in the midst of the patriarchal framework, offering a narrative that reflects the complexities faced by contemporary women who fight for self -self-determination while adhering to or rejecting social norms (Fahira, 2023).

Choosing Life: Veronika's Rebirth Through Death

Coelho's female characters are like a phoenix; they survive through the ashes and come out victorious. Veronika, in the novel *Veronika Decides to Die*, represents a very intuitive personality as she confronts the existential choice at a very young age despite being very successful. The tug of war between life, death, and the search for meaning, when death fails to accept her, she finds solace in rediscovering herself amidst the chaotic life of the asylum.

The repercussions of this decision have repercussions on her internal and external worlds, revealing the complex layers of Veronika's psyche and challenging the reader to reconsider their perceptions of happiness and despair (Miller, 2022). The representation by Coelho of Veronika's trip underlines how choices, even those that seem to lead to self-destruction, can catalyze a deep existential awakening and transformation, reminding readers that each decision has transformative potential, whatever its external appearance (Martinez, 2021).

In 'Veronika Decides to Die', the protagonist finds the enigmatic Dr. Igor, whose unconventional approach to life and death influences her perception of existential despair. Dr. Igor essentially incorporates a counterpoint into social standards, asking Veronika to question the value attributed to the normality and widespread fear of failure (Mayer, 2017). In this orientation, Veronika deals not only with her suicidal tendencies but also with the broader questions of existence, purpose, and meaning. Veronika's interactions with Dr. Igor probe her to think of life beyond the limits of her perception of success and a meaningful life. This tapping of the emotional aspect illuminates a deeper understanding of life and its purpose. Veronika once decided to take her own life now crosses the boundaries of the asylum with her boyfriend to a life that she had not predicted, but with the determination that she would create a beautiful life and accept as it comes. Veronika embodies a deep fight against existential despair and the societal pressures that dictate her existence. Her decision to put an end to her life propels her into an exploration of the values that govern her reality. After having survived the suicide attempt, Veronika is faced with a feeling of crushing regret, having inadvertently discovered the beauty of life while fighting against the chains of mental oppression. Coelho (1998) skilfully reveals Veronika's conflict when she reflects: 'What if every moment of life is precious and that I wasted mine'; This

achievement not only promotes the guilt of her past choices, but also ignites a fervent desire for freedom - a paradox where a new life has emerged from the very act of rejecting it. During his trip, Veronika illustrates the way in which the confrontation of existential choices can lead to a rediscovery of the goal despite deeply anchored remorse.

On the contrary, Veronika's narrative complicates the notion of love when placing it in the framework of existential despair. Initially, Veronika has a romantic vision of love as a solution to her underlying feelings of emptiness and disappointment. However, her suicide attempt catalyzes a trip that defies her preconceptions about love, which finally leads her to realize that authentic connections cannot only be found through fantasy or idealization (Coelho, 1998). The relationships that forge within the mental institution, from friendships to fleeting romantic encounters, consolidate it to face the fear of vulnerability and inevitable imperfections in love. These experiences catalyze a deep revaluation of their existential choices, which illustrate how love, although full of pain and disappointment, also becomes an essential way for personal transformation (Mugrib and Zulfah, 2016).

Veronika's existential dilemma compels her to end her life. After a failed attempt to end her life, she discovers a new path in an asylum, ironically enough, among the people who neither have life nor have a direction or meaning to the life that they are leading. Through her interactions with the inmates and Dr. Igor, she learns that life is not about mere success in career or in personal life, but the existence itself. Life is not what you create through the social norms but the one who create for yourself through learning your true potentials and knowing what you want to be rather than what society wants you to be. she learns that our decisions good or bad leads to unexpected consequences and the purpose often is derived from the resilience we built while we face obstacles. The irony of its circumstance reveals

that the act of choosing to live - a decision that initially considered unworthy - is what, in the end, reformulates its perception of existence.

Love, Freedom, and the Sacred Feminine in Eleven Minutes

Maria, of 'Eleven Minutes', still complicates the account of the existential choice by embodying the conflict between desire and rationality. Her life choices - rooted in experiences of love, sexuality, and profession - have noted a continuous negotiation between autonomy and external pressures. Maria's decisions are a reflection of her quest for identity in a space where the social norms were etched into the gender identity and specifications on permissible and impermissible actions. Women were controlled and put to the test with every choice they made. Coelho's account highlights his difficulties, demonstrating that his choices, in particular those who question societal standards, reveal the deep complexities of human nature (Thompson, 2020). The paths that Maria sails - defined both by her ambitions and the desire for connection - force the multifaceted nature of decision-making, finally affirming that each choice sculpts new trajectories for her life (Davis, 2019).

Maria churns her identity through the narrow parameters of gender roles set by society. The system, which scaled women based on the work and relationships that they engaged with. Leading her to see love through the transactional lens, which came at a price of judgment as she accepted the unacceptable. (Mayer; Mayer, 2017). As she sails through her way, the influence of cultural norms on sexuality - and the stigma associated with her profession - offers a constant challenge to her sense of self. However, Maria evolves with time, her different encounters with life and individuals help her to learn and unlearn the purpose of her life. Her understanding of human desire, loneliness, wealth, true happiness, and power dynamics deepens with every interaction with the world outside of her

comfort zone. Her journey from her hometown to the city challenged the narrative that was set by society.

Maria created her own story, giving the world a different perspective as she navigates the intricate interplay between sexual freedom and emotional vulnerability. Her choice to enter into prostitution, though, was initially for survival; she eventually owns it and finds meaning in what she does. This decision in her life allows her to find her new self. Torn between the worldly expectations of love, desire, pleasure, and genuine companionship, she grapples with the social standards surrounding her profession. However, her never-giving-up attitude. Coelho (2003) captures her fate as she notes: "Love does not only concern exhibition; It is the courage to face self-truth." This internal conflict reveals the duality of its choices - while its pursuit of freedom through sexual agency frees it from conventionality, it traps it simultaneously in a network of emotional disorders and regrets. Maria's existential choices bear witness to the complexity of the pursuit and the lengths that we must go to reconcile personal ambition with societal pressures.

Maria, on the other hand, embodies the struggle for identity in a rigid societal framework. Her pursuit of love is responsible for the existential weight of decisions that question societal standards and personal happiness. By choosing to venture into a world where love is not only an emotional pursuit but also a courageous declaration of autonomy, Maria's experiences highlight the complex nature of fulfilment (Miwa, 2018). Coelho sails in these themes with a narrative style that combines simplicity and depth, allowing readers to engage cognitively and emotionally with the difficulties of the characters. Coelho through his narratives paint a deep reflection of human behaviour. Maria's story unfolds the connection between desire, love and self-esteem. Though Maria in her early encounters romanticizes love, she gradually realizes that it

was just a trade-off to escape from herself and mundane life. Nevertheless, these sexual relationships finally help her to meet Ralf the painter, and this relationship gives her a new perspective, leading her to a more complex and realistic understanding of relationships. Instead of delivering kindness and the expected genuine connection, their romantic experiences often reflect objectification and social betrayal (Coelho, 2003). The evolutionary perspective of Maria about love illustrates the complexities of desire and how it often contradicts the idealization that is expected to be found. The narrative depicts love not only as a source of pleasure satisfying the physical needs but also as a vehicle for self-exploration and learning one's own identity and purpose. (Mugrib and Zulfah, 2016).

To conclude the stories of Brida, Veronika, and Maria, Coelho illustrates the intricate role that love plays in the configuration of existential choices. The idealization of each character's love constantly juxtaposes against their lived experiences, revealing the obstacles and rewards that accompany romantic relationships. Ultimately, love emerges as a powerful catalyst in their lives, serving to illuminate paths of self-understanding, transformation, and personal freedom, while imposing the weight of the decisions that define their lives (Mugrib and Zulfah, 2016). In Paulo Coelho's narrative universe, the exploration of existential themes usually appears through their female protagonists, while sailing through significant life choices that end up leading to deep self-reflections and growth. In 'Brida', the main character embarks on a search for self-discovery that intertwines her spiritual awakening with the need for self-acceptance. Brida's journey is marked by its complex connection between her inner self and the universe. Her encounters with the mystical elements of life challenge her prejudice and force her to face her deepest fears and desires. As she learns to accept herself and her identity, which opens up the possibilities of liberation

from the social norms and limitations, and guides individuals to a more authentic existence (Achom, 2020).

The interconnected stories of Brida, Veronika, and Maria portray the deep implications of existential choices. The weight of guilt and regret manifests itself as a recurring theme, demonstrating how the journey of each character towards freedom is responsible for the consequences that shape their identity. Their difficulties reflect the universal human experience of the fight against the essence of choice - a company that inevitably illuminates both the beauty and the burden of existence. The exploration by Coelho of the life of these women obliges readers to reflect on their own choices, by forging a link between the existential battles of the characters and the subtleties of the human condition (Coelho, 1990; Coelho, 1998; Coelho, 2003). In the narratives of Paulo Coelho, love represents a multifaceted force that deeply influences the existential choices confronted by Brida, Veronika, and Maria. Each character embodies unique idealizations of love that often enter into conflict with their lived experiences, and finally shape their paths significantly. The trip of each protagonist reveals how love operates not only as an emotional state but as a catalyst for deep decision-making (Mugrib and Zulfah, 2016).

Coelho uses the lives of Brida, Veronika, and Maria to show the struggle women face as well as the tricky link between choosing and who they are. Their narratives show that individual travel decisions can greatly affect someone's identity, which means choices made when facing big life questions can constantly change a person's sense of self. These characters demonstrate the discourse of surrounding freedom, identity, and the inevitable weight of choice, as the reader engages with the fundamental question of their existence and purpose. We understand through Veronika's narrative the importance of self-acceptance and continued search for meaning, which leads her to a happier destiny. The decisions they make at

this point both reveal who they are and also guide the direction of their lives. Literature research explains that having orientation is important for coping with complicated emotions, especially existential challenges (Mayer, 2017). What Brida, Veronika, and Maria go through, it is clear that their life decisions are strongly affected by their culture and society. A character's behaviour is a result of how their personal goals interact with the pressures from the world around them (Mayer & Mayer, 2017). The weight of these pressures is palpable and, through the lens of the rabbit protagonists, the intricate, weird webs between social expectations and individual autonomy, increasing, can be discerned, the understanding of personal evolution in the face of significant choices. The journey of the existential choices faced by the female protagonists of Coelho - Brida, Veronika, and Maria - considers a deep exploration of guilt, regret, and innate desire for freedom. These characters went through a drastic transition through the decisions that they made; one small change or a tough choice changed the entire narrative for better or worse. What fascinates the reader is how these characters accepted themselves, stood tall against the storm of internal and external struggles, and the influence. These women showcase the world's brevity and the importance of self-love amidst the chaos and calamity.

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