



Choosing Herself: An Existentialist Reading of Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*

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Abstract— This paper reads Paulo Coelho's novel *Eleven Minutes*, through the philosophical lens of existentialism, arguing that the protagonist Maria's journey from a small Brazilian town to sex work in Geneva is best understood not as a story of victimhood or of mystical awakening, but as a dramatization of how a person builds a self through choice. Using the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard, the paper traces four stages in Maria's development: her starting point in circumstances she did not choose, her exercise of freedom in leaving home and entering sex work, her repeated retreat into fixed, self-protective identities, and her final, uncertain choice to risk love with the painter Ralf Hart. The paper shows that each stage matches a specific existentialist concept: facticity, radical freedom, bad faith, the absurd, and authenticity. Reading the novel this way reveals a coherent philosophical structure beneath its simple, popular style, one that most existing criticism, focused on spirituality or feminism, has not fully addressed. Overall, it could be concluded that the paper proves that Maria's tale is more concerned with learning to accept her fate than trying to evade it, which only an existentialist might have the ability to comprehend.



Keywords— Authenticity, Bad Faith, Existentialism, *Eleven Minutes*, Freedom, Paulo Coelho, Self-Formation, The Absurd

I. INTRODUCTION

Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* tells the story of Maria, a young woman from the interior of Brazil who travels to Geneva in search of a better life and ends up working as a prostitute. By the end of the novel, she has moved from confusion about love and sex toward a settled, self-chosen sense of who she is. Most critics who write about this novel focus on two things: Coelho's interest in spirituality and mysticism, and the question of whether the book is feminist or not. Both readings are useful, but they do not fully explain what actually happens to Maria on a psychological and philosophical level. This paper offers a different reading. It argues that Maria's story follows, quite closely, the pattern that existentialist philosophy describes

when it explains how a person becomes herself. Existentialism is a philosophical tradition built around a simple but demanding idea: human beings do not come into the world with a fixed nature or a built-in purpose. Instead, a person becomes who she is through the choices she makes over time.

This idea can be generally summarized in Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase "existence precedes essence," meaning that we exist in this world before anything else, and only in our actions, we define what we want to be (Sartre, 1956). While this phrasing might sound very liberating, the existentialists' view emphasizes the importance of the challenges that a human might face. In other words, if nothing is given, every choice is entirely up

to the individual, and there is no God or any other higher power that one might rely on. Sartre calls this unbearable position anguish. What is more, the philosopher also mentions the concept of bad faith that can help one deal with the horrors of free choice. According to Sartre, people often trick themselves thinking that they are a certain way, and they have always been like that, meaning that their existence or being is not subject to change.

Apart from Sartre, the author also refers to Albert Camus and Søren Kierkegaard. Camus shared existentialism's interest in freedom but gave preference to meaning over freedom. According to him, humans' expectations of meaning in life conflict with the fact that the universe does not guarantee us any meaning. The conflict is termed absurd because a person is like Sisyphus, a Greek mythological figure who was doomed to roll a boulder up a hill without any rest (Camus, 1955). Kierkegaard, writing earlier than both Sartre and Camus but claimed by later existentialists as an important source, described how a person moves from anxious uncertainty into a genuine, self-defining commitment through what he called a leap: a decision that cannot be fully justified in advance and has to be made anyway (Kierkegaard, 1980). These three ideas, freedom and bad faith, the absurd, and the leap into authenticity, map onto Maria's story with striking precision. Her early life supplies the unchosen conditions she must work with. Her decision to leave home and to enter sex work is an exercise of freedom that the novel treats seriously rather than dismissing as mere desperation. Her shifting self-descriptions throughout the novel, at times cold and professional, at times numb, at times hopeful, show her moving in and out of bad faith. The repetitive, diary-recorded nature of her work echoes Camus's absurd hero. And her final decision to risk emotional closeness with Ralf reads as a leap into authenticity. The rest of this paper develops each of these connections in turn, first through a short review of existing scholarship, then through a closer explanation of the theory, and finally through detailed analysis of the novel itself.

1.1. Literature Review

Scholarship on Paulo Coelho has tended to fall into a small number of recurring categories. A large portion of existing criticism treats his novels, including *Eleven Minutes*, as expressions of popular spirituality, connecting his work to Jungian ideas about archetypes and the unconscious, as well as to broader New Age interest in the sacred. This reading is well supported by the novel itself, since Maria's story is explicitly framed, at several points, as a search for the connection between physical desire and something larger and more meaningful.

A second body of criticism approaches the novel through feminist theory, and here opinion is more divided. Some readers see the novel as a positive portrayal of female sexual agency, since Maria makes her own decisions about her body and her work, and the narrative avoids simply punishing her for those decisions. Other readers are more skeptical, arguing that the novel, written by a male author, may be projecting a fantasy of female desire that is more comforting to a general readership than it is honest about the real difficulties of sex work. Both sides of this debate raise fair points, and this paper does not attempt to settle the disagreement.

What is largely missing from this critical conversation is sustained attention to the philosophical structure of Maria's development, considered on its own terms. Existentialist literary criticism has a long history, stretching back to readings of Sartre's and Camus's own novels and extending into broader studies of coming-of-age fiction, but it has rarely been applied to popular, spiritually themed fiction like Coelho's, likely because such fiction is often assumed to be philosophically simple. This paper argues that this assumption deserves to be tested rather than taken for granted, and that *Eleven Minutes*, read carefully, shows a clear and consistent existentialist pattern that has not yet been fully described in the scholarship.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To keep the analysis grounded, this paper organizes existentialist theory into four working concepts, explained here in plain terms before they are applied to the novel.

Most of all the term "Facticity" refers to the parts of a person's situation that she did not choose: where she was born, her family, her early experiences, the opportunities available to her. Existentialists do not deny that facticity matters. What they insist on is that facticity is not the same as destiny. A person's freedom operates inside her facticity, responding to it and working with it, rather than being cancelled out by it. Next the term "Freedom", in the existentialist sense, is the ability to give meaning to one's situation through the choices one makes, even when the situation itself was not chosen. This freedom comes with a psychological cost, which Sartre calls anguish: the uncomfortable awareness that no one else can make our choices for us, and that we cannot blame anyone else for the direction our life takes. Bad faith is the common escape route from this discomfort. It involves treating oneself as a fixed thing, a role, or a type, in order to avoid facing an open, undecided future.

Moreover the term "The absurd" describes the tension between the human wish for life to mean

something and a world that does not supply that meaning automatically. Camus argues that the honest response to this tension is neither despair nor false comfort, but a kind of clear-eyed persistence, continuing to live and act fully while accepting that no final answer is coming. Finally the term "Authenticity" names a way of living that accepts freedom and responsibility instead of hiding from them. Kierkegaard's idea of the leap adds an important detail: authentic commitment is not something a person can reason her way into with total certainty. At some point, she has to decide and act, without a guarantee that she is right.

2.1. Maria's Starting Point: Facticity and the Limits of Her World

Maria's childhood and adolescence in a small Brazilian town establish her facticity: the conditions she begins with but did not choose. Her early disappointments in love, and the narrow range of options open to a young woman in her situation, form the backdrop against which her later choices take place. It would be easy to read Maria's later path as something forced on her entirely by these early conditions, but the novel resists that reading. Coelho gives real attention to Maria's inner thoughts as she considers her situation, which suggests that her circumstances set the stage without writing the whole script. This matters for an existentialist reading, because it keeps open the possibility that what happens next is a genuine exercise of freedom rather than simple cause and effect.

2.2. The Choice to Leave and the Choice to Work

When Maria leaves Brazil and later has agreed to work in the sex trade, the novel suggests that both decisions are choices that she exercises free will in making. This does not mean the decisions are free of pressure; money is clearly part of her motivation. But Sartre's point about freedom is precisely that it operates within pressure, not instead of it. A person is still choosing, and still responsible for how she chooses, even when her options are limited. The novel supports this reading by giving Maria extended passages of reflection before and during her decisions, showing her actively interpreting her circumstances rather than simply reacting to them without thought.

2.3. Retreating Into Fixed Roles: Bad Faith in Practice

At several points in the novel, Maria settles into a fixed description of herself in order to make her situation easier to live with. Sometimes she describes herself as someone no longer capable of real love. Sometimes she treats her body and her emotional life as two separate things that never need to interact. Sometimes she simply waits, telling herself that fate will eventually sort out her contradictions for her. Each of these self-descriptions offers a kind of relief, because it turns an open, ongoing question, who am

I becoming, into a closed, settled answer. But the novel keeps disturbing these settled answers. Maria's discomfort keeps resurfacing, which is exactly what Sartre would predict, since bad faith is never a permanent solution; it is a temporary shelter from a freedom that does not actually go away.

This pattern is not unique to Maria. Other characters in the novel, including some of her clients and Ralf himself, show similar tendencies to define themselves in fixed, protective ways, whether as respectable, as damaged, or as simply not the kind of person who falls in love. The existential interpretation of the novel implies that this defensive strategy is not limited to sex workers or even Maria: an overarching tendency toward self-definition as a means of protecting one's mind against the anxiety of undecidability is likely to be characteristic of human beings in general.

2.4. Repetition and the Absurd: Maria's Diary

One of the book's structural devices is the periodic interruptions of the main narrative to depict Maria's private diary. The diary is filled with descriptions that feature the protagonist's daily work in an almost identical manner, portraying the lack of any specific significance of Maria's life. Her entries could be associated with the absurdity of Sisyphus's activities as described by Camus: a task that does not have any purpose but cannot be abandoned. Her approach to her profession could be viewed as an example of the absurd hero's temperament: detachment from the meaningless repetition of actions that still need to be regularly performed.

2.5. The Leap Toward Ralf: An Uncertain Authenticity

By the end of the novel, Maria allows herself to risk emotional closeness with Ralf Hart, despite everything she has learned about the dangers of vulnerability. This shift can be read as a Kierkegaardian leap: a decision made without certainty, because certainty was never going to be available. It matters, for an existentialist reading, that the novel frames this choice as something Maria actively decides and continues to question, rather than as a rescue that simply happens to her. At the same time, a fair existentialist reading has to stay alert to an important tension. It is possible to read the ending as authentic self-choice, and it is also possible to read it as a more conventional romantic resolution that quietly closes down the freedom Maria spent the whole novel building. This paper leans toward the first reading, but does not think the second reading should be dismissed. Existentialism itself would suggest that no choice, including the choice a novel makes about how to end its heroine's story, comes with a built-in guarantee of being the right one.

III. CONCLUSION

Reading *Eleven Minutes* through existentialist theory brings out a philosophical structure in the novel that spiritual or feminist readings, on their own, do not fully capture. Maria begins in circumstances she did not choose, exercises real freedom in leaving home and entering sex work, repeatedly takes shelter in fixed self-descriptions that existentialists would call bad faith, lives through a long stretch of repetitive, meaning-resistant experience that resembles Camus's absurd, and finally makes an uncertain, self-defined leap toward Ralf. Each stage of her story lines up closely with a specific existentialist idea, and together these ideas form a coherent account of how a person builds a self through choice rather than discovering one that was there all along.

This reading does not replace existing spiritual or feminist interpretations of the novel; it adds another, more precise vocabulary alongside them. It also suggests that popular fiction like Coelho's, often assumed to be philosophically simple because of its plain, accessible style, can reward the same careful attention usually reserved for more difficult literary or philosophical texts. Future work could test this same existentialist framework against other novels by Coelho, or against other popular fiction that follows women rebuilding their sense of self after difficult or socially judged experiences. Such work would help show whether the pattern found here in *Eleven Minutes*, unchosen circumstance met with real freedom, bad faith as a temporary shelter, repetition as an absurd but honest condition, and authenticity reached through an uncertain leap, is specific to this one novel or points to something more general about how popular stories imagine a woman becoming herself.

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