

Desire, Sex and Subjectivity: You've Got *Eleven Minutes To Live!*

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“Gift him all,
 Gift him all what makes you woman,
 The scent of
 Long hair, the musk of sweat
 ...all your
 Endless female hungers”

(De Souza 15)

The question of feminine identity has always baffled and even today continues to baffle literary and cultural critics alike. In the realm of cultural constructions and literary representations, identity very often becomes a way to denote one's subjectivity (the catch being that it might not always be the case.) Being a prostitute, does not mean, that one would *want* (italics mine) to be one. Legal theorist and Social Historian Lawrence M. Friedman, in his work *The Horizontal Society*, directs us to the very crux of this issue of subjectivity –“That tension between choice and illusion, between imposed definitions and individual interrogations of them, and between, old formulae and new responsibilities” (Hall 2).

In any feminist/gender based/sexual discussion no matter how recent, we tend to be “removed from the tangible and knowable, having vectors of desire that are only imprecisely describable” (Hall 106). But, our discussions of a female or feminine subjectivity in such cases only serves to point out our, cultural, personal, sociological and psychological shortcomings. It

represents a system where as Toril Moi Points out: "...woman has been constructed as man's Other, denied the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own action" (Moi 92).

The cultural dynamics of the human set up do not allow women to voice their sexual subjectivities; lest they be termed 'loose'. As Naomi Wolf points out:

Daily we discuss important issues such as teen pregnancy and date rape with a lot of name calling but with too little real life experience providing a background against which to measure myths and distortions. A lot of media space is devoted to polemics on what, girls don't want, but very little information is available to boys, or for that matter to girls, that illuminates what girls do want, what it looks and feels like and how girls can get it. (Wolf 3)

Traditionally, feminine sexuality was upheld in great reverence. Wolf cites the examples of prostitutes in the temples of Sumer and Babylon, where "young women from the most aristocratic households" (84) helped the temple income through the ritual of sacred prostitution. This practice was prevalent in Egypt as well as in India, when the female desire was respected as the root of sacred procreation i.e. Shakti¹ –responsible for the continuation of the human species on earth. It was only after the consolidation of the institution of patriarchy, around 2500 BC, that "sexually sacred goddesses were demoted to become subsidiary to husbands or brothers" and "political power in women was identified with insatiable desire" (84). Hence, that signaled the onslaught of the ultimate male mind conditioning, which prompted the subjugation of female desire as a weapon to control her emotional and physical subjectivity. To trace the ramifications of such historical subjugation (in general terms) is clearly beyond the scope of this paper

(concentrate as it does on Latin American literature) ...and yet, in some of the more pertinent ways, it tries to represent the normal feminine subjectivity, which, I believe, cuts across geographic boundaries that undergoes changes in terms of a Self and the Other, in cases of desire being denied and fulfilled, through an examination of Maria –the heroine of Paulo Coelho’s *Eleven Minutes* (2003).

This paper intends to converge on this very aspect of physical desire and its gratification, which combines together to make up the subjectivity of, the Brazilian heroine of Paulo Coelho’s *Eleven Minutes*. Catherine Belsey says, “One of the central issues for Feminism is the Cultural Construction of Subjectivity” (Belsey 593). I shall try to see, the ways in which Maria’s personal desires and choices (i.e. her personal culture) take her close to the “possibility of agency in processes of self construction or re-construction” (Hall 99) via ‘sacred sex’ –a notion which leads to the completion and fulfillment of human life through love.

Eleven Minutes, is the story of Maria, whose tender and innocent notions of love leave her jilted and heartbroken. She begins to believe in the idea that “Love is a terrible thing that will make you suffer.” A chance meeting in Rio, takes her to Geneva, where she thinks, she would be wealthy and famous. But destiny and her personal choices (even if, for survival) have willed otherwise and the young Brazilian girl, ends up working as a prostitute.

Meanwhile, in Geneva, Maria develops a personal fascination with sex (not love); but yet again, her meeting with Ralf Hart, a handsome, young painter and a “special client”, puts her on a journey of self discovery. In this journey, she has a choice to either pursue a path of pure physical pleasure or discovering the possibility of a physical relationship which articulates the ‘unspeakable’ in her soul-in any woman’s soul –i.e. love.

Unlike what *Moi* felt, Paulo Coelho, for the first time ever, breaks the binaries of ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ to explore the uncharted terrain of humanity in desire or desire in humanity. In the novel, he tries to mould a new feminine identity, conjoining the female subjectivity, which encompasses love as well as lust.

Just like ‘acculturated good girls’, who kept control of their desires, as a “key to keeping herself and (her) emerging identity safe” (Wolf 82) –and yet, who, nonetheless, knew the “dimorphism”² within, so Maria, the slut, in spite of the “modern sense that our past must be immaculate, that our ‘promiscuity’, our being in any way ‘out of control’, can lead us, if discovered, into symbolic or actual annihilation” (83), ventured into the prohibited realm of prostitution, which allowed her to accept the “validity of (her) desire” (12). However, such an entry into the forbidden, was not made, without the secret wish of attaining that emotional fulfillment, which had eluded her all along. Yet, the motivation for having started it all, was very different:

My dear, its better to be unhappy with a rich man more than happy with a poor man, and over there you’ll have far more chances of becoming an unhappy rich woman. Besides, if it doesn’t work out, you can just get on the bus and come home. (EM 32)

This was Maria’s simple mother’s advice to her young, professionally inclined daughter, unknown to the dangers which the lure of professional success and money had for such uninitiated girls. At the outset of her professional journey, she begins, by “accidentally” being laid by an Arab man, who pays her one thousand Francs for one night:

she went to the Arab’s hotel, drank champagne, got herself almost completely drunk, opened her legs, waited for him to have an orgasm(it

didn't even occur to her to pretend to have one too), washed herself in the marble bathroom, picked up the money, and allowed herself the luxury of a taxi home... she fell into bed and slept dreamlessly all night. (EM 57)

This was the same Maria, who: "Dreamed of meeting the Man of her Life (rich, handsome and intelligent), of getting married (in a wedding dress), having two children (who would grow up to be famous) and living in a lovely house (with a sea-view). (EM 1)

Not that she regretted her choices, "she was running her own risks, pushing beyond her own limits" (72); but her choices did not give her the time of celebrating her subjectivity. Her story, more than being a fable of an innocent princess turned whore, is the story of the metamorphosis, of a young girl into a woman. This transition involved the stark realities of life, her choices, her clientele's desires as well as the entry of her Prince Charming-whose entry she had long ago stopped expecting. It is he who teaches her the real meaning of being a woman, who sets her culturally free by acknowledging the desire of a woman, denied pleasure instead of selfishly wallowing in it. It is he who makes her attain an orgasm (both emotional and sexual). Wolf feels: "You don't become a woman through sex. Ideally, you become a person first, and then you become a sexual person" (Wolf 138).

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

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. (111)

Through all such roles, Maria seems caught in the matrix of continuously changing and dissatisfied subjectivities as a "subjected being, who submits to the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the Absolute Subject(God, the King, Man, Conscience)" (Belsey 596), and yet, at times "finds agency and the ability to resist received roles and definitions" (Hall 99). But, deep within, her essential subjectivity remains unchanged as well as unfulfilled. For Julia Kristeva, the attainment or definition of what Belsey has termed the "cultural construction of subjectivity", involves "The subject in Process" (1998). This means dismantling the Freudian "unitary subject" (133) and "positing instead subjectivity always in the making and remaking" (Hall 99), as desire is invested in "transformation itself" (Kristeva 159). Gayle Rubin in her essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of The Politics of Sexuality" (1984) feels:

The realm of sexuality...has its own internal politics, inequities and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuvering, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. (Rubin 4)

Indulgence in sex, thus, for Maria, too becomes a radical way of reclaiming her lost identity (though not her subjectivity-which is essentially emotional). In experiencing the

“mystery and delight” (EM 150) of sadomasochism-with Terence, Maria attempts to cross the “frontiers”, because, unlike her emotionally hurt past, where she had offered ‘unwanted gifts’ to men, here, she “was offering herself up as a sacrifice”-this feeling within her soul, introduced her to the latent Woman in own Self, who “wants to have all the joy, passion and adventure” (153) that life had to offer. With respect, to the ‘unwanted gifts,’ it will be pertinent to mention what Beauvoir, thought about them in her section entitled ‘Women in Love’:

Men have vied with one another in proclaiming that love is a woman’s supreme accomplishment. “A woman who loves as a woman becomes only the more feminine”, says Nietzsche, and Balzac: “Among the first-rate, man’s life is fame, woman’s life is love. Woman is man’s equal only when she makes her life a perpetual offering, as that of man is perpetual action”. But, here again, is a cruel deception, since what she offers, men are in no wise anxious to accept. Man has no need of the unconditional devotion he claims, nor that of the idolatrous love that flatters his vanity; he accepts them only on condition that he need not satisfy the reciprocal demands these attitudes imply, He preaches to woman that she should give-and her gifts bore him to distraction, she is left in embarrassment with her useless offerings, her empty life. (Beauvoir 669)

This had been taught to Maria, in her young years, when she had dreamt of her handsome boyfriend, demanding something physical of her, and her regret on having denied the same, but at the same time not with lesser regret on having given in to some part of the demand (since, after half giving in to the boy’s demand, they had broken up). The episode had taught her the importance of the art of cultivating desire (both in self and other) and holding it back. However,

desire apart, her masochistic experiences with Terence were not a way of accepting her passivity in the matrix of heterosexual relations. Just like what Rubin felt, these ‘unnatural’ drives, brought back in her, a sense of identity ,as they served to “reawaken sensitivity blunted by the very violence of sex excitement and pleasure”. She seeks suffering, because, like erotic love, suffering “also tears through the limits of the ego, it is transcendence, a paroxysm” (Beauvoir 399). She “chooses to be made purely a thing” (399) under the conscious will of Terence, so that she can regain the agency that she has lost in her own eyes, As Beauvoir quotes Sartre in *The Second Sex*(1969), who says: “Masochism is an attempt not to fascinate the Other by my objectivity, but to be myself fascinated by my objectivity in the eyes of the other”(399).

Her relationship with Terence was doubly political, in that the latter also looked for a momentary Self elevation, by affording the Other, pleasure through, a cruel and indicting acceptance of the latter’s desire, as well as an attempt to be “fascinated by”(his) “objectivity”. He says: “Do you know why I am doing this? Because there is no greater pleasure than that of initiating someone into an unknown world. Taking someone’s virginity, not of their body, but of their soul, you understand”(EM 149).

Although emotional in nature, this relationship had the element of sadism, of a victory and a defeat. In this relationship, her “sham abandon, creates new barriers between her and enjoyment; and at the same time she takes vengeance upon herself by means of this inability to know enjoyment” (Beauvoir 400). Probably, the ‘barriers’ and ‘politics’ that Both Beauvoir and Gayle , respectively, talk about, are those involving the egos, which makes it practically impossible to turn sex into the kind of scared activity that Coelho, wants in to be turned into. It is not until she talks to Hart (who knows the art to ‘undo’ the ego barriers), that what, Beauvoir has called, her “erotic maturation” (400), as a Woman takes place, and she realizes the truth of the

masochistic 'theatre'(EM 158). That masochism is just one of “the masks that people wear in order never to experience a *real* (italics mine) encounter” (158).

Researches have proved that “women’s desire is a resilient force” and that “women’s preoccupation with their own desire manages to surmount cultural taboos, life circumstances, and even their own inner censor” (Wolf 169). This force has been depicted in Maria’s strong wishes to forge romantic relationships since her teenage years, her disappointment on the failures of such efforts, her adoption of prostitution in the absence of ‘true love’ and her visits to the Geneva library to look for books on sex, signaling her deep interest in meaningless physical relationships.

Even, though Maria’s 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” (167).

Studies undertaken by anthropologists like Margaret Mead, Bronilaw Malinowski, Mircea Eliade and Anne Cameron, mention the cultural presence of Rites of Passage in societies. With respect to the Latin American nations, there is the mention of the “Quinceañera festival, at fifteen, when they (girls) dress up in magnificent gowns, are consecrated at a special mass, and

announce themselves to the community with great formality to be nubile” (Wolf 139). However, the presence of these Rites of Passage, never at any time meant (more so, in the modern societies), that female desire was deserving of respect. The ‘good girls’ were and are supposed to be passive about their physical feelings. As Wolf states in her memoir:

The hormonal changes they talked about were related to menstruation, not to female desire, I never got the feeling that it was condoned or even acknowledged that girls would want to explore their sexuality the same way boys did. The books are about the idea that you’re supposed to be want to be afraid of boys. (148)

and later again: “Their(boys’) sex drive was considered normative, but ours, if it paralleled theirs, was deviant”(150).

This orgasmic ecstasy was something specially reserved for men. Even though the clitoris was identified way back in 1559, by Ranaldus Columbus (a Venetian scientist) who called it “preeminently the seat of woman’s delight” or “the love or sweetness of Venus” (151), studies amply prove that such admissions were by no means candid towards the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (when it was considered highly ‘indelicate’ to talk of ‘such matters’). Naomi Wolf quotes Dr. William Acton, a Victorian physician, who became the touchstone of modern sexuality, to show such neglect of womanly desire... and her subjectivity. He says: “As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband’s embraces, but principally to gratify him... The married woman has no desire to be placed on the footing of a mistress”(156).

Thus, in any case, voicing of one’s desire, automatically meant entering a slut’s dominion, which presupposed then conscious awareness of having ‘sex’ and being able to talk

about it. Interestingly enough, being the *'slut'* that she was, did Maria ever consciously ask her clients to satisfy *her*? Or was she not always paid by clients, so as to *make her* please *them*? (Italics mine). She knew, "having sex is about eleven minutes" (EM 88), but her own innate subjectivity never "revolved around something that only took eleven minutes" (88). In her heart of hearts, she still was innocence preserved and personified, and like every other 'good woman' felt that "really important meetings are planned by the souls long before the bodies see each other" (140). She always felt that what she needed was not a 'Cultural Passage,'³ but an Emotional one –to enable her to become the Woman, that she desired, of acknowledging within herself. As a straight⁴ woman, Maria's subjectivity desired the stable paradox of a fused ethic of Desire and Difference. As Simone De Beauvoir points out: "Eroticism is a movement towards the Other, this is its essential character: but in the deep intimacy of the couple, husband and wife, become for one another the 'Same'; no exchange is any longer possible between them" (Beauvoir 446).

Thus, rendering the sex act a shameful drudgery, Maria was a whore, and a whore in the "normal" culture is never regarded as an 'Other.' Still Beauvoir also, stresses the fact of such 'Otherness' being replete with pitfalls. She believes that even if the sex act is pleasurable, due to the acknowledged differences, the female may sometimes be "offended by a too obvious effort to give her pleasure" (392), which, she says, according to Stekel "means to dominate the Other; to give oneself to some is to abdicate one's will" (392). In this regard, indeed noticeable is the scene, where Maria sits with Ralf Hart, in front of the fireplace, sipping wine and having the following conversation:

Hart: "I can't buy your love, but you did tell me that you knew everything about sex. Teach me then or teach me something about Brazil. Anything,

just as long as I can be with you.”

Maria: “I only know two places in my own country: The town I was born in and Rio de Janeiro. As for sex, I don’t think I can teach you anything. I am nearly twenty three, you’re about six years older, but I know you’ve lived life very intensely. I know men who pay me to do what they want, not what I want.”

“I’ve done everything a man could dream of doing with one, two, even three women at the same time. And I don’t think I learned very much.”

“Do you want me as a professional?”

“I want you, however, you want to be wanted.”(EM 128)

In such a situation where sexual pleasure, becomes a token of a respected and satiated subjectivity, comes in what one calls love. A feeling which presupposes the presence of longing or desire due to the acknowledgement of the other person’s difference... a feeling where mutual communion gains over the paradigms of victory and defeat –a feeling where, even a ‘slut’ is considered a person... and a feeling, which responds to the call of a woman’s subjectivity. “Profound desire, true desire is the desire to be close to someone.” “...It is untouched desire in its present state” (EM 135). Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, in her collection *Essays in Medical Sociology* (1902), claimed that “the unbridled impulse of physical lust is as remarkable in the latter (women) as in the former (men), and felt, that women do not as strongly desire the sex act as “the profound attraction of one nature to the other which marks passion, and delight in kisses and caresses- the love touch.” A woman’s version of “physical sexual expression.” (Blackwell 149) Beauvoir feels that such “full development requires that –in love, affection, sensuality,

women succeed in overcoming her passivity and in establishing a relation of reciprocity with her partner.” (Beauvoir 401). The ‘battle of the sexes’, can easily be solved:

If he lusts after her flesh while recognizing her freedom, she feels herself to be the essential, her integrity remains unimpaired the while she makes herself object...under such conditions the lovers can enjoy common pleasure. Under a concrete and carnal form there is mutual recognition of the Ego and of the Other in the keenest awareness of the Other and of the Ego. Some women say that they feel the masculine sex organ in them to be a part of their own bodies; some men feel that they are the woman that penetrate. These are evidently inexact expressions, for the dimension, the relation of the Other still exists; but the fact is that alterity has no longer a hostile implication, and indeed the sense of the union of really separate bodies is what gives its emotional character to the sexual act; and it is the more overwhelming as the two beings, who together in passion deny and assert their boundaries are similar and unlike. (Beauvoir 401)

“I am Heathcliff”, says Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*... and this what Maria realizes when Ralf tells her the degradation that the experience of the ‘theatre’ had subjected her to and says that if that is what interests her, he would never again come to her. Ralf put her on pain again, this time it was not to objectify her, but because he wanted her to sail through the pain of the “stones lacerating her feet” (EM 199) without “humbling herself before him” (200). Hart is telling Maria about the ritual of sacred prostitution, the importance of pain in the garb of self denial in human lives, *pornai*, *peripatetica*, *hataeras* and cultural stigmas attached to the open acknowledgement of feminine desire, (for the first time ever)transported her into a mature realm

of satisfying relationship. Ralf “made her understand that the search for happiness is more important than the need for pain” (EM 211). She felt as wet as she had with Terence’s whip between her legs, when hart touched her naked breasts, only to ignite an insatiable desire, that never intended to ‘finish her off’ (read defeat her). It was then, that she found out, that “she wasn’t dead to sex. That man had managed to rescue her. It was good to be alive” (EM 222). That was, where the difference between physicality and emotionality delineated itself... within her Self... and Maria fell so in love with Ralf.

Her self-identification with the Universe, when Hart makes love to her becomes the “detour” that “defines a self” and as such, it “is a process that keeps identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an illusion of identity as immediate, secure, and totalizable” (Fuss 2) and yet, interestingly, Maria’s continuous slipping flux of subjectivity as well as its plural and contesting nature in its manifestation through her activities– is what guarantees her the ultimate anchor in Life. Personally, she never wanted a commitment from Ralf, because, she was not looking for a victory, but a “kind of utter surrender by which a person offers his or her heart and asks for nothing in return” (EM 155), and that is exactly why, she got everything– the totalization of her dream, her subjectivity and her identity.

This desire in reciprocity is exactly what Maria feels for the first time with Ralf Hart, when she scribbles in her diary: “When desire is still in this pure state, the man and woman fall in love with life, they live each moment reverently, consciously always ready to celebrate the next blessing”(EM 135).

The next blessing, being, the physical union of two passionate souls. As Maria puts it:

Anyone who is observant, who discovers the person they have always

dreamed of, knows that sexual energy comes into play before sex even takes place. The greatest pleasure isn't sex, but the passion with which it is practiced. When the passion is intense, then sex joins in to complete the dance, but it is never the principal aim. (EM 166)

This 'genital embrace' (176), according to Dr. Marie Stopes: "Must be premised on male attention to women's erotic needs-by having the radical idea of asking woman's questions about their sexuality and listening to their answers"(Wolf 162).

Ralf Hart's search was not that for Maria's body-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) The sex act, Maria's multiple orgasms –"none of this absolutely none of this was a LIE" (263), as had been pleasure, all her life, till then. She had always 'faked' her pleasure, her orgasmic ecstasy, to ensure a faithful clientele, to ensure that money never stopped coming in, unmindful of her own subjectivity (butchered under the axe of a cultural system which objectified and 'cheapened' the feminine sexuality) which for the first time felt satisfied when Hart penetrated her body, her soul... her Life.

Naomi Wolf, talking about the element of female pleasure and its importance in feminine lives, quotes from *Our Bodies, Ourselves* which says:

Until the mid-1960s, most women didn't know how crucial the clitoris was...even if we knew it for ourselves, nobody talked about it... learning about the clitoris increased sexual enjoyment for countless women and freed many of us from years of thinking we were 'frigid'. Our ability to

give ourselves orgasms and to show our lovers how to please us has been one of the cornerstones of a new self respect and autonomy, and has therefore been politically as well as personally important for women. (163)

Maria felt this new self-respect because her lover knew about her desire and took care to fulfill it, without, ever her telling him so. If, in experiencing masochism with Terence, she had felt the perpetuation of “the presence of the ego in a bruised and degraded condition,” thus giving her some sense of her own agency-“love,” brought, “forgetfulness of Self in favour of the Essential Subject” (Beauvoir 652)-and that was the definition of the Ultimate Pleasure, because it presupposed the satiation of carnal desire in the presence of an eternal emotional bond. The satiation of desire in a woman’s body has a lot to do with psychic factors. As Beauvoir feels: “The feminine body is peculiarly psychosomatic; that is there is often close connection between the mental and the organic”(391).

Repeating later, “Maybe it has something to do who you’re with and how they feel about sex and how they are able to connect with you” (Wolf 136).

Ralf Hart felt intensely about sex, because for Coelho’s hero, sex was beyond the body. As Maria writes:

If you live your life intensely, you experience pleasure all the time and don’t feel the need for sex, its out of a sense of abundance, because the glass if wine is so full that it overflows naturally, because it is inevitable, because you’re responding to the call of life, because at that moment, you have allowed yourself to lose control. (EM 176)

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. As one of the answers as to why Paulo Coelho wrote *Eleven Minutes*, he said: "I wrote Eleven Minutes, in order to find out, at this stage of my life, at 55 years of age I had the courage to learn everything that life has tried to teach me on the subject."

He felt:

If you give yourself entirely you will break through any mental blocks your partner may have, however impenetrable, because the act of giving yourself means 'I Trust You'. At that moment, real sexual energy comes into play, and that energy exists not only in those areas we term the erogeneous zones. It spreads throughout the whole body, into every hair and pore. Every millimeter is now emanating a different light, one that is recognized and absorbed by the other body. When this happens, we are drawn into a kind of ancient ritual that offers us the opportunity to be transformed. This ritual, of whatever sort, requires from the participant, a readiness to be led towards a new perception of the world.

And it is this willingness, that gives the ritual meaning.⁵

Wolf posits:

I think we became women, in our culture, when we made the decision, that, even , if we didn't know what womanhood meant or whether we had arrived there for sure, all the markers imposed on us were flawed, and that we were somehow going to find a way, through whatever struggle it might

take, to determine the meaning 'of becoming a Woman' for ourselves. (243)

For Maria, this point came in her life, when she felt or rather knew, that' she 'could' trust Hart, whereas, for the latter the point had come when he had made up his mind to win Maria's trust, her "inner light," as he calls it. If Ralf was ready to learn about Maria's sexuality and the timing of her body, he wanted her to learn about his body as well. Maria was "pleased that the conversation had shifted into being a discussion" (EM 258) Sex, then, for both of them meant a celebration of the divinity of selflessness-and in such a situation pleasure was guaranteed:

And I came at the same moment he came. It wasn't eleven minutes, it was an eternity, it was as if we had both left our bodies and were walking joyfully through the gardens of paradise in understanding and friendship. 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. (EM 264)

As Beauvoir feels, that in the presence of a "timeless and Absolute emotion": "Women can gloriously accept her sexuality because she transcends it; excitement, pleasure, desire are no longer a state, but a benefaction; her body is no longer an object; it is a hymn, a flame"(649)

And that: "It is not that mystical love always has a sexual character, but that sexuality of the woman in love is tinged with mysticism"(649).

Maria emerges as what Hélène Cixous calls the Newly Born Woman. She lives in The Realm Of The Gift "who gives without worrying" (Panja 101), about how to "recover her expenses" (101), and it the selfless expression of this very pure desire that transforms her from a prostitute into a wife. It is through the 'libidinous' female desire (otherwise castigated by the

regular 'decent society') that Hart's and Maria's personal societies are "integrated and the bonds of community affirmed" (Wolf 189). Her personality and its erotic fulfillment was "not a trashy and titillating cliché of material aimed at objectifying (her) for the consumption of (a) thoughtless man (Hart)." It became a "poignant tale of female coming-of age which ", successfully negotiated brought "well being to all" (184).

Unlike, the other encounters, it was through her legitimate(emotional) contact with Hart, that Maria felt her "sexual self discovery to be a scared and legitimate development" (Wolf 199). Maria, I feel, becomes the representative of thousands of women waiting to be 'brought to life', via the magical touch of a renewed subjectivity-a subjectivity which has bloomed due to the recognition and celebration of their respective physical/psychical needs and erotic desires. As stated by Wolf: "Perhaps, it is time to recognize that all customs codify maleness and femaleness with sexual symbolism, and that we can create a new world in which those categories need not be fixed and oppressive; but neither do they need to be dismissed or devalued" (224).

A lot has been written and felt about womanly desire, but what needs to be understood is that desire in a woman is analogous to manly passion... and that if a man's appreciation and elevation of a woman can help the woman's manifestation of desire reach a point of zenith, the opposite behavior may just as well kill it, by negating a woman's subjectivity, making it impossible for her to participate in the Ultimate Dance of the Life Forces. In the realm of heterosexual relationships, only when a woman's desire is positively acknowledged, will she emerge a full Woman. "And then, our bodies learn to speak the language of the soul, known as sex, and that is what I can give to the man who gave me back my soul"(EM 141).

Wolf wants women to develop a "subtle, fresh language to capture a woman's sense of the male body as an aesthetic and carnal object of desire, or a language that casts female

heterosexual desire as a manifestation of female power” (224). Beauvoir had said that one is never born a Woman, and that one becomes one. How much womanliness, she is able to attain, depends a lot on how well she is able to share and articulate her desire. In other words, the expression of desire in sex is one of the most important keys to unlocking the feminine subjectivity.... And this effort, as made by Coelho will have to be undertaken in as strong a measure by men as by women-perhaps, even more strongly by the males, because they have originally been the creators of a ‘feminine desire hating culture’. Taslima Nasreen, the famous controversial Bangladeshi novelist, says of female desire in one of her love poems:

If a man touches my body
I'll become unchaste
And not if he touches my heart?
The heart lives freely
In the whole body.
I don't know who can get to the heart
Without touching the body,
But I know it for sure
That human beings can't.

(Choudhary 1)

Notes

¹ Shakti means the female Creative Principle in the Indian mythology.

² Wolf mentions , that there is a duality in every woman-while her personal desires, make her culturally “slutty”, an adherence to the cultural decency proves her the “good girl.”

³ Any Rite of Passage is essentially a cultural way of accepting the maturity of a woman’s body. It is ever unmindful of her emotional needs which require a personal rite of passage-facilitated by the one who comes to claim her body.

⁴ I use this word to indicate Maria’s normal heterosexual subjectivity and desire (even if that involved prostitution. See Hall’s Subjectivity for an excellent discussion of the “Queer” existences.

⁵ See the home internet site of Paulo Coelho for the quotation.

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