
The Choice of Soul: An Exploration of Paulo Coelho's Novels and the Pursuit of Self-Discovery

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Abstract: Humans are born free, but they are condemned to choose throughout life. These decisions are the outcome of learning, either based on personal experience or imitation of others. It is not uncommon for their search for love, admiration, commendation, and love of caring to influence their life path. It is also not always ambitions that steer people, but also desires that help them learn about what is possible, and to evolve their personalities. The works of Paulo Coelho - *Veronika Decides to Die* and *Eleven Minutes* deal with the main concepts of existential literature, which include loneliness and existential emptiness that people can face when self-searching. The problem of choice is the hardest truth to be embraced, celebrated, and indeed made known by novelists like those of Coelho, where making individual choices in search of self-realization is a source of great individual and life lessons. The protagonists in the novels go through an existential odyssey, seeking to find their path to wilderness and the decisions that steer their lives. The characters Maria and Veronica undergo a roller-coaster ride as they try to create better prospects for life. This paper deliberates the philosophies and worldview that helped Coelho walk the road to self-discovery, and the decisions that shaped his life are discussed, and it is concluded that a choice is not more than a lesson learned.

Keywords: existential literature, choices, emptiness, self-searching, personal experience

Introduction: Existentialism, as a philosophical school of thought, grapples with the fundamental questions of human existence, emphasizing individual freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Central to existentialism is a renewed focus on the individual and their subjective experience, urging each person to contemplate the reason for their existence. Existentialism stresses the human condition and the importance of the search for meaning in life. The novels from Paulo Coelho, *Eleven*

Minutes, and Veronika Decides to Die, are in-depth explorations of the power of agency embodied in choice in the process of self-discovery and transformation. Both stories indicate that people are not just the uncritical subjects of fate; people can deliberately affect and mould their fate by way of choice.

In "Eleven Minutes," the protagonist Maria embarks on a path of self-identification and of spiritual growth as she navigates the labyrinths of love, and knowledge and acceptance. Maria's choice of Ralf the painter, for his professed commitment to love relationships, demonstrates the role of agency and affect in shaping her journey. Coelho demonstrated that every choice, no matter how insignificant, can produce transformation in one's life. The choices that resonate with Maria are the phenomenon that personal growth is formed of the challenges found in the unknown, 'transformational uncertainty'. As Coelho notes, her path is deep not only because of the resulting self-awareness but also by showing that she listened to her desires and intuition.

Similarly, the novel Veronika Decides to Die examines the ideas of choice as liberation and self-examination. The protagonist Veronika decides to end her life because she does not perceive an achievable goal. Nevertheless, Veronika experiences a new zest for life, an awakening at a psychiatric hospital, requiring her to consider the idea of choice. Engaging with the other patients also allowed Veronika to grasp that simply living is a choice and that living, also a choice, could be reflective of her identity. Coelho develops this narrative trajectory for Veronika to realize life is temporally and spatially enriched through choices that create lived experiences even in the social situations that compel despair.

The two novels affirm that choices navigate the external realities of life and catalyse internal transformations. Coelho's characters show that the choices they make push them ever closer to a new awareness and ask readers to embrace the liberating potential of choosing for themselves. Thus, the two novels in their entirety prompt a moral case study for the criticality of choice, as an essential feature of the human condition, and a fundamental component of the quest for self-discovery and emerging personal growth.

The Burden of Responsibility: Challenges in Accepting One's Decisions: No one wants to take the responsibility when a decision is challenging, this conversation is a recurring idea in the books of Paulo Coelho, a writer who also deals with the human aspect of the search for meaning and identity. By his writings, Coelho "sets [the reader's] thoughts off," making them ask questions about the life choices they make, and what relationships those choices have with their perception and with the perception of the world around them. In his novels "Veronika Decides to Die" and "11 Minutes," Coelho examines the richness of the human condition and the deep network of decisions that inform the human condition itself. While we read the plight of the characters, these characters raise questions about choices and their consequences (Valle Lara 2023). This fight for regaining choice over one's own decisions is a fight that Coelho's works are all too familiar with because his characters are often driven to despair by the weight of the agency that his characters have in their hands.

In *Veronika Decides to Die*, the protagonist's decision to die finally becomes a springboard for her self-discovery process, leading her to re-examine her intention to die and who she is and has been. Similarly, in "11 Minutes", the protagonist's experiences as a prostitute serve as a backdrop for examining the complexities of choice and responsibility within the context of relationships and personal growth. In these stories, Coelho highlights, on the one side, individual freedom and on the other, freedom of its subject, constituted by that of accountability and responsibility. This tension is intricately woven into the fabric of human experience, where every decision, regardless of magnitude, has the potential to shape our lives in profound ways. This profound approach to life highlights the appropriateness of deliberation both in terms of the formation of the self, i.e., in terms of our conscious or unconscious choices, as the conscious or unconscious of how this text of our lives is formed is of primary relevance. If, on accepting the ego-transforming of self-acceptance, we become attuned to how decision-making and responsibility are inextricably linked and how together they are constitutive of the experience of the self and the world in which it is acted upon. Approaching the depths of Coelho's novels, we reflect on how his characters, for instance, have to deal with decisions to paralyze and consider ways in which their own lives may lead to a reassessment of our views of the human condition.

Transformative Power of Self-Acceptance: In Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* and *Veronika Decides to Die*, self-acceptance - the basis of radical change in an individual is the core crust. Identity and self-esteem issues, identity pressure as a blocker for authenticity, and finally, the legitimacy of self and real self are also addressed in both novels. Maria in *Eleven Minutes* and Veronika in *Veronika Decides to Die* are two starkly different protagonists to follow their own remarkable individual path of discovery, leading to individual metamorphoses so impactful to the readers.

Maria, a Brazilian woman also engaged in the sex work profession in Switzerland, is initially defined by a fragmented sense of self produced by public stigma and personal pain. Her journey is the description of an intuitive duel between an objective acceptance and an absolute refutation of the self. Throughout the novel, Maria is exposed to unrelenting confrontation with what has gone before and is compelled to make decisions based on outcomes that have shaped her current juncture in life. As Coelho shows, "pain is a trampoline, by which failing to fall can be learned", and which is contentiously extended by Yolande Beverly to describe exactly how pain is an engine of personalizing process (Beverly). This insight drives into Maria's idea of autonomy, which enables her to refashion the story and reflect on her sense of self outside of social expectations.

Similarly, Veronika's character in "Veronika Decides to Die" exemplifies the power of self-acceptance. Feeling placed at an improper 'end', she is thrown into a dream-like experience where she begins exploring the nature of existence in an asylum. There, she meets different characters who deal with distinct facets of self-acceptance and social elimination.

This is the environment that serves as an immersive performance, meaning one engulfs the reader within the evolving understanding of freedom and self-esteem with the protagonist, De Araújo. The experience of Veronika represents a transformation of the renunciation and turning towards acceptance of life with all its impediments, hence all is worth staying for. Both novels make us think profoundly about changing our conventional view on the meaning of happiness and fulfilment.

Finally, Maria embrace her sexual being and ad a person who loves. Thus separating her profession as a sex worker from her as an individual who longed for love and care in Ralf the painter, Ralf enkindles a spark of true relationship and love, different from the one that she has with her clients for the materialistic gain. In essence, the novel shows an important turning point as she can now no longer focus on seeing herself in a stigmatizing profession, but experiences put together as who she is in a broad view. This change mirrors the discourses of the world regarding feminism, as expounded by Makhtar et al., who opine that self-acceptance is the origin of personal agency, especially in oppressive social conditions (Mukhtar, Rana, and Mukhtar). In tandem, acceptance of her mortality sets Veronika to appreciating the ephemeral beauty of life, both liberating and profound. When she comes face to face with her fears and acknowledges her right to live as she wants, she finds comfort in the uncertainties of life.

This theme finds resonance with current discourses about mental health and identity, thereby reiterating the need for self-love and acceptance when faced with identity, social pressures, and personal crises (Karen). Both novels represent a deep thematic development from hopelessness to acceptance, and this is the way self-acceptance can spur personal change. Although Minister and Guimarães address the relationship between different literary forms, it can be seen that Coelho's works include experimental and traditional forms of narration in the presentation of complex emotional truths (Minister and Guimarães). Ultimately, the novels *Eleven Minutes* and *Veronika Decides to Die* serve as personal journey narratives rather than declaration statements about self-acceptance; they build on the resilience of standing out in the multiplicity of life, challenging the reader to create their path towards authenticity and clear demarcation of external validation and internal conflict, and self-discovery.

The Role of Choice in Self-Definition: In Paulo Coelho's novels “*Veronika Decides to Die*” and “*Eleven Minutes*”, the options are fundamental to shaping self-deficiency, illustrating how individual decisions affect the transformation of identity. In “*Veronika Decides to Die*”, veronika redefines the meaning of life when she embraces her second chance. This rebirth redefines her identity and acts as a catalyst for a deep self-discovery trip within the limits of a mental asylum. The experience reveals that Veronika's identity has been limited by social norms, as reflected, "I can't understand what people expect from me" (Coelho 45). Here, her choice to finish her life acts as a catalyst for the revaluation and validation of her identity, which leads her to face the true essence of her desire.

On the contrary, in “Eleven Minutes”, Maria’s decision to move to an unknown place to reach the new heights of her life away from the countryside and to embrace challenges led her to redefine and write a new chapter in her life. Her choice of profession significantly alters her self-perception, and directs her to explore the complexities of love and

Self-acceptance. As she says: “She was no longer afraid of the life she had chosen for me” (Coelho 142). This echoes the feeling of Paulo in his exploration of identity, which suggests that the achievements caused by elections can lead to a deep self-acceptance (Minister and Guimarães). Consequently, Maria’s trip illustrates that her choices not only define her but also train her to remodel her destiny. She could have stayed in her hometown, married a guy, and lived a mediocre life, like every other classmate of hers. But she decided to explore life to find herself, Maria, as she gathers life’s experiences, learns a valuable lesson for life. Her encounter with Ralf changes her perspective towards life, she embraces the present. There is no right decision, the path unfolds with every step you take. What matters is the journey, not the judgment.

In addition, the narratives emphasize the development of moral identity, reflecting the opinions of Praxia S. Apostle concerning the experiences of adolescents, who resonate with the teenage struggles of the characters in both novels (Apostle). They navigate the limits of social expectations, building their identities through basic elements that society approves of. The exploration of Coelho’s choice speaks of the transforming power of personal agency to define one’s identity, reinforcing the perspective of Sumanyu Sympathy about the literary representations of identity (Sympathy). Through Veronika and María, Coelho invites readers to reflect on their selections and the identities they forge. Therefore, the characters illuminate the intricate relationship between choice and self-definition, revealing a universal truth of human experience.

Narrative as a Mirror: Introspecting the theme of Choice: Paulo Coelho’s novels portray life as a complex tapestry that revolves around critical ideas such as selection, fate, and personal revelation, and in doing so present a striking form of fiction. Coelho’s plots navigate the vast realms of human emotion and compel readers to engage with timeless conflicts and empathize with others while fostering introspection about the nature of self. His works captivate the reader with the fresh contemplation of the idea of selection and its ramifications. His storytelling brings in a new perspective in the readers, “Eleven Minutes” and “Veronika Decides to Die,” in particular talk about the journey that in time embraces the crucial reality of life i.e. accepting the present, this attitude of the protagonists, to the fact no matter what may come radically reshape their lives. Coelho uses these stories to impact the readers on a personal level by illustrating the immense power selection holds over one’s life journey (Prakoso & Daulay, 2020). In the novel “Eleven Minutes”, the protagonist Maria faces choices that deeply impact her identity as a woman and her autonomy in the society she lives in. These decisions are symptoms of a larger problem regarding the societal norms related to love, sex, and relationships.

Maria's journey epitomizes how choice can serve as a double-edged sword, leading to empowerment or entrapment, in sync with other works dealing with the consequences of agency. The decisions she makes associated with love and sex are suggested, in her case, to be far more complex than mere choice. They, together with the accompanying processes of reasoning, offer deeply hidden truths that disguise themselves as sophisticated imposition dilemmas. This nuanced portrayal resonates with other literary works discussing the underlying fuel that allows for character choices to be pathways to the actual construction of their worlds (Elsaesser et al).

In "Eleven Minutes," Maria, the protagonist, learns that her choices not just enable her to experiment with life but also help her to learn life's important lessons. On the other hand, in "Veronika Decides to Die," the main character's struggles with life highlight how her negative choice to take her life brings new perspectives and transforms her as a person. Veronika's decision to end her life shows both her hopelessness and her deep wish to be free from what society expects. As the story goes on in a mental hospital, her meetings with other patients make her question her past choices and think again about what freedom and happiness mean. This place helps her see that the choices we make, good or bad, shape who we are. In the end, Veronika's story shows that making choices can lead us to unexpected ways of finding ourselves and feeling stronger. This backs up the idea that life, even with all its hard parts, is about the choices we make (Coelho P). Looking at the choices in both the novels, shows how powerful it can be to accept yourself, which is a leading theme in many of Paulo Coelho's books.

In the fiction of Paulo Coelho, narrative serves as an internalized mirror that reveals the human condition with expansive themes concerning choice, fate, and the self. Often using the complex layered mind of humans, Coelho introduces the reader to collective dilemmas where the reader realizes possibilities of greater empathy and recognition of one's own being. Coelho's body of work offers new consideration of the importance of choice, the significant impact of choices, and implications of choices. In works such as "Eleven Minutes" or "Veronika Decides to Die", Coelho's protagonists often work through their character flaws in a way that reveals the weight of their decisions and how those decisions can result in serious outcomes that change the overall comparison of how one will live their life. Each narrative self-ties together the empathetic experience of the reader with the embodied experience of the protagonist. Coelho adeptly employs narrative to foster a deep sense of connection with readers, illuminating the transformative power of choice in individual destinies (Prakoso & Daulay, 2020).

To conclude, the Choices in narratives of Coelho's "Eleven Minutes" and "Veronika Decides to Die" show how accepting yourself can change you. This idea is a recurring theme in Paulo Coelho's books. Reshma and J (2021) say these books teach us about being brave, staying focused, and not giving up when life gets tough. The way people see themselves depends on what they choose to do. A study about how American schools teach students to be independent found something interesting. It says that when people pick what happens in

their lives, they feel more real. This is true even if what they pick makes them happy or sad (Promoting Self-Authorship to Promote Liberal Education, n.d.). This means that every choice, big or small, helps shape who we are and what we can do. Coelho writes about how people learn to like themselves and grow. His novels demonstrate that we may change when we take responsibility for our decisions and take initiative. "Veronika Decides to Die" and "Eleven Minutes" force us to consider how we direct our own lives and choose our paths. The topic of decision-making is interwoven throughout both novels with the individuals' struggles against social norms, illustrating the interplay between individual desires and external influences. Each of the major characters must make important decisions as the stories go on, which shape their futures and cause readers to reflect on their own life choices. This concept resonates with Thomas Elsaesser's ideas about stories being sophisticated textual objects that raise more significant life questions (Elsaesser et al.).

Maria's journey illustrates how choice can be empowering and confining, as noted in corresponding texts addressing choice and its effects. Throughout the novel Maria goes through the conflict between the complex relationship between physical longing and emotional attachment. Maria is the true example of how one's choices reflect the larger existential issues. Literature has always stood as a mirror to these aspects of life, such reading have enhanced the quality of life, giving importance to the choice as a mindful act and not to be taken lightly as they impact every stage of our life (Elsaesser et al.). Veronika Decides to Die as an avenue of personal change amidst existential crises as well. The idea of choice emerges in Veronika Decides to Die, as a mechanism for change amidst Veronika's existential trials. Veronika's first choice to end her life illustrates not just hopelessness, but a desire for sovereignty in the face of the very real constraints of society. As the tale is set within a mental hospital, she will encounter other patients who will not only challenge the constraints of their prior choices but will also provoke them to rethink how they define both happiness and freedom., This environment fosters her capacity to appreciate that choices, whether perceived to be constraining or liberating, are the essence of identity. In the end, Veronika's experience shows that choosing can introduce novel avenues of self-awareness and empowerment, reaffirming that life, even when endured with suffering, is still a product of choices (Coelho P).

This interplay is consistent with Paulo Coelho's novels, which survey the human quest for meaning and identity. Each of Coelho's narratives provokes readers to examine the choices they have made in life and how those choices have shaped their conception of self and the world they live in. Coelho's exposition in novels such as Veronika Decides to Die and 11 Minutes, captures the complexity of human life with an emphasis on narratives that explore the intricacies of the myriad choices that make up the human experience. Exploring the lives of his (Valle and Lara) characters gives us a glimpse into the troubles that occur when a person has to deal with their choices and the burden of those choices. The characters of Coelho's novels always appear as the guiding light in the realm of the choices and the consequences of the choices, with a strong message that one should own the responsibility as well as be prepared for the consequences.

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