

Global Bodies, Local Selves: A Postcolonial Reading of Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*

¹Ramya Bharathi.K, ²Dr. T. Ganga Parameswari

¹Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor & Research Supervisor

Department of English(Aided), V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women, NH7, Madurai Road,
GT Nagar, NGO Colony, Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the themes of migration, prostitution, and globalization in the novel *Eleven Minutes* by Paulo Coelho, within a postcolonial and global theory framework. The book's protagonist, Maria, came from a small village in Brazil, where she was promised a prosperous future in the sex industry in Geneva. Therefore, it is possible to analyse the story's plot through the lens of gender and class. According to Said, subaltern characters such as Maria are presented as an exoticized 'other' in Western literature and art. Furthermore, in her essay "The English Women", Spivak claims that the voices of subaltern women in western novels are barely heard. Similarly, Mohanty argues that Western writers and philosophers have been constructing problematic images of Third World for centuries. Hence, the themes of globalization and migration underpin the novel, as Maria's travel from Brazil to Geneva and her subsequent employment at the Geneva hotel signify the journey of not only body but also soul. Indeed, the European setting, the customers' perception of Maria as a sexual commodity, and the opening fairy tale all contribute to the idea of eleven minutes in the life of a Brazilian woman, which could be perceived as a part of Western culture and genre. However, as the plot demonstrates, Maria is not entirely subordinate to the system, as she is able to control her body and mind. In conclusion, it is possible to say that the novel cannot be seen as merely a Western exploitation of the Brazilian women's culture.

Keywords: Postcolonial Theory, Global Theory, Paulo Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, Orientalism, Subaltern, Migration

1. Introduction

Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* follows Maria, a young woman from a small town in the Brazilian interior, who travels to Switzerland in search of work and ends up in the sex trade in Geneva. This paper reads the novel through postcolonial and global theory, treating Maria's story as an example of a much larger and very real global pattern: the movement of women's bodies and labour from poorer countries in the Global South to wealthier cities in the Global North, often to work in industries, including the sex trade, that depend on cheap and available foreign labour.

The postcolonial theory explores the imperialist attitude towards the so-called civilized, modern, or superior world, as compared to the exotic, primitive, and available one. At the same time, the Orientalism theory addresses the way Western narratives depict non-western, European cultures, creating a vision of them as exotic and sensational. The postcolonial theory is applied to both Western and non-Western cultures, while the Orientalism theory focuses on Western narratives in particular. Edward Said's Orientalism theory tries to interpret the Oriental culture as something different, exotic, and non-modern. In his opinion, Western literature and art produced numerous works with the focus on Eastern traditions, geography, and people, and, in fact, they were purely imaginary (Said, 1978). Gayatri's Spivak's theory focuses on the so-called subaltern's voice that is not heard in the Western epistemology because of its focus on the dominant culture. She asks whether the third-world people's voices can be heard in the texts narrated mostly for privileged readers or not (Spivak, 1988). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's theory concerns the way Western narratives depict women of the third world, portraying them as poor, undernourished, and homeless (Mohanty, 1988).

Global theory adds an economic layer to this picture. Scholars of globalization describe how capital, labour, and desire now move across borders at high speed, connecting distant places through trade, migration, and media in ways that were not possible before (Appadurai, 1996). Sex work across borders is one visible part of this pattern, since it depends on real economic gaps between countries, on legal differences that make some cities safer or more profitable for this work than others, and on client demand that is often shaped by stereotypes about which nationalities are seen as more desirable or more available. Reading *Eleven Minutes* through this combined postcolonial and global lens does not replace existing spiritual or feminist readings of the novel. It adds a layer they tend to leave out: attention to why Maria's story could only happen the way it does because of where she was born and where she was able to travel to.

2. Maria as the Exotic Other: Brazil in the European Imagination

From its opening line, the novel frames Maria inside a familiar Western storytelling tradition. The narrator begins with the line "Once upon a time, there was a prostitute called Maria" (Coelho, 2003, p.3), placing a Brazilian sex worker inside the opening formula of a European fairy tale. This choice is not neutral. Postcolonial critics have long pointed out that Western culture often absorbs non-Western figures into its own familiar story shapes, turning a real, specific woman into a symbol that fits a pattern European readers already know (Said, 1978). By opening this way, the novel signals early on that Maria will be read, at least in part, through a Western lens built for someone else's story, even though the novel goes on to give her a detailed inner life.

This pattern continues in how Maria's clients see her. Several of the men she meets in Geneva are drawn to her specifically because she is Brazilian, associating her nationality with warmth, sensuality, and exotic difference from the women in their own country. This is a small but telling detail, because it shows how global stereotypes about entire nations, in this case, a widespread European association between Brazilian women and uninhibited sexuality, shape individual desire and demand. Maria's body, in these moments, is not just her own; it also carries the weight of a national and racial stereotype she did not create and cannot fully escape.

Mohanty's warning about flattening women from the Global South into a single generic type is useful here, since several of Maria's clients relate to her less as an individual than as a representative of a broader fantasy about Brazilian women (Mohanty, 1988).

At the same time, the novel resists collapsing entirely into this pattern. Coelho gives Maria extended interior narration, including her private diary entries, which allow readers access to thoughts her clients never see. These matters for a postcolonial reading, because it means Maria is not purely an object of the European gaze; she also narrates herself. Spivak's question about whether the subaltern can truly speak, or is always spoken for, is relevant but not fully settled by this novel (Spivak, 1988). Maria does speak, at length, but she speaks inside a story still shaped by a European author, a European setting, and European readers as the presumed audience, which keeps her voice only partly free of the very framing this paper is examining.

3. Migration, Labour, and the Global Sex Trade

Maria's move from Brazil to Switzerland is not simply a personal adventure; it follows a well-documented global pattern in which women from poorer regions travel to wealthier cities for work, often in industries that wealthier countries prefer not to staff with their own citizens. Global theorists describe this movement of people, alongside the faster movement of money, goods, and images, as one of the defining features of the modern connected world (Appadurai, 1996). Maria's journey fits this pattern closely: she leaves a region with limited economic opportunity for a country where her labour, including her sexual labour, has more purchasing power than it would at home.

The novel is quick to point out the economic rationale for Maria's decision to sell herself into sex work. She is tempted by the prospects of higher payments available in Europe compared to Brazil, and the choice is framed as a rational economic decision rather than a moral failing or an irrational decision. From a broader theoretical perspective, the novel's plot is just one example of how the situation in the international economy works. It is, in fact, a small-scale illustration of how the international division of labour works, with people and capital flowing from one part of the world to another along the lines of profitability, not human need. The systems in which Maria participates do not appear to have names within the narrative itself, but the plot action is inseparable from these systems.

This global economic backdrop also shapes how Maria is treated once she arrives. Switzerland's regulation of sex work, its currency, and its wealthy client base all make Geneva a more profitable destination than Brazil for the same labour, which is precisely why Maria and other migrant women end up there rather than staying home. A postcolonial and global reading therefore treats Maria's individual story as inseparable from questions the novel itself does not directly ask: why some countries produce migrant sex workers while others provide their clients, and what history of global inequality lies behind that pattern.

4. Conclusion

Reading *Eleven Minutes* through postcolonial and global theory shows that Maria's story cannot be fully explained by personal choice or spiritual searching alone. Her body and her labour move along a path shaped by real global inequalities between Brazil and Switzerland, and she is received in Geneva partly through stereotypes about Brazilian women that have little to do with who she actually is. Said's account of the exoticized other, Spivak's question about whether the subaltern can truly speak, and Mohanty's warning about flattening Global South women into a single type all find clear, concrete examples inside this one novel, from its fairy-tale opening line to its clients' assumptions about her nationality.

At the same time, the novel does not simply reduce Maria to a stereotype. Its use of her diary and inner narration gives her a voice that pushes back, at least partially, against the very framing this paper has traced. This tension, between a story shaped by global and colonial patterns and a character who still speaks for herself within that story, is perhaps the most useful finding of this paper. It suggests that popular global fiction like Coelho's can carry postcolonial patterns without being fully aware of them, and that reading for those patterns adds a layer of understanding that spiritual or purely personal readings of the novel tend to miss.

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