

Psychic Abnormalities and Aberrations in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*

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Abstract

*Entangled in the web of absurd and alienated society, modern man confronts bounteous problems and keeps on suffering with the greatest curse of the absence of inter-personal relations. Lack of humanity, results in fragmentation, frustration, chaos, desperation, perplexity and detachment in the human psyche. The injuries inflicted and the scars left on his psyche generate a cynical attitude towards the established social norms and values. The socio-cultural pressures tend to affect his inner peace causing disorders in his physical, mental and psychological attitudes. The issue of existing meaninglessly can be traced in all facets of human life which seems to be a major menace. Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*, in which he deals with life and death and its complexities. The society finds unacceptable and unmentionable, such as insanity and suicide that is depicted in the novel meticulously. It is about the protagonist *Veronika's* psychological problem and she decides to die and how she attempts to kill herself and how after her tailed suicide attempt, she learns to live.*

Keywords: Naturalness, Elegant, Unsophisticated, Self Fashion, Baroque, Decorum

Entangled in the web of absurd and alienated society, modern man confronts bounteous problems and keeps on suffering from the greatest curse of the absence of inter-personal relations. Despite the scientific and technological achievements, the contemporary man is doomed to find himself in a tragic predicament and discombobulation. It is well expressed as "Modern man's difficulties, dangerous beliefs and feelings of loneliness, spiritual emptiness, and personal weakness are caused by his illusions about, and separation from, the natural world" (*Explorers of Gor n pag.*).

Lack of humanity results in fragmentation, frustration, chaos, desperation, perplexity, and detachment in the human psyche. There is a wide gap between what an individual professes and what he practices, between what he is and what he should be. The breach between what the individual aspires for and the hard reality of what he achieves has mercilessly crushed his life, leaving a treacherous effect on his inner being. The injuries inflicted and & scars left on his psyche generate a cynical attitude towards the established social norms and values. The socio-cultural pressures tend to affect his inner peace causing disorders in physical, mental & psychological attitudes. According to From,

In the nineteenth century, the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century, the problem is that man is dead. The danger of the past was that man became slaves. The danger of the future is men may become robots who will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand... a meaningless life. (*Sane Society 122*)

Being crushed under the pressure of money-worshipping degraded society, the common man experiences the existential trauma and the terror of the world, which makes his self as powerlessness and identity crisis in both physically and mentally. All such threats, transform men into abnormal and aberrated souls who deviate from the normal stream.

The issue of existing meaninglessly can be traced in all facets of human life, which seems to be a major menace. The very emptiness of human beings leads to a profound spiritual crisis, and their mind is forced to doubt itself. With the modern shift towards the urban and the technological, the perception of both space and time undergoes a transformation; the mindset of the people to undergoes the same where they are forced to move to the periphery, ignoring the values of fellow human beings which are the outcome of their fragmented, chaotic psyche. Quite significantly, when the existential agony remains unnoticed, the tormented psyche is exploded.

Modern man, a product of the global digital era, is quite vulnerable to these mental illnesses as his boredom- mandatory life makes him question his existence. There is always a dispute between his individual and collective 'self' by which his "psyche develops as a co-evolution of these two forms" (*Our Dreaming Mind* 162), and it tries to solve the problems in both macros (collective) and micro (individual) levels and hence the emergence of conflicts can be felt. Erich Fromm analyses the concept of existentialism in the context of man's psychic needs:

Man's existential conflict produces certain psychic needs common to all men. He is forced to overcome the horror of separateness, powerlessness and lostness, and find new forms of relating himself to the world to enable him to feel at home. I have called these psychic needs of existentialism because they are rooted in the very conditions of human existence. They are shared by all men, and their fulfillment is as necessary for man's remaining sane as the fulfillment of organic drive is necessary for his remaining alive. (*The Anatomy of Destructiveness* 304.)

Issues about mental disorders are very complex, and many types of research have attempted hitherto to resolve this mental illness, which remains a

great threat to human beings. The factors related to mental disorders, including economic factors, civil liberty issues, skeptical approach in familial relationships, and mental illness, which are termed as schizophrenia and bipolar disorders, have a dangerous effect on committing suicide or involving in homicide. *Veronika Decides to Die* is a novel by one of the world's most distinguished authors Paulo Coelho. In this novel, *Veronika Decides to Die*; he deals with life and death and its complexities. The society finds unacceptable and unmentionable, such as insanity and suicide that is depicted in the novel meticulously. It is about the protagonist, Veronika, who decides to die and how she attempts to kill herself and how, after her failed suicide attempt, she learns to live.

Veronika is twenty-four years young girl, having boyfriends, a loving family, a good job, but still, she finds her life full of endlessly meaningless routine, which she hates like anything but still follows as she has nothing else to do. She had everything she could wish for. But she isn't happy with her life, not because she is deprived of something in her life: "She was not killing herself because she was a sad, embittered woman, constantly depressed" (Coelho 6).

The question of life and death continues to haunt her relentlessly. Out of desperation, she develops self-pity and wishes to have a peaceful death. She feels, "She would gain nothing by continuing to live; indeed, the likelihood of suffering only increased" (Coelho 6). Finally, her despair and meaninglessness of civilized society lead her to take impulsive decisions to commit suicide. She believes that she had spent her life to the full extent;

At twenty-four, having experienced everything she could experience - and that was no small achievement - Veronika was almost certain that everything ended with death. That is why she had chosen suicide: freedom at last. Eternal oblivion. (Coelho 7)

Veronika takes an overdose of sleeping pills to stop her life. But her suicide attempt fails, and she is taken to Villetje, the most controversial local mental hospital in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. After recovering, she would have to go back to her routine life. But later she is told that although she is alive,

her heart is now irreparably damaged and she has only seven days to live. She feels that as she has nothing more to lose or gain so, she should live the next seven days or the last seven days of her life to the fullest. And it is during this period she realizes that life is vibrant and invaluable.

But there is one thing that Veronika does not know that she is the subject of a psychiatric experiment conducted by the Villette's head Psychiatrist Doctor Igor "to discover a cure for insanity" (Coelho 67) because "he knew that failed suicides tend to repeat the attempt sooner or later. Why not use her as a guinea pig to see if he could eliminate the Vitriol, or Bitterness, from her organism?" (189). In R.K.Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi nature, science and human*,

...after all, we are civilized human beings, educated and cultured, and it is up to us to prove our superiority to nature. Science conquers nature in a new way each day: why not in creation also? That's my philosophy. (15-16)

He considers Veronika "a heaven-sent opportunity in the shape of a would-be suicide; he was not going to lose this opportunity for all the money in the world" (Coelho 67). Therefore he fakes upon her the news of her near-death, i.e., when he tells her that she is about to die in a week. To add the color of reality to his prophecy, he uses some drug with which he manages to stimulate the effects of heart attacks and impress upon Veronika, the shrinking days of her remaining life. There had been no damage to her heart and no problem with her health, but Dr. Igor makes up this story to make Veronika realize the meaning and lost importance of her life. He wants her to find the lost thirst for life.

He wants to prove that the cure to bitterness lies in an awareness of life itself. And so he observes how Veronika behaves, and how she lives from that point onwards. Dr. Igor's trick works, and gradually, Veronika starts seeing the world around her with new eyes. In the constant awareness of life, she begins to re-evaluate her life. She begins to question her existence and ideas about life. Every person Veronika meets at Villette changes her view of life; since her life is changing, and she is gaining a new vision of life, her wish to die gradually disappears.

In the asylum, she gets a chance to meet the three

most important characters of her life who serve as a medium for her self-reflection. Zedka, the depressed housewife; Mari, the Lawyer who gave up her dreams when she came to suffer from panic attacks; and Eduard, a schizophrenic artist who has spent his life denying love. Even though they are normal, but the outside world identifies them simply as mad people, these three persons become the reason where Veronika understands that the every second of existence is worth living; it is a choice that makes between living and dying.

During her first conscious night in the asylum, she meets Zedka. Though married with children Zedka had become obsessed with a former lover, frantically but unsuccessfully searched for him, and was even prepared to give up her family, her children, everything for him. Veronika learns from Zedka that some patients pretend to be mad to do exactly what they want. But Zedka's futile search led to depression, and finally, she was admitted to the asylum. Loneliness comes over her and leaves her frustrated. She experiences "astral" (Coelho 45) journeys during her treatment and explores the world around herself in a way that was strange by all standards. She becomes a friend to Veronika, and on the day of her release, she leaves her with the thoughts of inexhaustible and reasonless love. She makes Veronika realize that the deep inner desires that are rooted within us form a hidden but an essential part of our personality. Such desires should be understood and analyzed without fail.

The fear of things going wrong, reaction of others, of society, parents, husband, wife, etc. should not prevent one's soul to enjoy the freedom and do whatever he likes. So during the last days of her life, Veronika decides to discover herself, her dreams, her joys, her desires, her love, her sorrow, her pain, her hatred. She allows herself to live completely because she might not have another chance: "She felt like going over to the piano in the lounge, and celebrating that night with a lovely sonata she had learned at school. Looking up at the sky, she had an indescribable sense of well-being, as if the infinite nature of the universe had revealed her eternity to her" (Coelho 57). Zedka decides to leave her depression in the asylum but carries with her all other sorts of madness, which now will be normal

for her and others. She says:

When I came here, I was deeply depressed. Now I'm proud to say I'm mad. Outside I'll behave exactly like everyone else. I'll go shopping at the supermarket; I'll exchange trivialities with my friends. I'll waste precious time watching television. But I know deep in my soul is the tree and that I can dream and talk with other worlds which, before I came here, I didn't even imagine existed. (Coelho 148)

Veronika also meets Mari, a member of the Fraternity who is a group of long-standing members, who could have left several years ago, but stay at the expenses of the state due to the hospital's familiarity, and who behave like dangerously violent insane persons whenever there is a government inspection. Mari, a successful lawyer, enters the asylum as a panic attack patient. Mari's anxiety, fear, and pain stemming from his own mental and emotional fragmentation are echoed, and she undergoes irrational fear or phobia as they are subjected to beleaguered existence. Phobia may be defined as a persistent, abnormal, and irrational fear of a specific thing or situation that compels one to avoid it, despite the awareness and reassurance that it is not dangerous. A phobia is an intense fear of something that, in reality, poses little or no actual danger, which is also called as Psychic aberrations. (Phobia n.pag)

Though her state is completely curable, she decides to slay back at Villette, which she had avoided earlier due to her illness. Before coming to Villette, Mary had "decided to give up the tedious, unending job of being a lawyer to dedicate the rest of her days to working for some humanitarian organization" (Coelho 103). She wanted to go against the norm of being a successful lawyer and live life to the fullest by fulfilling her cherished desires. She wanted to work for the starving children of El Salvador, who "were forced to live on the streets and turn to prostitution" (Coelho 103).

But when she couldn't stand up against the societal norms, she started having panic attacks and consequently bowed down before the societal pressure and prevalent beliefs. Critics opine that people suffer from mental disorders, fear, phobia, and neurosis. These mental disorders shake the very realm of normal sublunary life and lead to ultimate

destruction. It is stated by Eric Maisel that

A clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or psychological pattern that occurs in an individual is associated with present disability or with a significantly increased risk of suffering, death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom. ("The New Definition of a Mental Disorder" n.pag)

And thus, she was thwarted from becoming "the fountain that overflows" (Coelho 180-81). But now, learning from her own experience, she teaches Veronika to push herself beyond her boundaries and urges her to experience the highest pleasure. She urges her to be true to her self instead of getting bogged down by other people's opinions and fancies. She makes Veronika understand that "her parents would still have loved her, but, afraid of hurting them, she had not dared to pay the price of her dream, the dream that was buried in the depths of her memory..." Veronika had known since childhood that her true vocation was to be a pianist" (Coelho 85). In the end, inspired by Veronika's courage to live each day as it comes, Mari decides to leave the asylum and follow her heart and free her soul by working for the children of war-torn Sarajevo. She asks: "'Where is my soul?' Mari asked again. In what I wanted my life to be. I left my soul captive at that moment when I still had a house, a husband, a job I wanted to leave but never had the courage to ... the death of that young girl made me understand my own life'" (Coelho 155).

Veronika's life changes when she meets Eduard, a schizophrenic whose madness was, according to the doctor's report, beyond cure. Schizophrenia is a brain disorder that affects the way a person behaves, thinks, and sees the world. People with schizophrenia often have an altered perception of reality. They may see or hear things that don't exist, speak in strange or confusing ways, believe that others are trying to harm them, or feel like they are constantly watched. Patients with schizophrenia often have overlapping depression and may have suicidal thoughts and behavior. They may withdraw almost completely from others, slipping into a world of private thoughts and experiences. They may cry, seethe with anger, laugh or giggle inappropriately, with little

responsiveness to others or events. (schizophrenia n.pag)

Being the son of a diplomat, he had seen all comforts in life, but his road accident changes his life. He gets inspired by the lives of great visionaries such as Jesus Christ, Darwin, Freud, Columbus, and Marx “whose ideas had shaken the world, people with their vision of an earthly Paradise” (Coelho 165) and desires to create his visions of paradise through his paintings. Finally, he is enveloped with such a “powerful feeling of guilt that he had felt incapable of doing anything” (Coelho 132) and ultimately ends up in the asylum as a schizophrenic.

When Veronika meets Eduard, she creates music on the piano; he listens to her as if he is under some magical influence. On her part, Veronika “had finally realized her dream: to play with heart and soul, for as long as she wanted and whenever the mood took her. It didn’t matter to her that her only audience was a young schizophrenic; he seemed to understand the music, and that was what mattered” (Coelho 10). Each night Eduard waits for her to play and loses all his sorrows and worries in the rhythm of the notes. Eduard is the person who incites the understanding of life in Veronika.

Veronika begins to experience all the things she never allowed herself to experience. And when she has just about twenty-four hours left for death as per Doctor Igor that she realizes life. She says to the doctor:

I want to ask two favors. First, that you give me some medication, injection, or whatever so that I can stay awake and enjoy every moment that remains of in my life. I’m very tired, but I don’t want to sleep. I’ve got a lot to do, things that I always postponed for some future date, in the days when I thought life would last for ever. Things I’d lost interest in when I started to believe that life wasn’t worth living. (Coelho 127)

And her second favorite would be:

I want to leave here so that I can die outside. I need to visit Ljubljana Castle. It’s always been there, and I’ve never even had the curiosity to go and see it close to. I need to talk to the woman who sells chestnuts in winter and flowers in spring. We passed each other so often, and I never once asked her how she was. And I want

to go out without a jacket and walk in the snow, I want to find out what extreme cold feels like, I, who was always so wrapped up, so afraid of catching a cold. (Coelho 127)

By convincing that her death is eminent, Doctor Igor has managed to shock Veronika, making her want to live, respect life, and - above all enjoy it, something which life is meant for. She always wanted to do things that fascinated her, and now she wants to go out of Villete to taste them all and to know what life is all about. She not only falls in love with Eduard with all her heart and emotions for the first time but also enjoys it. Veronica now fully grasps the meaningfulness of her life.

Like Veronika, everyone in this world is so busy playing safe and so busy keeping others happy by doing things that are required of them that they stop living for themselves, lose the essence of life: Wanting to be different, according to Dr. Igor, becomes a serious illness only when “you force yourself to be the same as everyone else. . . . It’s a distortion of nature, it goes against God’s laws, for in all the world’s woods and forests, He did not create a single leaf the same as another” (Coelho 153). Coelho encourages readers to look within to find the real selves. We have forgotten or hidden from ourselves to keep pace with the hustle-bustle of our lives. Veronika learns this fact when she lies in Villete, waiting for her date to die. An awareness of death encouraged her to live more intensely.

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