

Aurobindonian Echoes in Paulo Coelho's *Eleven*

Minutes and By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept

Dr. Sarani Ghosal (Mondal)
Associate
Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Rashtrapati Nivas,
Shimla - 171005

Paulo Coelho (1947) is a mystic story teller in the postmodern literary scene. In spite of hailing from a catholic country, Rio De Janerio, he sometimes comes very close to Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) in his approach to life. For Coelho, life is a pilgrimage towards the Infinite through suffering, betrayal, love and joy. In an interview with Juan Arias, an eminent writer and journalist of Spain in July, 1998, Coelho says that as a pilgrim, he travels an endless path “.....it is the path and the search that forge and change you. I keep searching” (Juan Arias, *Confessions of a Pilgrim*, 29). This motif of quest, which is a dominant image in the writings of Tagore, Whitman and Sri Aurobindo, is also obvious in Coelho. This theme of quest is a mystic element, which binds these four writers in the same thread. For the present paper, I restrict myself to Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* and *By the River Piedra* and I would like to trace Aurobindonian moments in Coelho's fiction.

Eleven Minutes (2003) is the fictional biography of a Brazilian Prostitute called Sonia, whom the author had met in Zurich in 2000. (Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, 274) In the novel, the author changes Sonia into Maria and explores her varied experiences sensitively, whereas in *By the River Piedra* (1994) the focus is on Pilar and her childhood sweet heart, the monk. Like Maria, Pilar is also an independent and strong, woman, who too learns the lessons of life through varied experiences of pain, joy and hardships. Both the female protagonists know how to bury their personal feelings deep in the psyche and to face the world with courage and smile. Their journey starts in Brazil and continues in different provinces of Latin America. They undertake this arduous journey to search for true love and pure joy or what Sri Aurobindo calls “Ananda”. Both Maria and Pilar dream of selfless love and existence. Towards the close, we observe that love helps them discover themselves and they find a meaningful existence through love. Both of them express Aurobindonian thoughts and quite often come close to Sri Aurobindo's heroine Savitri as seen in his blank verse epic *Savitri: A legend and a Symbol* (1950-51). *Savitri* is the longest blank verse

epic in the English language containing 23.809 lines in the revised edition. Originally it had contained 23.813 lines. Like Maria and Pilar, Savitri is also a very strong and determined woman. She undertakes a cosmic journey in Time to get back her husband Satyavan from the clutch of *Yama* or Death. Here we find that “Love” is the driving force behind these three female protagonists. Love is not an ordinary virtue for Sri Aurobindo and Coelho. Love is synonymous with surrender. It helps to erase our ego and liberates the self from meanness and contraction. Maria, though a prostitute by profession, is very much aware of the finer elements of life and she deliberately keeps her inner being away from the baser aspects like physical gratification and carnality. The names are also symbolic. Maria is mother Mary in *Vulgate*. Savitri is the daughter of Light symbolising Divine Grace. Again, Pilar is Our Lady of Pillar of Saragossa of Spain symbolising Virgin Mary standing on a column (Internet). “True love is an act of total surrender” (Coelho, *By the River*, IX, Author’s note).

In book V, canto II of *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo says that love is a power and a glory from eternity and it tries to realise the underlying unity in all. Both Maria and Pilar connect themselves with the world through love and sympathy. The monk too believes in the principles of love and cosmic consciousness. However, the monk is in a dilemma whether to accept family life or be in celibacy. The monk and Pilar move from one place to another but they are unsure of their deepest feelings for each other. The monk’s conflict grows intense towards the close of the novel. He wrestles with his own self: whether to follow the rules of the seminary or to break away from it as he is in love with Pilar. But he fails to express that. The author has beautifully expressed the monk’s inner conflict through the image of “breaking the glass”. The duo is having wine at a restaurant, when Pilar asks him to break the glass of wine:

Break the glass please – and free us from all these damned rules from doing only what others approve of. (Coelho, *By the River*, 170)

Finally, the monk realises the significance of integral life, which means the acceptance of life as a whole. He says:

We’ll buy a house, I’ll get a job, and I’ll serve God as Saint Joseph did, with humility of an anonymous person. (Coelho, *By the River*, 194)

Here we see that his ego is finally shattered. He wishes to serve God as a common man without the glory of monkhood. It is love of Pilar that helps him come

out of his ego sense. In the *Epilogue*, the monk talks of taking a journey together and his stress is on “Our Path”. He realises that without the presence of his lady love, his *Yoga* (Union with the Divine) will not be successful. Sri Aurobindo too is against an ascetic life, believing in the principle of integral life. According to him, a monk’s life is incomplete. A *rishi* lives a complete life by embracing both matter and spirit. Marriage and offspring give one totality of existence. A monk is deprived of that. The rejection of material life is a rejection of God. For Sri Aurobindo, “Matter is secret God”. (Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 844). Coelho echoes this Aurobindonian principle of integral life through Maria and Pilar. Time and again Pilar tells the monk, “There are many ways to serve God” (Coelho, *By the River*, 186). This *Rishi* cult is a key element in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, who does not reject the world because he wishes to taste all the flavours of life to go beyond them in search of the Divine. Sri Aurobindo also indicates a collaboration of man and woman on the path to perfection. Man is complimentary to woman in the path of spiritual practice. The woman is not an outcaste in Sri Aurobindo’s yoga. In canto IV of *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo writes:

This whole wide world is only he and she...

The Two who are one are the secret of all power

The Two who are one are the might and right in things...

(Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, *The Secret knowledge*, 63)

This relates to the tantrik cult of oriental scriptures. In tantra, the World Mother is worshipped as *Shakti*, who helps humanity to link man to God. In Coelho’s fictions, we see that he considers his female protagonists as woman of immense potentials and possibilities. For Sri Aurobindo, tantra means to elevate woman as an object of profound respect and even of worship (*SABCL*, 18, 627). Sri Aurobindo followed the dictum of Manu, who had spoken of the same philosophy long back in 5th cent B.C. In Coelho, the woman often gets the central role, not just as a glorification of feminism, but from an obviously spiritual standpoint. Like Savitri, Maria and Pilar not only transform themselves but also seek to transform their male counterparts. Tantrik tradition takes the whole person into account. Similarly, Sri Aurobindo and Coelho deal with the whole person. It is a world-embracing principle.

Both of them believe that the women will have the superior role to play in the future. Coelho says to Juan Arias:

I too, am sure that this century will be affected by the greater presence of women in society. Man is finishing this century with a larger identity crises than woman (Juan Arias, *Confessions*, 84)

Sri Aurobindo expresses the same feeling in the *Harmony of Virtue* that women will be equal to men and may even become superior. Both of them speak like that because they are mother-worshippers like Ramakrishna. To them the great Feminine is the link between the Earth and the Heaven The monk after his realisation tells Pilar :

One night I awoke, and my room was completely bright. I saw the face of the Great Mother, I saw her loving look. (Coelho, *By the River*, 189)

The image of World Mother appears again and again in the writings of Sri Aurobindo and Paulo Coelho in different names. The world mother is “Lady of the Voyage” to Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri* and she becomes the “Lady of the Grace” in Coelho’s *By the River Piedra*.

In the interview with Juan Arias, Paulo Coelho confesses that Hare Krishna cult; Buddhism and Yogic Philosophy have worked as formative influences on him (Juan Arias, *Confessions*, 34). Checking Coelho’s texts one suspects Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga was a strong influence on him. Apart from the themes of love, journey, integral life and mother worship, the issue of human personality is also a matter of great importance to both of them. Quite frequently Sri Aurobindo says in his major texts like *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *Savitri* that man is a multiple being. And inside man and woman lies a latent aspiration for the Supreme Being, the Divine. This is quite apt for Maria in *Eleven Minutes*. Maria, who turns a prostitute in the novel, has exceptional virtues even if she apparently leads a bad life for money. Sri Aurobindo has specifically pointed out that the physical being may be distorted but the psychic aspiration may not be affected by the wrong movements of the physical or the vital, which are the surface layers of human consciousness. Maria earns money by selling her body, but at her leisure, she expresses her best self, the psychic being, in

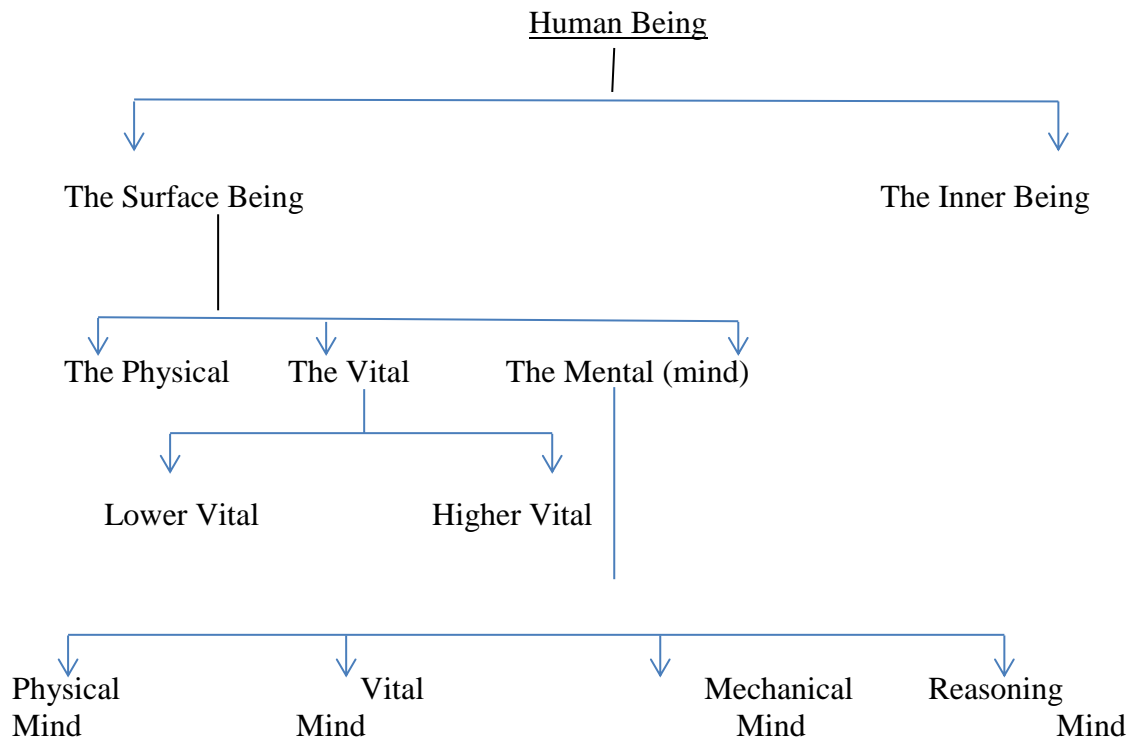
her diaries. Through the dark days of her prostitution, Maria searches for true love that lies beyond sex and physicality. Let us listen to one of her diary entries:

I am two women: one wants to have all the joy, passion and adventure that life can give me. The other wants to be a slave to routine, to family life ... I am a house wife and a prostitute, both of us living in the same body and doing battle with each other. The meeting of these two women is a game with serious risks. A divine dance. When we meet ... two universes colliding (Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, 153).

The image of battle or collision between two selves indicates Maria's inner conflict. Maria can be seen from two viewpoints, from the feminist standpoint and from the point of view of a human being realising her role to be played in the mundane set up. The dual selves of Maria run parallel in the novel as her diary entries project her consciousness. The diary shows the journey of the soul towards self-discovery. Through experiences and obstructions Maria realises her aspiration, her own "inner light" and the possibility of sacred sex in the context of love. This love is above gratification and carnality. In her dark days of prostitution, every night Maria analyses herself or inner being in her diary and also tries to find out the objective of her existence.

I can choose either to be victim of the world or adventurer in search of treasure. (Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, 39)

This image of "treasure" is the spark of the Divine. She aspires to be an adventurer in search of the Divine. This is her mystic quest, which does not allow her to be restful and complacent. Her inner conflict reminds us of Blake's philosophy that contrary is the condition of progress. Blake had spoken of it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Experiences, sufferings, contraries and obstructions give humanity a strong sense of life, with which one can progress further in the path towards the Infinite. In Maria, this latent aspiration is a sacred fire burning in her all the time alongside her sensuous life and the feminine quest for security. If we analyse this duality of selves in the context of Sri Aurobindo, we find that the Indian Master has divided a being in three segments. According to him, our being is not composed of one unit, but composed of many entities lurking behind the apparent single one.



The surface being or personality comprises three parts - **physical, vital** and **mental**. The physical part tries to maintain good health. Then comes the “vital”. The vital is a force which makes our physical instruments work normally. The physical instruments are glands, veins, arteries, nerves, plexuses, and so on. The vital or life-force works as *Vayu* or subtle air principle in the body and if it deserts the body, the latter perishes. Jung calls it libido, by which he means ‘life energy’ underlying all natural phenomena. According to Jung, libido is the driving force that initiates and sustains all human activity from its lowest biological to its highest spiritual level. This libido is *elan vital* to Bergson. (Coward, *Jung and Eastern Thought*, 171). In the words of E. Glover, libido is “...a dynamic and creative element in outer and inner directions, ie: towards outer objects and towards the self...it is desire, it is interest, it is love, it is the joy of living; it comprises all human activities...” (Glover, *Freud and Jung*, 58) **But Sri Aurobindo’s concept of the vital is more revolutionary. It leaves behind the western psychologists in search of a more detailed investigation into the human consciousness.** Along with the proper functioning of the body, the vital is also the source of diverse energies that a body requires. Anger, greed, vanity, jealousy, and lust are some adverse passions creating negative energy in the body, whereas a superior variety of energy nourishes aspiration and our efforts towards

meditation, concentration as well as receptivity to inspiration. In this context, Sri Aurobindo divides vital or life force in two segments: higher and lower. The higher vital deals with loftier emotions, kindness, sympathy and altruism, whereas the lower vital deals with desires, cravings and emotional disturbances. Sri Aurobindo suggests that if the vital is kept under control, humanity is then free from decay and diseases. Then there is mind (mental being) with its four subdivisions: physical mind, vital mind, mechanical mind and reasoning mind. The physical mind responds to all the physical needs and sense-perceptions. The vital mind is influenced by the lower and higher vital. This mind articulates in words our desires and emotions. The vital mind also possesses a strong power of imagination. The mechanical mind makes old habitual thoughts recur. Often we shadow-box with ourselves repeatedly over an issue happened in the past. This is an activity of mechanical mind. This mind is very brooding. The reasoning mind discriminates everything in terms of reason like what should be done and what should not be done.

Let us now discuss the inner being or the subliminal being of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. It is more powerful than the outer being. Both Freud and Sri Aurobindo had compared our outer lives with a floating iceberg---- nine-tenth submerged underwater and one –tenth above (Internet). The inner being is also divided into subcategories by Sri Aurobindo in *The Life Divine* but I am not going into the details of those divisions in the present study. The inner being carries all the refined emotions like selflessness. Selfishness is not the part of the inner being. Behind our outer and inner being stands our inmost being or the “**psychic being**”. Jung has described the term “psychic” as a consciousness lying ‘beyond’ or ‘beneath’ or ‘within’ the ego (Coward, *Jung and Eastern Thought*, 148). According to Sri Aurobindo, the psychic being or the psychic purusha is hidden behind our physical, vital and mental layers of consciousness. When the psychic comes to the front piercing the inner and the surface layers, one is in contact with the whole world. It is the beginning of man's expansion into the cosmic consciousness. The opening or coming forward of the psychic means one is standing at the gateway to the Supramental. It is the thumb-sized *Purusha* or the Cosmic Man of the *Rig-Veda* and *Sankhya* philosophy progressing from birth to birth to absorb the full consciousness of the Spirit. The awakening of the psychic being is essential in Sri Aurobindo's yoga. When the psychic is awakened, a man or a woman gets rid of vital motives and is capable of surrender to the Divine. Jung's idea of the

psychic lying ‘within the ego’ is not relevant to Aurobindonian context. According to Sri Aurobindo’s the ego goes to the backseat with the awakening of the psychic. Coelho’s Maria is a multiple being in the context of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga. She wavers from the surface being to the inner being and then to the psychic being. Her surface being enjoys money and sensual pleasure but her inner being carries the sacred flame of aspiration leading towards the opening of the psychic. Here I cite two of her diary entries to show her wavering nature from the surface layer of consciousness to a kind of refinement.

It hurt when I lost each of the various men I fell in love with. Now, though, I am convinced that no one loses anyone, because no one owns anyone. That is the true experience of freedom: having the most important thing in the world without owning it. (Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, 92)

Here, in my diary, I am aware that there are certain phrases which are not written by me, but by a woman full of “light;” I am that woman though I refuse to accept it. (Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, 114)

Similar examples abound in the text highlighting her contradictory selves. At one place, she writes; “when desire is still in its pure state, the man and woman fall in love with life, they live each moment reverently, consciously, always ready to celebrate the next blessing” (Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, 135). When Maria talks of “purity” in desire, it obviously comes from her inner being. In course of her low career, she finds Ralf, a painter and for the first time in her life she feels freedom through love.

When I stopped being who I am I found myself.

(Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, 191)

Her ego is now softened. She surrenders her surface being to live consciously. Freedom from ego indicates the opening of the psychic. Sri Aurobindo in his essays and letters says that this sacred aspiration that once rises in a being can never go to sleep again. It is interesting to observe that Paulo Coelho projects this Aurobindonian concept of man as a multiple being in Maria. In spite of being a prostitute she yearns to purify her life so that it becomes a living demonstration of the Divine in her material life. Both in Sri

Aurobindo and Paulo Coelho, we find that women manifest their power and consciousness in different ways and they are viewed as *Shakti*,... the power behind men. (Mishra and Tripathy, *A Critical Response to Indian English literature*, 27)

Carl G Jung (1875-1961), a contemporary of Sri Aurobindo, also speaks of the problem of contrary impulses, of good and evil, of mind and matter, of light and darkness. The experience of the problem of opposites is a common human dilemma. In a letter written to his friend, V. Subrahmanya Iyer, Jung writes about the impossibility of getting beyond the pairs of opposites in this life. Harold Coward quotes a portion of Jung's letter to V. S. Iyer :

It is certainly desirable to liberate oneself from the operation of the opposites but one can only do it to a certain extent, because no sooner do you get out of the conflict then you get out of life altogether. So that liberation can only be a very partial one. It can be the construction of a consciousness just beyond the opposites. Your head may be liberated, your feet remain entangled. Complete liberation means death. (Harold Coward, *Jung and Eastern Thought*, 16)

In reply, V. S. Iyer refers to a highest level of consciousness without ego. Jung in turn says that he is afraid "this supreme consciousness is at least not one we could possess." Here we see that Jung was not aware of fact that ultimately the opposite or contradictory emotions or conflicts get dissolved in our realisation of Oneness of *Brahman* Consciousness. This Oneness or the Emersonian Oversoul is Coelho's "inner light" or Sri Aurobindo's image of the Divine. Jung had the vision of man as a multiple personality, but he did not have a clue to dissecting the personality of man in the Aurobindonian way. For Jung, getting out of the contradiction means death. For Sri Aurobindo and Coelho, the contradiction is the way to discover the divine spark or the psychic being in us. Maria, Pilar and Savitri experience both hell and heaven in the same life and go beyond it to discover the Self.

Notes

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Dr. Sarani Ghosal (Mondal)

Assistant Professor (Business Communication)

Durgapur Society of Management Science, West Bengal

