

# Demarcating the Transitional Angst of Adolescent Protagonist in Paulo Coelho's Novels

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Received: July 12, 2018

Accepted: August 18, 2018

## ABSTRACT

*Paulo Coelho the renowned novelist of our times has scripted many noteworthy characters through his novels. The salient feature in the depiction of his characters is that he describes incidents from different stages of the character's life which facilitates in the reader's understanding of their personality lucidly. The adolescent period forms the crucial period in the lives of the protagonists Maria, Linda and Mata Hari in *Eleven Minutes*, *Adultery* and *The Spy* respectively. This paper attempts to study the adolescent phase of the central women characters in the novels mentioned above. Highlighting the traits exhibited by these women in their adolescence will help in describing the physical, psychological, cognitive and social developments in this period.*

**Keywords:** adolescence, Paulo Coelho, *Eleven Minutes*, *Adultery*, *The Spy*, *Trait*

*Adolescence is a new birth, for the higher and more completely human traits are now born.*

G. Stanley Hall

Paulo Coelho is a master story teller whose characters are an extension of his own persona. Being a male writer he has efficiently overcome the gender(.....) skillfully dissected and displayed the female psyche through his women characters. He has clearly outlined the life of the women by drawing on experiences beginning from their childhood. The challenges faced by his characters at different stages of life are relatable to real life. The adolescent experiences of Coelho's characters impacts the development of their personality. In the novels *Eleven Minutes* (2006), *Adultery* (2014) and *The Spy* (2016) Paulo Coelho highlights the adolescent experiences of Maria (in *Eleven Minutes*), Linda (in *Adultery*) and Margaretha Zelle alias Mata Hari (in *The Spy*).

The adolescent period is an important phase in the life of every individual. Lawrence Steinberg in the book *Adolescence* calls it "the second decade of the [individual's] lifespan" (4). The term 'adolescence' originated from the Greek word *adolescere* meaning 'to grow into adulthood'. On the basis of age, social scientists categorise adolescence into three periods: "early adolescence which covers the period from about age 11 through age 14; middle adolescence, from about age 15 through age 18; and late adolescence (or youth as it is sometimes known), from about age 18 through age 21" (Steinberg 6). It is marked by physical, psychological, cognitive and social developments which bring about the shaping of the individual's personality based on the traits displayed by the individual.

Adolescents, commonly referred to as teenagers, are filled with anticipation and expectation as they experience physical and psychological changes within themselves. While some have happy experiences others have to taste bitter pangs that leave them hurt for life. It is a phase of transition moulding them from adolescence to adulthood. The challenges experienced by adolescents of both gender are quite different. The paper details the adolescent experiences of the protagonists in Paulo Coelho's novels.

The most distinctive changes evident in adolescents are physical in nature. Physical development in adolescent girls attributes in forming a "self- image and body image" (*Developing* 10) about them. Coelho's adolescents are attuned to their bodily changes as they were aware of their beauty. Mata Hari notes, "Early on, as a teenager, I learned that I was beautiful from the way my friends used to imitate me" (*The Spy* 17) and Maria also "knew how attractive she was" (*Eleven Minutes* 16). They all have a definitive awareness about their 'body image'.

Another typically approach in adolescence is "openness to experience" (Bhattacharya 31). Adolescents tend to be on the lookout for something new, different and adventurous in everyday life. Maria's adolescent period is a remarkable example of the bodily exploration and discoveries done by adolescent girls. At the age of fifteen she was able to feel sexual pleasures. Maria further begins to challenge the idea that a man is needed to experience physical pleasure and this makes her grow "more and more

insecure in her relationships with boys" (*Eleven Minutes* 13). Coelho uses her as an example to reiterate the fact that this practice has its negative psychological impact on the sexual experience of individuals.

Physical changes also correspond to attraction between the sexes. Gender attraction is common in adolescent period and projecting a mysterious persona to the opposite sex is one attribute found in Coelho's adolescent girls.

Linda recollects:

I was at secondary school, and the boys were always hitting on me, no matter how I tried to fend them off....

And I rejected almost everyone, because I knew that if anyone ever managed to enter my world, they would find nothing of interest. It was best to maintain an air of mystery with a hint of unattainable pleasures. (*Adultery* 69)

Maria has an opposite approach,

... Maria's adolescent years passed. She grew prettier and prettier, and her sad, mysterious air brought her many suitors. She went out with one boy and with another her many suitors. She went out with one boy and with another, and she dreamed and suffered – despite her promise to herself never to fall in love again.

(*Eleven Minutes* 15)

Margaretha Zelle on the other hand was a victim of public opinion. People accused her of "being a "woman of easy virtue"" (*The Spy* 16-17), to which her father responded by writing a book in her defense. However Margaretha confesses that it was "something he should have never done" (*The Spy* 17). She was not ashamed of her actions because she had a rebellious adolescent spirit that helped her go against the moral code of society and she proudly states "I was perfect at ease with what I was doing" (*The Spy* 17). Acceptance of her true self is an exceptional trait exhibited by Margaretha. She ratifies,

Yes, I was a prostitute- if by that you mean someone who receives favors and jewelry I exchange for affection and pleasure. Yes, I was a liar, one so compulsive and out of control that I often forgot what I'd said and had to expend great mental energy to cover my blunders. (*The Spy* 17)

Here, the character trait of self-acceptance or "acceptance of ... appearances" (*Development* 10) and one's nature is seen as an essential part of adolescent physical development experience.

The adolescent life experiences of these three women in Paulo Coelho's novels are useful lessons to the young adolescents to void the pit falls during adolescent period. "Falling in love" (Erickson 235) is one emotional experience that adolescents experience. Erik H. Erickson states that " 'falling in love'... is by no means entirely, or even primarily a sexual matter... adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused ego-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified" (235-36). Maria's 'falling in love' begins from her early adolescence (age eleven) as she encounters multiple experiences of failure in love during her adolescent period. These negative experiences help her understand her self-esteem to deal carefully with men in her future relationships as "she came to the conclusion that men brought only pain, frustration, suffering and a sense of time dragging" (*Eleven Minutes* 13) and became "more and more determined to leave the place where she lived" (13). For Linda it is an unfulfilled romance with Jacob Koning that lingers on in her memories. But she progresses in her life.

Adolescents also face some negative experiences that impact their ideals and virtues. Sexual harassment especially rape is the most traumatic experience that is prevalent in our society even today. Margaretha is a victim of rape. It leaves a deep scar in their life and to an extent shapes her future actions and destiny. She confesses to having been "raped when ... [she] was sixteen" (*The Spy* 21), by her ephrophile (one who is sexually attracted to teenagers) school principal, the experience she says left her "confused and frightened" (21). "I began to associate sex with something mechanical, something that had nothing to do with love" (21) adds Mata Hari. Coelho, through Mata Hari, has clearly defined the psychological response of innumerable adolescents across the globe experiencing this heinous bodily violation that ruins their self-esteem. Developing the trait of self-esteem is seen vital to the psychological development of the adolescent.

The cognitive development in adolescent is instrumental in laying a strong foundation for 'life goals' that germinate in the adolescent period. The American Psychological Association points out that "cognitive competence includes such things as the ability to reason effectively, problem solve, think abstractly and reflect, and plan for the future" (11). Maria exhibits a desire to explore the world beyond the realms of her hometown for which she believed in educating herself as "she learned geography and mathematics" (*Eleven Minutes* 7) at school. Since she was aware of her poor economic status, "she studied in order to get on in life" (7). At seventeen she shows clarity in her thinking as she notes in her diary "My aim is to understand love"

(16). On the other side, Mata Hari was desperate for change “I was eager to leave that suffocating town, with its identical days and nights” (*The Spy* 19) and chose to train as a kindergarten teacher to get ahead in life.

In *Adultery*, one day on her way home Linda saw some poisonous mushrooms. She recalls, “For a fraction of a second I considered eating them. I wasn’t feeling particularly sad or particularly happy; I just wanted to get my parents’ attention. I didn’t eat the mushroom” (70). Her emotional state seems upset, earning for her parents’ attention. However, she does not act impulsively, but rather understands her emotional turmoil and makes a wise stance. Through Linda’s experience Coelho shows how the trait of self-control can help adolescents to take positive decisions even when they have negative experiences.

In the social relationship setup Coelho presents the adolescents Maria, Linda and Mata Hari as adolescents envied by their peers. He focuses on the “envy-hypothesis” where “dissimilarity in popularity leads to envy among lower status peers towards high popular peers”(Berger and Dijkstra 8). Their beauty attracted the opposite sex which was the main reason behind their peers’ envying them. “The other girls were green with envy” (*Adultery* 69) notes Coelho about Linda, while for Maria her girlfriends envied that she was able to “manage men so well” (*Eleven Minutes* 16). They respond to their peers envy differently. Maria and Margaretha Zelle are able to make a place for themselves among their peers despite the envy, but Linda is unable to fit in and shuttles between groups. The former are found to be ambivertive while Linda is more of an introvert. Also, social awareness is a key to their successful adolescent social life.

Some of the other characteristics of adolescent experience seen in Coelho’s adolescents are commonly seen among adolescents. Adolescents always have a need “to win the approval of peers” (*Development* 29). In her teen years Linda felt out of place among her peers and wanted to be accepted for who she was. Maria also had a need to belong. Another tendency prevalent among adolescents is having “unrealistic aspirations” (Hurlock 225) adolescent dream Coelho highlight’s through Maria and Mata Hari is, they believed their “Prince Charming would arrive, sweep her [them] off her [them] feet and take her [them] away with him so that they could conquer the world together” (*Eleven Minutes* 1).

The adolescent period of Coelho’s women characters in the novels *Eleven Minutes*, *Adultery* and *The Spy*, is marked by significant events that aid in bringing out their traits which in-turn facilitates the enhancement of their personality. “Whenever a particular type of behaviour occurs consistently over time and across situations, one can infer the existence of a trait” (573), note E.G Parameswaran and C. Beena in the book *An Initiative to Psychology*. The chief traits seen in Coelho’s characters are self-awareness, self-acceptance, openness to experience, self-esteem, self-control and social awareness. In the adolescent period the following traits can also be related to the different developments: (a) in physical development – self-awareness of body image, openness to experience and self-acceptance, (b) in psychological development-self-esteem, (c) in cognitive development -self-control and (d) in social development -social awareness. Thus, the adolescent experience of Paulo Coelho’s central characters the Brazilian Maria, Linda from Switzerland and Mata Hari from nineteenth century Holland throws light on the impact of certain traits that are exhibited by them which are essential for their development in the adolescent period.

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