



VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE: A MODERN NOVEL DISPLAYING THE BLACK AND WHITE SPECTRUM OF MODERN LIFE

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Abstract:

“Nowadays people know the price of everything and value of nothing” said, Oscar Wilde in the Picture of Dorian Gray. Even if we feel our life is worth living, there are times when our soul encounters a question; ‘is life really worth living?’ The reason for such an encounter could be either unique to one’s self or common to the entire mankind. We all move on without bothering about force and power of the word “Life”. Ours is not an easy journey, its destination and purpose are not always precise and worthy, its wings are not always strong, its visions are not always sharp, its perceptions and preaching are not always true, its companions are not always trustworthy and its dreams are not always colorful. So we should not forget the fact that our life is not monotonous, but its mood and tune changes, which can be either pleasant or the most unpleasant.

Veronika Decides To Die: A Modern Novel Displaying the Black and White Spectrum of Modern Life:

Life has become more complicated for the modern man dealing with complicated technology and complex targets. Human being, the only specie who is blessed with the power of reasoning is standing puzzled, staring at the reflection of his life which has lost its meaning and worth. In Scott McCracken’s essay titled “Imagining the Modernist City,” we could analyse the issues and crisis of modern population dwelling in cities of today’s world. The essayist says;

Urban life was qualitatively different, if contradictory. On the one hand, the opportunity was there to break free from family ties, religious supervision, social prejudices, and the inhibiting oversight of one’s neighbours. On the other hand, the lack of these social anchors could be disorienting, leaving the city dweller lost and rootless, and lacking a history or the common memories that give rise to community and solidarity. Nor should the primary economic reason for growing urban populations be forgotten. People were drawn to the city by the prospect of work. The breakdown of traditional bonds was useful to the owners of large industrial concerns as it offered a workforce without other resources. The experience of urban was, therefore, caught between the excitement of liberation and fear of isolation and exploitation. (643)

Veronika Decides to Die by Paulo Coelho is something more than a mere psychological thriller. It touches the conscience, and directs the thoughts and concepts of humans about their life. It has a profound influence on human race especially on the generation titled as “New Generation”; bearing a fragile mind in their sound body. When life fails to bring in home the colors, merry and jubilation which the young people of today expect, they readily reach at a conclusion that their life is boring and leading a life of this sort is completely absurd. They are living in the world of technology where everything is at their finger tip. The role of science and technology in the human life has shifted the entire concept about human beings and human life. In *Technological Revolution and Human Evolution*, we read;

With the ever deeper incursion of science and technology into the natural world, society, everyday life, and our very bodies, human beings and technology are imploding. A growing number of theorists contend that the age of humanism is over and that we are morphing into a new 'posthumanist' condition. With the eruption of new forms of media culture, the internet and cyberspace, transgenic species, cloning, frozen embryos, and nanomachines built from atoms, the reality principle of modernity and all Western culture has been irrevocably altered. Together, science and technology are undermining firm boundaries between reality/unreality, natural/artificial, organic/inorganic, biology/technology, human/machine, and the born/the made. In a world of virtual reality, biotechnology, surrogate, mothering, neural implants, and artificial intelligence and life, reality just ain't what it used to be. We're becoming cyborgs and techno-bodies, while our machines are becoming "smart" and more human-like. (151)

Paulo Coelho, the author of the novel we have chosen for our study, was born in 1947 in Brazil. His father was an engineer and his mother was a housewife. His parents wanted him to follow in his father's footsteps and become an engineer. Paulo had other ideas, ideas of being a writer. His first success with literature came when he was a young boy, in school poetry competition. His parents totally opposed his wishes and did their utmost to ensure he never followed his dream. As Paulo got older, he began to rebel. He became more determined not to stick on his parent's wishes and rules. Due to Paulo's bizarre behaviour, his father thought that he was mentally ill. And he took action. At the age of just seventeen, his father had him admitted to a psychiatric hospital, not once but twice.

In spite of everything Paulo ignored his father's wishes and joined theatre group and obtained a job as a journalist. Worried about their son his parents readmitted him in the mental hospital. Paulo moved totally out of his parent's control and wish so they sought the help of more psychiatrists. The doctors said to his parents that there was no way that Paulo was mad; he was just a youngster struggling his way in the world. These experiences were a major influence in writing of his book; *Veronika Decides to Die*.

If we are ready to discover our own lives and adventures and are ready to live, our life is not an absurdity. But, if we fail to realize the value of each day we have in this world, if we see our relationships as a burden and our life an unworthy free gift then we have only one conclusion that our life is nothing but an absurdity. So, start loving life than just living life.

Albert Camus, in his essay "Myth of Sisyphus", tells us about the absurd hero Sisyphus. We may feel Sisyphus is a completely absurd fellow. He strains his whole body to raise the whole stone, roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over. At the very end of this long effort Sisyphus watches the stone rushing down in a few moments towards the plain. He will then push it up again to the slope and thus repeats the task. But, Camus is not ready to title Sisyphus 'An Absurd Hero'. He says in his essay:

It is during that return that pauses, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is really stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of his consciousness. At each of these moments When he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the liars of gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock. (10)

Sometimes we may feel that our life is just absurd like the deed of Sisyphus. We may feel our actions, thoughts and struggles are useless and futile. We may even think it would have been better if we were not born. But when we go deep into the situation and examine it in favour of our existence, we can see a spark of worthiness in all our tasks. Just like Sisyphus we should feel happy and proud that at least we are doing something no matter whether it is best or worst. As Camus says,

In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of Promised Land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death. (15)

What seems worth in eye of one may not be worth in the eye of another. So, never be in a hurry to judge our life worthless after encountering mere tragedies or failures. We should not label the moments in this world useless. Everything has a meaning and light of its own. Life throws us a basket of experiences. There are good and bad experiences. What we have to do is to just throw away the bad experiences and fill it with good experiences and memories. We are a 'sea' of potentials, we can do miracles. But for that we need a belief in our ability and strength. If we get bored with our job, change it. If we have no fun in life, make new friends. We have to discover the hidden treasures of life, never chain our lives in four walls of our office or home, instead just move out and explore different places and cities.

The characters, in *Veronika Decides to Die*, were carefully chosen and cautiously placed as the major part of the novel surrounds a mental hospital named VILLETE. The chief characters are Veronika, Mari, Zedka and Eduard. Each of these characters has their stories and a life to reveal to the readers which, for sure, at certain points resemble our own life and circumstances we were in or are in.

First let's trace the past and present of Veronika, the chief character of this novel. Veronika, as already mentioned in the introductory page, was a girl of twenty four who decided to put an end to her meaningless life. She had cooked up an eccentric story to make her suicide look more extraordinary and worthy that she had attempted suicide because a magazine did not know where her country (Slovenia) was. So she wanted her suicide attempt to be something in honour of her country's cause.

But, the actual reasons behind her decisions to die were something seemingly absurd yet serious. The first reason was that everything in her life was the same and once her youth was gone, the old age would begin and there would be illness and departure of her friends and so she would gain nothing by continuing to live. The second reason was more philosophical, Veronica read newspapers, watched TV and so she was aware of what was going on in the world and in her eyes everything was wrong and she had no way of putting things right and that gave her a sense of powerlessness. Using the original words of the author we could say: "that's why she had chosen suicide; freedom at last. Eternal oblivion". (Coelho 5)

When we go deeper into the life of Veronika, we could meet her as a girl who was not given the freedom to think and do as she wished or dreamed in her life. She deliberately or forcibly tuned her life in accordance of her parent's wishes especially her mother. Veronika's dream since her childhood was to be a pianist. Her teacher recognized her talent and encouraged her to be a professional. But, when she told her dream to her mother, she looked at her with much love and affection and said that no

one made a living playing a piano. And when Veronika asked her mother why she wanted her to have lessons on piano she replied; "To develop your artistic gifts that's all. A husband likes that kind of things in a wife; he can show you off at parties. Forget about being a pianist, and go study law, that's the profession for future." (Coelho 85).

Veronika did as her mother told and finished her studies, went to university, got a good degree but ended up being a librarian. If her wishes were granted, if her dreams were cherished, she would have become one of the most famous pianists in the world. She would have led a happy life enjoying moments of her life calling it the most meaningful and purposeful life. Her decision to leave the world of music and entering into a legal profession was a mistake. Veronika never viewed her life from an angle of her own passion and desires, instead she hired the views and dreams of others, pawned her valuable life for the pleasure of people around her. Veronika was a girl who forgot to live for herself, who forgot to give colours to life with her dreams. As one of the characters in this novel says; "We are allowed to make a lot of mistakes in our life except the mistakes that destroys us". (Coelho116)

Mari is powerful character who was carefully included into the novel by the author so as to reveal the complications of in the life of married women. Mari was a lawyer by her profession. She loved and respected her career a lot and so she was a successful and satisfied lawyer. But in her life too fate played its role wildly. She, who was living a normal and happy life with her husband and children, suddenly began experiencing something strange in her body. With no reason sweat was pouring down in her body and strange light in her eyes. She could not walk properly. She had never felt so frightened in her life. But Mari experienced similar pain and fear again and that led to drastic changes in her simple and quiet life. She felt intense fear and sense of alienation from reality, the same loss of self-control. Moreover, she started to feel guilty about her husband, obliged to do his own job as well as all the housework.

As the days passed and the situation remained totally unresolved, the slightest thing made her lose her temper and she started shouting and then sobbed hysterically. And so on the advice of one of the colleagues of her, she herself went to Villette, the mental hospital. Dr. Igor, the director of the hospital told her not to worry as she was suffering from nothing serious but a mere panic disorder caused by just a chemical imbalance in the body like depression. So, Dr. Igor told Mari to go back home. But to his surprise, Mari told him that she didn't want to go back because her husband needed time to recover from those months he'd spent looking after her. Dr. Igor accepted her as a patient making it absolutely clear that it wasn't necessary. Mari got the necessary medication and proper psychiatric treatment and fortunately her illness completely disappeared. And so, she was preparing herself to leave Villette and join her family. Unexpectedly, one day the colleague who advised her to consult a Psychiatrist came to Villette and told her that Mari had to retire from her profession. Mari could not believe her ears. She could not argue because she knew the fact that they could no longer bear a lawyer who got admitted in a mental asylum. But Mari wanted her life back. So he begged him asking:

Inside here, I have lived with two sorts of people: those who have no chance of ever going back into the society and those who are completely cured but who prefer to pretend to be mad rather than face up life's responsibilities. I Want and need to learn myself again, have to convince myself that I'm capable of taking my own decisions. I can't be pushed into decision not of my own making. (Coelho 62)

The colleague was not ready to pay attention to her words. He was stubborn in implementing the company's cruel decision on the life of a poor soul. After that incidence Mari was slowly accepting the reality, heartless deeds of people, and was slowly overcoming the shock. But fate was not ready to spare Mari.

A few days later a lawyer visited her at Villette, smiled at her and said that he was there at her husband's request. And told her: "This is an application for divorce. Obviously, though he will continue to pay all your hospital bills as long you remain in here". (Coelho 64) Mari didn't utter a word, she didn't argue and she signed everything. She stood up and went to Dr. Igor's consulting room and told him that her symptoms had returned and she can't go back home. Dr. Igor knew that she was lying and he didn't say anything but accepted her desire to stay in Villette.

If the world was a bit merciful to Mari, if the colleagues and seniors of her firm had realized the true worth and talent of Mari, if her husband called her back to his life and hugged her with love and care which only he could provide in the world, Mari would never have chained her life in a bizarre world like Villette.

Eduard's case is not much different from that of Veronika's. His father was a Yugoslavian Ambassador and very rich. His family had been preparing Eduard to follow his father's footsteps. But one day he met with an accident and that led to a tremendous change in his life. While he was admitted in the hospital a nurse gave him a book which was about Visionaries whose ideas had shaken the world, people, with their own vision about paradise, like Jesus Christ, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius Loyola, Anthony, Columbus, Karl Marx, Theresa of Avila and so on. He decided to learn painting and show the world the visions those men and women had experienced. And so, he went out in search of painters and artists.

His parents were worried about the life and deeds of Eduard and his eccentric affinity for art. His father told him to finish his secondary education, so that he could set him on the path to a diplomatic career. Eduard said that he did not want to be a diplomat and he wanted to be a painter. Eduard soon heard the heart-breaking words of his father that turned his life upside down;

Since you were born, we've built up such dreams of how our lives would be. You're everything to us, our future and our past. Your Grandfathers were civil servants and I had to fight like a lion to enter the diplomatic career and make my way up the ladder. And I did all this just to create a space for you, I've got the pen with which I signed my first document as an ambassador and I lovingly saved it to pass on to you the day you do the same. Don't let us down son. We won't live forever and we want to die in peace, knowing that we've set you on the right path in life. (Coelho 96)

Eduard thought about his father's words deeply. He knew very well that if he gave up his painting the Vision of Paradise would never see the light of day and nothing else in this world could give him the same feelings of joy and pleasure. Yet something forced him to tell his parents that they were right, it was just a youthful dream, and his enthusiasm of painting had passed.

But Eduard's life was not easy and normal since then. He lost the control of his mind. He was treated by specialists and was diagnosed with a rare form of schizophrenia; to feel without touch, to hear without words, to see without being near. It was too problematic for the family to look after him and so they had no choice other than to leave him in Villette. So, like Veronika, Eduard too pawned his dreams and life for the peace and happiness of his parents. When he lost the focus and destination of his soul he missed the track of his life and began leading a life reaching nowhere.

Life is a miracle. It's a big island with hidden treasures which many of us fail to realize. Veronika, in *'Veronika Decides to Die'*, never expected that she could regain her life with a complete realisation of its purpose and meaning. She began enjoying the sun again, the mountains and even the life's problem and she began to accept that the meaninglessness of life was no one's fault but her alone. She never thought her life become an inspiration for people around her, to know to real worth and destination of their lives; "The young woman's (Veronika) case though was drastic because she was so young and because she now wanted to live again, something they all knew to be impossible. Some people asked themselves "What if that happened to me? I do have a chance to live. Am I making good use of it?" (Coelho 101).

Yes, Veronika changed the perceptions and attitudes of people, in Vilete, who decided to spend their entire life in the mental hospital and not to move to the world outside. Mari thought about her own life and future and, realized that the days she had in her hands were really worth than she expected. And so she prepared herself to leave Vilete and to begin a new life serving the poor people at Bosnia. Mari said:

I asked myself what I was doing in this hospital. And I thought how very interesting to be down in this square, at the Three Bridges, in the market place opposite to the theater buying apples and talking about the weather. Obviously, I'd be struggling with a lot of other neighbours, the ironic look of the people who don't understand me, solitude, my children's carping. But all that is just a part of life. I am thinking of going round my ex-husband's tonight, just to say "Thank You. (Coelho 138)

The piano hall at Vilete was a great relief to Veronika. She spent hours there, recollecting the musical chords she had learned and practiced at her school. There was a silence to her music, Eduard, the Schizophrenic. It was the music and the presence of Eduard that helped Veronika regain the meaning of her life. She loved Eduard beyond everything in her life and was ready to accept him because Veronika was sure her love could bring him back to his normal life.

Veronika achieved the heart of Eduard. They moved out of the meaninglessness world of Vilete to the new meaningful, poetic, romantic world awaiting them outside. Veronika helped Eduard to move into his world of art and 'Vision of Paradise'. Thus Eduard fulfilled the purpose and destination of his life holding the hands of Veronika. And Veronika with a heart filled with hope and eyes wet with tears of love and gratitude said:

Thank you for giving meaning to my life. I came into this world in order to go through everything I've gone through, attempted suicide, ruining my heart, meeting you, coming up to this castle letting you engrave my face and soul. That is the only reason I came into the world, to make you go back to the path you strayed from. (Coelho 186)

Veronika Decides to Die is not an ordinary novel with one hundred and ninety-one pages. It's a flowing river of the experiences and perceptions of its author Paulo Coelho. The plot of this novel carries sparks of suggestions and views proving the worth and worthlessness of life and takes the reader to a different world which forces him to think about his life, his actions and attitudes. We could see that Veronika bears many traits to a girl of modern day. The author placed her in the novel giving all the necessary elements of a modern girl; in the way she talks, the way she thinks and the way she receives her life. She is a girl who once attempted suicide as she felt her life useless, a girl who thought she had enjoyed all the pleasures of this world, a girl who believed that

the future would bring her nothing new. Suicide was not a shelter for Veronika but an ultimate rest for her busy, monotonous, meaningless life.

Paulo Coelho also wants to pass on his views about how we receive spiritual guidance or wisdom. His perspective involves talking about both mind and heart. In *The Alchemist* by Coelho one of the character says, "There are those who are vague because they do know what they're doing but also know that the language of alchemy is addressed to the heart and not to the mind" (8). Coelho thinks that spiritual guidance comes to us in a particular form. For Coelho, spiritual guidance is more emotive. Someone tells us to change gear and to find some soul, which is certainly a part of Coelho's message. Contemporary spirituality encourages us to spend some time on ourselves, thinking about the deep stuff, getting spiritual and finding some peace of mind. For many people, spirituality has less and less of a supernatural dimension. Rather, it has simply become a synonym for caring the inner self.

One of the key stresses of Coelho's writing is that we need to take some time to reflect: to zoom out from a routine life and think about the big questions: Am I really happy? Is what I live out each day real? Is what I believe true? He is right in proposing that spending some time for us, without reaching the experience or narcissism, can be an important part of dealing realistically with the blows that life sometimes gives us. He tries to offer something for the mind to turn over, as well as something that appeals to, and engages with our emotions. In fact, his writing is so existential, 'so feely', that the expression of the deeper philosophical and spiritual concepts is rarely more than a step away from some real-life situation that we can relate to.

Conclusion:

Human relations and ethics have lost their grip in today's 'rat-race'. A life of material achievements cannot fill the desire for peer support and solace that human mind longs for. Man is a social animal, he/she is the only specie who has given the power of choice, but in the modern world of today, we want a life least exposed to the people around us, we tenderly call it 'privacy' without knowing the exact implications of a life with all doors shut with suffocating air of tension and targets. Sharing and caring are precious than anything we could afford with the money we gain by pawning the same sharing and caring. *Veronika Decides to Die* brings before us many characters that are the reflections of our own self, our own life and our own future. It leads us to look into our own life so as to prevent the sprouting up of more 'villetes' in this world. The characters are skillfully chosen from different spheres of modern life and they have been attributed with human qualities closer to a typical modern human. Veronika represents the youth of today who has given no freedom of choice. Parents 'devote' their life for choosing everything for their children and in turn making their children incapable of doing anything on their own. These children would lack the strength and will power to accept the turmoil and hardships in life. Depression is an inevitable term in the 'vocabulary' of modern man. Smiling faces and helping hands have become a part of history. Gone are the days of mutual concern and respect. We should not forget the fact that the fragmented life depicted in modern novels is not a mere literary imagination of author or his play of words. It's a mirror reflecting our life, our mind, our thoughts, and our dreams and longings.

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