



A Maslowian Analysis of Self-Actualization in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*

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ABSTRACT

This study critically elaborates *Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho under the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis of self-actualization by Abraham Maslow. This Study finds, how the meaningless norms of a society can lead a person toward insanity and suicide but a person rescues one's life by knowing and expressing his identity through the yard-stick of psychoanalysis of self-actualization. It is an exploration of not the world around oneself but the world inside oneself. Moreover, the female protagonist's rejection to become a part of mass hysteria and her realization after a break in an asylum, reconcile with the reality projected by the society, consequently, it leads her toward self-actualization.

Key Words: Self-actualization, Suicidal Tendencies, *Veronika Decides to Die*

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1. Introduction

Maslow's psychoanalysis rejects the idea that human behaviour is projected and changed by only internal or external forces but the collaboration of the both through which a man realizes that he is part and parcel of the world in which he exists. But before such realization, his personality bears madness and trauma through futile struggle to change the world around him. Hence, madness marks a gap between the inner and the outer worlds of a person. It challenges and transforms the values of a society which produces it and leads to an extreme form of individual whose corporeal body co-operates with the world, while his spirit stays with ego. The said statement is depicted through the character of Veronika from the novel *Veronika Decides to Die* (1998) by Paulo Coelho (August 24, 1947 – till now), a Brazilian author of many world-famous works including '*The Alchemist*'. Veronika represents a modern woman who first tries to fit in the life which is designed by the norms of society but then rejects it and her suicide is a voice against those pre-decided norms of patriarchal oppression. However, her madness allows her to explore her true self by acting freely. Irigary says, "*Each sex, and every desire have relation with madness, some desires are taken as wisdom, love, truth, but unacknowledged desires by the society are titled as madness*" (Irigary, 1985, p. 10).

Phyllis Chesler in *Women and Madness* (1972) asserts that madness in any form is associated with repressed desires and an escape from the traditional roles; the very same instinct is adopted by the title character and many others whom she meets in asylum. They all successfully evade the circumstance those gradually crush their spirit and enslave them to the code of culture. Like the other people, Veronika is also bound to forfeit her identity just after her birth, and is taught how to behave by following certain manners of an ideal figure. She realizes that she has to start a family by getting married which is the end of her all-former fantasies, and loses her identity for the role she is obliged to play because a married woman can only turn into a wife and then a mother, and her demand about outdoor rights makes her rebel in front of others.

Veronika is not insane who breaks the law imposed by the system; she's a good citizen and employ of a company. But her robotic routine life without the love of her parents makes her feel miserable. She realizes the severity of a powerful system in which it is impossible to live according to her own wish, so to attempt suicide is an irrational reaction against such system. Hence, an irrational perspective to deal with various issues often assume as incorrect rather than unique. Francois Boissier de Sauvages, a French therapist of 18th century regards this malady as a diversion of a person's mind because of his blind submission to his desires, and his inadequacy to direct his passions.

2. Literature Review

This study explains the urge of insanity and suicide in VDTD by Paulo Coelho that how the meaninglessness of life and conflict with societal norms lead an individual towards insanity and lead to suicide, by highlighting the causes of insanity, creating a link with the theory of self-actualization. The basic things we consume daily only satisfy first four levels of needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but they never complete the jigsaw of our true self, and fill the pyramidal hole that constitute the sexual needs as defined by Sigmund Freud as well. A man can be whatever he ever wanted to be, says Maslow in his essay '*Motivation and Personality*' (1954). Referring to his





concept of self-actualization which is highest stage in his analysis of the *'Hierarchy of Needs'*, self-actualization, accordingly makes a man realize about his true potential and helps him to achieve his *'ideal self'*. Maslow quoted the names of *'exemplary'* people for instance, Mahatma Gandhi, & Elbert Einstein, who are aware about their full or near to full potential in their particular areas of expertise and *'personify self-actualization'*. Such individuals have firm relation between their free will and determinism.

In VDTD, Veronika's depression regarding the world around her, gradually increases when her basic needs whether they are 'physical or psychological' do not fulfil. She feels herself 'insecure, devoid of love and self-esteem;' hence such needs get powerful reaction if are suppressed for a long time. Nonetheless, Maslow (1943, 69) further elaborates that if basic needs are acknowledged, a false impression is generated about the prosperous life of a person. A cycle of basic needs precedes one another of which some accomplish and some do not, and the unaccomplished needs become our desires and occasionally push us towards serious results. Self-actualization, and other needs can be satisfied by limiting the circle of needs. Maslow narrates, *"an individual is constantly 'becoming' and never stays stationary in one condition, he gives meaning to his existence according to his ability and moves on"* (Maslow, 1954).

An individual's acceptance of himself, his abilities, and the world around him are through self-actualization; hence if he has an inaccurate guess about the mentioned circles his inner and outer world disturbs reciprocally. In this era of mass culture, individuals tend to think and act within the accepted social norms, those neither allow them to develop new problem-solving strategies, nor facilitate their realization of true potential by diverting their attention from the real problems of their existence. In literature, throughout ages madness is used to give height and complexity to many characters. Veronika's madness is a foil to *Medea's* who just out of her jealousy precautions murders her concubine and her own two sons, and her escape to Athens considers a slap on the face of the society and its norms. But Veronika seems passive against a utilitarian system, in which she is just bound to do her routine works as decided by the society, and finally feels herself so weak to challenge the system and attempts suicide. However, her rebirth in asylum where she spends her life among the people who seem much miserable than her; leads her towards knowing her true identity.

Veronika is young and beautiful girl with excellent job and an adoring family. However, the story begins when she takes an overdose of dozing pills and is rescued by a neighbouring emergency clinic, and she knows that despite being alive her heart is currently harmed and within few days she is to die. Emer Owens states, *"Freedom is a major theme throughout the book which is first introduced with the word 'DECIDE' in the title. She feels trapped by the things those supposed to bring happiness in her life i.e. her boyfriend, her job, and her fame. Within a week she realizes the true reason to end her life"*.

Interestingly, the story is based upon multiple narrations i.e. Veronika, Dr. Igor, and asylum's different patients, and the credit goes to Coelho who combines all the unique perspectives in a single chain. Jagdish Patro (2016), says about VDTD that it works like medication for the unstable people by enhancing the value of life that ought to spend in a positive way apart from the suffering those push a man towards disappointment. In Karenn Joy Trias Calosa's words, the novel exhibits the mental disorder of ordinary individuals who attempt to live among the daily stressful desires and perplexity; and the failure to impart one's thought leads to insanity.

In VDTD, Zedka works like Coelho's mouthpiece who accepts that everyman is an individual who search for his existence in his own way and often baffled with the customary





standards of society. Nonetheless, when an individual refuses to act according to design approved by the society, he/she is titled as 'mad'. The protagonists of *VDTD*, and *The Witch of Portobello* all are devoid of having good terms with society and face the adventure of self-realization via different mediums; the first knows about her identity in an asylum, the other one through prostitution and her gradual and mysterious disappearance from her society.

Phyllis (1972, p. 93) in *Women and Madness* claims that madness is a total or partial break from customary jobs of one's gender-role stereotype. Throughout ages self-murdering was considered a worthy method of dying, but it just turned into a religious sin in 452AD, when the Christian Church articulated suicide as a demonstration roused by the devil (Giddens 1971, xi). Hence, from the 452AD till 1832 the victims of suicide could not bury in sacred places with no burial rituals (Gates 1988, 6). The Burial Act of 1880 proclaims a critical change in disposition toward suicide, including religious burial services for the individuals who ended their own life. In *VDTD*, a young woman was transferred to a mental asylum after a failed suicide endeavor and submitted to a trial treatment wherein she is made to believe that she would die within seven days because of her weak heart condition, bringing about the character's newly discovered will to live. The self-realization venture – regularly coming about of a physical one – is clearly the most repetitive theme in Coelho's books.

Veronika decides to take action firstly by committing suicide and then by denying her submission to death which is a clear contrast to the will of the woman of subcontinent, Afghanistan, and Africa because the women of such areas are usually devoid the will of decision-making. They even do not have sexual or gender-based awareness. They all regard themselves as the inferior creature comparatively to men by a total submission to the patriarchal system projected by false norms and culture. They never rise their voice against the system in which they are thrice trapped since their birth.

3. Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to highlight the social, economic, and psychological issues which lead an individual to insanity by analyzing the crucial aspects of insanity which push Veronika to commit suicide. Moreover, to study the personality growth hierarchy which guides an individual towards self-actualization is also an important aim of this study.

4. Significance

The study of the novel *VDTD* by Paulo Coelho signifies the social pressure that suppresses an individual's dreams and inner-self and ends in madness, and proves self-actualization an important factor in personality growth and ultimately understands the meaning of his/her existence by acknowledging the need of freedom and true self.

5. Research Questions

1. How does insanity lead to suicidal attempts of Veronika?
2. How can self-actualization save an individual from insanity and suicide in this dystopian world?

6. Data Analysis

Veronika Decides to Die is a novel published in 1998 by Paulo Coelho. The female protagonist is of twenty-four years old who attempts suicide and awakes in an asylum. Though, she is young and beautiful librarian; loved by many people but still she feels a lack of concern toward her life. Things get worse as she ages, so in order to settle things she takes an insensible choice to take her life and makes her soul free from the boredom of modern life. The novel can be





regarded a prose version of *'The Wasteland'* by T.S. Eliot, as it elaborates how modern man's life has become meaningless in this materialistic world. Behaving according to society's demand means Veronika is acceptable otherwise a mad one, but such behaviour toward society doesn't make her happy. On November 11, 1997, she decides to take four packs of sleeping pills one by one which shows the intensity of her intention to enjoy each and every last and painful moments of her life. She reads an article after taking over-dose of pills, "Where is Slovenia?" and composes a mail to the editorial manager, advocating her suicide as a response to the article's belittlement of human existence.

She is stunned after awaking in a local mental hospital, and informed by the staff that while the over dose of pills did not kill her immediately, yet she bore severe heart-damage and has only few days to left. Actually, she has a modern quest to find meaning in a culture overshadowed by angst, soulless routine and lack conformity. She questions the meaning of life in her own way and celebrates madness and individuality by not fitting into patterns of society considers being normal. She presents a woman at crossroads of despair and liberation and finally wins her goal by leaving sanction with her lover. This is the very same desire of escape, first she wants an escape from the hollow world around her and then she is eager to be the part of the very same world.

The textual analysis is under the perspective of self-actualization by Maslow, it narrates how modern society suppresses a woman's real self and leads her to madness and suicide; but she overcomes the hurdles of her life by knowing about the meaning of her true identity and existence as well. Protagonist's act of taking over dose of sleeping pills makes her choice of committing suicide is doubtful, perhaps she just tried to warn the society about how much she is feeling tired in her life because if she really wants to take her life, there are many inevitable ways to do it; and literary history is replete with such references. She can either shoot in her head like *Hedda Gabbler* or put her head in an oven like *Sylvia Plath*, but her weak spirit is only willing to take pills and later after getting recovered in the asylum she puts the idea of committing suicide aside when she gets physically attracted towards Eduard.

She is quite a passive woman who is afraid of taking risks. Her life is based on the series of failures, she neither becomes a good woman in the role of a daughter, a good citizen, nor she is good at taking her own life. Under the Maslowian thinking, she has everything in her life but only her sexual needs are not fulfilled, hence in sanctuary she finds Eduard and tries to attract his sleeping soul toward her while doing masturbation. His first response outwardly is no doubt passive but later, they both escape from the Villeite. The protagonist of *'The Alchemist'* by Coelho, named Suleman loses his treasure but finds courage and full potential to travel to Egypt, so does Veronika first bargains her life with death but when she fails, gets new courage through which she Decides NOT To Die. Hence, in Asylum, her timid spirit changes into bold one by acting according to her will because once she notices that an old man was causing disturbance, she directly goes to him and in the presence of the Fraternity group of elders and before anyone could stop her she gives him an echoing slap on his face, "She had done something different that she had never done in her entire life" (41); makes her enliven regarding her will and freedom. This action of 'slap' portrays her first step into self-actualization.

Veronika dislikes everything but primarily she hates the way she has spent her life and never tried to discover her other split personalities those are interesting, curious, brave, bold, and mad existing inside her. Veronika opens the door to the lounge went over to the piano, opened the lid, and summoned up her whole fragmented potential on the keys "I am mad, I'm allowed to do this" (63). By doing this, she finally allows her negative emotions to escape, feelings which she





suppressed for years inside her are which remain no longer necessary for her. Since her childhood Veronika had known that her true profession was to be a pianist. She had felt this ever since her first lesson at twelve. Her teacher acknowledged her talent too and supported her to become a professional. However, whenever she delighted about competition and said to her mother that she projected giving up everything and dedicated herself to the piano her mother always replied: “*No one makes a living playing the piano my love*” (85). However, such statements pushed her towards accepting harsh reality with which she never ever reconciled though existed in the very same circle.

7. Conclusion

Veronika’s journey from self-denial to self-actualization is supported by Maslow’s psychoanalysis. Her suicide attempt, leads her toward an asylum where she experiences a new kind of life without the boundaries of behaving well like the people who reside out door of the asylum. Such circumstances help her in strengthen her personality positively and makes her feel life a free individual. *VDTD* is a story of self-disclosure instilled with the writer's voice. As I referenced, the novel is motivated by the writer's personal experience all through mental emergency clinics. One extremely descriptive scene from the book where a character experiences electric-stun treatment comes straight from Coelho's journal, composed during his time when he remained in a psychological clinic.

This novel recounts to the account of a Slovene lady who, at the age of 24 years old, faces discouragement and nervousness by endeavoring suicide. With every pill Veronika takes in the isolation of her rented room located in a religious circle in a Ljubljana. The omniscient storyteller depicts the features of the character's existential emergency: the presence of God, the significance of life, the bluntness of regular everyday practice, the certainty of misfortune and enduring, and so forth. Veronika awakens in a psychological establishment and is informed that she had been unsuccessful to murder herself. The data was a piece of an informal trial treatment by which - her primary care physician mesmerizes – living with the danger of fast approaching; unavoidable demise could counteract future suicide endeavors.

Nonetheless, in order to avoid the effects of mass hysteria, and disillusionment of the reality, just be the part of mass hysteria, and start to live in gloomy reality; the very same approach is adopted by Veronika, because an individual always fails in challenging the system so he has to submit himself for happily covering the time period of his life. That is why when Veronika knows about her existential boundaries of which she cannot rebel, she begins to adopt the very same code of life proposed by the society; and after escaping from asylum starts her new life in the world where formerly she felt abhorred and preferred committing suicide rather than living in that circle. However, the actualization of herself and the world around her makes her life far easy to live.

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