

MORAL DILEMMA IN PAULO COELHO'S "THE DEVIL AND MISS PRYM"

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Abstract: His novels try to answer the questions that haunt our minds and hearts whenever we are in distress or sufferings. It is a question that arises in the human mind at times of distress, rejection or betrayal. Also life is full of moments when one has to make a choice. Many a times this decision making process is not easy as one is caught in moral dilemma. Paulo Coelho's novel 'The Devil and Miss Prym' deals with the conflict generated by a strange offer and concludes by commenting on the simultaneous existence of good and evil within the human soul. This striking novel through the moral dilemma of the protagonist explores the timeless struggle between good in a fresh perspective. His characters in this novel prove to the stranger as well as the reader that humans are not, at their core, evil, but both good *and* evil, with the option of choosing between the two.

Key words: Moral dilemma, good, bad, choice.

Paulo Coelho in his novels deals with the questions we often ask ourselves and situations we often find ourselves in. His novels try to answer the questions that haunt our minds and hearts whenever we are in distress or sufferings. It is a question that arises in the human mind at times of distress, rejection or betrayal. The question is "Are people bad?" or "Are we good or are we bad?" Also life is full of moments when one has to make a choice. Many a times this decision making process is not easy as one is caught in moral dilemma.

Paulo Coelho's novel 'The Devil and Miss Prym' deals with the conflict generated by a strange offer and concludes by commenting on the simultaneous existence of good and evil within the human soul. This striking novel through the moral dilemma of the protagonist explores the timeless struggle between good in a fresh perspective.

The novel spans a week's time. As Coelho states in the novel:

"I have always believed that in the lives of individuals, just as in society at large, the profoundest changes take place within a very reduced time frame".

The Devil and Miss Prym concludes the trilogy *And on the Seventh Day*. The first two books were: *By the River Piedra I Sat and Wept* and *Veronika Decides to Die*. Each of the three books is concerned with a week in the life of ordinary people, all of who find themselves suddenly confronted by love, death and power. Coelho believes that a period of a week is sufficient to bring about a profound change in the lives of individuals and in society at large.

Paulo presents Chantal's journey from her monotonous life to a decisive moment where she is able to make a choice. The stranger shows her the buried treasure and promised that it would belong to the villagers if they agree to kill someone until the week is over.

When the girl asks the reason behind such an unusual condition, the stranger said:

"It's nothing to do with you or your village. I'm simply thinking of myself; the story of one man is the story of all men. I need to know if we are good or evil. If we are good, God is just and will forgive me of all I have done, for the harm I wished on those who tried to destroy me, for the wrong decisions I took at key moments, for the proposition I am putting to you now- for He was the one who drove me towards the dark. But if we're evil, then everything is permitted, I never took a wrong decision, we are all condemned from the start, and it

doesn't matter what we do in this life, for redemption lies beyond either human thought or deed." (p.18)

It is on this proposition that the story moves and Chantal becomes an instrument to prove whether we are good or evil. Through Chantal's thoughts and actions Coelho throws light on human nature and his vision of life.

Passing through a series of conflicts, within and without, she overcomes her fears, confusions and makes a choice that answers a question that the stranger has been asking since long. Chantal makes a stand and persuades the inhabitants of Viscos what a great stupidity they are about to make by killing an innocent old lady Berta. She proves them wrong about all their foolish dreams about the gold and convinces them that under no circumstances murder are justified. This way she gives the stranger the answer to his question, as well. Every human being embodies some evil and some good; our conduct is a matter of control and choice. Her logical and motivating words turn the evil to good.

The Devil and Miss Prym recounts the struggle between good and evil, an age-old concept, which Coelho offered through Viscos making it the microcosm of the world and the emotions, strong and weak, present among the villagers represents the destiny of humanity. Coelho makes the reader realize that everyone is capable of both, good and bad. As Coelho states in the novel: Savin and Ahab had the same instincts - Good and Evil struggled in both of them, just as they did in every soul on the face of the earth. When Ahab realised that Savin was the same as him, he realised too that he was the same as Savin. It was all a matter of control and choice. Nothing more and nothing less. (135)

The struggle between good and evil is present in everybody as in the case of Chantal. Paulo, through the struggle that she exhibits, shows how it's a matter of control and choice. She rises above her animal instincts and decides to make a choice not only in her favor but for the humanity. The choice is governed by her own will and not by the circumstances.

Paulo depicts Chantal's inability to steal the gold and run away, which she initially calls her as fear. Chantal feels that life has always been unfair to her and with the gold bar would fulfill all her dreams. Paulo says her inability to steal the gold bar has nothing to do with honesty or dishonesty. Chantal realizes that there are two things that prevent us from achieving our dreams. First in believing them to be impossible or seeing those dreams made possible by some sudden turn of the wheel of fortune, when least expected. For at that moment, says Paulo that all our fears suddenly surface- the fear of setting off along a road heading who knows where, the fear of life full of a new challenge, the fear of losing forever everything that is familiar. People want to change everything and at the same time want it all remains the same. Chantal plans to steal the gold bar and abandon Viscos. However, destiny has something else in her store. In the forest she encounters a rogue wolf that threatens her life. At this point of time, the stranger comes and saves her. This incident changes Chantal's track of life. This encounter with the devil has great impact on both of them. Chantal gets an opportunity to rethink about her decision not only for her own betterment but also in favor of the humanity. On the other hand, by saving Chantal's life the stranger renews his belief in himself and in the goodness. Thus, the same incident pulls back Chantal from the evil and renews his faith in goodness.

Chantal has seven days to decide her individual future and ultimately the future of the inhabitants of Viscos. For the first three days, she is caught between the struggle between good and evil. So at first she causes delay in his plan, and finally on the fourth night informs the people about the stranger's offer and the fortune awaiting them. The society is immediately taken away by the offer and after much debate reaches to the conclusion of executing the murder selecting Bertha an old widow. Again, Chantal has to take a decision and she acts bravely against the decision of the society, which could have changed the fortune of Viscos.

Her decision to stop Berta's murder comes from her understanding that alongside the freedom to choose comes the responsibility for our choices. Paulo thus depicts brilliantly how this understanding helps one to choose correctly. Life sets challenges for the protagonists in these novels to test their courage and willingness to change. Coelho writes:

“Whatever the answer, it is clear that from its very inception the human race had been condemned to exist within the eternal division, always moving between those two opposing poles.” (*The Devil and Miss Prym*, p. ix)

In *The Devil and Miss Prym*, Coelho presents an allegory in pure and simple language in which his characters must prove to the stranger as well as the reader that humans are not, at their core, evil, but both good and evil, with the option of choosing between the two.

Talking about making a choice in ‘Confessions of a Pilgrim’, Coelho says:

“You can choose between two classic paths, meditation or the good fight, but you have to choose. If you’re a monk, Trappist or Buddhist or whatever, you enter a monastery and devote yourself to constant meditation, but if you are a person who needs action, you are going to be a Jesuit, a more war-like spirituality. But you have to choose between yoga of action or yoga of inaction. You can’t stop, because there is no evil or good, as God said, what there is, is motion. And in the sense that there is motion, we often see things as evil or good.” (214)

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