



## PAULO COELHO'S *THE ALCHEMIST*: EXPLORATION OF HIDDEN PHILOSOPHIES

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### ABSTRACT

*Paulo Coelho's first notable novel The Alchemist brought him immense popularity and prestige. This inspiring novel receives its recognition from worldwide readers. The novelist makes an effort to present a realistic picture of a shepherd boy Santiago and his journey in order to realise his dream. Although, the protagonist of the novel suffers a lot of difficulties during his journey, and several times prepares his mind to discontinue it due to hardships, depression and nostalgia, but he learns the hidden truths of life which inspire him and lead him near to his dream. He also learns the mysteries and philosophies of universe through encountering with people. The present paper is an effort to trace out Coelho's philosophies and mysteries of life which he has incorporated in the novel for presenting it in impactful manner. The paper also highlights the learnings of Santiago which make him able to realise and achieve his dream.*

**Key Words:** - Dream, Learning, Mystery, Philosophy, Realise, Truths of Life.

“You see things and you say, ‘why?’ But I dream things that never were; and I say, ‘why not?’”

– **George Bernard Shaw**

The above said line of a great writer, thinker, educationist and politician is suitable for Paulo Coelho who kept alive his zeal to be a writer after facing a lot of difficulties which were standing like hurdles between him and his zeal. After a long dark night frustration, his own dream to be a writer was realised in the age of thirty-eight when he wrote his first notable novel which is also based on a protagonist's journey for realising his dream. He has received numerous prestigious international awards, especially the Crystal Award by the World Economic Forum and France's Legion d' Honneur for his creation.

Paulo Coelho never thought before writing *The Alchemist* that the novel would receive such kind of appreciation from the world, and stand him in the list of prominent writers in modern literature. The popularity of *The Alchemist* is perceived by this thing that the novel has been translated into sixty-seven languages and has sold more than thirty-five million copies worldwide which is still progressing after two decades and seven years of its first publication. After showing the interest of Harper Collins, an American publication house, to translate the novel into different languages, the novelist reminisces a letter from their side in the author's note of the novel which says, “reading *The Alchemist* was like getting up at dawn and seeing the sun rise while the rest of the world still slept. (*The Alchemist*, p. vii)” It is a kind of aspiration of every writer that his creation receives maximum recognition from the world wide readers. The success of the novel makes Coelho's dream come true. He writes about it,



And little by little, my dream was becoming reality. Ten, a hundred, a thousand, a million copies were sold in America. One day, a Brazilian journalist phoned to say that President Clinton had been photographed reading the book. Some time later, when I was in Turkey, I opened the magazine *Vanity Fair* and there was Julia Roberts, declaring that she adored the book. (*The Alchemist*, p. vii)

*The Alchemist* is an account of a journey of an Andalusian shepherd boy Santiago to search out a hidden treasure which was appeared in his dream. He is a literate boy who had attended a seminary to learn Latin, Spanish and theology, and might be a priest in a church that could have been “a source of pride for a simple farm family” but since his boyhood he wants to explore the world and its mysteries rather than “knowing God and learning about man’s sin. (p. 8)” He opts the shepherd life to pursue his dream and explore the world. He encounters with several people in different places during his journey those not only lead him nearer to treasure but make him learn about the hidden philosophies and secrets of life. These learnings are more important than any kind of hidden treasure because through the appropriate learning one can easily get the happy life. Although the protagonist of the novel gets the hidden treasure at the end of the novel but he also learns the mysteries of life. The aim of present paper is not only to highlight the hardships of the protagonist which he faces during his journey but, most importantly, to trace out those hidden philosophies and secrets, which are not explored by any researcher till yet, through the novel which are essential for the life.

The novelist has written several inspiring novels apart from his magnum opus *The Alchemist*. His attitude to explore different places gives him inspiration to write novels, and he pours those experiences, which he receives during his personal journey, in the novel as a key flavour. Consequently, the plot, scene, and location justify the main stream of every novel and give a lively image of every episode as well as incident. He depicts the sacred and complex nature of sex and love in his novel *Eleven Minutes* through its prostitute protagonist Maria’s exploration. *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* is an account of an independent and practical but restless young woman named Pilar who becomes frustrated by the daily depressed life of a university, and indulges herself finding the greater meaning of her life. Her childhood friend, a mesmerising, handsome and spiritual teacher, helps her to realise her actual purpose of life. The story of twenty-three years old boy Elijah who flew away from his home after persecution is highlighted by the novelist in his novel *The Fifteth Mountain*. Elijah’s faith and love helps him to triumph over his sufferings. Paulo’s philosophy of humanity and depth of his search reflects from *The Pilgrimage*. *The Valkyries* is a story about forgiving the past and believing in the future. *Veronika Decides to Die* is based on Veronika’s frustrated life who committed suicide by the overdose of sleeping pills on November 11, 1997. She finds the meaning of her life in a hospital where she meets other patients.

The protagonist of *The Alchemist*, Santiago, wants to know the literal meaning of his dream before starting his journey in *The Alchemist*. So, he starts his journey from Andalusian fields to Tarifa with the herd of sixty sheep where he finds the interpretation of his dream from an old woman. She becomes ready to interpret his dream after getting an assurance that the protagonist would give her “one-tenth of the treasure, (*The Alchemist*, p. 13)” after



finding it. She interprets the dream, “you must go to the Pyramids in Egypt. I have never heard of them, but, if it was a child who showed them to you, they exist. There you will find a treasure that will make you a rich man. (p. 14)” She makes him learn that to change any kind of dream into reality is just the hands of dreamer and no one can help him in this regard. Santiago meets an old man named Melchizedek, who introduces himself as a king of Salem, in the plaza. After sharing the book which Santiago was trying to read, he tells him about the greatest lie of the world which says that human beings should not believe on fate, and should not make responsible fate as a cause of their failures. The king tells a secret to Santiago, “.....there is one great truth on this planet: whoever you are, or whatever it is that you do, when you really want something, it’s because that desire originated in the soul of the universe. It’s your mission on earth.” He further says, “when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.” (p. 21)

It is not that Santiago has not encountered with the bad experiences during this journey. He becomes the victim of cheating in the market of Tarifa, when he was straying in the market, by a boy who met him in the bar. His new companion flies away with the protagonist money which he gets after selling his sheep for his travelling. Santiago feels nervous about his survival as well as his remaining journey now. Coelho explains the feel in blue state of mind of the protagonist that with the sunrise the protagonist starts his journey with enthusiasm, and he suffers depression with the sunset because, “this happen between sunrise and sunset,” and Santiago “was feeling sorry for himself, and lamenting the fact that his life could have changed so suddenly and so drastically. (p. 37)” It is a kind of human behaviour that one tries to recollect the happiest memories from the past in hard and solitude time. And always indulges to compensate the grief of this worst time with the memories of previous life as an emotional support. Coelho portrays this behaviour with his literary brush in the novel that is clearly perceived when the protagonist suffers from the deep grief of cheating, and starts reminiscing the movements from the past life. The pain of Santiago is observed further,

When I had my sheep, I was happy, and I made those around me happy. People saw me coming and welcomed me, he thought. But now I’m sad and alone. I’m going to become bitter and disrespectful of people because one person betrayed me. I’m going to hate those who have found their treasure because I never found mine. And I’m going to hold on to what little I have, because I’m too insignificant to conquer the world. (P. 37)

But, Santiago recollects his energy like a true traveller in the next episode of the novel; who opens his journey with a dedication that he will have to complete his journey whatever would happen during covering the distance. He consoles himself regarding the misshappening, “I’m like everyone else- I see the world in terms of what I would like to see happen, not what actually does.” (p. 38) He finds two stones Urim and Thummim, given by the king as a token of blessing to him, in his pouch and remembers the spoken phrase of the king, “Learn to recognize omens, and follow them.” (p. 39) He learns through this incident that one cannot predict his destiny but pursue the dream is a crucial element to make one’s own destiny.

The protagonist gets some food and money after rendering his services in the shop of candy seller and crystal merchant. He, especially, works in the crystal merchant’s shop for almost six months and learns Arabic. The new ideas of the boy increase the income of the



shop and with the passing of time more money pours into the cash drawer of the shop. The merchant recognises the presence of the boy as a good omen and finds no regret about to hire the boy.

After spending his eleven months and nine days in the African continent Santiago moves further and leaves the crystal merchant's shop. He finds himself in dilemma due to suffering of nostalgia for his herd of sheep who, "taught him something even more important; that there was a language in the world that everyone understood, ..... It was the language of enthusiasm, of things accomplished with love and purpose, and as part of a search for something believed in and desired." (p. 59), and wants to get back them soon. But the protagonist has a dream and there is an entire Sahara Desert remains to tread to reach Pyramids for accomplishing his dream. He decides to carry on his journey because it may happen that he will "never have another chance to get to the Pyramids in Egypt" (p. 61) and would not be able to realise his dream in the future. For his further journey he joins a caravan and meets an Englishman in a warehouse who has "studied Esperanto, then the world's religions," (p.63) and now alchemy. He is always indulged in reading a chemical journal and joins this caravan, "to find a man who knows that universal language. An Alchemist." (p. 67) The Englishman and the protagonist takes a walk in a full moon night along the dunes surrounding the encampment. The Englishman gets fascinated about Santiago's journey and his progress in the crystal shop. He appreciates the protagonist with the alchemy language that is known as "Soul of the World (p. 75)"; if one wants something from his complete heart, then, a positive force leads him nearer to his goal because in this universe all minerals, vegetables, animals, and even a simple thought connects with each other by the soul of the world. He illustrates about it in his philosophical tone,

Everything on earth is being continuously transformed, because the earth is alive... and it has a soul. We are part of that soul, so we rarely recognize that it is working for us. But in the crystal shop you probably realised that even the glasses were collaborating in your success. (p. 75)

Santiago also learns from the camel driver in the desert to have trust in God under any circumstance of the life. The camel driver consoles the frightened heart of the people after receiving a warning from Bedouins about thieves and barbarian tribes. The information regarding the war between the tribes scares the caravan, and in the silence of dark night mere the groan of exhausted camels makes panic to complete caravan as an alarm of raid. The driver motivates his caravan, "once you into the desert, there's no going back. And, when you can't go back, you have to worry only about the best way of moving forward. The rest is up to Allah, including the danger. (p. 74)" The driver's strong logic with his courage in this very site, where the complete caravan is in the state of terror, exhibits a maxim for living the life. His logic is applicable in this modern world also where people suffer a lot of mental trauma in the apprehension of the future. He says to protagonist about his confidence and belief,

I don't live in either my past or my future. I'm interested only in the present. If you can concentrate always on the present, you'll be a happy man. You'll see that there is life in the desert, that there are stars in the heavens, and that tribesmen fight because they are part of the human race. Life is a party for you, a grand festival, because life is the moment we're living right now. (p. 81)



One moment comes during Santiago's journey when it seems that time has stood still for him. He meets with Fatima and falls in her love. Her dark eyes and pretty lips teach Santiago the most beautiful language of the world that is easy to understand through everyone's heart, and recognised as a love which is "older than humanity, more ancient than desert (p. 88)" in this earth. Through this episode the novelist tries to depict the purity of love in which there is no need of any explanation, and which is easy to understand without uttering any word. This language is helpful to make one's beloved more important than anything, and, indulges him to make his beloved's presence meaningful in his life as well as in the world. Coelho describes about it that if somebody learns,

that language, it's easy to understand that someone in the world awaits you, whether it's in the middle of the desert or in some great city. And when two such people encounter each other, and their eyes meet, the past and the future become unimportant. There is only that moment, and the incredible certainty that everything under the sun has been written by one hand only. It is the hand that evokes love, and creates a twin soul for every person in the world. Without such love, one's dreams would have no meaning. (p. 89)

Fatima is a desert girl who was born and brought up in the desert. She has inculcated all the necessities like optimistic approach, patience, calmness etc., which are essential for living the life in the dry and worst atmosphere of desert, in her personality. She has her own outlook for desert as well as tribesmen. Santiago is mesmerised by the beauty and outlook of Fatima and proposes her for marriage near the oasis where the caravan has stayed. He regularly meets her for fifteen minutes in a day and describes about the omens, his shepherd's life, the king's teachings as well as his experiences in the crystal shop. His portrayal about his past life's episodes leads Fatima nearer to him and a new relationship cropped up in the form of friendship. Meanwhile, the leader of the caravan calls a meeting and informs about the cancellation of the travelling due to the war between two tribes. Santiago meets Fatima in afternoon of that day and puts the picture of that very morning in front of her. He wants to quit his journey and stay with Fatima because she is, "more important than his treasure" (p. 91) for him now. Fatima consoles and convinces him not to impede his journey for her. She has well accustomed to the life of desert and says to Santiago, "the tribesmen are always in search of treasure. And the women of desert are proud of their tribesmen. (p. 91)" She further says, "if you have to wait until the war is over, then wait. But if you have to go before then, go on in pursuit of your dream" (p. 93). The caravan does not move further and remains in the desert of Al-Fayoum due to the war. Eventually, Santiago gets the opportunity to meet an alchemist in the southern direction of the desert. The alchemist already knows about the purpose of the protagonist's journey and tells him that he is here to guide him "in the direction of" his "treasure" (p. 110). He gives various suggestions to Santiago for his journey and tells him, "sell your camel and buy a horse. Camels are traitorous: they walk thousands of paces and never seem to tire. Then suddenly, they kneel and die. But horses tire bit by bit. (p. 111)" After getting acquaintances with the alchemist the protagonist says to him that he has decided to refuse his remaining journey because he would not tolerate detachment from Fatima. The alchemist exposes the further life of Santiago, if he quits his journey, in the philosophical tone. In his prediction he says that the protagonist would live a happy and prosperous life with Fatima as a rich man. But it would happen there when omens abandon

him in his life and he will regret about his decision because, “love never keeps a man from pursuing his destiny. If he abandons that pursuit, it’s because it wasn’t true love... the love that speaks the Language of the World. (p. 115)” This charismatic explanation fascinates Santiago and arises calmness in his mind, and he gets determined to prolong his journey with the alchemist. The protagonist meets, before leaving the oasis, Fatima with the help of his young Arab friend outside of her tent because the customs of Al-Fayoum does not allow a young woman to meet a stranger boy. He wants to speak about his love for her but Fatima discontinues him with her belief, “one is loved because one is loved. No reason is needed for loving” (p. 116). Santiago leaves the place after ensuring her that he would turn up one day as her father came back to her mother. The novelist concludes this scene with the emotion of Fatima for her beloved to whom she loves truly. He portrays a picture of a painful heart of a woman, who has separated from her beloved and stays there till he turns up again, with his philosophical brush. He exhibits the pain of Fatima,

From that day on, it was the desert that would be important. She would look to it every day, and would try to guess which star the boy was following in search of his treasure. She would have to send her kisses on the wind, hoping that the wind would touch the boy’s face, and would tell him that she was live. That she was waiting for him, a woman awaiting a courageous man in search of his treasure. From that day on, the desert would represent only one thing to her: the hope for his return. (p. 118)

Coelho opts a special technique for his characterisation in which “the author not only directs our attention to a given character, but also tells us exactly what our attitude towards the character ought to be. Nothing is left to the readers’ imagination.” (Pickering and Hoeper, p. 28-29) His characters seem like the characters of our vicinity and we sympathise towards him. It is observed in the novel that the dialogues of the characters reveal their moods and personalities, and “some characters are careful and guarded in what they say: they speak only by indirection, it must be inferred from their words what they actually mean.” (p. 32)

The next episode of the novel opens with the departure of the alchemist and the protagonist from the oasis. Santiago feels heaviness in his heart and seems in the deep grief. His companion, the alchemist, consoles him, “don’t think about what you’ve left behind, everything is written in the Soul of the World, and there it will stay forever (*The Alchemist*, p. 118).” After a while the protagonist consults to his companion about a dilemma which he was suffering for last few days, and not able to understand whether he should have carried on his journey or not. The alchemist suggests him to follow his heart’s speaking and do whatever it says. The novelist depicts an old philosophy through this episode which is known as the law of attraction through this episode. The philosophy exhibits that this complete universe is a living object, and the Soul of Universe sends it’s strengthen rays to a person according to his determined desire and thought. It can be observed in the episode where the protagonist thinks about the agitation of his journey in which he has come in the state of dilemma but when he thinks over the hardships and agitation of the journey as a God’s plan that governs by the Soul of the World then his heart produces right sense for him as well as his journey. His heart says to him, “I’m the heart of a person, and people’s hearts are that way. People are afraid to pursue their most important dreams, because they feel that they don’t deserve them, or that they’ll be unable to achieve them” (p. 124). Moreover, with setting of the Sun, the



protagonist recites, “every search begins with beginner’s luck. And every search ends with the victor’s being severely tested,” and remembers an old proverb from his country that, “the darkest hour of the night came just before the dawn.” (p. 127)

The barbaric tribesmen, “dressed in blue, with black rings surrounding their turbans” (p. 132), arrest the two travellers travelling in the desert. They suspect them and take to a nearby military camp. The alchemist ensures them that after three days Santiago would do a magic for them in which he will transform him into the wind. Santiago communicates to the desert with the secret language of the Soul of the world, and, consequently, the fast sand full wind start blowing. The tribesmen called this gigantic and horrified wind *simum*. The chief of the tribesmen becomes happy with the protagonist’s act, and realises that the boy has understood the glory of the God. Next day the chief bids the boy and the alchemist farewell with an escort party. This incident explores Santiago’s wit, and his ability of learning. He learns a lot of things during his journey that are essential for living the life in the desert. It is the outcome of his learning that he learns alchemy, and after realising the language of the world, which has its own soul and everything in this world controls through it, he transforms a wind into *simum*.

They reach a Coptic Monastery after treading the entire day where the alchemist turns lead into gold. Before leaving the monastery the alchemist divides that gold into four parts. He handovers the first part to the monk of monastery for his generosity, second to Santiago for his reaming expedition, keeps third part for himself because he has to turn back to his native place, and secures the fourth part with the monk for the protagonist in his needful hours. Santiago is astonished for fourth part and inquires the alchemist regarding it. The alchemist replies that the protagonist has already lost his saving twice during his journey, and perhaps he may sacrifice his third part of gold in further journey also because, “everything that happens once can never happen again. But everything that happens twice will surely happen a third time.” (p. 148)

The boy reaches near the pyramid and digs the sand for hidden treasure. Some refugees, who came from the tribal wars and searching money in the desert, snatch the golden plate from the boy. Santiago tells them the reason for his journey and digging the sand in his state of scariness. One of them refugees tells him about his recurrent dream that the treasure is hidden in an old church where a shepherd with his herd is taking rest. But he could not pursue his dream because he did not believe in it. The picturisation of the refugee about his dream is recognisable for Santiago where he used to go with his herd of sheep before the journey. Santiago collects the fourth golden plate which was keeping secure with the monk, and get back to that old church where he was with the herd of sheep before starting his journey. He digs under the sycamore and find the hidden treasure. The boy now believes that, “life really is generous to those who pursue their destiny. (p. 160)”

*The Alchemist* is not only an account of its protagonist Santiago’s triumphs over the difficulties and getting the hidden treasure but it is based on one’s belief in his dream and the efforts to realise that very dream. The novel also reveals the mysteries and philosophies of life which are essential to mould a dream into reality. It is clearly perceived through every episode of the novel that these philosophies motivate Santiago to carry on his journey. And he learns several hidden truths from his experiences which he encounters during this journey.



The novel acts like an inspiring element for its readers to realise their dream like Santiago and create history in this world.

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