

Quest for Self as Reflected in Paulo Coelho's Novel, "The Alchemist"

Pooja Pradeep Shinde

Visiting Faculty, Department of Mass Media

B.K. Birla College (Autonomous), Kalyan, Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian writer and lyricist known for using rich symbolism in many of his works. He is honored with many international awards for his prolific contribution to the field of literature. In 1984, he wrote his first novel, "The Pilgrimage," which is a collection of his spiritual inclination on his way to Santiago de Compostela, but he did not receive much acclamation for this. He achieved fame with his second novel, "The Alchemist," which has sold at least 65 millions of copies and holds a position in Guinness World Record for being one of the most widely translated books in the contemporary world. His mesmerizing novel 'The Alchemist' is regarded as one of the magnum opuses that deals with the self-recognition of the protagonist of the novel.

Keywords: Spiritual inclination, Alchemist, Mesmerizing, magnum opus, self- recognition

Objectives

1. The general objective of the proposed research paper is to emphasize how simple shepherd boy accomplishes his dreams, which most people find difficult to achieve in their life.
2. The study also presents the transformation which takes place in the protagonist on his way to his quest.

Methodology

The research work is divided into two: primary and secondary sources. The primary source of the research paper is from The Alchemist novel, and the secondary source comprises of library resources and internet resources.

Introduction

"His journey led him to his destiny" - 'The Alchemist.'

Paulo Coelho, inarguably, considered one of the most-read writers in the modern era. He achieved fame with his second novel, "The Alchemist," which has sold 65 million copies worldwide. Also, he holds the Guinness World Record for having the most translated books in different languages. Born, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to a family of devout Catholics, Coelho aspired to become a writer since his adolescent age. However, his parents denounced the thought as they felt it was a dead-end and wanted him to pursue a well-to-do career. This made him rebelled against the catholic upbringing because of which he was admitted to a mental asylum three times. Later, to fulfill his parents' dreams, he went to law school, but he was dropped out from there in 1970 after that he got involved in drugs, sex and lived as a Brazilian hippie.

The Pilgrimage

Before returning to his passion for writing, he drifted among different professions. In 1986, at the age of 38, he visited Spain to Santiago de Compostela. This led to a spiritual awakening he experienced onwards his

journey to the shrine, which inspired him to write his first autobiographical book, "The Pilgrimage." However, he didn't get much recognition from it. After that, he devoted his full time to writing.

The Alchemist

"When you want something, the entire universe conspires in helping you to achieve it."

- The Alchemist

In 1987, Coelho wrote his second book, *The Alchemist* (OAlquimista), originally written in Portuguese and later translated into different languages, made him an illustrious figure in literature. The novel articulates the idea of spiritual inclination, one's intended destiny, and the journey to pursuit truth. Coelho has made use of magical realism to explain one's "personal quest" to attain happiness. An allegorical novel, the story revolves around the journey of an Andalusian shepherd boy named Santiago, who dreams of a long-buried treasure in the pyramids of Egypt. The style of writing is simple and lucid, which contains strong images, interesting characters and hidden meaning with twisted plot.

Santiago, the novel's protagonist by nature, is a curious, keen observer and determined to learn new things. He used to spend most of his time taking care of the sheep. The sheep were used to him, and they knew the schedule of the boy. Whereas Santiago wanted to travel across the world to learn new things, on the contrary, his parents wanted him to become a priest, and live a prestigious life. However, Santiago was against this thought, and with much persuasion, he convinced his parents for his adventure. One day, he arrives at an abandoned church with his flocks of sheep, where he fell asleep and has a disturbing dream. To pursue his dream, he sets to Tarifa in the Egyptian desert from his homeland. Santiago's curiosity leads him to the gypsy woman's house, whose archetypal role helps him in acquiring answers to all his doubts. However, as per his nature, Santiago remains agnostic to her advice. He had sheer disappointment after listening to the words of the older woman;

"Dreams are the language of God. When he speaks in our language, I can interpret what he has said. However, if he speaks in the language of the soul, it is only you who can understand". (P. no. 12)

Further, he meets Melchizedek, the old king of Salem, who challenges the boy to discover the truth of life;

"To find the treasure, you will have to follow the omens." (Page no. 28)

Here, the old king appears as a symbol of motivation to people who are in search of personal legends. Each character points Santiago in the direction of his quest, which adds a new twist to the plot. As Santiago moves forward to Moroccan port city of Tangier, along the way, he becomes the target of a thug. As he entrusts the person who later cheats him leads to the development in the character of Santiago. Contemplating what to do, he thinks of returning to his homeland and to give up the idea of discovering the truth of life. Later, the words of the wise older man struck Santiago's mind;

"Learn to recognize omens and follow them." (Page no.39)

Santiago here comes out in a positive light instead of making a decision in haste. He ponders over every incident. This empowers him, which forms one of the themes of the novel. Santiago changes his mindset and decides to continue his search for his quest. He reminds himself that the work does not compete until its objective is not achieved. Soon, Santiago commences into a new adventure full of challenges.

In Tangier, he encounters a crystal merchant from whom he regains a new outlook and discovers optimistic view which leads him to his legends. He indicates Santiago that his destiny is written in stars by using the Arabic word, "Maktub," which means,

"God has written one's destiny, and whatever we experience, it occurs because it is meant to be." So, he drops the idea of returning to his homeland and has to continue with his journey to the pyramids of Egypt. After seeking blessings from the merchant, he sets on his way of reading and learning books. But he realizes that he has got familiar with the language of the world, which is the soul of the world. He can now interact just by observing his surroundings. Meanwhile, he joins the caravan, where he meets an Englishman who wants to learn the universal language from the ancient alchemist. Santiago begins to read the books the Englishman has bought, but he couldn't concentrate on it as he was fascinated by observing the desert and the companion around him.

The Englishman's character thwarts to Santiago's character, where the one is interested in reading while the other in observation. Later, both of them develop a companionship, despite their differences. The Englishman states that everything that a human being learns comes from books not from life experience. While conversing with Santiago about his involvement in the crystal shop, the Englishman makes a statement;

“When you want something with all your heart, that's when you are closest to the Soul of the World. It's always a positive force.” (Page no. 75)

Santiago tries to read the book which Englishman was having. For him, the books resembled strange as it contains details about properties of mercury and salt, discussing kings and dragons. Out of the collection, the one book that Santiago took interest consists of the life stories of famous alchemists who devoted their life in purifying metals. The boy learns that the world has a soul and whoever understands that soul can also understand the language of things. Along his way to Oasis Santiago and the Englishman encounters a pretty young woman; at first glance, Santiago falls for her;

“At that moment, it seemed to him that time stood still and the soul of the world surged within him. When he looked into her dark eyes and saw that her lips were poised between a laugh and silence, he learned the most important part of the language that all the world spoke. The language that everyone on earth was capable of understanding in their heart. It was love.”

Santiago considers Fatima as a good omen and professes their love for each other. They understand that their relationship is already destined. Meanwhile, he observes hawk in the sky and warns the Oasis chieftain of the upcoming danger. During the battle, the boy is introduced to the alchemist. He asks the alchemist to instruct and help him in his journey. The alchemist offers to guide him in his quest, which will take him across the Sahara desert and the pyramids. However, Santiago fears of losing Fatima. Here, Fatima stands for strength and generosity. She aspires him to accomplish his legend. After hearing the words of his beloved, Santiago grabs the strength and continues his journey with the alchemist in the desert.

The alchemist urges Santiago to engross himself in the desert and listen to his heart. He instructs the boy he should keep himself away from the worldly attractions and should concentrate on pursuing his quest. He differentiates personal legend with the one who lacks it. He states if one wants to become a true alchemist, then he must follow his heart and listen to the soul of the world. The words of the alchemist had a lot of impact on the boy; he decides to follow his heart and performs a miracle. He transforms himself into the wind, which proves him that he is suitable to become an alchemist.

Santiago rides through the desert, listening and following his heart. He starts digging the place where his tears fell. While digging that place, some thieves attack him thinking he is hiding treasure. The thieves beat him badly and ask for treasure. Santiago screams and tells them about his recurring dream. Like the crystal merchant, the thieves ignore his dream, whereas the leader of the thieves responds that he too had the parallel dream where he saw an abandoned church that sheltered shepherd and sheep. He tells Santiago that he didn't went in search of the treasure as it was just a dream and him advise the same to Santiago. After his departure, he learns the actual place where the treasure is hidden. In search of the treasure, he returns to his homeland. Santiago now learns that his quest was valuable in itself, even though it ends where it began.

Conclusion

Through Santiago's journey, the author intricate that everyone has the right to chase his dreams. Coelho is of the view that dreams do not have price. The novel highlights the inner quality that every human being should realize. The book proved to be life-changing and highly awakening to those who want to achieve their quest.

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Author Details

Ms. Pooja Pradeep Shinde, Visiting Faculty, Department of Mass Media, B.K. Birla College (Autonomous), Kalyan, Maharashtra, India, **Email ID:** pujashinde462@gmail.com.