

**CRYSTALLISATION OF FLUID ETHEREAL CONCEPTS
IN PAULO COELHO'S *THE ALCHEMIST***

Mrs. T. Vijaya Priya, Ph.D., Research Scholar,
Department of English, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

Dr. K. Mohan, Research Supervisor,
Associate Professor & Head,
Department of English, Madurai Kamaraj University College, Madurai

Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian lyricist and recipient of numerous international literary awards, through his most famous novel *The Alchemist*, has earned the nick name, “The Alchemist of the literary field of this era”. He is reputed as the all-time bestselling Portuguese language author, whose books have also garnered a coveted position as best translated literary pieces in various languages. He would always use the metaphor in *The Alchemist* - “I was doing something that gave me food and water - I was working, I had a person whom I loved, I had money, but I was not fulfilling my dream. My dream was, and still is, to be a writer.” (http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Paulo_Coelho)

The Alchemist of Paulo has inspired international readers all over the world. The core theme revolves around an Andalusian, educated boy Santiago who opted to become a shepherd instead of priesthood to roam around the world so that he would be able “to see the castles in the town where they live, how they live” (*The Alchemist* 8) and that ever since he had been a child, he had wanted to know the world, and this was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man’s sins in a seminary via Latin, Spanish and theology.” (ibid8 9).

Eventually, the story portrays the shepherd boy named Santiago who travels from his homelands in Spain to the Egyptian desert in search of a treasure buried in the Pyramids, though he never knows what the treasure is, or if he would surmount the obstacles along the way, in spite of his approach to a gypsy to get guidance or through the mysterious encounter with the Biblical King of Salem Melchizedek, to whom he offers a part of his treasure (to gypsy) and his sheep to the King of Salem. But, the wonderful Alchemy of *the* novel lies in the fact that what starts out as a simple treasure hunt, to find worldly goods ended with the unraveling of the spiritual treasure that is ever present concealed inside him through the assistance of various mystic experiences and the esoteric tutorship of an Egyptian Alchemist of the novel guiding the readers also to slow down, to introspect and also to find answers to the questions like who we are and what is our place in the world. Through this novel, the author, as his wont, sentimentally and esoterically stirs up

controversy and extremes of mystical elements, “but continues smiling and sure, on his path to awaken the lost taste for mystery and magic in the men and women at the beginning of this new millennium, overcoming tedium and helplessness in the bosom of a mechanized and bored society.” (*Confessions of a Pilgrim* by Juan Arias-XI).

In the simple travelogue over the Egyptian desert and a stint in the Oasis Al Foyoum, Paulo stresses the need to be aware of one’s personal calling, and personal legend; his authentic destiny in this life. According to Paulo, “it is God’s blessing, it is the path that God chose for you here on Earth. Whenever we do something that fills us with enthusiasm, we are following our legend.” (*The author’s note VIII*).

Paulo also admits that it is not an easy job to walk towards one’s aim and target without being disturbed by impediment crossing his path “There are four obstacles. First, we are told from childhood onwards that everything we want to do is impossible. We grow up with this idea, and as the years accumulate, so too do the layers of prejudice, fear and guilt. There comes a time when our personal calling is so deeply buried in our soul as to be invisible” (Paulo’s notes VIII) forever.

The boy’s parents had wanted their child to become a priest, and thereby a source of pride for a simple farm family which worked hard just to have food and water, like the sheep with no more high ambition, whatsoever amongst whom, “the only ones who travel are the shepherds” (*The Alchemist*) alone. But, Santiago would not yield to their parent’s wish to stay in the secured Village; but rather he wishes to wander in strange risky lands. Just like the author, who has stuck to his artistic career, against his father’s aim to make his son, a lawyer. Paulo’s protagonist, more or less is chosen as the reflection of the author’s personality cult and spiritual image.

Love becomes the second hurdle, though the same sentiment is also the nourishing potential in human lives. “Treasure is uncovered by the force of flowing water (Love) and it is buried by the same currents (Love). Also, People learn, early in their lives, what is their reason for being; May be that’s why they give up on it so early too. (*The Alchemist* 23)

Paulo goes on enumerating the third hurdle. “Fear of the defeats we will meet on the path of the personal calling. But the protagonist Santiago, as a Warrior of light is prepared to have patience in calamities taking into his heart the faith on the universe which would conspire to let him realize his personal legend, as being assured by Melchizedek. Paulo convincingly says so in the novel *The Alchemist* through the Biblical King that it is a force that appears to be negative (in defeats), but actually shows you here to realize your destiny. “It prepares your spirit and Will, because there is one great truth on this planet: whoever you are, or whatever is that you do, when you really want something, it is because that desire originated in the soul of the universe, it is mission an earth. The soul of the World is nourished by people’s happiness; and also by unhappiness, envy, and jealousy. To realize one’s destiny is a person’s only real obligation,”

(*The Alchemist*²¹) against all odds and unavoidable, with the sole trust on divine guidance in the form of omens. This profound truth is explicitly revealed in Ecclesiastes of the Old Testament.

“Consider what God has done:

Who can straighten what He has made crooked?

When times are good, be happy; but when times bad consider:

God has made the one as well as the other.

Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future” (*Ecclesiastes-7:13-14*)

Moreover, Bible also says “Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure, for there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though, a man’s misery weighs heavily upon him.” (*Ecclesiastes.8:5, 6*).

The fear of realizing the dream for which we have been fighting” (author’s note IX) enduring all the intense unexpected suffering that is apparently unbearable, on the auspicious hour of achieving the goal, inordinate stupidity engulfs the unprepared man from grabbing his goal due to a guilty feeling of unworthiness. Paulo quotes Oscar Wilde in this regard of hesitance and laxity and sloth of less wise mortals. Such people, when tormented this way need Melchizedek like divine guidance and that of an Alchemist who is characterized as wisdom embodiment, in the novel.

Melchizedek promises the boy that he would appear when any aspirant is at the verge of giving up his quest for his supreme goal or Personal legend. He says in his conversation with the boy that “But I always appear in one form or another. Sometimes I appear in the form of a solution, or a good idea. At other times, at a critical moment, I make it easier for things to happen... but most of the time people don’t realize I’ve done them.” (*The Alchemist 22*). Grasping the hand of divine guidance, and guided by one’s mentor, Paulo wishes his readers for whomsoever it is concerned, to forget about all the obstacles and sufferings, all the things sacrificed, giving one a saintly aura, to believe himself ‘worthy of the thing’ (author’s note X) fought for by becoming an instrument of God and an accomplice of the Soul of The World to understand one’s stint on this beautiful earth. The most profound lesson Paulo Conveys through *The Alchemist*, is given in his fervent respect for a man, a pianist in a raucous mall playing his music with total involvement, “regardless of whether or not he is noticed, regardless of the money he gets paid, as if he were playing at the Opera in Paris. He is playing because that is his fate, his joy, his reason for living, reminding everyone of us of “a very important lesson: that we each of us have our personal legend to fulfill, and that is all. It doesn’t matter if other people support us or criticize us or ignore us, or put up with us - we are doing it because that is our destiny on this earth, and the fount of all joy.” (The Pianist in the Shopping Mall, Oct-2006.) Paulo admits that he wrote this novel within two weeks in 1987. He was able to achieve this incredible feat because the story was “already written in his soul,”

probably, through his basic intuition about Alchemy of the Almighty and his acquaintance with relative books by various authors such as Argentine writer, who is also Paulo's role model Jorge Luis Borges whose short story called *Tale of Two Dreamers* in which two men dream of the other's treasure. Santiago, the protagonist, impelled by a dream when he slept in a dilapidated church under a sycamore tree in which "a child appeared and took (him) me by both hands and transported (him) me to the Egyptian pyramids" (*The Alchemist*13), Where supposedly lies a treasure awaiting him. But when he digs for the treasure at the base of the pyramid, a stranger informed him that "two years ago, right here on this spot, I had a recurrent dream, too. " (He)I dreamed that I (he) should travel to the fields of Spain and look for a ruined church where shepherds and their sheep slept. In (his) my dream, there was a sycamore growing out of the ruins of the sacristy with hidden treasure,"

(*The Alchemist*155) the same spot where the boy got his own dream of Egyptian treasure.

The title character the Arab Alchemist of the Saharan desert is a typical ancient spiritual alchemist, sprung meticulously from Paulo's mighty pen. An inordinately learned man, he lives at the oasis and can turn any metal into gold. He acts as the mentor of Santiago, the protagonist of the novel. "If such a man is here at the oasis, he must be the powerful one... whom not even the tribal chieftains are able to see him when they want to. Only when he consents... That is the man who knows all the secrets of the world who communicates with the genies of the desert" (*The Alchemist* 88-90) thus, justifying the title of the novel. The alchemist appears in the novel, riding a horse, completely in black, with a falcon perched on his left shoulder wearing a turban and a black kerchief, posing as a powerful messenger from the desert to take the protagonist of the novel into his custody to help him execute his search of his Personal Legend successfully; He Plunges the boy into myriad tests and troubles so that he'd master the alchemical lessons along the way, The boy as well as the readers feel that People are capable, at any time in their lives, of doing what they dream of, before they finish reading the novel. No doubt, all should agree with Philippe Douste-Blazy, French Minister of Culture, France who loudly proclaims that "Paulo Coelho, you have become the alchemist for Millions of Readers. Your books do well because they stimulate our capacity to dream, our desire to search, and to find ourselves through this search." (Apr1996)

References

Primary Sources

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Secondary Sources

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