

Quest and Mysticism : A Journey from self to Self in Paulo Coelho's *Alchemist*

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Abstract

*Quest and mysticism are two related terms. Both of them are psychological and conceptual in nature than practical. Quest is a phenomenon of human nature which helps one to search for something. Humanity is patent as born quester. There are many types of quests but the ultimate quest is the quest for self. When one journeys to find answer to the reappearing questions regarding self, one has to go through mysterious aspects and profound faith. A person's keen desire to know is a longing for truth, to which the human being is naturally inclined through his intellect. The present research work is a study of the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho's *Alchemist*. The principal objective of the study is to examine critically the novels of the writer in order to highlight the quest and mysticism of individual self towards Supreme Self.*

Quest and Mysticism is the highest spiritual experience possible to man in this life. It consists direct intuitive awareness of God and the souls union with him. A mystic is one who is united with God in Divine contemplation. Quest and Mysticism is considered as a prominent factor in one's search for his/her Self and to make one's life meaningful and worthy of existence. The very nature of mankind, therefore, gets to be regarded as inherently spiritual. Spirituality means the quest to know one's true Self, to find out the real nature of consciousness This search is the foundation of all great spiritual teachings, the goal of all great mystics. The search of the Self sets a person free from the fears that makes him uneasy. It is a state of one's psychological wellbeing, a state of inner silence, a state of boundless joy and peace. In this state the senses experience the reality without the interference of the mind and make a communion with the divine. In short it is a state of enlightenment.

The Alchemist has opened up a new epoch of psychology and a new epistemology in the world of literature. Santiago, the protagonist transforms himself to an alchemist as well as a mystic. The alchemist who becomes the mentor and master of Santiago imparts all his wisdom of the world to him and encourages Santiago to find his destiny by himself. He not only travels around the world as he wishes but also learns the mystery of the world,

Santiago is a young and adventurous shepherd boy. He spends most of the time in reading books. He is close to his flocks and he can also communicate with his flock. Santiago's parents wants him to become a priest but he tells them that, he wants to become a traveler. He revolts against tradition and leaves the comforts of

home to know the secret of life which is more important to him than knowing the Supreme Self. Coelho paints the experience which is timeless and never dated. Coelho undertakes the importance of the journey both spiritual and physical. He himself is fond of exploring the world and its wonders and reveals, “without doubt it was traveling that made me make the leap” (195). While throwing light on the importance of journey, he says, “Journey has a very strong symbolic significance in people’s life” (Arias 197). He further adds, “Using the metaphor of the journey, I see life as a caravan. I don’t know whence it came or where it’s going to end up” (210). So, in one way or other journey acts as a metaphor in this novel and the riddles that the protagonist faces becomes the milestone of that journey.

One can find that this novel is the by-product of the author’s intense spiritual conflict with the contemporary society and what is more important is that he tries to find out a solution as he is both, the product of his time as well as ahead of it. Though living a normal life, Santiago is not content with mere existence, for he tends to believe that the purpose of life is to live a purposeful life. And this quest is aroused while sleeping near a Sycamore tree in the abandoned church. He gets a recurring dream, in which a child tells him to seek a treasure at the foot of the Egyptian pyramids. Santiago decides to undertake the journey and in the journey he encounters several antagonistic situations.

Santiago recollects that an old gypsy woman who interprets dream lives nearby the village of Tarifa. He meets her and explains his dream to her. After listening to the dream, the gypsy woman asks him to go to Egypt and find the treasure and she says that she will not be charging him for her service, but she wants ten percent of the treasure when he finds. Santiago doesn’t believe the words of the gypsy woman.

The old man introduces himself as Melchizedek and says that he is the King of Salem. He encourage him to follow his dreams. Though, he was a bit reluctant in the beginning but at last he makes up his mind and decides to take the challenge. Thus “the Ulysses-like journey of exploration and self-discovery symbolized search for treasure becomes Santiago’s mission on earth, which is nothing but to find God, implying happiness, fulfillment and the ultimate purpose of creation” (Mishra 167). When Santiago decides to travel all the way to the distant to Egypt, he is not fully convinced.

Coelho employs Melchizedek as a symbol to represent the ‘Great Spanish Inquisition’. He holds the symbol of both the priest and the warrior. He makes Santiago realise that when he attains self-realization, his individual soul is identified with the Supreme Self and the world is realised as an illusion. While describing the nature of the soul of the world, Melchizedek says that “All things are one” (23). This means that all individual souls are part of the soul of the world. The Egyptian pyramid is another historical symbol used in the novel to declare that human beings can create wonders in this world. Ancient Egyptians collectively generated their personal legend by building pyramids almost two thousand years ago, which still stand as a monument of their collective personal legend. He also adds that common sense is enough to understand one’s personal legend, and Supreme Self, According to Coelho, after recognizing one’s personal legend, one need to be aware of his strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Melchizedek, the old king of Salem, assures Santiago as well as the readers that “when you want something, the entire universe conspires in helping you to achieve it” (20). This statement becomes the soul of the novel as well as the journey of Santiago. Melchizedek is of the view that ‘Everything is written in the Soul of the World’. What matters is to know how to read the omens, which would reveal the secret of everything. He states, “In order to find the treasure, you will have to follow the omens. God has prepared a path for everyone to follow. You just have to read the omens that he left you” (20). The fact is that an omen is a phenomenon which is believed to foretell the future. Omens are actually neither good nor bad, they are a sort of symbols which indicate what would happen in future but all the same one could manipulate the outcomes by preventive action or modify the very nature of things. Coelho is of the opinion that the ability to read the omens can help one in one’s journey for the dream. Both intuition and experience are required for this since they will help to interpret the things and make the journey easy.

After listening to the voice of the omens, Santiago looking around finds a crystal shop. Santiago requests the merchant of the shop to prevent him clean glasses in the shop in exchange for food, but the crystal merchant does not respond to him. Santiago cleans the glasses. During the time, two customers enter and buy crystal. The crystal merchant says it is a good omen that customers enter while Santiago cleanse the glasses and therefore he offers Santiago a job. Santiago says that he will clean all the crystal overnight in exchange of money to get to Egypt. Santiago with the help of crystal merchant becomes a crystal merchant himself and acquires a grand success. With the incident of crystal shop Coelho wants to signify that the individual has power to alter, shape, and improve their life. On the other hand, he believes that character is destiny and our unconscious is as powerful as our conscious in shaping our personality. He also reflects that all things and beings in the universe are connected.

Santiago journey’s through the desert towards pyramids which leads him to find the hidden treasure. He decides to continue pursuing his Personal Legend. Santiago joins a caravan crossing the Sahara desert towards Egypt and meets an Englishman who studies books to become an alchemist. The English man seems unfriendly at first, after Santiago says his story they become close. Santiago learns a lot from the Englishman during the journey. He also learns that the secret of alchemy is written on a stone called the Emerald Tablet. The ultimate creation of alchemy is the Master Work, which consists of a solid called the Philosopher’s Stone which can turn lead to gold, and a liquid called the Elixir of Life that can cure all ills. Santiago comes to know that Englishman is traveling with the caravan to the Sahara oasis of Al-Fayoum, where a powerful, 200-year-old alchemist resides. The Englishman plans to ask the alchemist the secret of his trade.

A war begins in the desert but the caravan reaches the oasis safely. Santiago wants to travel to Egypt but he stays in the oasis in order to avoid violent tribal war which takes place in the desert. Santiago meets a beautiful girl in the desert named Fatima and he starts to love her. The novelist has beautifully painted the powerful impact of love and believes that love is the magic that impels one to be successful. He highlights:

“When we love, we always strive to become better than we are. When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better too” (100). Coelho has painted the importance of the feeling of love

During a walk in the desert, Santiago witnesses an omen that foretells an attack on the oasis. He warns the tribal chief about omen and the attack, and as a result, the people of Al-Fayoum successfully defend themselves against the attack. The alchemist gets the word of Santiago’s vision and invites Santiago on a trip into the desert, during which he teaches Santiago about the importance of listening to one’s own heart and pursuing his Personal Legend. He asks Santiago to leave Fatima and the caravan for the time being to finish his journey to the pyramids, and he offers to accompany him till he reaches his destiny.

Santiago and Alchemist continue the journey through the desert. The alchemist shares his wisdom about the Soul of the World. They want to travel many days to reach pyramids. Arab soldiers capture them during the travel. In exchange for their life, the alchemist hands over Santiago’s money, but they do not trust them. Alchemist tells the soldiers that Santiago is a powerful alchemist who will turn into wind within three days. Santiago feels frightened because he has no idea how to turn into the wind, and over the next three days he contemplates on the desert. On the third day, he communicates with the wind and the sun and coaxes them to help him create a tremendous sandstorm. He prays to the Hand That Wrote All, and at the height of the storm he disappears. He reappears on the other side of the camp, and to the tribesmen. Now Santiago realizes that the soul of God is his own soul the supreme Self, and that he can perform miracles. Witnessing the miracle of Santiago they were released.

Santiago urges the alchemist to teach him alchemy, the art of transmutation. The alchemist tells him that it comprises of simple truth that everything in the world had a soul and they would evolve when they became perfect. He further tells him to listen to his heart. The conversation between the boy and his mentor highlights this thing: “Why do we have to listen to our hearts?” the boy asked, when they had made camp that day. “Because, wherever your heart is, that is where you’ll find your treasure.” “But my heart is agitated,” the boy said. “It has its dreams, it gets emotional, and it’s become passionate over a woman of the desert. It asks things of me, and it keeps me sleepless at many nights, when I’m thinking about her.” “Well, that’s good. Your heart is alive. Keep listening to what it has to say” (84)

The alchemist also tells Santiago’s secret to calm his heart when he complains that he finds it difficult, “My heart is afraid that it will have to suffer,” and Santiago tells to the alchemist one night as they looked up at the moonless sky, “Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity” (85). Before taking leave from Santiago, the alchemist initiates him with yet another secret: What you still need to know is this: before a dream is realized, the Soul of the World tests everything that was learned along the way. It does this not because it is evil, but so that we can, in addition to realizing our dreams, master the lessons we’ve learned as we’ve moved toward that dream. That’s the point at which most

people give up. It's the point at which, as we say in the language of the desert, one dies of thirst just when the palm trees have appeared on the horizon. (87)

At the end of the novel, Santiago reaches the place of his dreams and feels stunned. In order to show the contrast between the one who chases the dreams and wins it and the one who leaves it thinking it impossible. Coelho has deliberately portrayed the character of the leader of the refugees from the tribal war as a person who has missed an opportunity to attain his treasure. The courage of Santiago opens all the door of his inner self. In his dream he clearly sees the exact location of the treasure. But his 'self-love' makes him reluctant to take up any endeavor to achieve it because his heart does not want him to suffer in his pursuit of the treasure. That's why he says to Santiago that, "I'm not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream" (172). But, Santiago has the strong and deep desire to follow his dream. He is willing to accept the pain involved in achieving the treasure and attains the treasure at the end. He knows that one should listen to one's heart, "Remember that wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure" (111).

Santiago eventually discovers the hidden treasure and achieves selfhood. His immersion in the soul of the World or the collective unconscious makes him understand the nature of life and the value of love. Though the father of Santiago tries to stop him but he pays no heed. "A world traveler is like an arrow shot, never meant to stop. Pa, I'll keep on moving ahead, march forward, ahead . . . not looking back. There is no turning back" (Tendulkar 33). Likewise, Santiago too feels that once he has decided to set on his journey there is no turning back. Deliberately, Coelho has put Santiago at the centre or as a subject and he preaches how to live life and how one can alter one's life by altering his attitudes. The novelist has propounded that it is the radical inner transformation, much like in alchemy, which is an unstoppable condition to attain the Supreme Self.

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