

CONCEPTION OF SPIRITUAL ECSTASY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE PROTAGONISTS OF PAULO COELHO IN *THE ALCHEMIST* AND *THE WITCH OF THE PORTOBELLO*

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"There are many ways to serve our Lord. If that's your destiny, go in search of it. Only a man who is happy can create happiness in others. (Coelho, "TFM"104)

These lines decode the notion of spiritual accent which is voiced through Santiago and Athena in *The Alchemist* and *The Witch of Portobello*. The present paper is an effort to understand the odyssey of spiritual happiness which is projected and comprehended by Paulo Coelho through Santiago and Athena. The paper is an effort to understand the manner and reason of this spiritual ecstasy of two ordinary characters which become extra-ordinary after these conceptions. Coelho had infused his signature theme of spiritualism in both the novels. Paulo Coelho is one of the most widely read, loved and influential authors in the world today. His novels carry the theme and subject which connects him directly to his readers. As most of his works carry glimpses from his real life and are autobiographical readers connects subconsciously with him. Through his novels Coelho dissects the human souls from different aspects to explore the hidden treasures of human capabilities. His most important tool to achieve this goal is his universal language through which he simplifies the complexities of human heart to aspire the readers to adopt and accept the simple and real values in life. He put forth the theory that the most inevitable form of goal in all aspects of life ultimately is happiness and the sublime of this form is spiritual ecstasy.

"No one lights a lamp in order to hide it behind the doors; the purpose of light is to create more light, to open people's eyes to reveal the marvel around"(Coelho, *TWOP*)

What is spirituality in a broader sense? It is a natural quest to look for a meaning connection with something bigger and mightier to ourselves and to recognize the fact that whatever connects you to a higher or mightier power also connects you to others. So, the ecstasy of attaining this level is contagious. This ecstasy is transferred through Athena and Santiago to many across the globe.

Coelho believes that to attain this state of spiritual tranquility one does not need to lead the life of a monk, but the purpose is to attain a perfect cadence between spiritualistic and materialistic life. As Santiago and Athena had almost reached that state where they remain untouched by worldly distractions. They reached a state where "the complete absence of noise and movement, the silence that brought me into contact with myself. (Coelho, *TWOP* 86).

Happiness is becoming the most unapproachable luxury in present time. Coelho believes that real happiness lies in pursuing a dream cherished and accomplished by anyone through their dedicated efforts. He explains how 'soul of the world' helps us when we work towards the real happiness. He believes in eternal goodness present in the world and the adoptability of that essence through selfless motives which ultimately is the way for happiness.

Writing about the spiritual awakening and paranormal happenings has always been the forte of Paulo Coelho. *The Alchemist* is a mesmerizing fable about the spiritual journey to take our life to a different level. It is about one's acceptance towards 'transforming and improving the soul of the world'. Whereas *The Witch Of Portobello* is one of those few books that dig deep into the mysteries of the transcendental world. This thought-provoking book has beautifully blended the mundane life with esoteric and infused the simple dimension of mortal life with the complexities of the super-natural world. Paulo Coelho in these two novels compels the reader to think that divine powers are vested in all of us and that we all need to look at the world from an altogether different perspective. Because everyone's journey is not same. Some journeys cannot be understood by analyzing them with set parameters and norms. An altogether different perspective is needed to understand them. The methods and ways of judging the divinity in an individual is a not simple. Coelho believes that this characteristic in any individual is contagious. Santiago and Athena possess this quality and they represent an example of subtle and serene spirituality which help others to attain a stage of spiritual ecstasy. The reverberating quest for spiritual happiness runs throughout the novels.

Coelho put forward the theory that society lacks beliefs and spirituality and that a new perspective is needed for reviving the humane aspect. This aspect has always been an undeniable theory, but it remained a taboo topic. Materialism is not the only reason to break this cocoon. Coelho believes that the lack of courage to accept it is the basic reason for that. As Coelho echoes his voice through Athena, "How do we find the courage to always be true to ourselves even if we are unsure of whom we are". (Coelho, *TWOP*)

Matthieu Richard, the happiest man on the earth, who is a molecular biologist turned Buddhist believes that anyone can become the happiest person if he is free of desires. Richard doesn't own any worldly treasures, but he holds the title of the most contented being since a decade. He is contented with his "self". He says that there is no parameter to scale the amount of happiness and it is just a state of mind. The primary factor for being happy is the quality of human relationship one owns in his life. Coelho's two novels highlight the same theory. His protagonists are not monk, but their souls are wrapped with altruism. Internally the soul of a monk keeps them guiding to attain the joys of life without any regret. Santiago develops a cordial relationship with everyone he came across from Spain to Egypt. Athena's story is a jigsaw puzzle which is solved through the characters she came across and helped them to transform their life.

The Alchemist is the odyssey of Santiago, an Andalusian shepherd boy. Santiago left his native place in search of a treasure which recurs in his dreams. He undertook a voyage to exotic North Africa and finally to Egyptian deserts. His encounter with the alchemist helps him not only to achieve his treasured goal but to also find his treasured soul. *The Alchemist* is a story of listening and realizing the call of our dreams. But to find the treasure Santiago had to discover his 'personal legend'. Coelho believes that every individual in this world is blessed with a unique personal legend, but rare are those who discover it. Santiago is one of them "To realize one's destiny is a person's only real obligation". (Coelho, *The Alchemist* 86) but Santiago also had to remember about his roots to save him from any misery. "A shepherd may like to travel, but he should never forget about his sheep". (Coelho, *The Alchemist* 31).

Santiago's journey towards the Egyptian pyramid enriched him not only with survival spirit but it also made him realize about the real essence of life. The hurdles made him mature and strong and convinced him about his own capabilities which he could have never discovered otherwise. He learned that while he should never lose sight of his destination, he should also enjoy the experience of getting there. Santiago cherish the ultimate happiness irrespective of the cultural differences. This experience of enjoying is based on his personal experience rather of any institutional prescriptions. Santiago led forward enjoying and accepting the challenges and undergo a series of fluctuations but succeeded at last. He evolved into a higher being attaining a new personal legend.

“The boy was beginning to understand that intuitions is really a sudden immersion of the soul into the universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected, and we are able to know everything because its all written there”(Coelho, *The Alchemist* p71)

As Santiago moves forward it is found that he must give up his flocks, his job, his gold, his treasure and even Fatima, his love. All these are the materialistic hurdles which may trigger his goal to ultimate happiness. Coelho wants to convince his readers that for experiencing the ultimate joys of life the trash of worldly attachments had to be dropped as these can camouflage the true colours of ecstasy. In *The Alchemist* the soul of the world represents the spirituality which binds every thing living and non-living. Santiago learned the art of alchemy and purifies his soul through his actions and altruist deeds .Santiago was able to find the state of ecstasy because he finally was able to find the meaning of his life which, according to him was much more than the treasures of Egyptian pyramid or the treasure of his recurring dream but because he ultimately discovered that the real ecstasy is to never stop encouraging himself to follow his dreams and his faith in his destiny and the reason behind the faith. But why so many failed to achieve this? As the alchemist told him the reason,

“They were seeking the treasures to their destiny without wanting actually to live out their destiny”. (Coelho, *The Alchemist* p120)

The witch Of the Portobello is the story of a Romanian orphan Athena who was refuge to London with her Lebanese parents. Athena’s odyssey is to find her ultimate happiness through spirituality which has always been a pertinent note in her life since her childhood. She developed an interest in religion from an early age. Athena as a child, sees invisible angels and untold happenings that shows the symptoms of her contemplative nature. This trait dominantly developed later in her and helped on her journey towards self-knowledge. She develops skills like dance and calligraphy that helped her to connect with the divine power. She also learned and developed skills to invoke the spirit and attained spiritual ecstasy through these skills. She spiritually tried to understand the various layers and aspects of her life to fill the “blank spaces”. Athena’s altruistic nature helped others also to attain spiritual happiness and helped others to erase their worries to move towards a more peaceful life. Athena was bringing to the surface the immensely rich world of happiness that we carry in our souls. Those who differ with her accused her of satanism and witchcraft. In an interview with John Lyside Coelho admitted that, “In, *The Witch of Portobello* the main character tries somehow to bring the divine energy of love to her life”. And Athena willingly tries to do the same for others to attain that level of spirituality so they could feel their divine powers. This novel is about the spiritual philosophy of traditional witchcraft. It is usually impossible in general to understand how the esoteric methods and techniques of different traditions and cultures around the world can assimilate into the philosophies of witchcraft. Athena tried to affect the life of people in a positive way with the help of this technique.

The character of Athena is narrated by her acquaintances. Through them we come to know about her desire to know the deeper meaning of life to attain a level of extreme spiritual happiness. But her norms to reach her goals create an uproar in the ‘set norms of framed society’ because they fear the breakage of their fixed norms of religion. Coelho enables his reader to understand the character of Athena or Sherine. The journey of Athena to becoming Hagia Sofia reflects the undying spirit of Athena to look for a perfect serenity which she believes could only be attained through spirituality.

Paulo Coelho wrote in his blog that, “Society convince us that we have to be completely transparent not only to the world but to ourselves: there is where the danger lies. Its necessary to admit that something can’t be grasped, that our empty spaces exist and that we have to represent and honour the mystery”. But Athena worked hard to fill her ‘blank spaces’, she faced multiple challenges, accepted them improved herself and tried to attain the level of knowing her true self through spirituality. Her altruism took her to a divine level. As she said, “Joy is like sex.....it begins and it ends. I want pleasure. I want to be contented. Happiness I no longer fall in that trap”.

Thus, the spiritual perspective of Santiago and Athena is of a monk who creates a spiritual happiness in their own vicinity which never compel to perform. They set a paradigm to follow their heart in true sense to be spiritually happy. It not only helped them to transform their life towards an amplified contentment but also helped them to surpass all negativity. This quality rewarded them to make a cadence of their body and soul or between materialism and spiritualism respectively. And what is the ultimate reward? They attain a state of mind, which put forward the theory, “what we gain and what we lost.....our desires and anxiety becomes neutral”. They realizes the fact that happiness can be achieved through things we already have in our life but to accomplish spiritual ecstasy we have to look for the divine horizons in our life. The discovery of this horizon is our sole responsibility as for that one had to understand the true language of our soul. They undergo the procession of alchemy of the soul. The quest mystery which grafted their souls finally refine and transform them. It is thus a process of refinement where Santiago and Athena paradoxically turned sufferings and awareness into a divine and spiritual ecstasy, i,e “ allowing love to manifest in me without barriers letting to fill up my blank spaces”.



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