THE ROLE OF SELF IN SELECT NOVELS OF PAULO COELHO

Vikas Chandani
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English and Foreign Languages
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

Abstract:

　　The characters in Paulo Coelho's novels have a reputation for engaging in a variety of cognitive activities. This paper aims to establish a character analogy by delving into the roles of self in Paulo Coelho's creation of his characters. The paper establishes similarities between Paulo Coelho's characters by tracing the instances where various cognitive processes, related to self, as are observed across different novels. Characters share a sufficient amount of factorial commonality in various cognitive activities. It aids in the comprehension of the cognitive trends that Paulo Coelho's characters follow.

Keywords: cognitive processes, self, self-criticism, self-contrast, self-actualization, Paulo Coelho.

　　Paulo Coelho is a celebrated novelist who has been credited with the delineation of vibrant and sophisticated characters. He has written more than thirty novels and is widely read across the globe. This paper will focus on selective novels from the oeuvre of Paulo Coelho and trace the similarities, as can be found, between the cognitive processes associated with the self and the intuition of the characters in his novels. The term "self" can be defined in various ways, but essentially, it is a complete set of physical and mental traits that define an individual. In the *Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, the term in context is defined as "The whole of the individual, including all physical and mental processes and activities with his/her history of development as well as personal identity and experience." (Matsumoto 464). However, the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* defines the term slightly differently as "the totality of the individual, consisting of all characteristic attributes, conscious and unconscious, mental and physical. Apart from its basic reference to personal identity, being, and experience... " (VandenBos 951). Keeping both definitions in mind, we may suggest that the self is integral to an individual's personality.

　　Out of the various activities associated with the "self", there are self-actualization, self-criticism, and self-contradiction, which can be witnessed in the novels of Paulo Coelho. Such cognitive processes may be found in first-person or third-person narrations. The protagonists tend to exercise these cognitive processes when they are either affected by an external stimulus, driven into deep meditation, or frenzied by thoughts. In either case, the processes find settlement when they reach a new idea. The definition of self-actualization, as in the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* is "the complete realization of that of which one is capable, involving maximum development of abilities and full involvement in and appreciation for life…" The process involves finding the most potential version of oneself. Self-criticism is defined as "the evaluation of one's own behaviour and attributes, with recognition of one's weaknesses, errors, and shortcomings." (VandenBos 954). While self-contradiction is understood as "a deep inconsistency between two or more beliefs, intentions, desires, or behaviours of an individual or of a group" (VandenBos 953). The definition of intuition is "immediate insight or perception, as contrasted with conscious reasoning or reflection." To state the idea more clearly, we may put it as the realization of the complete self, the evaluation of oneself, and the recognition of

the inconsistencies within oneself. By observing various instances where the protagonists experience or enact such cognitive processes, we can establish a structure in which all the protagonists can be framed. The succeeding part of this paper is an analogy of the protagonists in the novels *The Alchemist*, *The Winner Stands Alone*, and *The Valkyries* by Paulo Coelho, basing them on discrete cognitive processes as stated above.

The underlying meaning of the cognitive process of self-actualization is the realization of one's skill sets, truths, and characteristics, which otherwise remain undiscovered. In The Alchemist, the protagonist, Santiago, who is a shepherd, elopes from the comforts of his vagrant life and sets out to find a treasure hidden near the pyramids in Egypt. Before leaving, he examines how routine and controlled his life had become with respect to the routine of his sheep. His sheep could never converse with him. However, they still had the ability to decide what Santiago did day in and out. Santiago realizes that his sheep aren't accustomed to his schedule, but rather it was "he who had become accustomed to their schedule" (The Alchemist 4). In *The Pilgrimage*, it is revealed that Paulo suddenly develops the ability to speak a strange language when encountered by a dog that appears to be the devil. He states that he "was trying to understand the strange language" (79), but was unable to do so. The language actually emerges from a frenzy of thoughts that Paulo actually has, because he is cynophobic, which is, again, later realized by him. He realizes that the devil is a force within, a force that must be surpassed in order to achieve success. In *The Valkyries*, Chris realizes that she can talk to her guardian angel just as Paulo can, even though she never realized it until Paulo dictated it to her. Not just Paulo, but her intuition is instrumental in making her realise her potential. When Santiago is busy selling crystal with the shopkeeper in Egypt, the thought of the prophecy and the Old King is almost obliterated from his mind. When, in tranquility, he recollects the thought of the Old King, "it startled him to realize how long it had been since he had thought of him." (The Alchemist 64). He realises that it is his virtue to find the necessary things to be done in order to achieve his destiny. The memory of his personal legend and the prophecy come to him naturally. The thought is, in a manner, provoked by his consciousness as a stimulant for his realisation. During his journey, Paulo, in *The Pilgrimage*, wonders if he has the same spiritual powers as Petrus, but his efforts are in vain. It is later revealed that he is, in fact, as powerful as Petrus. A force which he can feel rising from within his body helps him realise his true strength, "At the same time, something told me that down deep, in places that my mind could not reach, a force was being born and becoming ready to manifest itself." (86). Therefore, we may assume that most of the characters in the novels of Paulo Coelho have the common trait of realizing or actualizing themselves.

Another important feature shared by many characters in Paulo Coelho is the faculty of self-criticism. The characters frequently berate themselves for their actions on the basis of their newly acquired wisdom or virtues. Such instances are found scattered in many works of Coelho as most of his works are representations of an individual's emotional or spiritual ripening. One can frequently find a character berating himself over a past action or a momentary error of judgment. In *The Valkyries*, Christina, in response to the emotional build-up between Valhalla and her husband, starts to feel jealous of the Valkyries. However, she soon checks her behaviour and criticizes herself for acting so covetously: "Why am I acting this way? What's going on with me? She thought." (207). In a similar fashion, Gabriella, in *The Winner Stands Alone*, restrains herself from thinking about the possible implications of walking up the ramp with a film star. She starts to believe that she will make the newspaper headline the next day and may also feature as one of the putative love interests of the film star. She soon barges out of her day-dream into reality and asserts, "What am I thinking about?", "I should be concentrating on the moment, on going up the steps!" (262). Likewise, we also detect Maria, in *Eleven Minutes*, contemplating about the painter whom she meets a day before her meeting with Ralf Hart. She finds herself lost in romantic thoughts about the painter, a person who does not match her taste and whom she met in a tiny span of thirty minutes. While she delves into the thoughts of the painter at Copacabana in the middle of jazz music and the smell of booze, she is driven back to reality by admonition of her own thoughts, "Why was she thinking about him? Why was she thinking about someone who, at that very moment, might be painting another woman…" (119). However, as Maria has matured over time, she is now able to administer an answer to this question. She says, "I'm thinking about him because I was able to talk to him." (119). Igor's personality displays this maturity when he ponders whether his wife has ever loved him. is driven into a nostalgia, imagining various instances where he might have observed his wife being reluctant towards him. He becomes lost in nostalgia, recalling various occasions when he might have seen his wife being uncooperative with him. He wonders, "Was she always like this or is it that she doesn't love me as much as she did at first? A forbidden thought. Concentrate on other things, please." (88). Later in the narrative, after killing the girl with the dark hair, Igor finds new inspiration to carry out his mission. He believes that the expulsion of a defenseless being from the earth's surface is his fault. To dismiss his guilt, he says, "Don't think about it, it's done now. You have prepared yourself to go much further than this, so carry on." (42). In

every one of these situations, one might find that characters often criticize themselves or change their focus back to their goals when their minds wander. These instances clearly demonstrate their propensity for talking to themselves.

The tendency of the characters in Paulo Coelho's works to contrast one another is another defining trait. Self-contrast occurs when characters contrast their own past or present ideas with new knowledge or insight that has recently come to them. Such self-contrast is typically detected through realizations or revelations. In The Alchemist, Santiago is able to realize that, despite not knowing it, he had been talking to his sheep. He is shocked and taught a valuable lesson when he realizes that he can communicate with others simply by being connected to them. Paulo in *The Pilgrimage* learns about Petrus' lack of attempts to act in a patronizing or senior manner halfway through his journey. He is taken aback, and his perspective on Petrus is altered. After completing the seed exercise successfully, he notes "that at no time during the entire journey had Petrus made any effort to appear wiser, holier, or in any way better." (99). Igor confronted his unfaithful wife vehemently in *The Winner Stands Alone*, telling her that he had been completely mistaken about her and that he had learned from his error. This confession is a precondition for his final action and thus leads to the great end of the story. Igor asserts, "I realized that you didn't deserve it. You're a selfish, implacable woman, interested only in acquiring more fame and more money." (355). Maria, in *Eleven Minutes*, keeps on wondering for several days about the passive feeling of love for Ralf Hart. She comes to believe that her incessant efforts to distract herself from giving any thought to her love have led to a further deepening of her feelings for him. Although she believes it to be homesickness at first, she later realizes that the more she tries to avoid love, the more she will succumb to it. She confesses to herself later: "...if I don't think about love, I will be nothing." (76). In *The Valkyries*, Chris has a song on her mind to counteract the stressful feeling, so Paulo inquires whether she has been experiencing a lot of stress lately.
When Paulo makes a suggestion, she becomes agitated and reacts until she is instructed to pay close attention. She becomes aware of the song she has been inadvertently humming all day. In all of these cases, we might find that characters later come to realize truths and facts that contradict their original beliefs and motivations.

The traits of self-actualization, self-criticism, and self-contrast aid in the development and caricature of the characters. Coelho keeps up with these characteristics to the point where his characters appear to be similar to one another. Each character shares many traits and cognitive abilities, so it can be said that their similarities are clearly evident. Such expert delineation of characters and powerful presentation of the cognitive development is what makes Paulo Coelho a celebrated writer.

Works Cited:

- Matsumoto, David Ricky. "Self." *The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 464.
- VandenBos, Gary R., editor. "Self." *Apa Dictionary of Psychology*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2015, p. 951.
- VandenBos, Gary R., editor. "Self-Criticism." *Apa Dictionary of Psychology*, American Psychological Association, 2015, pp. 954.
- VandenBos, Gary R., editor. "Self-Contradiction." *Apa Dictionary of Psychology*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2015, pp. 953.
- Coelho, Paulo. *The Winner Stands Alone*. HarperCollins, 2009.
- Coelho, Paulo. *Eleven Minutes*. HarperCollins, 2003.
- Coelho, Paulo. *The Pilgrimage: A Contemporary Quest for Ancient Wisdom*. Translated by Alan Clarke, HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.
- Coelho, Paulo. *Valkyries*. Translated by Alan R. Clarke, HarperCollins, 2016.
- Coelho, Paulo, and Alan R. Clarke. *The Alchemist*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2002.