
THE ALCHEMIST- A SYMBOLIC AND SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

D.VIJAYA LAKSHMI, PROF.BH.V.N. LAKSHMI, PROF.RATNA SHEELA MANI

Abstract: Symbolism, one of the literary devices, always takes different forms in the hands of literary artists. It is quite interesting for any reader to go through the magical gallery of Paulo's writings as the symbols deftly erase even the slightest ambiguity. Thus Paulo Coelho is seen by many as an alchemist of words. The Alchemist is about the adventure of Santiago, a young Andalusian shepherd boy, who one day leaves his herd to follow his dream. Emphasising the symbols used in the story, this paper elaborates Santiago's enriching voyage through the desert. Santiago's journey symbolises a simple truth of life that one should sacrifice material gains to attain maturity, spirituality and knowledge. Throughout his journey the boy experiences irresistible desire to quit his journey and settle down, but he prefers to continue. This determination empowers him to overcome the hurdles and to identify himself with the Soul of God. Paulo Coelho believed that his fable about a shepherd boy in search of treasure and knowledge carry a deeper meaning for those on a spiritual path.

Keywords: alchemy, journey, spirituality, symbolism.

Introduction: Symbolism, one of the literary devices, always takes different forms in the hands of literary artists. It is defined as the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Enjoying the freedom given by the symbols writers such as Paulo Coelho magically transforms his characters into symbolic entities. It is quite interesting for any reader to go through the magical gallery of Paulo's writings and rhapsodise about the deftly used symbols. While doing so, Paulo Coelho is seen by many as an alchemist of words. The ideas, philosophy, and subject matter covered in his books touch the aspirations of millions of readers searching for their own path and for new ways of understanding the world. His writings operate beyond the realm of pure aesthetics. What his novels do is persuade. Since they persuade, they are influential.

According to Celia Fulco, "Paulo Coelho masterfully includes identifiable symbols in his works that increase the power of each novel's message. Each theme he includes is supported by the presence of symbolism that adds significantly to the impact the message has on his readers." His book, *The Alchemist*, on the surface appears as a fairy tale or children's bedtime story. Though simple in style, Coelho develops layers of the story that unfold their symbolic and allegorical meanings page by page. In the words of Jennings Bryan, "destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice," and it is very much evident in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. Coelho sees the story as a way to reach and experience a deeper spiritual life. In the preface, Coelho writes:

"I discovered that the symbolic language, which so annoyed and confused me, was the only way to reach the Soul of the World... This is why *The Alchemist*, too, is a symbolic text. In the course of the book I pass on everything I have learned. Coelho believes

that in the experience of reading the book, you are offered his gems, his learning about spiritual matters."

The story is about the adventurous journey of Santiago, a young Andalusian shepherd boy, who one day leaves his herd to follow his dream. With this enriching voyage through the desert Paulo Coelho recreates the symbolic language describing life, man and his dreams. This story, timeless and entertaining, interesting yet simple, breaks down the journey, we all take to find the most meaningful treasures in our life, into steps that are at once natural and magical.

In the story dreams, symbols, signs, and the wisest lead the journey of Santiago to his ultimate success. Santiago's journey is Ulysses-like journey of exploration and self-discovery, symbolically searching for treasure near the pyramids in Egypt. When Santiago decides to be a shepherd, his father says, "someday you'll learn that our countryside is the best, and our women the most beautiful" and gives him three ancient Spanish gold coins as an inheritance. According to the Bible number 'three' has a symbolical significance. It is a divine number representing the Trinity - God the Father, Jesus the Son and God the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). Also, 'three' is the symbol of fullness, completion, perfection and unity. A complete man is formed with body, soul and spirit. Many significant events take place in the Bible 'on the third day' (Hosea6:2). Jonah is in the belly of big fish for three days and Jesus is in resurrection for three days. Santiago's father giving three gold coins is an indication of giving him a direction towards fulfilment. Paulo Coelho intends to use it as a signpost to the readers to understand the philosophical meaning of Santiago's journey.

Recurring 'dream' is another conspicuous symbol in Santiago's quest for his Personal Legend. He dreams that he was in his fields with his sheep when a child

appeared and took his hands and showed him the pyramids of Egypt. An old Gypsy woman, the interpreter of dreams, says that dreams are the language of God. J. E. Cirlot in *A Dictionary of Symbols* says, "psychologically speaking, the child is of the soul - the product of the *coniunctio* between the unconscious and consciousness: one dreams of a child when some great spiritual change is about to take place under favourable circumstances." (P 101-102) The child in Santiago's dream symbolizes the spiritual change which is going to occur in his life. When the Gypsy woman demands him one tenth of his treasure he decides that he won't believe in any dream. He leaves the old woman's house and has arrived at the market place. Santiago fills his wine bottle and sits on a bench reading a book.

Paulo Coelho gives importance to wine in all his novels. Most of his protagonists use wine to rejuvenate themselves in different contexts in the novels. According to the Bible, wine is the symbol of joy, divine grace, blessing, judgment and transformation. Transformation of grapes into wine requires artistry and knowledge so also an individual needs the guidance of a mentor to transform their lives. Santiago meets the old king whose name is Melchizedek who inspires him to know about his Personal Legend. The old king explains about principle of favourability, beginners luck and Personal Legend. Melchizedek says to him that he can find the treasure by following the omens. At that time a butterfly appeared and fluttered in between Santiago and the old king. Santiago recollected his grandfather's words. He said that fluttering butterfly was a good omen. Urim and Thummim are oracle stones which act as beacon lights in Santiago's journey. The breast full of gems and gold coins and other valuable stones represent Santiago's destiny. Emerging from the earth, these stones become valuable when handled by a right person. Symbolically, the breast plate of the old king represents Santiago's actual treasure.

Santiago's journey is symbolically based on the essence of 'Four Pillars of Alchemy. Speaking in an interview, Paulo Coelho emphasises the importance of four pillars for finding one's Personal Legend. The first pillar is belief in the Soul of the World, which suggests that everything in the world is interconnected. The second pillar is to listen to the voice of the heart. Coelho suggests that we must follow our feelings and intuitions, even if we do not fully comprehend them. The third pillar is to be loyal to one's dreams, for they both test and reward us. The fourth pillar is to surrender oneself to the universe. Coelho suggests that one must allow oneself to be open to recognize and learn from omens and signs which come on our way.

In the mid way of his journey Santiago meets a crystal merchant who is inactive like the sheep and is blind to identify his Personal Legend. The sheep are ignorant of their vulnerability and merely seek food and water. Similarly characters such as the baker and the crystal merchant remain content with what they have with them at that moment. They lose the opportunity to pursue their Personal Legend. As per the essence of the article entitled 'The Alchemist - the lessons of life' published in the news paper The Nation, "the personal legend of a person surfaces at childhood and one can never find true happiness without fulfilling it. So Santiago's legend drives him to his treasure as he chooses to acquire it, and the alchemist to become the most farmed alchemist in the world. While others, like Tarifa Baker and the crystal merchant, choose to ignore their legends and thus shape their life to be forever wanting."

After leaving the crystal merchant Santiago resolves to join a caravan. This caravan symbolizes the journey of life with dangers inherent in it. Santiago befriends the Englishman in the caravan and his search for the alchemist further navigates Santiago's journey in the desert. The desert is symbolic of hardships that stand between life and dream. Those who are in pursuit of their Personal Legend, learn to accept the desert, listen to it and even learn from it. Desert offers Santiago a mentor, who guides him to find his treasure. Despite the heat, silence and emptiness in the desert he learns to understand the Soul of the World. His crossing of the desert symbolizes the attainment of wisdom and enlightenment.

The Englishman investigates the mysteries of the universe through books, science and experimentation. Coelho significantly symbolizes him as a man of Europe and a master of discipline, science and knowledge. Instead of firsthand experience of communicating with natural elements he is learning everything from the books and interested in implementing in his own way. Santiago's interaction with the Englishman and camel driver gives inspiration to pursue his treasure. The Englishman explains about the alchemist who can transform everything into gold. Santiago reads the Englishman's books and tries to understand what the alchemy is.

They both start searching for the alchemist. In the process Santiago meets a young woman named Fatima at the well and falls in love with her. Water in the well comes endless from unknown depths and symbolizes the eternal outflow of God's unfathomable love. Thus, 'well' symbolically signifies the unconditional love of Fatima who liberates Santiago and directs him towards his destiny. Every day he meets Fatima and through her he comes to know that the alchemist resides in the south of Al-Fayoum. Santiago tells his story to Fatima and

expresses his desire to marry her and stay back with her. But she says that desert women are proud of their men's freedom. She makes him understand that she will wait for him throughout her life. Santiago realizes that he has to find his treasure.

Santiago meets the tribal chief and assists him by reading the omens. The chief rewards him with 50 pieces of gold and makes him the tribal counsellor. On the way Santiago finds the tent of the alchemist. Unlike the Englishman who doubts the true powers of the alchemist, Santiago succeeds in following him and learning the Language of the World. Leaving the caravan, he sets out his journey on the sands along with the alchemist. On the way suddenly Santiago's horse becomes slow. Keenly following the Language of Life Santiago identifies the presence of life in the desert. Pulling the cobra from the hole, the alchemist considers it as a good omen. Cobra symbolises strength, secret knowledge and transformation. The alchemist identifies Santiago as a boy of strength and capable of learning the secret knowledge.

The alchemist starts transforming the soul of Santiago. When Santiago reveals that he wants to stay back at the oasis for the sake of Fatima, the alchemist understands him and convinces him to target his goal. He explicitly details Santiago's future and what will happen in the coming five years if he has not found his treasure. This makes Santiago to concede with the idea of the alchemist and sets out his journey towards the pyramids. He bids farewell to Fatima assuring to come back with the treasure. While travelling the alchemist says to Santiago that he has to listen to his heart and the Soul of the World.

On the following day Santiago and the alchemist were captured by the tribal men. The alchemist convinces them by saying that he is a mere guide to the boy and warns the tribal men that the boy is an alchemist and he has powers to destroy their camp by simply turning himself into the wind. Left with no choice Santiago climbs to the cliff of the mountain, listens to his heart and communicates with the desert. Finally on the third day 'the boy is able to reach through to the Soul of the World and realises that it is a part of the Soul of God. And he sees that the Soul of God is his own soul.' Thus, he performs miracle by turning into wind. The tribal men feel

terrified but the alchemist gets satisfied. In the journey of Santiago the alchemist himself symbolises divine help through which Santiago learns not just alchemy but also to do miracles.

After reaching the Coptic monastery the alchemist prepares gold using alchemy and presents a piece of gold to Santiago saying that the boy needs no more guidance to reach his destiny. Alchemy symbolizes understanding and clarity of thought. The alchemists spent years in their laboratories, observing the fire that purified the metals. In the process they spent so much time close to the fire that gradually they purify their souls deserting the vanities of the world. In the last phase of his journey Santiago, listening to his heart, travels all alone to the pyramids. Santiago feels excited seeing the pyramids in the moonlight. There the attack of the thieves makes him to shed his last layers of materialism. The dream of the thief and the laughing pyramids flashes the location of the treasure in the mind of Santiago. He returns to the abandoned church in Spain and digs the treasure under the sycamore tree. His treasure reminds him of his promises and he moves in the direction of sharing the treasure and finally rests with Fatima in the desert.

Santiago's journey symbolises a simple truth of life that one should sacrifice material gains to attain maturity, spirituality and knowledge. Despite many irresistible materialistic pulls, Santiago continues his journey deciphering and interpreting the symbols and omens which he comes across either in the form of people or objects. His relentlessness empowers him to overcome the hurdles and to identify himself with the Soul of God. Paulo Coelho believed that his fable about a shepherd boy in search of treasure and knowledge carry a deeper meaning for those on a spiritual path. Also, he believed that his book had a destiny that would eventually influence millions worldwide. He focused on that belief, and that's what manifested. *The Alchemist* is an adventure of the heart, a parable of spiritual maturing and change, and Paulo Coelho is a master of blending an exotic sense of magic with an earthy, gritty depiction of life's many challenges. The result is a symbolical and poetic amalgam of human spirit, passion and existential search. Coelho is indeed a talented alchemist.

References:

1. Coelho, Paulo. "The Alchemist." Trans. Alan R. Clarke. Pb. Harper Collins. 1993. Print.
2. Narduci, Rachel. "The Alchemist: Spirituality, Religion, and Life Experience." Web. 22 January 2013. <http://kidspiritonline.com/2013/01/the-chemist-spirituality-religion-and-life-experience>
3. Fulco, Celia. "Symbols." 23 April 2009. Web. 13 January 2013. <http://cfulco.wordpress.com/symbols/>
4. The Nation. "The Alchemist-the lessons of life." 18 June 2012. P 7. Print.
5. "List of Catholic Symbols and Meaning." Web. 2

-
- March 2014. <http://hubpages.com/hub/catholic-symbols>.
6. Larsen, Iver. "Number symbolism in the Bible." Web. 2 March 2014.
7. http://www.academia.edu/1040939/Number_symbolism_in_the_Bible
8. Burch, David. W. "Wine a Symbol of Transformation." Web. 2 March 2014.
9. <http://www.burchfamilywines.com.au/news/article/10072012-169/wine-a-symbol-of-transformation.aspx>
10. Cirlot, J.E." A Dictionary of Symbols." Trans. Jack Sage. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001. Print.
11. James, King. "The Holy Bible." Pb. Cambridge University Press. 2008. Print.
12. Coelho, Paulo. "Preface- The Alchemist." Pb. Harper Collins. New Delhi. 1993. Print.

Sr. Assistant Professor, Vishnu Institute of Technology, Bhimavaram, A.P. India
Professor, Department of English, Bhimavaram, A.P. India
Professor, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, A.P. India
dvlakshmi1973@gmail.com & drbhvnlakshmi@gmail.com
