

Quest for Personal Legend in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

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Abstract

Quest is a phenomenon of human nature which helps one to search for something. The popular proverb, 'life is a journey not a destination' assumes that human beings are in perennial search to find out something. And there are different destinies that one arrives at the course of this search. The present paper deals with Quest for Personal Legend in Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist. The novel concerned with the journey for the sake of a long cherished dream. The protagonist is in search of his identity the search comes to an end in a Self- Realization which reveals that he is part of the universal soul.

Keywords: Quest, Self- Realization, Journey, Existence. Personal legend.

Journey towards Personal Legend is an attempt to realize one's own Self, understanding the dreams and desires hidden beneath the shades of the true Self of the individual. Identifying and materializing the dreams and wishes one's heart truly desires is the real way to be in harmony with the Self. For the proper understanding of one's own Self, the individual must undertake an inner journey, an exploration into the unexplored areas of one's own psyche. "To explore the unknown reality you must venture within your own psyche, travel inward through invisible roads as you journey outward on physical ones" (Roberts 350).

The destiny can only be realized by discovering the contents of the personal unconscious, that is, by discovering the fears and desires that motivate the individual and the conflicts that endanger the decision making process and destroy the energies and ruin the

creativity of the individual. For the realization of one's true Self "what has to be achieved is to expand the personal consciousness into that of the Self, to unite the lower with the higher Self," (Assagioli 24)

The people have witnessed a power that has manifested itself in nature. It is in the form of moving stars and planets and in the form of five elements - Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Sky. It is manifested in the blooming flower and sweeping storms alike. On one hand the scientists in this world have been making constant efforts to understand the exact nature of this universal force - the ultimate reality, and on the other the poets and saints have been making efforts to realize the ultimate reality by way of intuition and by the effort of trying to establish spiritual union with the Universal Soul. This inward journey takes a series of transformational processes and it is quite interesting and anxious to go through the unexplored territories of human mind and to know its complex processes as it moves forward in its journey to unite with its real Self. Many of the great psychologists attempted to derive an exact explanation of these complex, mysterious processes, of whom only a few had succeeded.

The philosophy of life in *The Alchemist* is that everyone has a personal legend. When Coelho was asked what was the secret behind the huge victory of his novel, he replied, that all he knew was that, like Santiago the shepherd boy, we all need to be awake of our personal calling. In the preface to fiftieth impression of *The Alchemist* published in 2011, and translated by Margaret Jull Costa, he defines what a personal calling is. He writes: "It is God's calling, it is the path that God choose for you here on world. Whenever we do something that fills us with passion, we are following our legend" (viii). On the recurring theme of 'personal legend' in Coelho's works,

A recurring theme in Coelho's novel is the 'personal legend' in which his characters follow their dreams and pursue their paths of self discovery. They meet hardships along the way, but only by standing true to their dreams do they achieve spiritual fulfillment. Here it is interesting to find Coelho taking the stand of a sage for his readers as he preaches 'personal legend' as one's reason for living essentially one's goal in life. He says that everyone in the world has a personal legend and by reaching it one adds to the Soul of the World. (Mishra 166)

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 want him to become a priest, and thereby a source of pride for the family. They worked hard just to have food and water. The boy had studied Latin, Spanish and theology. But ever since he had been a child, he wanted to know the world, and this was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man's sins. One day he summoned up the courage to tell his father that he didn't want to become a priest; that he wanted to travel.

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 reconnoitering the world and its wonders and reveals, "without doubt it was traveling that made me make the leap" (*The Alchemist* 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" (*The Alchemist* 210). So, in one way or other journey acts as a metaphor in this novel and the riddles that the protagonist faces become the milestone of that journey. 'Journey' appears to be a notable sign in *The Alchemist* signifying that wisdom is found in the journey and not in destination. Santiago's symbolic journey obviously refers to Homer's legendary hero Odysseus who, prefers to travel around in order to discover new places, to encounter fresh adventures and to venture into the vast realm of the unknown with a view to satisfy his restless spirit as much as to search for a stable meaning in life. The book frequently reiterates that: "When you really want something to happen, the whole universe conspires so that your wish comes true" (*The Alchemist* 21)

Though living a normal life, his 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 dreams 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 dreams stand for not only an outlet into one's inner desires, but also a form of communication with the Soul of the World. Santiago's dream of a treasure in Egypt, for instance, tells to him his Personal Legend.

Santiago meets old man he introduces himself as Melchizedek and says that he is the King of Salem. He encourages 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" (*The Alchemist* 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.

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" (*The Alchemist* 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" (*The Alchemist* 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 thematic 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” (*The Alchemist* 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 them self 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 captures 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, the chief and his officers visit Santiago to see if he can prove his claim. What Santiago has learned so far as the Language of the World comes to his help to rescue him from the present situation.

Then Santiago goes to “the hand that wrote all”. In this context Paulo writes:

The boy turned to the hand that wrote all. As he did so, he sensed that the universe had fallen silent, and he decided not to speak. A current of love rushed from his heart, and the boy began to pray... the boy understood that the desert, the wind, and the sun were also trying to understand the signs written by the hand, and were seeking to follow their paths, and to understand what had been written on a single emerald. He saw that omens were scattered throughout the earth and in space, and that there was no reason or significance attached to their appearance; he could see that not the deserts, nor the winds, nor the sun, nor people knew why they had been created. The boy reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw

that it was a part of the Soul of God. And he saw that the soul of God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles (*The Alchemist* 159-160).

The wind understands but doesn't know what to do. Santiago attempts to convince the wind that love can empower it to do anything. This makes the wind feel that Santiago demeans it by telling what it already knows how to do. Annoyed, it blows harder, and tells Santiago to talk to the Hand That Wrote All. Santiago readily accepts what it says with the request to create a sandstorm so he can look into the sky without the sun blinding him. The wind agrees to do so and picks up into a powerful gale. The tribesman asks their chief if they can stop Santiago's stunt. The chief, however, wants to see Santiago complete his task.

Santiago communicates with the wind and the sun and coaxes them to help him create a tremendous sandstorm. 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. 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. "The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world, and never to forget the drops of oil on the spoon." (*The Alchemist* 30)

In the novel Coelho seems to say that if the aspirant hunts for the Divine sincerely within his own body, instead of seeking Him outside himself, he will realize the self soon and then view the body as the indwelling place of God. Through such knowledge the seeker attains deification. He experiences the uniqueness of all things. In the novel Santiago realizes the oneness of God and Man. "The boy reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw that it was a part of the Soul of God" (*The Alchemist* 160),

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" (*The Alchemist* 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 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" (*The Alchemist* 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. (*The Alchemist* 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" (*The Alchemist* 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" (*The Alchemist* 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 Alchemist* brings home the biblical message that God made man in his own image and hence whatever is possible to God is possible for the children of God. Transformation is the key of life. Things transform and eventually have to become one with the Supreme Self

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