

The Alchemist: A Journey Towards Self-actualization

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ABSTRACT

Literature has always depicted man as a center of active, dynamic force capable, or incapable, of controlling, synthesizing and organizing the heterogeneous elements of experience into a functional unity. It has been an inspiration to souls around the world by presenting human nature in its varied forms, weaving marvellous plots to tell tales of diverse tastes. Every writer- poet, dramatist or novelist reaches to the inner recesses of human psyche to awaken mankind from the deep slumbers. This great quality of literature makes a work of art appeal equally to all generations. Art not only portrays life as it is but also shows how it should be. Literary works, especially fiction act as an explanation to many of the contemporary social and psychological crisis that postmodern man finds difficult to cope with. One such present day crisis is that man has lost the self in the fast changing global world. He has abandoned the essential quest for meaning and ultimate reality of life which comes through self-actualization.

Therefore, to reign over nihilism and hopelessness, man must take the self-journey to find hidden treasures that lie unexplored in the inner recesses of human soul. The novel, The Alchemist is one such tale that encourages and inspires reader's to realize their potential by constantly working on the impulses of the soul. Hence, this paper is an attempt to analyse Santiago's self-discovery as the microcosm, representing the journey of everyman towards self-actualization.

Keywords: *Self-actualization, Santiago, dream realization, self determination, destination*

1.INTRODUCTION

Self-actualization is a term that has been used in various psychology theories, often in slightly different ways. The term was originally introduced by the organismic theorist Kurt Goldstein for the motive to realize one's full potential. Expressing one's creativity, quest for spiritual enlightenment, pursuit of knowledge, and the desire to give to and/or positively transform society are examples of self actualization. Kurt Goldstein in his book The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man (1939), presented self-actualization as "the tendency to actualize, as much as possible, [the organism's] the individual capacities" in the world. The tendency towards self-actualization is "the only drive by which the life of an organism is determined". The term was later used by Abraham Maslow in his article, "A Theory of Human Motivation". Maslow explicitly defines self-actualization to be "the desire for self-fulfilment, namely the tendency for the

individual to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. The life of novel's central protagonist, Santiago, fundamentally reflects these traits. He takes his journey across the continents to fulfil his inner dream. His quest is not essentially for worldly desires such as excessive wealth, but a more noble spiritual quest to actualize his self in the tirade of man, god and universe.

Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian novelist, takes the human self as the central point to deal with wider issues of human enterprise. The self in his works becomes many kinds of self. In his fictional world mostly common individuals not the epic heroes struggle and try to find the meaning of the life. His heroes are not defeated and heart broken by the bitter realities, but are the ones who take arms against all the oddities that life offers in multitude ways and embrace a noble and least trodden ways in order to pursue and find multitude of treasures that lie un-explored within the human self. His journey is not the journey for the worldly pleasures, but essentially an existential quest for ultimate reality and meaning in the world. The central protagonist of the novel, the Alchemist, is an epitome of extraordinary exceptional qualities. His empirical experience from a shepherded boy to seer teaches important lessons of courage, determination and single-mindedness to achieve glorious triumphs through human passion and endurance. The novel could be decoded from various theories- it is a philosophical, allegorical and existential novel, encompassing several meanings underneath the surface meaning. On the surface level, it seems a simple tale of struggle, of love and exploration, but by unlocking its allegorical threads leads one to the realisation that it is a work of fiction that narrates those realities which are no less than poetic revelations. Each word, every sentence and each page of the book deserves thorough attention because it is pregnant with dense meanings.

The source of the novel heavily draws from the story, "the Ruined Man who Became Rich Again through a Dream," a story from "the Book of the One Thousand and One Nights" often known in English as "Arabic Nights", a collection of Middle Eastern Folktales compiled in Arabic. The tale narrates a story of a very wealthy man who once lived in Baghdad, but who lost all his substance and became so poor, that he could only earn his living by excessive labour. One night, he lay down to sleep, dejected and sick at heart, and saw in a dream one who said to him, "thy fortune is at Cairo; go thither and seek it." (The Book of the Thousand Nights, p. 134-135)

Thus, drawing from dreams, *The Alchemist* (1988) is hailed as a modern classic even in the 21st century, as it comes under the category of psychological novels. This novel is based on the theme of self-realization or spiritual fulfilment through self-awareness, self-exploration, heart-searching and action where the poor shepherd boy achieves self-actualization and the writer suggests if Santiago can why can't the readers? As Manju Muraleedharan in his article, *Multi-disciplinary Dimensions in Paulo Coelho's novel the Alchemist* rightly observes that the theme of this novel, the vision of life, is built upon the foundations of various disciplines like historical-geographical, philosophical-theological and psychological-mythological foundations. The historical-geographical foundation suggests the need for following one's personal legend and observing nature. The

philosophical theological foundation conveys the interconnection of various things in this world. Psychological mythological foundation confirms the need to follow our heart. Coelho proposes these principles and establishes his vision of life that when a person really wants something, the entire world will help him to achieve it just because a deep-rooted desire is first born in the Soul of the World. In his article, existential Reading of Paulo Coelho's the Alchemist, Javeed Ahmad, situates this work within the Sartrean existential philosophy, by analyzing this work in light of Sartre's essay, Existentialism is Humanism. There are also various articles, dealing with life and works of Paulo Coelho and also discussing several issues from different perspectives. This article will focus on the theme of Santiago's self-actualization through textual references.

II.DISCUSSION

The soul is a treasure and is farthest to be discovered and in the journey of its discovery one is destined to dive deep into the realms of one's soul to find that treasure. Everything that exists in the world has its entity and is supposed to aid and assist those who are out on a journey to actualise their dreams. The quest to realise one's dream begins from the stings which one receives from the inner recesses of heart. People often fail to respond the beats of their hearts merely because they are immersed in the world which really does not belong to them. They are unable to recognise their innermost quest 'The voice of the soul' not because they are incapable of doing so, but obstacles like impossibility, fear, love and defeat plough their way in the pursuit of dream. But, when our journey towards the realisation of dream is set out in response to a call from within, the impossibilities seem bridges to success, the fear turns out to muster the courage, the defeat decides to surrender before the towers of inspiration and all the obstacles become tools to achieve what our soul really pines for. What is there in the world is naked to us with all its arms widely open waiting and watching, with zeal and zest to hug the fellow who is on way to dominate the whole by breaking the shackles of agnosticism and nihilism.

Many dreams wither, get buried alive, some in the womb, some in the buds, some in the way to realise them and some just at a furlong away to success. But, conquerors of the dream have always been those who clung closely to their dreams and never thought to shun despite dense disparities, benighted obscurities and seducing almighty dollar. The priceless gifts come from God and the most precious gift He has ever bestowed upon is human life which is teemed with opportunities and each opportunity is pregnant with opulent treasures. The Alchemist testifies Santiago's determination to determine whether he merely follows fancy or his whims are short lived like a walking dream, but what Santiago follows and achieves is really a treasure that every one of us should harbour, dwell and eagerly pursue. In the journey towards self-actualization, Santiago comes across several hardships, but with single-mindedness, he defeats all these forces to enter the un-known gates of heavenly knowledge. When one masters these forces, they become agents of new spring dawn, showing new realms through untrodden routes. This is recorded in the novel as:

"It is a force that appears to be negative, but actually show you how to realise your destiny. It prepares your spirit and your will, because there is one great truth on this planet; whoever you are, whatever it is that you

do, when you really want something, it's because that desire originated in the soul of the universe. It is your mission on earth." (Paulo Coelho, P. 20-21)

The world is like a stage; all set to be performed a particular role upon it which one is destined to play and the same is bound to support and favour each role the one is performing. The world is pre-set, pre-furnished and prepared to caress and cater all our pursuits in the way of realising and actualising our mission on earth, particularly the dream that is harbouring inside our heart to give our life the most essential and most appropriate meaning. It takes energy, vigour and motion to stir or shake anything from its place and Paulo Coelho's protagonist is equipped with all unshakable faith, exulting thrill and exhilarating adventures which propel him to enter the realms of soul and find what the soul was really calling for.

"When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it." (Paulo Coelho, P. 21)

Paulo Coelho maximizes our minimized world of which we are so used that we even daren't to look beyond it. He defies the hypothetical thought that "content is happiness" and advocates the philosophy of being an explorer, an adventurer, an exhilarator and an epic hero of one's destiny who has an inextinguishable fire in his heart to discover the actuality. This is reflected in the conversation between crystal Merchant and the boy (Santiago). The conversation begins when the boy suggests the old crystal merchant to extend his merchandise. It is then the old man replied:

"I don't want to change anything, because I don't know how to deal with change. I'm used to the way I am." The old man continued, "You have been a real blessing to me. Today, I understand something I did not see before: every blessing ignored becomes a curse. I don't want anything else in life. But you are forcing me to look at wealth and at horizons I have never known. Now that I have seen them, and now that I see how immense my possibilities are, I'm going to feel worse than I did before you arrived. Because I know the things I should be able to accomplish, and I do not want to do so."

III.CONCLUSION

The Alchemist is a novel about how to attain one's dream by working on the instincts and making these instincts as the guiding principles for self-actualization. Looking at the novel as a whole makes the reader to realize that this novel is the symbolic representation of man's insatiable quest to search his place in the world and the ultimate search for meaning of life in the universe. It deals with the expedition of Santiago in literal, symbolic, intellectual and spiritual level. Santiago yearns to travel in search of a worldly treasure as extravagant as any ever found. His voyage across different continents symbolically reveals that man is the master of his destiny and by taking negative forces along with omens positively, one can reach to the higher secrets of the world. The crux of the novel rests on the philosophy that strong will power, courage, determinism, passion and persistence are the only way to self realization. Santiago successfully masters all these positive as well as negative forces to keep pursuing his dream and finally is able to discover the treasure lands that lie hidden in the deep recesses of the human self.

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