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**Exploring Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* from the Deconstructive Angle**

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**Abstract**

*This research article explores The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho from the deconstructive angle. Based on the quest of exploration and adventure of the treasure by a shepherd, Santiago, this article tries to interpret the treasure hunt as the deconstructive signifiers. As the dominant signifier is the treasure hunt, the central idea of the novel is configured in the interpretation of the dream submerged with several signifying process connected with the treasure hunt. This signifying process, then, gets interlinked with some striking terms like journey, magician's quest, dream, desert, and others. That is, the journey of the main character, Santiago is baffling, for it cannot reflect a set journey that is fixed in his mind, but a process of trial and error. Like the deconstructive labyrinthine connection, therefore, the signifiers' fleeting course binds the journey as mere interpretation of the people in course of meeting for further perusal. Some of it is part of the dream which is, by nature fleeting. This, thus, projects a deconstructive angle connected just as an expansion of the meanings or multiple meanings in the lack of one concerted meaning. That being considered, the journey in Santiago's dream reflects one conceptual image which*

*invariably differs from the rest, like the deconstructive realm of interpretation. This is also analogical to the meaning being pushed aside in deconstructive angle: a subterfuge postponing of set meanings. This being the case, this article relies on interpretative analysis and qualitative approach of research corroborating ideas of the famous theorists like Jacques Derrida, and J. Miller; Mary Poovey and A. T. Nuyen. In addition, the textual interpretation and analysis are focused on some of the thematically significant words like dream, journey, and treasure, which help shape deconstructive lenses.*

**Keywords:** fleeting, interplay, signifier, signification

### **Introduction**

This article tries to explore a deconstructive interpretation of the most celebrated novel, *The Alchemist*, by Paulo Coelho. The novel deals with exploration and adventure, based on the treasure hunt of a shepherd called Santiago. It further tries to prove that the quest for treasure and the journey are nothing but a pursuit of uncertainty and bafflement. That is, the interpretation of journey of treasure hunt is not based on signified tied to a signifier, but mere signification or lengthening process. As this being the case, the journey of the main character, Santiago, is uncertain because he is not sure where the treasure lies but goes on finding it. Relying on one image to another for the treasure is thus compared as the finding meaning of the signifier fixed in the signification process. As the result, Santiago feels confused at not knowing how he could get the treasure. He resorts to believing others' words which take him to the labyrinthine process of finding meaning. From deconstructive angle, there is process of being certain of the treasure: to devise meaning for the purpose but relying on the dream. This can be compared as a provisional meaning of signifier in deconstructive interpretation as Derrida mystically puts, "What would be this event be then? Its exterior form would be that of rupture and a redoubling" (95). This clearly indicates that the exterior form of signifiers get rupture and thereby become redoubling.

Further to note, this connotes about the signifier diffusion. At the same time, the treasure is interpreted by several people differently like a signifier that has different meanings to different people without specific truth as is put by Mary Poovey "Deconstruction therefore undermines, identity, truth, being as such; , its substitutes deferral or play these essences"(108). Considering fleeting nature of the text, this article relies on interpretative analysis and qualitative approach corroborating ideas of the deconstructionist theorists like Jacques Derrida, Paul de Mann, and J. Miller, Mary Poovey, and A.T. Nuyen.

Interesting quest for the treasure hunt takes the readers to several narrative and dramatic conjectures. The central character, Santiago, becomes an ambitious and inquisitive boy who gradually develops with a growing transformation from a simple shepherd to a matured person. To some extent, his character himself is deconstructive like: who is mysterious and unbelievable in the quest of the treasure that is merely flocking the sheep. Amazing events occur in course of the journey that shock and dismay him, but still the meaning of treasure and its place remains far-fetched reality: an unfound meaning. He

makes an unprecedented pursuit despite discouraging situations in course of his journey. Each encounter he makes, he is revitalized and is ready to face unfolding mystery.

Relying on his dream, he is on part of finding treasure and this is what he makes as mission for life. This can be taken from paradoxical situation because one cannot accomplish dream; it is simply beyond reach. As is the case, deconstructive meaning is delayed because meaning of dream is just puzzling. Ironically, he is persistent in the journey to find the treasure and other characters also encourage him. He is asked to sell his sheep but he is reluctant to do so since he is deeply confused what to do. If he had been pretty sure of the treasure, he would have sold the sheep and pursued different life. It seems there lies a crevasse of confusion in the mind like a reader who is puzzled at not finding the right meaning of the text from deconstructive angle. He cannot understand the situations and therefore relies on other people— like gypsy woman, a mysterious man who claims to be the king of the desert, and an English alchemist. Though they give him hint of the treasure, like the meaning of baffling signifier, there is no point of certainty however.

On this backdrop, the novel reflects several potential grounds to be reasonably justified from deconstructive angle. The treasure, supposed to be in the Egyptian pyramid, seems to denote an enigmatic meaning. It seems as what is the right place for the treasure that the Santiago would be certain about. He is not recollecting his dream to be certain about it. That is to say, when we read a primary text, the author may have some ideas of a particular meaning. As soon as the meaning comes to another context, it becomes quite uncertain. This nature of deconstructive reading applies to the text and its quest for the meaning. Words like dream, treasure, journey, and encounter with the strangers attribute to the deconstructive texture. The narrative texture of the story, thereby associating with deconstructing complex context, gives ample ground as shifting signifiers: Santiago's dream, the robber's dream, the ideas of the gypsy woman and mysterious man to interpret it.

That said, the dream, as a signifier, cannot be tied to its signified, or its perfect meaning: the treasure thus giving us a ground of uncertainty. Each time, there is a process that the treasure is close by; situations appear that this goes in distance thereby being beyond reach. Even in the last moment the treasure is hunted in Spain, it does not, however, represent the same treasure that has been depicted in Santiago's mind. Santiago is greatly baffled of the outcome, because his pursuit for the treasure in the desert is nothing but a vain or fixing a baffling meaning of the text, a large contours of the fleeting signifiers. As is put, "Deconstructionists look for the logical flaws and blind spots, or aporias, in textual arguments so that they can undermine the hierarchies which fix systems thinking and being into place" (Lane 73). As is said, we find several logical flaws in the story. These flaws get reflected in the characterization of the shepherd, Santiago, his journey, his quest, and his unprecedented meeting, the treasure dreams and so on. Such flaws further subvert common understanding of the text, thereby leading it to the deconstructive interpretative crossroads. Here, the treasure, the journey, and dream seem to

be entangled into uncertainty: as they are not properly connected to refer to the central meaning of the text. Somewhat similar in this connection is of the opinion Lois Tyson:

Deconstruction thus offers us a radical vision of the activity of thinking. Our mental life consists not of concepts—not of solid stable meanings—but of a fleeting, continually changing play of signifiers. These signifiers seem to be stable concepts – they look stable enough when we hear them spoken or see them written down!— but they don't operate in stable manner in our mind. (252)

The meaning of the journey and dream of the novel are linked with changing play of the signifiers. And this gets expanded in the course of the narrative. Even though the signifiers try to create refer to some images in order to denote certain meanings, they, however, change over times, creating instability and perennial flux. They sound playful because they do not operate in the same context, for the contexts arise out both interesting and confusing. Santiago's journey, dream, his encounters with all mysterious people passing through the desert, therefore, indicate a long signification process.

### **Storyline**

*The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, is a story based on a journey of Santiago, a young shepherd boy who is persuaded to go for a search of treasures across the pyramid and deserts of Egypt. Replete with magic, myth, and supernatural elements, the novel is significantly interpreted in terms of literary, philosophical, and spiritual interpretation. It has drawn numerous critical opinions and the book has been discussed from several theoretical perspectives. Encountering magical personalities and supernatural forces, the story traverses through the landscapes ranging from Andalusia to Egyptian deserts. The recurring dream haunts the shepherd and he also has some bleak idea that the treasure is under the sycamore tree in the ruins of church. However, Santiago continues the journey and comes through different people who encourage him to hunt the reassurance. There appears a gypsy woman who asks him to go to Egypt for the treasure. Then he comes to contact with another mysterious man called Melchizedek, who claims to be the king of the desert. He asks Santiago to sell all his sheep, but Santiago refuses to do so. Unfortunately, all his sheep are robbed and Santiago laments. He becomes poor and works for the crystal merchant in Tangier. He, then, becomes a rich person and gets good fortune from the crystal merchant. He falls in love with an attractive girl called Fatima and teaches tricks of the business to her father. Santiago proceeds his journey and comes to contact with an Englishman who wants to learn about alchemy. The Englishman is travelling with the caravan heading to the Egyptian deserts and Santiago accompanies him. But as he comes to the pyramid and finds the treasure, the two robbers beat him. He shares with them that he knows about the desert and they tell him that the treasure is under the sycamore tree in Spain. The two robbers philosophically hint him not to follow others' dream, but to adhere to one's own. This also indicates a part of deconstructive hint.

### **Statement of the problem**

Santiago's journey is enigmatic and uncertain. He enjoys herding the sheep across new lands and starts being familiar with interesting people and knowing about them.

Neither is he fully prepared for this tough journey of treasure hunt with sure and conformity. Whatever journey he takes, is the kind of journey that is part of esoteric ramble: a kind of vague trial and error. However, his ambitions proliferate and he is to prepare setting off a journey for the treasure. However, this is just a way to pace oneself for the unprecedented uncertainty. From deconstructive angle, he is defining meaning of life, but it turns out a provisional constituent setting him ready for another journey. This article tries to infer textual analysis and interpretative approach in its methodological application which could configurate deconstructive model of interpretations and its recent theoretical approach.

### **Deconstruction as the theoretical concept**

Deconstruction is a philosophical concept impacting intellectual and academic milieu of the twentieth century. It was derived by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 60s and then was explored in several other philosophical and intellectual discussions. Fundamentally, deconstruction questions conceptual distinctions, or ‘oppositions’ in Western philosophy which defines things from logo centric perspective. Further, it tries to see language from a chain of interpretations, thereby disbanding the connection between signifier and signified. That is, the meaning of a particular thing is created through binary proposition and differences.

*Of Grammatology*, a pioneering book by Derrida published in 1996 deals with distinct play between language and the construction of meaning. We see art and literature with is an inherent desire for meaning of a particular word and concept. It is not, however, based on any fixed principle, but is produced through conventional propositions established by esoteric signification process that is not long lasting. As a radical academic discourse, deconstruction attacked traditional binary: a word and meanings. Getting the meaning of a particular literary text is interpretation or interplay of signifiers, subverting other signifiers that can be potential in another context of interpretation.

Trying to read a text whether be it spoken or written or literary or non literary from deconstructive angle is to be conditioned by series of interpretations channeled through signifying process based on fleeting signifiers. That being the case, any reading of text is misreading, for it can just embody partial and minimal information of that concept, but waiting for several other interpretations to be prone in the realm of intertextuality. Besides, it is just a process of filling one gap in any text through an expedient justification. This definition may not work in other conditions. In this sense, any textual interpretation is not the finished product. It is rather an endless way to referring something in flux (Bloom, de Man, Derrida, Hartman and Miller 22).

Deconstructive analysis, hence, is based on provisional explanation. To note further, it is one way of contextualization until another interpretation is proposed. There is always flux and indeterminacy of the meaning. It is perpetuated with play and pause, like spinning wheel which makes a momentary pause when there is not the blow of the wind. As it is aptly put, “The play of differences, in turn, is made possible by the fact that part of the meaning of a word is very things, or things that the word excludes, for example the “day”



that “night” excludes, the “oak” tree that “acron” excludes”(Nuyen 135). When the journey and treasure hunt is correlated, there are only words which one thing in one context, leaving the gap. What they mean is also is part of their exclusion because Santiago's journey covers one aspect of journey led through his dream, but he seems to exclude several other elements as a deconstructive proposition of the meaning of the text.

### **Analysis of the text**

The novel has dream as a central driving force of the plot. Dream, by nature, is unstable mental makeup, whose formulation is not defined among dream psychologists unequivocally. Dream and dream work by Freud, is full of enigmatic psychological and physical element. There are two things: the conscious and subconscious mental stage because all dreams can expand to conscious level, but their realities, however, do not exist in the same plane. In that sense, dream is a puzzling signifier which cannot reciprocate with reality. This is the common ground this article underscores its textual interpretation. In the novel, Santiago is consistently making pursuit to seek meaning of the dream. In other words, hunting dream is analogical is hunting treasure which however seems a bit problematic in the text. This pursuit is a kind of effort of finding a connection between signifier and signified which is always far-etched thing in the deconstructive angle. Normal in context as well, we have dream in the night which changes in course of morning time, thus the meaning becomes void. That said, it is just as a term, a linguistic connotation, a deconstructive and elusive meaning conjoined by fleeting signifier.

Derrida contends that any meaning of the word is provisional, waiting for another link for signifiers. In this sense, the dream of Santiago in finding treasure is just a signifier: an expansion of the meaning. In the novel, we clearly understand that Santiago does not know about the treasure and comes to others' interpretation. We can therefore compare a situation of hunting treasure is equivalent to hunting meaning. And even that being the case, the language to define the dream, or meaning of it is elusive and relational, but not factual. This has been aptly put as “Derrida argues that presence is always elusive and relational—not the ground of truth but the illusion produced by the endless substitutions of signifiers witch which we (hopefully and futilely) try to capture it”(Poovey 108).

There is another facet of the ext to be interpreted from deconstructive angle. It is the journey Santiago makes: the journey from a simple meadow as shepherd to alien land like a wanderer. Recurring dream, entrenched into his subconscious and unconscious mind, haunts him because he does not find validity of the dream in his realistic life. A bit skeptical and uncertain, he meets the magical persons whose behests encourage him to pursue further. This can be taken as a process of finding meaning of a word, dream (a signifier) and others interpretations as hedgy signifiers. According to the deconstructive angle, this signifier is not tied to a signified. From the psychologically standpoint also, had he got any substantial meaning of the dream, it would not have occurred repeatedly. That can be easily justified in terms of Freudian sense as well, because our dreams recur in mind when they don't have anything to do with the reality. In this sense, Freudian psychology and Derrida's fleeting signifiers, though, coincide. The journey is therefore a range of

physical landscapes with absolute uncertainties and readers do not make sure where and how it may end. This journey can be interpreted as deconstructive reading of text. We corroborate Widowson's (1999) interpretation as,

A deconstructive reading, then, is governed by *aporia* (moments of absolute uncertainty), and the recognition and acceptance that all texts are ultimately unreadable, in so far as 'readability' implies that a text is reducible to a single definitive interpretation. Again, therefore, the author does not control the literary text, it does not contain a meaning and it cannot seem to hold final truth which can be extrapolated from it. (87)

Not only the dream aspect, as the central stride for interpretation, can we find several other words confusing in the novel that are intricately linked into the broader realm of deconstruction. The two terms "Urim" and "Thummim" have been referred to as magical and mysterious embodiment of ideas, mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, known as breast plate worn by high priests. However, they are not clearly justified, and some scholars take them two protective objects. And others take them as "lights and perfections." Evidently, they are not in fixed and determined in terms of plausible meanings, but are just fleeting signifiers thus somehow employed by Coelho as spiritual sense. "The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of fundamental immobility and reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of the play" (Derrida 95). For deconstruction, if language is the ground of the being, then the world is infinite text, that is, an infinite chain of signifiers always in play. Because human beings are constituted by language, they, too, are texts. In other words, deconstruction's theory of language has implications for subjectivity, for what it means to be human beings (Tyson 257).

When we compare Santiago's personality, we find similar deconstructive elements embedded into it. His personality traits are revealed as from a simple shepherd. We find as if miracle takes place. He becomes visionary and attains financial gain. Then he is enamored in love and gets it. He helps people as the messiah. How can this be possible? When a person is not pretty sure of his journey to lead his sheep, he becomes such wise, and proficient. In this perspective, we can easily deconstruct his personality. We find several changes occur in him like the fleeting signifiers.

Besides his personality, his journey can be analyzed as deconstructive vantage point. With struggles and adventures, he reaches the Egyptian desert and thinks that he may have got the treasure. Ironically, he does not get. As a result, in want of treasure, his destiny is nothing but of any wanderer. Shockingly, when one of the robbers shares his dream, he feels wonderstruck because that was what he was revealed in his dream that the treasure to be in Spain in the same dilapidated church under the same tree. Question arises: Why he makes such vain effort then and why he did not have faith in his dream. The questions can be reasonably answered in philosophical context from deconstructive angle again. When we try to get meanings, maybe we are right in some provisional and expedient situations, but the signification process of signifier never rests at stable point. We are not certain and

hunted by the process of impending signification process and lose our meanings. That is what happens to this young shepherd.

### **Conclusion**

Deconstructive lenses of any text help propose a new approach to literary text in finding certain hidden meanings. Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, I think, projects an innovative view to deal the novel as a philosophical embodiment in deconstructive angle. The story's enigmatic exposition about the journey, the people, the places and unfolding mysteries mark this novel as a contested piece of literature prone to deconstruction. And this article, I think, will open an avenue in this dimension.

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