

## **Heroic Self-discovery of the Shepherd in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the heroic self-discovery of a common shepherd in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988) through the concept of popular culture. Santiago, the protagonist, abandons his home and family in teenage for a mysterious hidden treasure. What are the reasons that make him to undertake an adventurous journey from the known to the unknown land? So this paper draws on ideas from Marshall W. Fishwick and Joseph Campbell to respond the shepherd's journey in order to substantiate his expedition as an adventure of the hero. Santiago's journey of self-discovery can be analyzed in the theoretical frame of the hero journey and the quest of myth. Therefore, Santiago's journey from Andalusia to Africa in search of a hidden treasure is uncommon because he begins his journey in a response to an exotic recurring dream where a child summons him to the Pyramids of Egypt. This is the reason why his journey differs from the celebrities, artists, politicians, and mythical heroes.*

**Keywords :** Adventure, myth, popular culture, quest, self-discovery, uncommon

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### **Introduction**

*The Alchemist* (1988) is a novel written by Paulo Coelho (1947- ) that explains an unbelievable journey of a shepherd, Santiago, from Andalusia to Africa in search of a hidden treasure. The ordinary shepherd's mission to explore the unknown world sounds like a folktale. Likewise, the concept of popular culture is also more or less developed from the folklore. Exactly, Santiago initiates his journey after a child's call to the Pyramids of Egypt in his dream. Santiago encounters numerous hurdle in his journey: meeting with the dream interpreter woman, the old man who claims to be the king of Salem, time spend with an alchemist, love experience with Fatima, captivity in

a military camp etc. reflect the upheavals of his excursion. Ultimately, he succeeds to discover the hidden treasure at the end of the expedition. Therefore, Coelho's narrative of a shepherd attract the attention of intellectuals ever since its publication.

Coelho's writing career is the blending of joy and sorrow. Reviewers and critics appear with astounding ideas after the publication of the novella. Megwen Loveless perceives the novel as "...synopsis of Coelho's metamorphosis from recalcitrant teen to enlightened sage..." (320). Loveless discovers the parallel nature of transformation between the author and the protagonist of the novel. But, Glauco Ortolano focuses on Coelho's marketing policy as a reason behind his name and fame. He writes: "Several critics in Brazil would deny his literary talent, attributing his success merely to an opportunistic marketing strategy" (90). It seems irrational to think that a novelist will be successful only through an advertising policy. The author's ability to raise the contemporary issue certainly plays an efficient role to achieve success in life. Of course, reader's response will determine it to some extent.

Media and television are popular means of communication in the modern age. Coelho expresses his artistic vision in one of his interview with Glauco Ortolano. "My literature is committed to a new political attitude: man in search of his own identity. It does not deal with the old and worn-out categories of right and left" (Ortolano and Coelho 58). Coelho's writing avoids the traditional flavor of politics and his purpose of writing is to develop a new trend in an academia. Some writers take *The Alchemist* more than a novel in the sense that it has transformed the life of the millions of the people. Sonia Soni highlighted Coelho's philosophy of 'art of living' in order to make life beautiful by following one's vision (90). Soni's observation of Coelho's philosophy echoes the words of Indian spiritual leader Ravi Shankar. The better way to live our life is to respond the dream. Surely, the achievement of a writer depends upon how sincerely he or she follows the dream.

Is it possible for an ordinary shepherd from the terrain of Andalusia to experience the marvels of the world? It seems possible if we go through the pages of history. Therefore, this paper examines the journey of an ordinary shepherd in search of a cryptic treasure and explains how it looks uncommon from the others. The outstanding journey of a shepherd reverberates through the manifestation of dreams, myths, omens, and symbols. Yet critical thinkers might have other observations as far as the study is limited to a single text of Coelho. For all this reason, the present study is different from the fables or the psychological reading of a text.

This study is based on the descriptive textual interpretation of the primary text *The Alchemist* in the light of popular culture. Marshall W. Fishwick's concept of hero and myth as well as Joseph Campbell's three stages of journey serves as a tool to analyze the protagonist's journey. The opinions and ideas of other criticare also included to support the main argument of the paper.

The present paper draws on ideas from Fishwick and Campbell to respond

the journey of the protagonist Santiago in Coelho's *The Alchemist*. Fishwick, for example, argues that heroes, myths, and archetypes are the products of earth (40). Land has immense influence in the creation of heroic and mythic figure. Similarly, Campbell reinforces hero's life as the 'pageant of marvels' throughout the quest (294). Campbell's idea of hero's life sounds highly aesthetic. The three stages of heroic journey: departure, achievement, and return is a key to analyze the novel. Similarly, Campbell believes that the hero always returns with a reward. This is what exactly happened in Coelho's *The Alchemist*. By considering these ideas of Campbell and Fishwick, the only purpose of this paper is to respond the journey of an ordinary shepherd from Andalusia to Africa in order to substantiate the claim of hero's uncommon journey.

### **Santiago's Quests for his Heroic Self**

Shepherds live their miserable life in the lap of the nature. They wander the huge terrain of land in search of food and water. In other words, they are unknown about the outside world. Similarly, they are away from the media, technology, and the mass of the people. However, Coelho's protagonist in *The Alchemist* defines an exception because he has access over books. His life style reflect the marvels of the world. What makes it possible? Santiago's desire to experience the outside world is the ultimate response to this question.

Santiago begins his journey in order to experience the world outside the terrain of Andalusia. He enjoys traveling the mysterious world. Santiago also has a wonderful habit of studying books in spite of being a shepherd. In this context, Kristjana Gunnars claims that "books are like caravans" (25) for the shepherd Santiago. Both books and caravans are the source of understanding for the shepherd. The analogy explains the way of knowledge transformation. On the other hand, Juan Arias throws light on the purpose of journey. Arias declares: "Journey has a very strong symbolic significance in people's life" (197). No journey is purposeless, but instead it has a symbolic significance. Thus, Coelho introduces his protagonist as: "His parents had wanted him to become a priest, and thereby a source of pride for a simple family. He had studied Latin, Spanish, and theology. But ever since he had been a child, he had been wanted to know the world, and this was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man's sins" (8). Santiago initiates his journey to know the unfamiliar world. He ignores the parent's desire as well as his religious creed. It seems that his childhood passion urge him to undertake the risk of wandering the world. Undoubtedly, travelling is a way of pursuing knowledge for a hero.

The recurrent dream of the protagonist can be interpreted as a 'call to adventure' in Campbell's phrase. Santiago's recurrent dream indicates significant transformation in his journey. For Campbell, it is a transformative journey of a hero to an unfamiliar place (53). Journey to an unexperienced place shows the transformation of a hero.

The small child calls Santiago to the Pyramids of Egypt in a mysterious dream that reinforce the protagonist to undertake the journey. "Instant information cries out for instant action. Faced with instant problems, we want heroes with instant solutions" (Fishwick 74). One cannot be a hero until and unless information is transformed into action. Likewise, their action must infer a solution to the problem. "It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting, he thought, as he looked again at the position of sun, and hurried his pace. He had suddenly remembered that, in Tarifa, there was an old woman who interpreted dreams" (Coelho 10-11). Santiago decides to interpret the dream with the help of an old woman. It sounds strange to the readers of the modern age. Moreover, his purpose to interpret the dream is to find his destiny. In fact, one can find his or her destiny by realizing the selfhood.

Santiago reaches to a state of refusing the call when he observes the image of Jesus in the living room of an old woman. As a student of theology, he denies deep faith in religious icon. Fishwick explains the icon as "...tangible symbols of intangible beliefs" (131). In other words, elusive beliefs cannot represent spiritual symbols. So, Santiago prefers to do his daily chores rather than engaging in religious icon. "He remembered that he had a number of things he had to take care of: he went to the market for something to eat, he traded his book for one that was thicker, and he found a bench in the plaza where he could sample the new wine he had bought (Coelho 14-15). Santiago's life style reminds us some popular cultural habits of the youth of the 21st century. Yet travelling is constantly appealing Santiago.

Apart from this, the old man's concept of mysterious force is like a supernatural aid to the protagonist Santiago. The old man's idea to impress the merchant's daughter sounds mysterious. Campbell argues that supernatural helper "...supply the amulets and advice that the hero will require" (66). As far as the hero receives the divine support, the journey moves towards success. The old man provides precious stones to guide the journey in the case of Santiago. The old man suggests in this manner: "Take these," said the old man, holding out a white stone and a black stone that had been embedded at the center of the breastplate. "They are called Urim and Thummim. The black signifies 'yes,' and the white 'no.' When you are unable to read the omens, they will help you to do so. Always ask an objective question" (Coelho 28). The stone's color and their connotation is really strange. Of course, it will help Santiago to read the omens when he is in difficulty at the journey. He suggests Santiago to ask only objective questions. For all this reason, the old man is no different than a mysterious helper for Santiago.

Moreover, the old man's narrative of a shopkeeper, who sends his son to learn about the secret of happiness from the wisest man in the world, reads like a mythology. Myth is the foundation of the popular culture. Fishwick considers them "...as supreme models of heroism and courage..." (155) in Greek myths. The valor is the parcel of a mythological hero. Definitely, the advice of a wise man supports Santiago during the

trip. "The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world, and never to forget the drops of oil on the spoon" (Coelho 30-31). The desire to see the wonders of the world is a driving force of the journey, but one should be cautious to avoid the danger. Indeed, mythological narrative urge the protagonist to cross the forthcoming threshold in a quest.

The first part of the novel ends with Santiago's decision to continue the journey. He has already received the advice from the old man. Therefore, Santiago initiates to take crucial turn in his journey so as to cross the upcoming threshold. In a similar case in point, Fishwick asserts: "...heroic reputations swing between two poles..." (63) in the journey. Surely, the hero in his quest for reputation in society is divided between two worlds: the ordinary world and the dreamy world. Santiago's experience sounds parallel to Fishwick heroes: "At the highest point in Tarifa there is an old fort, built by the Moors. From atop its walls, one can catch a glimpse of Africa" (Coelho 31). The peak of Tarifa is the border of two worlds: the ordinary world and the dreamy world where Santiago stand somewhere between Andalusia and Africa. Surely, he is in a liminal state. Anyway, Santiago moves toward his dreamy world to pursue his dream.

Santiago's trial begins soon after he leaves the beautiful terrain of Andalusia. He is robbed by his new friend at the port of Tangier. Campbell argues that the hero "... must survive a succession of trials" (89) even after receiving the advice and amulets from the supernatural helper. Campbell's argument depends upon the test and trials of the heroic figure. Santiago's journey evoke the similar impression to the readers. Coelho writes: "They walked together through the narrow streets of Tangier... But the boy never took his eye off his new friend. After all he had all his money... but nowhere could he find his companion" (35-36). Although Santiago walks with his new friend, he is unable to recognize him. Yet he did not lose his hope and confidence in his life. In this sense, Santiago's performance can mark a new paradigm in the domain of popular culture.

Next, Santiago reveals the characteristics of the hero in a new world where he is awakened by someone in the middle of the marketplace. Actually, he is in search of a hidden treasure rather than the food and water. Therefore, Santiago is happy with his present condition because it is the result of his self-decision. "The source of true heroic power is internal," observes Campbell (63). Epic power springs from the heart, and it is the ultimate way to demonstrate heroism. "He had not a cent in his pocket, but he had faith. He had decided, the night before, that he would be as much an adventurer as the ones he had admired in books" (Coelho 40). The greatest attribute of a traveler is to have faith on selfhood. Santiago makes a plan to be an adventurer as in the narratives. He generates confidence by reading books. Ultimately, knowledge derives from the books will help him to reach his destination.

Apart from this, Santiago has to work for the crystal merchant to fulfill his dream. He even suggests the merchant to build a display table for the crystal in order

to promote the business. His suggestion indicates the vision of popular culture in the life of an ordinary shepherd. Culture, according to Mathew Arnold, is "...the best that has been thought and said in the world" (qtd. in Storey 19). In other words, the best culture becomes popular in the world. For instance, the culture of the pilgrimage is replaced by travelling because travelling is more popular than the pilgrimage in the modern world. It turns out to be the way of conquering the world by the common people. "He was more confident in himself, though, and felt as though he could conquer the world" (Coelho 60). Santiago's passion to conquer the world is inspired by his confidence. Certainly, confidence is the attribute of the hero.

Anyway, Santiago continues his journey with the Englishman in search of a hidden treasure. His group travelled day and night until they reach Oasis because there is a rumor of tribal wars. In the Oasis, Fatima attracts Santiago when he approaches her to inquire about the alchemist. Fishwick contends that the charm is the parcel of the heroic figure for ages (59). Hero cannot avoid the alluring beauty during the journey. Coelho draws the condition of Santiago in this way:

At that moment, it seemed to him that time stood still, and the Soul of the World surged within him. When he looked into her dark eyes, and saw that her lips were poised between a laugh and silence, he learned the most important part of the language that all the world spoke—the language that everyone on earth was capable of understanding in their heart. It was love....(88)

Santiago feels attracted by the eye-catching personality of Fatima. He recognizes that there is a universal language on earth which reveals the voice of the heart. They express their love without using the word or an image. In fact, this is the sign of Santiago falling in love with Fatima, but the romance is followed by the obstacles in the journey.

Santiago's meeting with the strange horse man reveals his courage that is necessary for the hero. He did not lose his confidence even at the sight of a glittering sword in the moonlight. Later, tribal leader offers him fifty pieces of gold and then asks him to be the counsellor of the Oasis. Santiago's most important achievement seems to meet the alchemist in the desert. Fishwick acknowledges: "The search and need for heroes is inherent in human history" (60). As a hero figure is the part of human history, they need to be searched in every sphere of life. Santiago's plea for life out in the desert is a sign of an emerging hero. "Only those who can see such signs of life are able to find treasure" (Coelho 110). The ability to see the sign of life will help to find the treasure in the future. After all, Santiago has to pass the other trials as well.

In the heroic journey, the hero sacrifices his self for a noble cause. In the process, he prefers celestial experience over the terrestrial one. The hero undergoes a process of revelation on his quest journey. "The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world" (Campbell 37). The more the hero releases him from the bond of love, the

easier to reach his destiny. Again Santiago makes a bold decision to continue his journey for a hidden treasure. "To continue his search for the treasure meant that he had to abandon Fatima" (Coelho 113). Santiago realizes that love cannot block him to pursue his destiny. That is the reason why he resumes his journey and abandon the personal legend, Fatima.

Transformation define the hero during the course of an adventurous journey. Actually, Santiago has to transform himself into the wind when three armed tribesmen take him to the military camp. In the words of Campbell, the adventure of the hero is a "redemptive deed" (295). Redemptive action is the part of the adventure of the hero journey. Santiago's adventure calls for the redemption from the military camp. "The *simum* blew that day as it had never blown before. For generations thereafter, the Arabs recounted the legend of a boy who had turned himself into the wind, almost destroying a military camp, in defiance of the most powerful chief of the desert" (Coelho 145-46). Nature is in favor of Santiago's trial of turning himself into the wind. Otherwise, he is likely to be killed by the tribesman. His successful communication with the nature without using human language save his life. Then, Santiago becomes a legendary figure in that region.

At last, Santiago's journey in search of a hidden treasure wrap up with his miraculous performance. He feels great joy at the sight of the majestic Pyramids of Egypt. But, Santiago finds nothing even after he digs hours and hours at the place of his choice. Campbell insists that, "When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal, personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy" (179). Despite of hardship during the journey, the adventurer always returned with brilliant reward at the end. This is what happens to Santiago at the end of the novel: "In my dream, there was a sycamore growing out of the ruins of the sacristy, and I was told that, if I dug at the roots of sycamore, I would find a hidden treasure. But I'm not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream. . . Because now he knew where his treasure was" (Coelho 155). Coelho concludes his narrative by reminding Santiago the sycamore of a ruin church in Spain through a character who is unwilling to cross the desert just because of a recurrent dream. The absolute truth reveals at the end of the novel. Actually, there is no treasure hidden in the Pyramids of Egypt. In this way, the man appears as a precious reward for Santiago who realizes his selfhood in the desert.

## **Conclusion**

The dynamic journey of a shepherd, Santiago, from Andalusia to African search of a hidden treasure sounds a parallel narrative of self-discovery like that of the author Coelho. Santiago adopts some of the popular trends like travelling, studying books, drinking wine in a café etc. throughout the journey. Popular culture reflects

in the work of arts and literature, music and cinema, and feasts and festivals. So, Coelho's *The Alchemist* reverberates popular culture through myths, omens, icons, and most importantly through the universal language of love. Santiago's heroism also incorporates the mysterious combination of natural and supernatural elements. His self-realization sets a new trend in popular literature. Thus, Santiago's journey reflect the most significant stages of adventure of the hero, and his excursion to explore the unknown world establish a new paradigm of a hero in the domain of popular culture. The conclusion is drawn from the premise that popular culture always aims at discerning a new hero.

Travel literature explores the positive as well as negative aspect of the journey. Coelho's *The Alchemist* reflect the positive attitude towards human life in my observation. Santiago, an ordinary shepherd, crosses many tests and trials as in the parameter of the hero journey developed by Campbell. As a result, he is able to realize his self near the end of the novel. Santiago's self-realization is the supreme reward of the journey. An adventurous journey is driven by the passion rather than power and position. The success of the shepherd is a departure from the canon of the past. At last, his reciprocal relation with the nature and natural objects can be another useful topic for further research because his communication with the wind is highly impressive in the entire novel. The reason behind this suggestion is to highlight the importance of reciprocity that is what lacking in the present world.

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