



IMMERSION OF THE SOUL IN THE UNIVERSAL CURRENT OF LIFE IN *THE ALCHEMIST*

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Abstract

Eco-narratives are narratives that help the reader realize that man is part of the universe and need to be rooted to mother earth/ nature. In reference to this statement, the paper explores Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* where the narrative is visual and a lot of motifs and symbols are used in the form of omens and 'calling' to find one's life purpose. The author through the protagonist Santiago informs the reader, that life should be in tune with nature/ environment to accomplish his/ her dream. The paper examines the protagonist path taken to achieve his dream in comparison with the Englishman and studies the reason for other characters in the fiction for not materializing their dream. In narration of the protagonist life puts forth that everything in our surrounding has a soul and something manifests life in all the objects like the sand, water, rocks etc. The novel helps the reader to identify their goals/ dreams which is the life's purpose and if one is determined to achieve their purpose than the universe too conspires by helping them to achieve. For this the person should be alert and learn to recognize omens, this is possible only when the person knows what they want, and promises that the universe is close at hand to help people who want to realize their destiny.

Key words: nature, dream, soul, courage, nurture, action.

May I be a protector for those without one,
A guide for all travelers on the way;
May I be a bridge, a boat and a ship
For all who wish to cross (the water)

Acharya Shantideva (8th Century Buddhist Master)

Eco-narratives are narratives that help the reader realize that man is part of the universe and need to be rooted to mother earth/ nature. In reference to this statement, the paper explores Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* where the narrative is visual and lot of motifs and symbols are used in the form of omens and 'calling' to find one's life purpose. The author through the protagonist Santiago informs the reader, that life should be in tune with nature/ environment to accomplish his/ her dream. The paper examines the protagonist path taken to achieve his dream in comparison with the Englishman and studies the reason for other characters in the fiction for not materializing their dream. In narration of the protagonist life puts forth that everything in our surrounding has a soul and something manifests life in all the objects like the sand, water, rocks etc. The novel helps the reader to identify their goals/ dreams which is the life's purpose and if one is determined to achieve their purpose then the universe too conspires by helping them to achieve. For this the person should be alert and learn to recognize omens, this is possible only when the person knows what they want, and promises that the universe is close at hand to help people who want to realize their destiny. Only then the evolution of an individual creative process can be vividly registered.

Paulo Coelho born in Rio, in August 1947 dreamt for himself an artistic career, but his parents had other dreams for him. When Paulo showed more interest towards literature, his parents mistook it

to be mental illness and Paulo was forced to undergo electroconvulsive “therapy”, even after he became involved with a theatre group and also started to work as a journalist. Paulo also embraced progressive politics and joined the peace and love generation during the guerrilla and hippy movements. He even ventured as a music lyricist, transforming the Brazilian rock scene. Paulo joined the Alternative Society- organization which defended an individual’s right for free expression. This new enterprise calling for more freedom put his life into trouble. At the age of 26 Paulo felt he was living a life too much on the edge and yearned for a normal life. He started as an executive in the music industry and as a writer with little success. Paulo had an encounter with a stranger who had come in his vision two weeks earlier. This man suggested a lot of things to Paulo, following his words turned out to be heartwarming state of affairs. He published *The Pilgrimage* which describes his experience and discovery that extraordinary things happen to ordinary people. There is no turning back after this -along with *The Alchemist*, he has published many books, is sought after by his readers. *The Alchemist* was translated into 61 languages, sold worldwide and became an international best seller. The secret behind the success of this book Paulo Coelho explains that it was a personal calling to write, the success followed. The book goes on to explain what this personal calling is through the protagonist’s journey, exploring his life identifying his calling- that each individual needs to identify and follow persistently like the protagonist did.

The Alchemist is one of the books that seize one's attention every page the reader reads. The book starts with a prologue –a story the alchemist is impressed with, the twist to a well known story of Narcissus. Narcissus, a youth who knelt daily beside a lake to contemplate his own beauty ... One morning, he fell into the lake and drowned. At the spot a flower was born- named Narcissus. The addition to this story is that- the goddesses of the forest found the lake of fresh water transformed

into lake of salty tears because the lake wept for Narcissus. “Why do you weep?” the goddess asked. “I weep for Narcissus,” the lake replied. (xiii) When the goddess said none other than the lake could contemplate Narcissus’ beauty close at hand, the lake was surprised about Narcissus beauty. Further exchange of words made the lake silent and said: “I weep for Narcissus, but I never noticed that Narcissus was beautiful. I weep because, each time he knelt beside my banks, I could see, in the depths of his eyes, my own beauty reflected.” (xiii) This story of the Narcissus helps us understand people’s obsession and its impact on others, which is always mistaken/ misunderstood. The narration of the fiction goes full circle especially in terms of the place and story, but the protagonist is transformed into a different human “The Alchemist” in the end. An alchemist is a person who can transform any metal into gold. The title is a metaphor for life; a similar effort is required to transform oneself into a valuable person. The title “The Alchemist”, its meaning is beautifully explained in the character the Englishman and Santiago. The Englishman is a well-read man, he knows to identify omens, he knows the procedure, but he is not in tune with nature, he goes by the books, and could not undergo himself the arduous life because of fear of failure. He tried to look out for and establish a relationship with an alchemist. When he could not find one, he thought they failed to discover the secret of the master work. As he continued reading, in one of the books he came across a famous alchemist- more than two hundred years old, living in Arabia. The book said he had discovered the Philosopher’s Stone and the Elixir of Life. This information was supplemented by his friend, returning from Arab, an archaeological expedition. The Englishman immediately cancelled all his assignments and carrying his best books on alchemy started his journey to Arab lands to meet the alchemist. On the other hand, the boy Santiago, now resembling an Arab- following his dream path, collided with the Englishman. The Englishman encouraged the boy to read. Reading the Englishman's books, the boy learns a lot of things about

different books on various topics on life and Alchemist. During the conversation the boy suggests to the Englishman to observe the desert, try to read the surrounding/ nature. After few days the boy realizes that he did not gain much from reading he did not want to look like the Englishman and closes the book. In fact both were disappointed because they were not able to appreciate much of what they did. This sharing of knowledge and its consequence helped the boy realize that they were both different “everyone has his or her own way of learning things”. Nevertheless both are in search of their destinies and he respected the Englishman for that. The Englishman looking for the alchemist in the oasis for help could not meet him, instead the boy had the opportunity to meet the alchemist who identifying the need of the boy guided him, traveling with him closer to achieve his dream. When the Englishman did not get the required help, he realizes his procrastination- took to action putting up a furnace outside his tent. Informs the boy he should have started ten years ago. He was happy that finally he was on his way to becoming an alchemist.

The difference with the boy Santiago and other characters in the novel is in the action taken, the action follows dreams and omens, including individual’s strong feelings, a guide (encounter with strangers) that the universe provides to fulfill one's dreams. One also has to face a lot of hurdles that make them stronger to feel deserved to reach where/ when one’s journey ends. How does this story become an eco-narrative?

The book helps the reader to understand that everything on this earth has a purpose and one needs to identify it in the first place. After identifying one has to doggedly take action to fulfill it. This action and purpose should be in tune with our ecology which is evolving continuously. This is beautifully put across in his narration of the fiction- **the dilemma** one encounters to choose the

unknown path, to overcome the obstacles, exactly identifying universal state of affairs in our journey- how to blend in such times....is in detail explored through the protagonist decisions and monologues.

This 'purpose of our life' the writer accentuates again and again- is possible when one is in tune with nature and bear the hurdles the nature pose courageously- to each of them trying to realize one's goal. The boy encounters many who do not realize their dream even after realizing the purpose of life. How they settle for ordinary life like the sheep. The paper explores the protagonist's path taken to achieve success with those he comes across- few characters who don't follow their dreams. The narration distinguishes the characters, who settle for ordinary life- the boy's father, the baker- a story the king narrates to help the boy not to give up on his dream and the crystal merchant. In the narration of the camel driver is laid down to show that some are pushed into following one's dream.

The first person in the narration is the boy's father, who listening to his son's interest in traveling tried to convince the boy to stay back and become a priest. He also discouraged the boy by telling him that people even after traveling remain the same all over the world, though they look different. Adding to this he said that their town, countryside and women were most beautiful than any other. When he could not convince the boy to stay back he gave him a pouch that held three ancient Spanish gold coins to buy a flock and blessed the boy. The boy saw in his father's gaze his desire to travel the world- a desire that was still alive but he had buried it, over dozens of years, under the burden of struggling for water to drink, food to eat, and the same place to sleep every night of his life. (9) This incident proves that it is not the age, time and situation that matters, it is the

willingness to take one's dream into action which is the greatest challenge. The author explains to us through the voice of the boy that:

“When someone sees the same people every day, has had happened with him at the seminary, they wind-up becoming a part of that person’s life. And then they want the person to change. If someone isn’t what others want them to be, the others become angry. Everyone seems to have a clear idea of how other people should lead their lives, but none about his or her own”. 15

The boy has been a shepherd for some time now and settled comfortably in his new profession. He knows the in and out of rearing sheep and people and place around, was about to propose a girl and forget his dream of venturing. At this point the king, a guide helps the boy realize that he had succeeded in discovering his destiny. This destiny is what one wants to accomplish in life. He further says that “Everyone, when they are young, knows what their destiny is”, it is clear to them at that age, they also feel everything is possible- are not afraid to dream and yearn to see their dreams happen to them in their lives. But as time passes, a mysterious force convinces them it is impossible to realize their destiny. Then the heart speaks slowly so as to let life proceed, in its own direction/fate. Not to cause suffering to people, but the heart suffers silently. Unfortunately very few follow the path led out for them that is destiny leading to happiness. The king further inspires the boy saying- most people see the world as a threatening place, and so the world turns out to be a threatening place for them. The narration of the story, enlighten the readers not to give into fears -leading to failure.

The King narrates the story of the baker, second person the boy understands – does not fulfill his dream in spite of all things favoring him. He got trapped in his daily activity of life -to be a baker.

It is the old man (king) pointing to a baker standing in his shop window at one corner of the plaza told the boy that he too wanted to travel as a child. Thinking of putting aside some money before he ventured on his dream travel, he took up as a baker. Now he is convinced he would spend a month in Africa when he is an old man. The old man tried his best to make the boy realize in the course of this story that people are capable at any time in their lives, of doing what they dream. (21) Further shed light on the baker being more important people than shepherds, because bakers have homes; parents would prefer to see their children marry bakers than shepherds who sleep in the open. The main intention of the old man was to help the boy become conscious and pursue his dream.

The next person is the crystal merchant whom the boy happens to work for after he was robbed and had no place to go for. He looked for the omens with patience which he had learnt with his sheep when he worked for the merchant. This crystal merchant awoke every morning with the same anxiety, had been running a shop at the top of a hilly street for thirty years now with few customers visiting the shop. He had lost hope thinking it was too late to do anything. The merchant though an old grouch, treated the boy fairly giving good commission for each piece he sold. He was a devout man, wanted to live his life in accordance with the Muslim law. He had fulfilled the four obligations but was not able to fulfill his fifth obligation to visit the holy city of Mecca. As a child he wanted to put together enough money to start the shop and decided that once he would be rich, he would go to Mecca. But he could never bring himself to leave someone in charge of the shop, so never made his journey. The merchant at this instant thinks he should not fulfill his dream because he feels he has lost the meaning of life- living a mundane life, thinking of coming back to the same place, after the visit to lead the same mundane life troubled him. This visit to Mecca was

a hope to continue his life than to live for nothing. This conversation of the merchant to give up his travel had both positive and negative impact on the boy. He started feeling like the merchant to give up his dream and go back to his sheep and live with hope, but that was not what he wanted and besides the thought of quitting troubled him, brought him unhappiness. He deliberated that he could always be a shepherd or a crystal merchant even if he fails to find the treasure following his dream. This thought gave him more happiness and satisfaction. Possibly, cleaning the crystals freed him of this negative thought- **quitting**. The boy worked enthusiastically promoting the business by placing a display case down the hill and serving tea in crystal glasses, bringing prosperity to both the boy and the merchant. The boy's journey to the pyramids although delayed by a year was resumed soon.

Life is made tough for people with the responsibility of understanding one's surrounding. Only those who are persistent and willing to study things deeply achieve the master work. 78 Walking in the desert the boy realized that the world has a soul and whoever understood that soul could also understand the language of things/ surroundings. The boy gained a lot of information in relation to the alchemist after stumbling upon the Englishman. Nature evolves so should the other creatures that exist in this world should continuously work towards progress/ evolution. Man, an intelligent creature believes and considers himself to be powerful. He mends his surrounding according to his needs and comforts to lead a stable life. This he assumes to be a highly developed, sophisticated life discards seasons and fruition, losing the real essence of life. Nature knows its surrounding better -time and again reminds its creatures of the purpose in this universe. One person who realizes nature and its evolution in the fiction is the camel driver who helps the caravan, narrates his story to the boy.

The camel driver used to live near EI Cairum. He had an orchid, children and a life that would not change until he died. One year when the crop was best ever, he along with his family went to Mecca and satisfied the final obligation of life. This brought in him a complacent look at life that made him feel good and happy. But one day the earth trembled and the Nile overflowed its bank, ruining the land, destroying many families around him. He had no choice but to fend for his family and took up being the camel driver ferrying people in the desert, it gave him happiness. This incident in the camel driver's life helped him not to fear the unknown, to comprehend that they are capable of achieving what they need and want at any point of time. "We are afraid of losing what we have, whether it's our life or our possessions and property. But this fear evaporates when we understand that our life stories and the history of the world were written by the same hand." 73

The author, continuously construct in the narration the comfortable situation of a stable life in the protagonist; that he had everything, he was progressing incessantly by making the right decisions. But every time he had to make decisions, a recapitulation of the boy's journey is made to the reader, his thought process circumstances aiding to the right decision. The author calls it 'Maktub' which means fate. There are many omens to assist people who want to track their dream. These omens are not things of the world like eating or sleeping or seeking love or job but are language used by god/ nature to indicate what one should follow/ take up. The fiction has a lot of references to Omens –In the Kings word- "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 for you." 28 Some of the omens that aid the boy are: butterfly appeared and fluttered between him and the old man, the hawks informed the boy of the war in the oasis. Looking for life in the desert boy found a snake to follow towards his treasure. Drop of his sweat at the pyramids was an indication

to dig at that spot... but if the boy is confused, he can use the two stones given to him by the king Urim and Thummim depending on which stone shines, he makes the choice.

A lot of references to nature are also made in the fiction, he says one has to be in tune with the universe for it to oblige. The old man wants the boy to grasp that the universe conspires to help him achieve it when he wants something but one should have patience. To explain patience he narrates a story about the miner, who was about to give up his dream after spending five years trying to find his emerald -grew angry, in his frustration a stone which was rolled by the king towards him to identify the emerald, was picked up and thrown by the miner. This wrong action of his broke the emerald that he was looking for. The author gives hints at many places in the fiction about the desert having its own mind. The wind, the sun and the silence around are given as references frequently. In one instance the boy is challenged to turn into wind to expose his power over nature by the alchemist- his harmony with the nature. His conversation with the desert, the wind and the sun about love: When the desert asks what love is. The boy replies that, "Love is the falcon's flight over your sands. Because for him, you are a green field, from which he always returns with game. He knows your rocks, your dunes, and your mountains, and you are generous to him." 138 Further draws a comparison of what is not love and explains the true love in the lines: "It's not love to be static like the desert, nor is it love to roam the world like the wind. And it's not love to see everything from a distance, like you do. Love is the force that transforms and improves the Soul of the world." 143 This soul like other aspects of creation has its own passions and wars, it is in how people nourish the soul of the world, that the world will either be better or worse. The power of love comes from people always striving to become better/ evolving. Another explanation

of love that is referred is that “Love never keeps a man from pursuing his destiny. If he abandons that pursuit, it’s because it wasn’t true love- that speaks the language of the world.”¹¹⁵

The alchemist clarifies the boy’s doubts of people trying to practice alchemist: Many who want to be an alchemist are looking for gold- the treasure of their destiny, without wanting actually to live out the destiny.¹²⁰ God created the world so that, through its visible objects, man could understand his spiritual teachings and the marvels of his wisdom- his action and not just the destination is important.

CONCLUSION

The crux of the story is hidden in this narration of the shopkeeper who sent his son to learn the secret of happiness from the wisest man in the world. The boy wandering in the dessert for forty days reaches the castle, high atop a mountain where the wise man lives. There were many people from different backgrounds whom the wise man engaged until his turn. The wise man listening attentively to the boy asks him to look around the palace and return after two hours, as he is unable to explain the secret of happiness at that point. Meanwhile he wanted him to hold a teaspoon that held two drops of oil. After returning the wise man asked the boy if he had noticed the Persian tapestries hanging in the dining hall, the garden that took ten years for the master gardener to create, beautiful parchments in the library etc. which the boy had not seen. He was sent back again this time he observed the surrounding but ignored the spoon and the oil it held. So the secret of happiness or this life is to enjoy the marvels of the world at the same time not to forget the drops of oil on the spoon. This was what the boy did as a shepherd. He had loved to travel and took care of his sheep.

The author stresses on the need to possess a lot of courage and patience to achieve ones dream. Once the courage is exhibited the universe helps the person by giving hints and supporting the cause at times, but it is the individual who should be constantly aware of his goal and take action accordingly.

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