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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Symbolism in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

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Article History: Submitted-09/02/2019, Revised-26/02/2019, Accepted-27/02/2019, Published-20/03/2019.

Abstract:

Symbolism is a popular technique used in literature when a writer presents an idea with multi-level meanings. That idea is presented through symbols. A symbol can be an object, person, situation, event, or actions that have a deeper meaning in the context resulting in enriching writing and enlightening the reader. The technique of symbolism is practiced by almost all the writers of all the eras. But there are few who use this art wonderfully and took it to the lofty heights. One such writer is Paulo Coelho. Paulo Coelho is one of the most widely read and celebrated authors of the contemporary world. He is remarkable for his great psychological insight and excellent use of symbolism in his works. His novel "The Alchemist", an international best seller, is highly symbolic. This research attempts to show Paulo Coelho's great concern for symbols and his purpose to present the spiritual reality in the "The Alchemist" which he suggests through his art of symbolism.

Keywords: Symbol, Spiritual reality, Personal legend, Dreams, Inner happiness, Soul of the World, journey.

Introduction

A symbol is an object that represents, stands for or suggests an idea, visual image, belief, action or material entity. Symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures or visual images and are used to convey ideas and beliefs. (Campbell 143).

Symbols are one of the means which aid a human being to get an improved understanding of the universe and guides him in making better judgments. As Langer states, "Symbols are the

bases of all human understanding and serves as a vehicle of conception for all human knowledge" (Langer 93).

Every great artist employs the technique of symbolism or makes use of symbols in his works because he cannot reveal his thoughts explicitly. Kajali Sharma rightly wrote, "Since an artist cannot always adequately express his ideas about life through his artistic medium directly, he has to resort to symbolic devices. Besides, he generally apprehends something mysterious and unknown in the world, and to communicate his vision of it he often feels the need for employing symbols" (Symbolism 01). That is why we find presence of symbolism in almost every important work of literary genre—poetry, drama, fiction etc – from ancient to the present times. However, novel writing is of recent origin in comparison with poetry and drama. Therefore, the presence and significance of symbolism in it have been realized late. In fact, it is in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that symbolic meaning become a mark of greatness of a work of fiction too. Emphasizing the value and need of symbolism in art and literature, Joseph Conrad, a great twentieth century fictionist asserts in a letter written to Barrett in 1918:

A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character....All the great creations of literature have been symbolic, and in that way have gained in complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty.(Conrad 189)

Many great novelists such as Anita Desai, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Andre Gide, William Faulkner etc have made use of symbols abundantly in their novels. Similarly Paulo Coelho, one of the most famous novelists of the present era, exploited this technique of symbolism brilliantly in his books.

Paulo Coelho's novels are highly symbolic and have touched the hearts of the people everywhere. Some of his best known novels are – *The Pilgrimage*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Fifth Mountain*, *Veronika Decides to Die*, *The Devil and the Miss Prym*, *Manual of the Warrior of Light*, *Eleven Minutes* and *The Zahir*. But his most famous and successful novel is "The Alchemist" which is amazing or we can say, mind blowing in its use of

symbolism. Though “The Alchemist” is a simple tale written in a simple language, but behind this simple story, there are profound and grand ideas hidden.

The text “The Alchemist” is full of symbols. However, it would be impossible to discuss all the symbols. Therefore, the present paper has focused more on the major symbols and tried to interpret their meanings so that the reader can catch the real message of the novel.

Narcissus

The first major and beautiful symbol that Paulo Coelho paints in “The Alchemist” is the symbol of Narcissus depicted in prologue of the novel. The writer presents the symbol in such a wonderful manner that all the earlier versions of the myth of Narcissus that highlight the negative connotations of Narcissus seems poor and unappealing. Actually, it is by the modified and lovely ending of the story of Narcissus that arrests the attention of a reader and compels him to rethink over the myth again and again. One possible meaning that the symbol of Narcissus seems to suggest is that it implies a treasure of spiritual beauty which is few able to achieve. Here, it is the lake that gets this spiritual wealth. The lake’s achievement is evident in the following comment made by the goddesses of the forest when they found it mourning over the loss of Narcissus:

“Ah, it is no surprise that you weep for Narcissus,” they said, “for though we always perused him in the forest, you alone could contemplate his beauty close at hand”(Coelho XIII).

The comment puzzled the lake because it hadn’t seen the physical beauty of Narcissus. That is why, at the end the lake 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 (Coelho XIV).

This clearly shows that Narcissus symbolizes spiritual beauty therefore a precious treasure for the lake.

In addition to the above meaning, Narcissus also seems to represent one who is able to understand and recognize his true self. It is evident that Narcissus 'knelt each day' to see his image in the lake but it may be also true that he went there to contemplate the beauty of self or may be, to understand the mystery of self. Therefore, the reader can interpret that Narcissus's contemplation might have led him to the spiritual depths and consequently, he might have lost all control over his material self and got drowned.

Thus, we can say that Paulo Coelho wants to suggest through the symbol of Narcissus something positive as well as spiritual. He tries to convey that everyone is in search of his personal legend and that real treasure can be achieved only by one who has no material greed like the lake or by one who focus on the inner wealth of a thing where he will find reflection of his true self like Narcissus. The writer repeats this beautiful idea in the story of the novel through the protagonist, Santiago and his treasure that he gets in the end at the Pyramids of Egypt.

Alchemy

The central symbol around which all the other symbols revolve and which is also implied in the title of "The Alchemist" is, of course, the alchemy. However, it is not the literal alchemy, transformation of lead into gold, that Paulo Coelho aimed at but his real purpose is to show the spiritual progression and perfection of an individual like Santiago who is passionate to realize the dreams of his Personal Legend.

The spiritual transformation of Santiago had already started before the story begins though we first learn about the term 'alchemy' when Santiago met Englishman. His renunciation of base and ordinary life is reported to us in a flashback. He had embraced the life of a shepherd, "he was able every day to live out his dream" (10). However, later, Santiago left the life of shepherd too because his curiosity to know the 'Soul of the World' grew more than before. He suffered an intense conflict. On the one side he feared to leave his present life but on the other he was passionate to make a journey to the Pyramids of Egypt. Finally, his desire to pursue his dreams won and he resolved to scarify his sheep for "something he wanted to have" (26). But to pursue the dreams of his personal legend he had to cross the vast desert which challenged him at every step. Santiago accepted each and every challenge of the desert bravely and it is here his maximum spiritual development took place. He confronted death many times in the vast desert

and every time he emerged superior than his previous self. His spiritual transformation was a step by step process. At every stage he learned great values of life. Though sometimes Santiago was not able to tolerate his sufferings like saying goodbye to his true love, Fatima, which was a hard thing for him but with the passage of time Santiago even bear this separation too as he now understands the truth about true love that it " never keeps a man from pursuing his destiny" (115). Thus further strengthened his soul and spirit. Afterwards, he also learnt how to listen to his heart, to contemplate and meditate and to read the omens. Gradually and slowly his endurance in the path of his dreams led him close to the 'The Soul of the World'. Then he was also able to transform himself into the wind by his strong will as well as by his strong faith and belief on the Supreme Hand who "could transform the sea into desert... Or a man into the wind" (145). Ultimately, at the end, he gets success in the quest of his personal legend as he caught the sight of the great pyramids and achieves the spiritual peace and perfection. In other words, we can say that Santiago like a 'true alchemist', who cuts himself from all the pleasures of life, "tried to evolve, as gold had" (131) and found the secrets of his treasure and became "better than he was in his former life"(143). The alchemy or the transformation from earthly life to spiritual life is referred in the following quote spoken by alchemist, one of the principal characters of the novel:

You already know about alchemy. It is about penetrating to the Soul of the World, and discovering the treasure that has been reserved for you (Coelho 130).

Desert

The desert, where the major and most significant portion of "The Alchemist" is set, is symbolically very essential. The desert suggests a vast field with dangers and uncertainty lurking at every step of a traveler. It is the world where one must trust the person who had played with the dangers and had crossed the field like the leader of the caravan who knew that "The desert is a capricious lady, and sometimes she drives man crazy." (68). Further, The danger and risk of the desert is clearly indicated in the following lines of the novel where the alchemist advised Santiago after checking his courage:

"Courage is the quality most essential to understanding the Language of the World... You must not let up even after having come so far," he continued. "You must love

the desert, but never trust it completely. Because the desert tests all men: it challenges every step, and kills those who become distracted” (Coelho106)

Hence, the world of desert spares only courageous like Santiago. It is a brave world and hates cowards. In spite of his courage and confidence Santiago suffered intensely because "...the dessert is, so huge, and the horizons so distant, that they make a person feel small..."(70). But the more Santiago suffered the less fear of desert became.

However, this huge world of desert encouraged Santiago to learn and experience the spiritual truths of life. Santiago began to receive spiritual inspiration as soon as he moved in the desert. He thought that he had learnt from the past and can learn from the present too that is, from the desert. To him desert seems ‘old and wise’. “The desert fills men’s hearts with vision” (96) commented the Camel Driver on listening Santiago’s ‘experience of the moment’. The desert became a means to penetrate the ‘Soul of the World’ and enhanced the spiritual growth of Santiago. Therefore, the desert can also be the symbol of a spiritual inspirer. The desert as a spiritual inspirer is highlighted through the beautiful advice of alchemist to Santiago which is given below:

....The desert will give you an understanding of the world; in fact, anything on the face of the earth will do that. You don’t even have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a single grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of the creation. (Coelho 122)

Besides this, the desert provides Santiago an opportunity to comprehend the meaning of a true love which is presented clearly in the following lines of "The Alchemist" when he first met the desert woman, Fatima;

At this moment, it seemed to him that time stood still, and the Soul of the World surged within him. When he looked into her dark eye, 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. Something older than humanity, more ancient than the desert.... (Coelho88).

Thus, the desert suggests that sort of the world, which challenges as well as inspires its travelers and make them strong and wise personalities with the passage of time.

Pyramid

The pyramids are very important and powerful symbols that we find in the book “The Alchemist”. They seem to manifest number of meanings. They suggest the final and essential part of Santiago's personal legend but at the same time the difficult part too because of the long distance. Sometimes, they seem to challenge Santiago’s dream. The more Santiago walked in the direction of the pyramids the more tough his journey became. The journey not only became difficult but also demanded much sacrifice. Once Santiago "didn't want to talk about the pyramids" because "His heart was heavy... To continue his search for the treasure meant that he had to abandon Fatima." (113). However, he left Fatima too for the dream of his personal legend and continued his journey towards the pyramids of the Egypt. But at the end of his journey, Santiago’s heart overwhelmed with joy as he saw the great Pyramids of Egypt “illuminated by the light of the moon and the brightness of the desert” (152). The pyramids here represent the realization and actualization of Santiago's dream. He felt enlightened and awakened." He thanked God for making him believe in his destiny "(152).

Thereafter, he dug at the pyramids for his treasure but found nothing. "He felt weighted down by the centuries of time since the Pyramids had been built." (153). Here, the pyramids symbolize some deep and unfathomable secret which is not easy to excavate. But Santiago's continuous digging and his struggle made it possible when in front of the same pyramids he came to know the secret of his hidden treasure. The spiritual triumph and inner happiness as well as the knowledge that Santiago achieves is actually the real treasure that he gets from the pyramids. That is why the narrator of the novel "The Alchemist" said:

The boy stood up shakily, and looked once more at the Pyramids. They seemed to laugh at him, and he laughed back, his heart bursting with joy. Because now he knew where his treasure was. (155)

The symbol of pyramids also implies the spiritual agencies that have the power of knowledge and wisdom and that bestow the gift of knowledge and wisdom on them who like

Santiago suffer and scarify all their material possessions and belongings for the dreams of their personal legends and never give their dreams up until they achieve them.

Church

The story of "The Alchemist" opens with Santiago's arrival along with his sheep at an abandoned church, another great symbol, description of which is given in the following way:

The roof had fallen in long ago, and an enormous sycamore had grown on the spot where the sacristy had once stood (Coelho 03)

From the above given lines of the text, the reader can understand that the church symbolizes the organized religion which once had restricted the freedom of people but now has become a ruin which is no longer able to oppress the true spirit of God's creation. The freedom of spirit implied by the huge sycamore tree which crossed the boundaries of the church to grow its fullest also highlighted the weakness of the church.

Furthermore, Santiago's dream in his sleep shows the incapability of the church to imprison the power of vision of human beings. In fact, in the beginning, Santiago visited the church not for any religious purpose but only to save his business because "once an animal had stayed during the night, and the boy had had to spend the entire day searching for it (03). And, at the end, Santiago returned to the same church to get his treasure but the treasure was hidden below the sycamore tree in the earth which, of course, is a creation of Supreme Hand and not a man made construction like the church.

In simple terms we can say that the church suggests only a broken shell hollow inside. It can neither limit the freedom of true spirit nor can have the power to bind the dreams of people like Santiago.

Sheep and Shepherd

Another major and the significant symbol in the text "The Alchemist" is the sheep and the shepherd. When the story of the novel starts Santiago had already rejected the suggestion of his parents who wanted him "to become a priest, thereby a source of pride for a simple farm family" (08). He had preferred to become a shepherd and rear the sheep than bound himself to one

particular place. However, he did not love to rear the sheep but opted for shepherding only to fulfill his purpose of travelling. This is manifested in the following lines of the text:

“Amongst us, the only ones who travel are the shepherds” said the father. Santiago replied, “Well, then I will be a shepherd”. (Coelho 09)

Santiago’s adoption of the life of shepherd stands for individual’s choice for the life that helps him to escape from his mundane as well as narrow society and provides him an opportunity to know the world around. Though, later on, Santiago left the job of shepherd but the thought of his sheep comforted him whenever he felt that he could not be able to continue in his long journey. This is evident in the book when he changed his decision to return to Spain. The following lines show this:

I know why I want to get back to my flock, he thought. I understand sheep; they’re no longer a problem, and they can be good friends. On the other hand, I don’t know if the desert can be a friend, and it’s in the desert that I have to search for my treasure. If I don’t find it, I can always go home.... (Coelho 61)

Here, we can judge that sheep and shepherd symbolize a good option for Santiago to live a settled life in case he failed in his quest.

However, the sheep also stands for the simple aspect of life which when contemplated connects one to the 'Soul of the World' and teaches him the 'Language of the World'. It is revealed in the text when the narrator says:

...the sheep had taught him something even more important; that there was a language in the world that everyone understood, a language the boy had used throughout the time that he was trying to improve things at the shop. It was the language of enthusiasm, of things accomplished with love and purpose, and as part of a search for something believed in and desired (Coelho 59)

Emerald Tablet

Emerald Tablet is also among the dominant symbols of the novel “The Alchemist”. The protagonist, Santiago read in one of the books of alchemy “that the most important text in the

literature of alchemy contained only a few lines, and had been inscribed on the surface of an Emerald" (76). He learnt from Englishman that the inscription is a code and needs extensive reading in order to understand it. But alchemist, Santiago's teacher and guide, denies the symbols on the surface as a code. According to him;

It is like the flight of those two hawks; it can't be understood by reason alone. The Emerald Tablet is a direct passage to the Soul of the World. (121).

These words of the alchemist helps the reader to a great extent to understand the symbol of Emerald tablet and the reader can analyse that the writer attempts to mirror through the symbol of Emerald Tablet a simple and pure thing which reflects the grand spiritual message that one can understand easily through meditation and observation than mere reason.

Actually, through the symbol of Emerald Tablet, Paulo Coelho aims to disclose the limitation of the rational and theoretical research which is no doubt large in quantity but lacks the quality of the truth. The reason alone cannot help a person to comprehend the perfect. In another words, we can say that through Emerald Tablet the writer wants to emphasize the importance of experience as well as the need of contemplation of simple and pure things. It is obvious in the below lines of the novel:

...the master work could be written simply on an emerald. But men began to reject simple things, and to write tracts, interpretations, and philosophical studies. They also began to feel that they know a better way than others had. Yet the Emerald Tablet is still alive today. (Coelho120).

Urim and Thummim

The one more noted symbol that a reader can find in the text of "The Alchemist" is Urim and Thummim. The two stones are highly symbolic in the context of the novel. They are introduced in the story when Santiago met the old man, Melchizedek. During their meeting Melchizedek gave Santiago these two stones. The reader can infer here that Urim and Thummim are the physical representations of the old man's knowledge that he gave to Santiago in case he felt difficulty in understanding the 'Soul of the World'. This is demonstrated in the given paragraph of "The Alchemist":

“Take these”, said the old man, holding out a white stone and a black stone that had been embedded at the center of 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)

Santiago used the stones only once when he was robbed by a thief in the beginning of his journey to Pyramids of Egypt. The stones answered his first question but as soon as he asked the second one both the stones fell to the ground. The fall of stones indicates the danger of trusting too much on objective knowledge. But it is in this way the stones reinforced Santiago to believe more on his own self. That is why, immediately, after the fall, he said to himself: “I promise that I would make my own decisions” (39).

However, Santiago never used the stones afterwards. But whenever he looked at them during his journey, sometimes after long intervals, he felt himself strangely close to the old man who reminded him of his personal legend. Thus, Urim and Thummim can also stand for the strong spiritual stimulators that encouraged Santiago to follow his dream.

Conclusion

After examining the symbols of the novel “The Alchemist”, it is clear that Paulo Coelho emphasis on the spiritual aspect of man’s life and hence, inspires him to quest bravely his personal legend in which his real and true happiness resides. To put it simply, the writer’s purpose behind the symbolism is to remove the fear of failure from the hearts of people and make everyone believe that nothing is impossible when one is determined to excavate the treasure of his personal legend.

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