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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Paulo Coelho's *The Pilgrimage*: A Unique Search for the Meaningful

Dr. A.K. Chaturvedi
Asst. Professor of English
Govt SLP College Gwalior

There is no denying the fact that Paulo Coelho with more than a dozen novels to his credit has emerged as a contemporary literary figure of international repute. The *Pilgrimage* marks his entry into the world of fiction with a bang followed by a big bang in the form of his most popular novel *The Alchemist*. No doubt, *The Alchemist* has earned him immense popularity far and wide and established him as a novelist of consummate skill. His other novels which include *The Valkyries*, *Like the Flowing River*, *By the River Pedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Zahir*, *The Witch of Portobello*, *The Devil and Miss Prym*, *The Fifth Mountain*, *Eleven Minutes* and *Manual of the Warrior of Light* flowed from his pen in quick succession and succeeded to capture the attention of the novel loving readers across the globe. The novel under discussion is about the Brazilian protagonist's quest for the sword which stands for all that is meaningful to him in the world. This paper aims to highlight diverse experiences he encounters during his adventurous journey that he undertakes to find the sword in Santiago.

Human life is not meant merely for eating, drinking and merry-making. Its meaning lies in a quest for something true and meaningful. Paulo Coelho's philosophy of life as reflected in the novel subscribes to this fact. The protagonist of the novel eschews his hearth and home, wife and domestic strife, and wholeheartedly engages himself in a long abiding search of the sword which symbolizes ancient wisdom and represents his anointment as the Master and Knight of the Order of RAM. Because of his avidity for the new sword he is deprived by his master of his right to the sword and is asked to seek and find the sword after a long struggle among the simple people. The master reveals to his wife that the sword will be found by her husband at the right time on the Road to Santiago in Spain. The master's revelation drives the protagonist to give farewell to all his assignments in Brazil so as to dedicate himself to a sincere quest of the sword.

At the outset of his long journey to Santiago, the protagonist stays in the French city of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and holds a meeting with an old woman named Mme Lourdes who having entered his name in the register of those who walk the Road to Santiago tells him, "Your road and stopping places will depend on decisions made by your guide."¹ Mme Lourdes, like India's saintly persons, underlines the role of guide as indispensable to his success in the pilgrimage. Placing the palms of her hands on his head, she says, "May you obey the one who is your guide, even though he may issue an order that is homicidal, blasphemous, or senseless. You must swear total obedience to your guide." (18) Two kilometer outside of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port the protagonist meets Petrus, his guide under whose guidance he is destined to cover a distance of seven hundred kilometers for reaching his destination. To address the protagonist's doubts with regard to the competence of the guide, Petrus says, "I am going to teach you some exercises and

some rituals that are known as the practices. All of us, at some time in our lives, have made use of at least one of them. Every one of these practices, without exception, can be discovered by anyone who is willing to seek them out, with patience and perspicacity, among the lessons that life itself teaches us. The RAM Practices are so simple that people like you, who are used to making life too complicated, ascribe little value to them. But it is they that make people capable of achieving anything, absolutely anything that they desire.” (24) The RAM Practices, according to Petrus, teach one ancient wisdom which, if not applied in practical life “becomes a useless thing and deteriorates, like a sword that is never used.” (25) The true path to this wisdom is the one which can be followed by anyone, like the Road to Santiago. The very first day Petrus teaches Paulo the first RAM Practice, the Seed Exercise, which will help him to achieve rebirth and get rid of the burdens he has piled upon himself. The repetition of the exercise for seven consecutive days will make him perceive that he is a tiny seed, cradled in the comfort of earth. This perception having been achieved he will feel fully relaxed and see “something up there.” (26)

Petrus, “one of the most famous European designers of the moment,” (31) serves as a competent and dedicated guide of Paulo. From his disciple Petrus hides no part of wisdom he is gifted with and within due course he intends to make Paulo well versed in the art of living life meaningfully. Like an Indian guru, he takes over himself the entire responsibility of orienting his disciple towards the basics of an evolved life directed towards the supreme goal of pursuing the ancient wisdom. In order to guide Paulo in search of his sword he eschews his private life and detaches himself from his personal assignments. To Paulo Petrus candidly explains his position:

I am not guiding you to your sword. It is your job, solely and exclusively to find it. I am here to lead you along to the Road to Santiago and to teach you the RAM Practices. How do you apply this to your search for your sword is your problem.(32)

Fully aware of the crucial role of pilgrimage in the making of a perfect man, Petrus feels immense pleasure to reveal to his disciple the benefits of journey like the one he has been forced by his master to undertake. As regards the multiple plus points of pilgrimage he tells Paulo, “When you travel, you begin to attach much more importance to the things around you because your survival depends upon them. You begin to be more accessible to others because they may be able to help you in difficult situations. And you accept any small favor from the gods with great delight, as if it were an episode you would remember for the rest of your life. At the same time, since all things are new, you see only the beauty in them, and you feel happy to be alive. That’s why a religious pilgrimage has always been one of the most objective ways of achieving insight.” (32)

Before they reach a beautiful small village about two hundred meters away towards the left on the Road down, Petrus intends to teach his disciple the second RAM Practice—the Speed

Exercise about which he says, “When you are moving toward an objective,...it is very important to pay attention to the road. It is the road that teaches us the best way to get there, and the road enriches us as we walk its length. You can compare it to a sexual relationship: the caresses of foreplay determine the intensity of the orgasm. Everyone knows that.(36)

The aim of the Speed Exercise is to enable the practitioner to minimize the speed of gait so that he may observe the details, people and surroundings which the travelers generally bypass. As per the advice of Petrus, Paulo repeats the Speed Exercise regularly with the result that he is now able to calm himself and perceive the things around him through new eyes. His imagination begins to work to his advantage and makes him realize that he seldom paid attention to the world around him. After the Speed Exercise is over, Paulo discusses with Petrus the subject of God and humanity. To Paulo, the path to God is different from the path to Santiago. While the Road to Santiago is beset with fears resulting from sorcerers and devils, the path to God is without them. Petrus does not agree with Paulo on the question of difference between the Road to Santiago and the path to God. To convince his disciple, he argues that the guiding concept along the Road to Santiago is its simplicity, that the Road is one along which any person can walk, that its significance can be understood by even the least sophisticated person and that, in fact, only such a road as that can lead to God.

Petrus puts forth his view that God resides in the heart of men in the form of love and can be realized only through love and patience. He tells Paulo, “God is in everything around us. He has to be felt and lived. And here I am trying to transform him into a problem in logic so that you can understand him. Keep doing the exercise of walking slowly and you will learn more and more about His presence.” (49) Petrus is of the view that the one who wants to succeed in life must see dreams and engage oneself in the good fight in the name of dreams. What kills our dreams, according to Petrus, is our sense of the lack of time. To bring this fact home Petrus tells Paulo, “The busiest people I have known in my life always have time enough to do everything. Those who do nothing are always tired and pay no attention to the little amount of work they are required to do. They complain constantly that the day is too short. The truth is they are afraid to fight the good fight.” (51)

On reaching Puente de La Reina, a village where all Roads to Santiago become one, Petrus talks of the roles of angel and devil in elevating and spoiling the life of a man. In the words of Petrus, “The angel always protects us and is a divine gift.” (64) On the other hand, the devil is a free and rebellious force, a link between the man and the world and hence is also known as messenger. He is present in our ways of dealing with money and knows a great deal about the world and human beings.

When we become susceptible to his power, he owns us and keeps us from fighting the good fight, and that is why, as Petrus advises, “the only way to deal with the messenger is to accept him as a friend—by listening to his advice and asking for his help when necessary, but never allowing him to dictate the rules of the game.” (64) Acting upon his guide’s advice, Paulo takes

the friendship of the messenger as a means to improve his work and his dealings with the world. To take the help of the messenger in the time of need, Paulo performs the Messenger Ritual and holds communion with the messenger in conformity with his guide's instructions.

At Logrono, one of the largest cities through which pilgrims traveling the Jacobean route pass, Petrus talk of eros, philos and agape. While eros signifies the power of love in the work we do, philos is "love in the form of Friendship." (40) When the flame of eros stops burning, its philos that keeps a couple together." (98) Agape, according to Petrus, is in both eros and philos and stands for the highest kind of love that consumes us. It is a human weakness to seek eros and when eros turns itself into philos, the feeling of love gradually loses existence. Different from both eros and philos, agape is the purest type of love that consumes the person who experiences it. Whoever knows and experiences agape learns that nothing else in the world is important—just love. This was the kind of love that Jesus felt for humanity and it was so great that it shook the stars and changed the course of history. His solitary life enabled him to accomplish things that kings, armies and empires could not."(105) Unlike physical love, agape makes everything else lose its importance. When Christ spoke of loving one's enemies, he was referring to agape. The pilgrims who walk the Road to Santiago and learn the RAM Practices experience agape in the form of enthusiasm which, for the ancients, "meant trance, ecstasy—a connection with God." (106) To develop in Paulo agape in the form of enthusiasm, Petrus teaches him the Blue Sphere Exercise. This exercise, if performed well with more than one person, "reinforces and invigorates, as it provides energy and peace." (110)Death, which is another manifestation of agape, causes fear in the mind of even the most courageous man. What distinguished a man from an animal is his awareness of death. Petrus does not consider death as an enemy of man. Instead, he considers it as a companion without which life loses its true meaning. As he says, "Death is our constant companion, and it is death that gives each person's life its true meaning. But in order to see the real face of our death, we first have to know all of the anxieties and terrors that the simple mention of its name is able to evoke in any human being." (123) Petrus' positive attitude towards death makes him grow sensitive and respectful towards all human beings. As he puts it:

Human beings are the only ones in nature who are aware that they will die. For that reason and only for that reason, I have a profound respect for the human race, and I believe that its future is going to be much better than its present. Even knowing that their days are numbered and that everything will end when they least expect it, people make of their lives a battle that is worthy of a being with eternal life. What people regard as vanity—leaving great works, having children, acting in such a way as to prevent one's name from being forgotten—I regard as the highest expression of human dignity. (122-23)

Death is nothing but the shifting of consciousness from one level of existence to another. Man's unawareness of the experiences that he will encounter at the time of death and his ignorance of

what will happen to him after his final departure from the world cause immense fear in his mind. This fear prevents him from doing many unwanted things and drives him to lead an ethical life. Thus, the fear of death is a boon in disguise. Petrus is fully aware of his fact and in order to make his disciple aware of this bitter reality says that death “motivates them to do the best things in their lives. They are afraid to step into the dark, afraid of the unknown, and their only way of conquering that fear is to ignore the fact that their days are numbered. They do not see that with an awareness of death, they would be able to be even more daring, to go further in their daily conquests, because then they would have nothing to lose, for death is inevitable.” (123)

Those who are unaware of death being a boon in disguise hate it as their arch enemy. Their hatred for death emanates from their unawareness of “the many kingdoms through which they have already passed, and the many deaths they have already suffered.” (135) In this world there are many people who are unhappy to think that one day their world will end; there are some others who having already known their many deaths think of themselves as immortal. Petrus, along with Paulo, prays to God to be merciful to such people because they do not know the divine law that says, “Except that one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (135)

In the deserted city of Foncebadon Petrus warns his disciple of the disadvantages of dissatisfaction in life. Since the people of this city were not satisfied with their life and felt the need for a change, they left the city for some other place. Satisfaction is what makes man happy in all conditions and it is in this state that he can put all his wisdom into play. Petrus considers the feeling of satisfaction as central to the realization of the true meaning of life. As he tells Paulo, “Everything I have taught you, including agape, make sense only if you are satisfied with yourself.” (157) The person who is satisfied with the rhythms of life can handle even the most critical problems by taking wise decisions at the right time. Finding the sword is Paulo’s problem. To help him in finding solution to this problem Petrus teaches him the Shadows Exercise. A mastery of this exercise can help one to find correct solution. As per the instructions of Petrus Paulo studies the shadows of all of the objects and people around him and focuses on problem with the result that he grows confident of his success in finding solution to his problem.

Listening to others, voices of silence as well as rumblings constitutes one of the keys to success in life. Petrus fully subscribes to this fact. Siddhartha, the protagonist in Hermann Hesse’s famous novel Siddhartha an Indian tale achieves wisdom after attentively listening to the sound of the river. As he says, “I was listening to the river. A lot it has told me, deeply it has filled me with the healing thought, with the thought of oneness.”² To make his disciple aware of the importance of the ability to listen to sounds, Petrus says, “Everything is contained in sounds—the past, the present, and the future. The person who does not know how to listen will never hear the advice that life offers us all the time. And only the person who listens to the sounds of the moment is able to make the right decisions.” (176)

To satisfy Paulo’s curiosity with regard to the ability of listening, Petrus intends to teach him the nuances and intricacies of the Listening Exercise. Purposefully, asks his disciple to close his eyes

so that he may withdraw his sense of sight. To enable him to shift his faculty of hearing from the outside to the inside he instructs,

Try for several minutes to concentrate on all of the sounds you hear in your surroundings, as if you were hearing an orchestra playing its instruments. Little by little, try to separate each sound from the others. Concentrate on each one, as if it were the only instrument playing. Try to eliminate the other sounds from your awareness. (177)

Before reaching the destination, Petrus reveals to Paulo that as per the law of the Tradition the seeker has to find his sword alone. In conformity with this law the guide (Petrus) decides to leave his disciple (Paulo) alone after having gifted him with the mastery of the Ram Practices with the help of which the disciple will confidently continue his good fight till he attains his goal. Before leaving for his native country, Petrus wishes Paulo not only to find the sword but also to learn its secret. At this moment, he also teaches his disciple the last exercise -The Dance Exercise which “offers an almost perfect means of communication with the Infinite Intelligence.”(193)

Paulo, left alone on the Road to Santiago, nurtures a deep sense of obligation to Petrus for his help without which it would not have been possible for him to fight the good fight and turn his life into a series of triumphs. Loneliness causes in him immense restlessness to locate his sword as early as possible. In this state of restlessness and hopelessness he miserably utters, “Is this story never going to end? Nothing but more and more tests, battles, and humiliations and still no clue about my sword.” (209) He gains strength from the remembrance of his guide and his repeated quotation, “He that ploweth should plow in hope. He that thresheth in hope should be partaker of hope.” (207) With his heart full of hope he passes through the Gates of Forgiveness to reach the church where he hopes to find his sword. But he is disappointed to see Santiago’s sword and not the one he is in search of. In the absence of his guide, Paulo realizes the importance of his teachings. Now he also realizes that knowing what he should do with the sword is as much important as finding it. He also repents for having disappointed his guide by not realizing this fact before. Remorsefully, he says, “Throughout our time on the strange Road to Santiago, the only thing I had wanted to know was where it was hidden. I had never asked myself why I wanted to find it or what I needed it for. All of my efforts had been bent on reward; I had not understood that when we want something, we have to have a clear purpose in mind for the thing that we want. The only reason for seeking a reward is to know what to do with that reward. And this was the secret of my sword.” (213)

To unburden himself of the nagging sense of repentance he reveals on a piece of paper what he intends to do with the sword and puts the paper under a stone thinking that it will be delivered to Petrus. Till now he was searching for his sword without his awareness of what he will do with it. But now he is engaged in search of his reward with full awareness of what he will do with it after getting it. He acquires a state of trance in which he finds himself talking to everything along the Road including “tree trunks, puddles, fallen leaves and beautiful vines. It was an exercise of the

common people, learned by children and forgotten by adults.” (214) What people think about his craziness does not bother him at all; He is happy to think that he is celebrating his life on account of his awareness of what he is going to do with the sword after he gets it. Now that he knows what to do with the sword, he becomes worthy of it. No sooner does this realization sink deep in his mind, his master appears before him with the sword in his hand. Handing over the sword to Paulo, the master blesses him and says:

No evil will befall you, no curse will fall upon your tent; your angels will be given orders regarding you, to protect you along your every way. (223)

Thus, Paulo’s pilgrimage from Black Needles in Brazil to Santiago de Compostela in Spain proves a miraculous success. His personal efforts under the guidance of his Italian guide bear desired fruits at the right time. He feels that the Christ power also helped him in winning his reward and this is why he prays to Jesus Christ, “I trod the road of the common people and in mingling with them found your secret...you made me see that the search for happiness is a personal search and not a model we can pass on to others.” (220) The secret of the sword as well as of what he will do with the sword constitute the true meaning of Paulo’s life. By the grace of God and Jesus Christ, by means of his guide’s teachings of the Ram Practices Paulo persistently pursues his goal and confidently surmounts a number of hurdles that generally beset the path of a seeker of ancient wisdom. Like the protagonist of *The Alchemist*, Paulo is a role model for modern youths who are impatient to find the reward of their efforts before right time and in their impatience many times lose sight of their destination with the result that their misguided efforts result in failures that invariably lead to despair and depression. It must also be borne in mind that failures many times serve as stepping stone to success. Thus, it is evidently true that the most important factors leading to success include the persistent efforts like Paulo’s, the competent guidance like Petrus’, the protective and motivating hand like Paulo’s Master’s and above all the grace of God in the form of favourable circumstances.

The seed of victory lies in a passion for victory. As the king of Salem tells the shepherd boy named Santiago in *The Alchemist*, “If you really want to achieve something, the whole universe conspires in your favour.”³ An intense desire for something not only propels us towards required efforts but also miraculously make the circumstances favourable to us. Evidently, Paulo’s pilgrimage and his success story owe their origin to his intense desire to be anointed as the Master and Knight of the Order of RAM. Deprived by his Master of his right to the sword symbolizing his anointment, Paulo dedicated himself to the search of the sword, the only thing meaningful for him in the entire world. The intensity of his desire turns the circumstances into his favour and makes Petrus leave Italy to guide him and teach him the RAM practices which give him strength enough to surmount all hurdles.

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