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Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain*: A Journey towards Personal Legend

Shruti Joshi

Assistant Professor,
Vivekanand College,
Kolhapur (Maharashtra).

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Abstract:

Brazilian novelist Paul Coelho is acclaimed worldwide for the inspirational qualities of his novels. In *The Fifth Mountain*, he employs the archetypal model of the hero's journey as discussed by Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler. The protagonist's journey symbolizes of his growth towards obtaining his personal destiny or personal legend. The hero, Elijah, is forced to embark on his arduous journey – both physical and spiritual. He faces exile, death and emotional tragedies; which makes him stronger, mature and enlightened. Elijah's struggle against his faith in God results in strengthening his relationship with the Divine. After a long period of suffering, destruction and reconstruction, he completes his ordeal and reaches his personal destiny. Coelho reinvents the Biblical story as an inspirational saga. The reader gets an impetus to overcome the odds of human existence in order to live a fulfilled life and thus, contribute to the larger universal plan. This paper traces this inspirational element in Coelho's work through the hero's quest model as employed in *The Fifth Mountain*.

Keywords: The Archetypes, Hero's Journey, Personal Legend, *The Fifth Mountain*, Inspirational.

Introduction:

The works of Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho have a life-enhancing effect on his readers thus, making him a global phenomenon in Inspirational Literature. Almost all of his fictional and non-fictional texts have been translated into nearly fifty-six languages and are widely read in 150 countries. His books have universal appeal because he discusses certain fundamental questions of human life and tries to offer answers to them. These books send messages to his readers that inspire them to review their lives in a new light and strive for happiness. His major works centre on themes like fate versus willpower, personal legends, omens, love, marriage, the soul of the world, spiritual quests for redemption, and self-enlightenment. His characters embark on an adventure in search of an ultimate truth. During their journey, they encounter people who help them through the hurdles on their way to spiritual awakening and self-discovery. Coelho's novels achieve an aura of mystical adventures due to the obvious semblance with the archetypal hero-journey. Paulo Coelho has travelled extensively and participated in various pilgrimages. During these journeys, he has experienced gradual awakening of his spiritual self. His unique experiences impart authenticity to his narratives.

His novel *The Fifth Mountain* (1996) is based on the story of the Israelite prophet Elijah (ninth century B.C.) from the *Hebrew Bible* (1 Kings, chapters 17-19) (Techietonics par. 2). This story is also referred to in *Talmud* and *Mishnah* (central texts of Rabbinic Judaism), *New Testament* and *the Quran*. Paulo Coelho has improved upon the simple Biblical story making it inspirational by adding his own philosophical insights to it. In the novel, the Fifth Mountain is the highest mountain in Zarephath (a Phoenician city). The prophet's life is a metaphor for human desire and confidence to achieve self-fulfillment. Elijah is the epitome of the human strength to overcome all misfortunes while pursuing dreams amidst the storms of life. Like most of Coelho's novels, *The Fifth Mountain* is also about living one's dream and fulfilling the personal legend.

Personal Legend:

Paulo Coelho explains in *The Alchemist* that a personal legend is one's destiny in life. It is identifying our purpose in life and pursuing it. Joseph Campbell (1991) uses the expression 'follow your blessing' which reflects the same idea as in personal legend. It is a spiritual calling that awakens a deep desire and a passion to live with a sense of purpose; for something greater than oneself that ultimately helps one leave a lasting legacy behind. This can be called a life's mission or vision. According to Paulo Coelho, we are destined to a personal legend. We need to realize what that legend is and then travel towards it. On the path towards our goal, we live our destiny. Things happen to us, we are tempted to stray away from the path. We learn the lessons necessary to fulfill our destiny and are brought back to the path. The fulfillment takes place at the end of the journey of life and it is our salvation. We are exalted and enlightened spiritually. If we are truly determined to have the goal fulfilled, the entire universe helps us to achieve it (*The Alchemist*, 28). The universe provides clues and hints through signs and omens so that we can take proper decisions. We need to be aware and attentive. Whatever the condition, 'the unavoidable' happens in the life of every human being. This 'unavoidable' is 'Maktub' as mentioned in *The Alchemist*. It means 'it is written' by the hand of God. So, personal legend is also 'Maktub'. In Elijah's case, his destiny is already decided by his Lord – to help free his people. Elijah's journey is a path full of complexities which takes him towards his destiny and turns him into a fully exalted soul.

The Archetypal Hero Journey:

An archetype is a constantly recurring symbol or motif in literature, art or mythology. Archetypal images are perceived in human dreams, visions and fantasies, and they vary across or within cultures. The dominant archetypes influence and control human thoughts and behaviour. There are numerous character archetypes (e.g. the Self, the Shadow, the Hero, the Wise Old Man etc.) and situational ones (e.g. the quest journey). In the myths and legends from all over the world, a typical pattern of a hero's journey – physical and spiritual – gets repeated. Joseph Campbell, in his seminal work – *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968) – explains the 'monomyth' of hero's adventure. He divides the journey of his royal hero in different stages and sub-stages as:

1. Departure or call to the adventure (dawn of spiritual awakening and the appearance of a herald or initiator)
2. Hero's refusal or acceptance (of the call)
3. Meeting a supernatural guardian
4. The road of trials or ordeals (meeting with a goddess, atonement with father, the hero's magic flight, the reward)
5. The return of hero (to share his blessings with the community).

This typical mythical hero is depicted as a god, a prophet, a saint, a world-redeemer or a lover. The whole journey of the hero is explained in a nutshell by Campbell as:-

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won. The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men. (2014:28)

Christopher Vogler, in his *The Writer's Journey*, presents his own version of the mythical hero's journey as a 'set of principles for living' and 'a manual for the art of being human' (2007: xiii). According to Vogler, all kinds of stories, and not only myths of adventure, trace the stages of the Hero's journey and the protagonist of every story is the hero of a journey. For Vogler, the hero's journey can be a guide not only for art, literature and movies, but also can give an insight about people's own lives and ordeals. It can provide abundant time-tasted strategies for survival, success and happiness. Vogler's hero journey model is similar to that of Campbell's, with the following stages:

1. Hero in the Ordinary World
2. The Call to Adventure
3. Refusal of the Call
4. Meeting with the Mentor
5. Crossing the First Threshold
6. Tests, Allies, Enemies
7. Approach to the Inmost Cave
8. The Ordeal
9. The Reward
10. The Road Back
11. Resurrection
12. Return with the Elixir

This paper analyzes *The Fifth Mountain* with reference to an eclectic model (Fig.1) based on these two models by Campbell and Vogler. The prophet hero Elijah travels a similar route of the archetypal journey and fulfills his personal legend as follows:

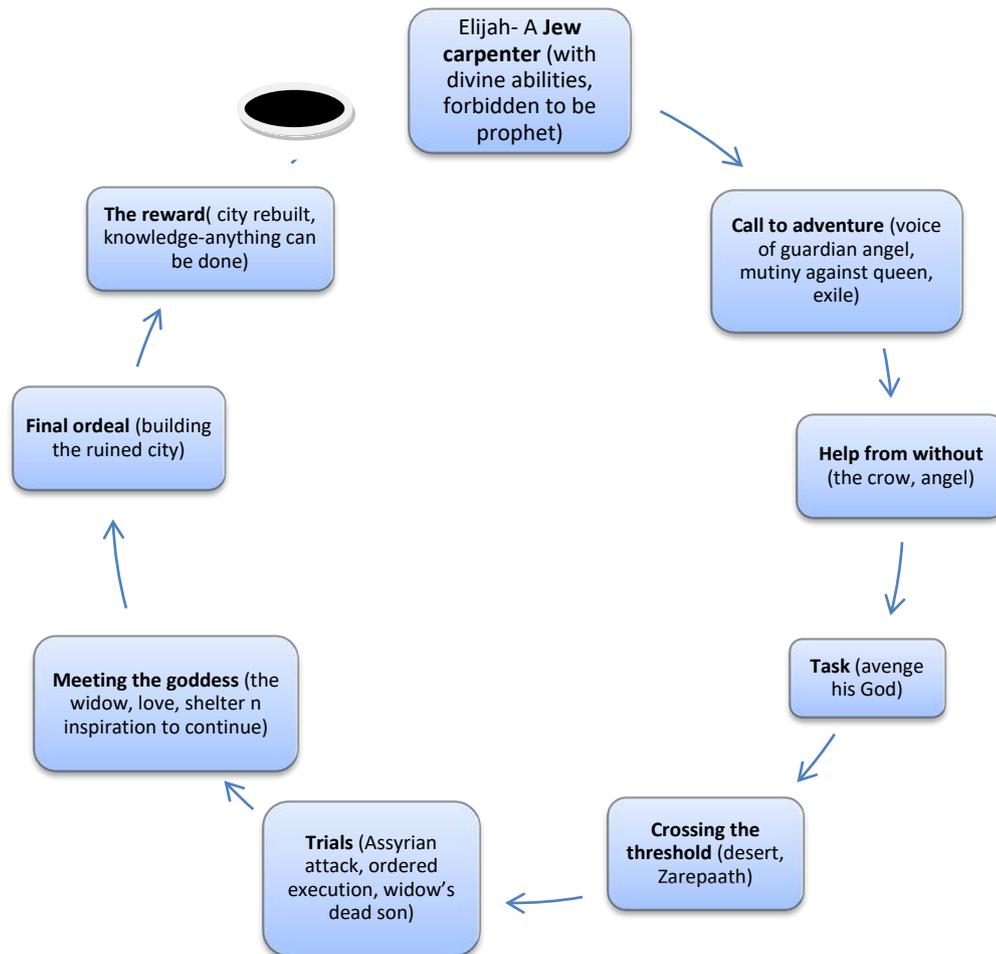
1. Hero in His Ordinary World:

According to the archetype, the hero is always introduced in his ordinary, mundane world which contains the seeds of future challenge. In *The Fifth Mountain*, Elijah is a young

Jew carpenter from Gilead, Israel. As a child, he could hear voices, have visions and speak with his guardian angel. He is a 'nabi', a prophet – 'a man of the spirit, one who exalts himself with the word of God' (9). However, his parents do not want him to be a prophet. So, he learns to ignore the voices and visions, and as he grows older, they stop occurring. He is happy being a common man and what happened in his childhood becomes a remote memory. Queen Jezebel tries to convert the Israelite people forcibly to worship her Lebanese God Baal instead of the One Lord of Israel. Elijah pays no attention and continues worshipping his Lord.

2. Call to Adventure:

Usually, the hero is propelled out of his comfort zone due to a new challenge or adventure (e.g. the dying community, a kidnapped beloved) or simply a stirring within his unconscious (e.g. prophetic dreams or visions). The call to adventure is a trigger that gets the story rolling. Sometimes, the hero is placed in increasingly difficult situations without any help from surrounding and is left with no other option than to jump into the adventure. For Elijah, it is the voice of the Angel of the Lord that orders him to tell the king about an impending doom. Elijah is pulled out of his ordinary life suddenly. The prophets are important as they convey the Lord's messages to the rulers so that they always follow the right path. With their guidance, wars are won. Therefore, Elijah easily gets access to the king. He conveys the message of the Lord to King Ahab that a famine will infest Israel unless they stop the worship of the Phoenician gods. Jezebel becomes furious and orders to execute all those who refuse to abandon the Lord. Elijah is to be executed too, so Elijah flees and hides in a stable for two days. His faith is shaken: 'I have served a Lord who now abandons me into the hands of my enemies' (5). He thinks it stupid to die at twenty three without knowing a woman's love and grieves over all he will be losing- his parents, friends, long years of work in carpentry. He escapes his death miraculously and flees the city to save his life.



(Fig. 1 Elijah’s Journey in *The Fifth Mountain*)

He has nowhere else to go but the desert. Either he will be captured or die in the desert. While waiting for his death, Elijah contemplates that even having courage to face his death is enough. He learns that ‘a man cannot fight his destiny’ (22). The Lord has ‘written’ (Maktub) a path for every person. He himself has tried not to be a prophet and be a carpenter; but the Lord has led him back to the same destiny. People betraying their destiny have to pay a high price like him. So, now he is ready to face his lot.

3. The Help from Without:

In the beginning, the archetypal hero is helped by a ‘donor’ or ‘provider’ who supplies the hero with knowledge and confidence needed to overcome fear during his journey. This strengthens the hero’s mind, changes his consciousness, and redirects the will to face any ordeal with confidence; sending the hero to the next stage of the adventure. On the banks of the river Cherith, while waiting for his death, Elijah is saved of his fear and delirium by a crow.

The crow brings food for him every day. Elijah observes the crow and develops skills of hunting in order to survive. He even pretends to converse with the crow which provides

insights to Elijah. In fact, the crow becomes a symbol of his own soul that needs food of thoughts. The crow tells him that carpentry has taught Elijah to understand that he is better and wiser than he believes himself to be. He is able to discover the sacred in all things because he enjoys his work as a way to serve God. This ability has prepared his soul to receive God's message through the angel. The crow assures him,

“ When a man journeys toward his destiny, often he is obliged to change paths. At other times, the forces around him are too powerful and he is compelled to lay aside his courage and yield...But no one can lose sight of what he desires. Even if there are moments when he believes the world and the others are stronger. The secret is this: do not surrender.” (Coelho 28)

Elijah finds peace and encouragement in the crow's company. He discovers that he has a soul more exalted than he has thought. He knows now that having seen an angel, he cannot doubt what he is capable of doing. He is in the desert as a part of fulfilling his destiny. This self-realization gives him strength to continue on his path.

4. His Task:

One night, the Angel of the Lord appears again and endows Elijah with a mission 'to avenge the Lord'. He orders Elijah to go to Zarephath (Akbar) where a widow will give him shelter. He should return to Gilead to avenge and destroy Jezebel when the time is right. That will be Elijah's mission now.

5. Crossing over into the unknown:

The hero crosses the threshold between his ordinary, known world and the unknown, dark world of adventure. Elijah leaves behind the world he knows so well. He crosses the desert and arrives in the valley of Akbar where he meets the poor widow. As Elijah is Jezebel's enemy, he is her enemy too. So, she refuses to give him shelter. However, as she has had a dream the previous night about a stranger coming to her, she decides to help Elijah. The people of Akbar come to know that the foreigner staying in the widow's house is the Israelite prophet hiding away from Jezebel. They decide to give him asylum until they need some favor from their princess. They can use him as a currency. Till then, he is allowed to stay and look after himself. Elijah must await the order of his Lord. He says,

“ Everything will happen as was written by the Lord...There are moments when tribulations occur in our lives, and we cannot avoid them. But they are there for some reason...only when we have overcome them do we understand why they were there.” (Coelho 39)

6. Tests and Trials:

Crossing the threshold, the hero enters a dream world of ambiguity to face numerous tests, trials and ordeals. This stage is only the beginning of the long perilous path of

conquests and illuminating moments during which the hero discovers his true self and is cleansed of his pride and inner demons. Elijah gets settled in Akbar; however, his troubles begin soon. At the entrance of the Akbar valley, the Assyrian patrolmen start encamping and their number keeps increasing. To add to this, the widow's son falls ill suddenly. The people of Akbar think that the foreigner has brought the wrath of the gods of the Fifth Mountain. The widow asks Elijah to pray to his Lord to save her son. If He does save him, she will renounce her gods and begin worshiping Him. Though Elijah tries hard to implore his Lord to cure the child, the boy dies. The authorities of the city condemn Elijah to death. They accuse him of returning their love and hospitality with hatred. Elijah also feels that he deserves suffering as his Lord has abandoned him and accepts the fate. The high priest orders Elijah to climb the Fifth Mountain and ask forgiveness of the gods. The holy fire will descend and slay him. If not, then the people will carry out the justice. They will execute him in a sacred ritual by tearing his heart out and cutting off his head.

On the mountain, Elijah contemplates his situation: why he was asked to go to Akbar and not to avenge the evil princess immediately. He feels unsure of everything that has happened so far. He cries out to the heavens asking why he has to face the misfortune when he is about to fulfill his mission. Elijah thinks about fleeing, but he is tired of running away all the time. Besides, wherever he goes, his curse will follow. So, he decides to surrender himself to the people of Akbar. Just as he is about to give up all hopes, the Angel of the Lord descends and asks him to return to the city and ask three times for the boy to come back to life. The boy will be brought back to life in order to establish the God's grandeur. Elijah no longer feels himself worthy of His task. Therefore, the angel tells him,

“ Every man hath the right to doubt his task and to forsake it from time to time; but what he must not do is forget it. Whoever doubteth not himself is unworthy – for in his unquestioning belief in his ability, he committeth the sin of pride.” (Coelho 53)

Elijah returns to the widow's house where he does as he is asked. The boy is brought back from the land of the dead. The widow and other people witnessing the miracle accept him as a man of God. However, they do not accept his Lord. Elijah once again fails to convince them the grandeur of the One Lord. So, the angel of the Lord warns him that no more miracles will take place now. Elijah must use his own abilities to fulfill the task of proving his Lord's greatness to the Phoenicians.

As the Assyrian army keeps increasing, Elijah conveys the governor the Angel's prophecy that Akbar will be destroyed by the war. The governor asks him to perform a miracle in order to stop the war. In return, he offers to impose the religion of the Lord in Akbar. Elijah's angel reminds him that there won't be any miracle until he returns to Israel. At the same moment, the Angel of the Lord blesses him with a miracle, but he has a condition. Elijah has to choose whether the miracle happens in Akbar or in his homeland while freeing his people from Jezebel. Elijah is tortured by a strange dilemma and cannot take any decision.

7. The Supernatural Guide:

Elijah's guardian angel has been visiting him since his childhood. He advises Elijah regarding the daily problems of his life. It represents Elijah's conscience and unconscious wisdom. When the war is declared by the Assyrian army, Elijah is tormented by his inability to decide about performing the miracle. The angel tells him that the Lord expects of a person to do only that which is in his capacity. If any obstacle appears, it is eventually removed by the glory of the Lord. Elijah is agonized by the choice he has to make between saving Akbar and redeeming his people. The angel reminds him that a man must always make choices. The power of his decisions gives him his strength. Further he adds,

“ There is no tragedy, only the unavoidable. Everything hath its reason for being: thou needest only distinguish what is temporary from what is lasting.”(Coelho 137)

8. The Meeting with Goddess:

In a typical hero myth, the female counterpart of the hero is either a temptress or the helpful Mother figure. Her mystical marriage with the hero ensures the heavenly bliss to the soul. The widow in *The Fifth Mountain* comes with the boon of love and helps Elijah to gain the control of his life again. In the beginning, she is only a part of his Lord's plan for him. However, their relationship changes after her son's rebirth. Elijah becomes alarmed at the possibility of his falling in love with her. Though he has waited for love all his life, he wants to run away from it now. The widow also feels that Elijah has awakened a love inside her that she had never felt. His love has even made the poverty bearable. Their union results into the divine marriage (hieros gamos) that brings emotional strength and spiritual peace to the hero on his lonely path to the destiny. The widow knows that one day Elijah has to go away to fulfill his mission and his Lord is more important to him than anything else. Her dream of a life with him is impossible. Her love for Elijah liberates her from social bondages and becomes a source of repose and energy for Elijah during his struggle.

9. The Ordeal:

The Ordeal is a battle or confrontation with opposing forces (an enemy or antagonist), the hero's Shadow (negative or dark aspects of his personality and his worst fears) or an emotional crisis like the death of a relationship. The hero must die a real or symbolic death only to be reborn with evermore vitality and maturity. The ordeal signifies the death of hero's ego transcending his older Self into a new one with a new consciousness. On the night of the Assyrians' attack on Akbar, Elijah tries to escape to Israel, along with the widow and her son. But the Angel of the Lord orders him to return as his destiny is not fulfilled yet and he must remain in Akbar. The Assyrian army mistakes Elijah to be the governor, beats him severely and sets the widow's house on fire. The widow dies under the rubles, however, her son escapes harm. Elijah is grief-stricken at losing the only woman whom he ever loved and who could have been his source of energy. He cries, “I do not understand Thy designs....Remove Thyself form my life, for I too am reduced to ruins, fire and dust” (168). As a result, he is

denied the meeting with the angels until his days of trial end. Elijah is wounded physically as well as emotionally. The Assyrian army leaves behind the destroyed and panic-stricken city. A group of men attacks him accusing him of Akbar's misfortune. When he recovers from the shame of humiliation, he is a totally changed man. Devoid of love and faith, he has no desire to live on. Henceforth, the widow's son becomes his guide and reason to live. He reminds Elijah that 'all life's battles teach us something, even those we lose' (Coelho 173). Therefore, Elijah must rise from the rubbles of his soul and help Akbar as well to rise from its ruins.

There is nothing left of Akbar. Elijah has no hope and energy to rebuild the place. He is confused and lost in his own guilt and needs time to recover from the shock and loss. At this time, a shepherd offers them food, shelter and also some wisdom. He acts like the mythical Wise Old Man who guides the hero at the time of crisis and sets him again on the path. The shepherd tells Elijah that the unavoidable always happens. One needs hope, discipline and patience to overcome it. With hopeful spirit, one can rebuild a life as well as a city. One must think only of the victories in the past; that gives one strength to accomplish future plans. The wise shepherd feeds Elijah's body as well as soul. He says,

“ Everything that could have happened but did not is carried away with the wind and leaves no trace...Life is made of our attitudes. And there are certain things that the gods oblige us to live through. Their reason for this does not matter, and there is no action we can take to make them pass us by.” (Coelho 183)

The thought of forgetting his past as a prophet frees Elijah of a life-long burden. He no longer hears voices of angels, but he can do as he desires. Elijah's heart is overwhelmed by a mutinous rage and he decides to avenge himself. The Lord whom he has served all his life has rewarded his sacrifice with the death of his beloved woman. Therefore, he rebels against the destruction and death, and vows to rebuild the city. He decides to go against the Lord's judgment. In his grief, Elijah forgets that it is his destiny to learn to rebuild before he goes to Israel. He decides to redo the Lord's work as a way of revenge, but he doesn't realize that in doing so he is in fact following the path that has already been set for him by his Lord. Soon, he learns that sometimes it is necessary to struggle with God to realize one's true capabilities. Then, the person takes the responsibility of his or her decisions and actions. Such a person can turn a tragedy into challenge and has the courage to confront God.

This realization is a kind of rebirth of Elijah and as a symbol, he renames himself 'Liberation'. 'Liberation' stands for a life of freedom from fear and suffering. In his rebellion against the Lord, Elijah has liberated himself from the fear of his God and has attained a kind of authority over his own decisions and life. First, Elijah rebels against God and then, going against custom, he incinerates the decaying bodies of the dead of Akbar. He feels no sense of sin in applying a new answer to his new problem. As an individual, Elijah shows growth. His conscience is heeled, unconscious is exalted and spirituality is enhanced. He is more confident and firm than ever. He confesses that he is not ashamed of fighting against the Lord. He discovers that he is set on his path willingly and not because it was forced upon him

by Him. He realizes that his new mission of rebuilding Akbar is, in a sense, a way of 'reencountering' his lost Lord and he wishes to continue it until the Lord blesses him.

10. The Reward:

Elijah gathers the disillusioned, shattered, remaining inhabitants of Akbar – the old, women and children. He inspires them to come out of their shock and start rebuilding the city and their lives as well. He teaches the widow's son to write 'Byblos' (the Phoenician script) and record the history of rebuilding of Akbar. He communicates with the people what tragedy has taught him: God gives everyone a second chance and one must seize the opportunity. His dialogue with his Lord continues. Then, one day, he achieves 'Atonement' with his father the Lord. According to Campbell, 'at-one-ment' means the reconciliation of the hero with his father figure. Though the Lord has done much injustice and Elijah has made many mistakes and sins against the Lord, he asks forgiveness of his Father. To his astonishment, he receives his guardian angel back, which for a long time has been absent. The angel delivers him the Lord's message – "Thou hast done well, Elijah. God hath accepted thy combat....Thou hast guided the path of thy vessel well and transformed pain into action" (Coelho 219).

Akbar is rebuilt as a stronger, more beautiful and advanced city. Elijah establishes a new governance system based on writing, builds a stronger defense system. The city prospers as traders start coming for business and Elijah feels happy and proud. The city becomes a part of his life now and he feels like staying there forever. However, the Angel of the Lord appears to tell Elijah to return to Israel to liberate his people. Elijah leaves Akbar in the care of the widow's son and achieves his destiny by rebelling against Jezebel after returning to Israel. The final dialogue between Elijah and the widow's son is the proof of Elijah's heightened spiritual awareness and the mature person he has become. Elijah tells the boy,

" God is all powerful. He can do anything and nothing is forbidden to Him (239)...Still, because of His infinite power, He chose to do only Good. If we reach the end of our story, we shall see that often Good is disguised as Evil, but it goes on being the Good, and is part of the plan that He created for humanity." (Coelho 240)

Conclusion:

Paulo Coelho applies archetypal hero-journey formula, as discussed by Campbell and Vogler, flexibly and with certain variations without compromising any of its magic. Elijah's story ends with the lesson that when we overcome all the difficulties in our life with an unwavering faith in our own abilities and reach the ultimate aim, 'personal legend', it is the point of acquiring wholeness and self-realization. Coelho inspires the readers to undertake their own journeys and not to give up on their dreams amidst the storms of life. He focuses on the capacity to choose and determine one's acts. Coelho's novel inspires a common reader to reconsider his/her own stagnant and thwarted life-journey and to begin afresh towards the ultimate goal of becoming a hero of his or her own kind. His epigrammatic dialogues comment on the existential queries of human life and provide answers to them. Transcending

the bondages of the past and conquering suffering with the help of faith and love, his hero fulfills his personal legend/destiny and completes his own contribution to the larger plan of the universe. Thus, Elijah's journey towards his personal legend becomes an inspiring saga that proves Coelho's global appeal as an inspirational writer.

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