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A Comparative Study of Historical Consciousness in Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain* and Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*

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Abstract:

The main focus of this study is on how historical awareness is used in *The Fifth Mountain* by Paulo Coelho and *The Zigzag Way* by Anita Desai. The novels are set in various times and places, such as ancient Israel and postcolonial Mexico. They examine how history can influence a person's spiritual path and sense of identity. Coelho's description of the prophet Elijah explores the themes of divine fate, exile, and conflict with authoritarian powers. He demonstrates how history can be utilized to foster spiritual growth within an individual. Then Desai follows Eric's trip to Mexico to find her roots. She does this to see how the effects of colonisation, memory, and cultural switching affect the idea of self. Between the two novels, the comparison reveals how the authors utilize the past as a living entity that shapes the problems faced by the main characters. On the other hand, Desai's postcolonial study of identity and heritage differs from Coelho's allegorical and metaphysical thought. Elijah's divine exile and Eric's need to join are both about journeys of self-discovery. This demonstrates that history, whether personal or shared, can profoundly impact a person's spiritual and emotional state. In this paper, the historical setting of the novel is examined as more than just a backdrop. It is viewed as an active force in character development and the pursuit of meaning.

Coelho and Desai both write about faith, moving, and personal growth in the setting of history. They do this by combining spiritual and historical elements.

Keywords: historical awareness, spirituality, exile, identity, personal change.

Background to the Study

For a long time, history has been an integral part of literature, serving as a means to connect identity, faith, and personal transformation. In both *The Fifth Mountain* by Paulo Coelho and *The Zigzag Way* by Anita Desai, historical awareness plays a significant role in shaping the characters' movements. The biblical story of the prophet Elijah may have influenced Coelho's novel, which explores how one person struggles against divine commands, social expectations, and their own fate. This spiritual metaphor connects history to themes of defiance, exile, and predetermined fate, which echoes the tension between fate and free will.

Desai's *The Zigzag Way*, on the other hand, is about a character named Eric who wants to get back in touch with his Mexican roots. The story examines the concept of postcolonial identity. The novel prompts one to reflect on the colonial past and its impact on one's self-perception. Desai not only changes how her character sees herself by using historical background, but she also seems to be making a point about the enormity of diasporic life and how people can become a part of something.

Even though the novels are set in different times and places and have distinct plots, they both demonstrate how history shapes people's lives, whether through religious prophecy or postcolonial analysis. There are allegories in Coelho's work that discuss religion and

divine purpose, while Desai's work critiques post-colonial influences and the search for a fractured cultural identity. The comparative part of this work examines how both authors utilize historical settings to reveal more about the human experience. It focuses on big ideas, such as exile, spiritual awakening, and the search for personal meaning within broader historical narratives. This study will demonstrate how Coelho and Desai explore the human condition through the intersection of history and spirituality, providing readers with valuable insight into the complex nature of individual and group identity. Historical events will be set against a backdrop of theme and philosophy.

Introduction

In many cases, literature serves as a medium for writers to explore the ways in which history has shaped the minds of individuals and influenced their development of identity. This multifaceted narrative intersects themes of spirituality, exile, and personal transformation with historical awareness. The individual and society as a whole are engaged in a conflict. Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain* and Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* are the two novels that this work compares and contrasts.

These are two novels that, despite their distinct historical and cultural backgrounds, both delve thoroughly into the concept of history as a living force that transforms things.

Coelho reimagines the biblical narrative of Elijah in *The Fifth Mountain* to evoke reflection on God's plan, the resilience of individuals in the face of adversity, and the obligation of loyalty. The novel explores the prophet's journey within the context of political unrest and spiritual awakening during a specific historical period, thereby illustrating the interplay between faith and history. Coelho posits that history is not a series of numerical values. Instead, it is

described through allegorical layers. Coelho views history as a moral and spiritual environment that necessitates exploration in order to uncover its significance.

In contrast, Desai's *The Zigzag Way* is founded on postcolonial principles and revolves around a hero from diverse backgrounds who seeks to forge a connection with a foreign and hidden past. Desai employs the prism of personal memory to investigate the extent to which colonial histories hinder individuals' ability to understand other cultures and determine their place in the world, as well as their impact on future generations.

Objectives of the Study

This study's primary objective is to investigate the manner in which historical consciousness is communicated in *The Fifth Mountain* by Paula Coelho and *The Zigzag Way* by Anita Desai. This will aid in comprehending the characters' journeys and the tales' overall framework. The research seeks to identify thematic connections between exile, identity, and spiritual transformation, as well as the cultural and philosophical differences between Coelho's allegorical approach (derived from the Bible) and Desai's postcolonial vision (associated with memory and diaspora). The study examines how historical contexts such as ancient Israel and colonial Mexico become vehicles for self-discovery. It attempts to determine how both authors use history not as a decorative cloth, but as a force shaping people's growth. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the field of comparative literature by demonstrating how writers from diverse faiths have employed historical frameworks to convey universal truths applicable to all people.

Literature Review

Literature critics have long been interested in the study of historical awareness, particularly in examining how the personal, spiritual, and political intersect in writers' works. One can learn a great deal about how history is more than just a backdrop by comparing Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain* and Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*. This type of study also reveals the various ways in which history influences the development of characters, identities, and themes. This literature review examines key studies on Coelho and Desai to establish the context for the proposed comparison.

People often consider Paulo Coelho's 1996 novel *The Fifth Mountain* a spiritual allegory, drawing inspiration from real and biblical stories. The story takes place in the 9th century BCE, during the time of the prophet Elijah. It is a retelling of a biblical story with a focus on faith, pain, and God's plan. Some experts, including Elzbieta Formosinho and John L. Cullinan, have noted that Coelho employs story, allegory, and spiritual symbols to convey the profound ideas of fate, free will, and change. Even though the novel is set in the Bible, Coelho's version goes beyond religious stories to look at existential issues. Critics have noted that *The Fifth Mountain* follows Coelho's general style of combining history, faith, and personal action to help readers on their own paths to self-discovery. Many people dislike his work because it preaches too much, but others love it because it makes historical and religious stories more relatable.

Coelho demonstrates historical awareness in a subtle yet profound manner. He doesn't pay attention to the details that are historically accurate; instead, he uses the past to illustrate the inner battles and moral dilemmas. Elijah is not only a prophet, but also a man who has to deal with loss, fear, and being sent away. This transformation of biblical

characters into symbols of all human pain is an example of how Coelho attempts to combine historical myth with modern existential philosophy. Scholars have written about Coelho's retellings of historical stories, stating that they make the lessons in traditional stories more timeless, ensuring that they don't get lost over time or across different countries.

On the other hand, Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* (2004) provides a more profound and historically significant narrative. The novel explores the overlooked stories of German miners who migrated to Mexico during the 1800s. It is set in both contemporary and colonial Mexico. Desai constructs a narrative that explores the relationship between an individual's identity and a memory being suppressed at the group level through the protagonist, Eric, a young European researcher in search of his family roots. Brinda Bose and Meenakshi Mukherjee have examined Desai's work as a means of contemplating the intersection of memory and history, diasporic isolation, and postcolonial identity. The fragmented nature of her storytelling suggests a persistent sense of disorientation and discontinuity characteristic of the diasporic experience.

Desai's reading of history is thorough, and it shows the voices that she has been trying to silence in her thoughts. She doesn't make up stories about history; instead, she saves it from death by focusing on the people that history hasn't picked. In *The Zigzag Way*, history is both frightening and forgiving, and it plays a significant role in shaping how people find their identity and sense of connection. Critics have noted how Desai is able to convey cultural displacement without making it seem overtly political. Instead, she employs atmosphere, imagery, and an introspective narrative voice to illustrate how historical absence affects people emotionally. Her non-linear storytelling reveals how memory is

fractured and, by extension, how challenging it is to navigate one's own past in a globalized and postcolonial world.

There are big differences between Coelho and Desai's writing styles, genres, and settings, but at their core, both novels are about how different people experience and understand history. The story of Coelho is more spiritual and symbolic, whereas the story of Desai is more realistic and grounded in postcolonial critique. Even though their works are very different, both show that history is not idle; it shapes people's thoughts and choices. Scholars like Linda Hutcheon and Dominick LaCapra have pointed out that historical fiction can also be used as a means to discuss moral issues, as telling stories is now a way to perceive, remember, and understand past wrongdoings. In this way, both Coelho and Desai use writing to connect the personal to the historical, though they do so in different ways.

Recently, the field of comparative literature has begun to recognize the value of examining texts from different cultures and languages to identify issues that affect all people. However, there haven't been many studies that directly compare Coelho and Desai in terms of their historical awareness. It's important to note this difference because both writers utilize history as a backdrop for their stories and as an integral part of their narratives. Together, these two writers demonstrate how history impacts people by examining aspects such as migration, loss, identity, and spiritual growth through the lens of history. Coelho's Elijah must contend with both divine command and human pain, while Desai's Eric attempts to piece together a complex and incomplete past. Both characters go on an inner journey that is set off by historical events. This is a common theme in literature: how the past affects the present.

A great deal of writing has been written about Paulo Coelho and Anita Desai, focusing on their narrative structures and the themes that interest them. However, little attention has been paid to how both writers approach the concept of historical consciousness from different cultural perspectives. Our study aims to fill that gap by comparing their novels in a context where different types of history, whether religious or secular, mythologized or ignored, are a vital force shaping people's lives and their writing. From this perspective, both *The Fifth Mountain* and *The Zigzag Way* share similar yet distinct views on the power of the past in the quest for meaning, identity, and spiritual fulfillment.

Research Methodology

This study examines the portrayal of historical awareness in Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain* and Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* through a qualitative, analytical, and comparative literary lens. Close reading of primary texts forms the basis of the analysis. This involves examining elements such as story patterns, character development, thematic patterns, and symbolic elements. Comparative literature is used to illustrate how writers' approaches to history, identity, and spirituality vary depending on their culture and time period. Literature is also used to gain academic insight into postcolonial criticism, historicism, and archetypal analysis, thereby deepening the study of well-known topics such as exile, belief, and the search for oneself. Secondary sources, such as critical essays, journal articles, author interviews, and related literary criticism, are also used to provide additional background information and critical analysis. This approach is what the work is all about: showing how Coelho and Desai don't just use historical settings as a background for their stories, but as an important part of how their main characters grow as people and as writers.

Problem of the Discussion:

The story of Paulo Coelho's novel *The Fifth Mountain* is based on the historical prophet Elijah, who must navigate both divine orders and personal challenges in his life. Retelling the story of Elijah is a way for Coelho to explore themes of fate, strength, and the potential for personal transformation. When Elijah thinks, "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" (Coelho, 1996, p. 75), he is in a state of inner conflict. This emotion encompasses the paradox of free will and spiritual guidance, illustrating the difficulty the prophet faced in balancing doubt with a sense of purpose.

"All life's battles teach us something, even those we lose", says Coelho to continue the idea that hardship shapes us (Coelho, 1996, p. 128). Perspective places past events in context, not merely as background information, but as a means for characters to grow and become more self-aware. "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, 1996, p. 137) backs up the idea that problems are what make us grow, which fits with the idea that history can help us become better people.

The Zigzag Way, by Anita Desai, on the other hand, explores historical awareness in relation to postcolonial identity and memory. Eric, the main character, travels to Mexico to discover the value of his family. Desai paints a beautiful picture of Eric's descent into the past: "Golden dramatic words unfurling through the rubble... each had an image, a memory linked to it that he struggled to resurrect" (Desai, 2004, pp. 31-32). The 'fracturation' and 'recursion' of history, which Eric is trying to piece back together from its small pieces, mark this passage.

Reconstructing a story by Desai is similar to putting together pieces of history that don't fit together in a straight line. As Eric learns more about the lives of the Cornish miners and the native people of Mexico, he sees how personal and public events are linked. Celebrations of Day of the Dead take place in a sad setting that reminds us of where the past and the present meet and how history lives on in our modern selves.

Both Coelho and Desai utilize past settings to explore themes such as being on the run, finding one's identity, and transformation. Elijah in Coelho's novel deals with religious issues in ancient Israel, and Eric in Desai's novel navigates the complex postcolonial Mexico. Even though the situations are different, both main characters grow as a result of being part of history. Coelho wrote, "The act of living one's own destiny includes a series of stages... to make us learn the lessons necessary to fulfill our own destiny" (Coelho, 1996, p. 204). Eric's journey can be seen as he peels back the layers of his family and cultural history.

The Fifth Mountain and *The Zigzag Way* show how historical awareness can affect individual stories. Through their main characters' quests, Coelho and Desai demonstrate the complexity of the relationships between personal experiences and larger historical events. This suggests that understanding one's past experiences is crucial for self-discovery and self- fulfillment.

Conclusion

The study of historical awareness in Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain* and Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way* reveals that history serves a purpose that extends beyond providing a backdrop for shaping a person's identity, purpose, and transformation. Even though the

stories take place in different places and times, both novels explore how the past influences our lives and how we remember it.

Using biblical history, Coelho rewrites the story of the prophet Elijah's journey as a deeply personal spiritual journey in *The Fifth Mountain*. Not only do divine orders and political unrest cause Elijah trouble, but so do his questions, grief, and his search for meaning in hard times. Coelho's overall philosophical view is that life's problems have meaning and that people need to believe in fate and persevere even when things become difficult. All the bad things that happened in history, such as wars, exile, and destruction, were used to make Elijah pure and wise. Through these kinds of events, Coelho builds a model of spiritual strength based on the idea that history is a divine story that can teach a soul. The novel becomes an ageless story about how willpower and the need to make things better can change things.

The Zigzag Way by Desai, on the other hand, is about the complicated history and culture of postwar Mexico. Eric's journey is not religious at all; it is more emotional and about finding meaning in life. Desai examines the connections between history, memory, and identity in his quest to discover his ancestors. The novel suggests that the past never truly disappears; it endures in traditions, landscapes, and the cultural imagination. Eric's experience is shaped by his postcolonial identity, characterized by feelings of displacement, uncertainty, and a strong desire to belong. Desai skillfully weaves historical events into Eric's story, such as the mistreatment of Mexican miners, the lives of Cornish migrants, and native cultural practices, to show how history shapes and sometimes influences modern subjectivity.

Although they are very different, both novels demonstrate the importance of learning

from and being involved in the past. Coelho thinks that historical awareness is a divine way for people to become wise. Desai views it as a non-religious, yet equally important, way for people and societies to express their identity. In both stories, the main characters transition from being cold or confused to gaining a profound understanding of things after learning about their past. Whether you are in the broken-down Israelite lands or the creepy Mexican mountains, the landscapes are not just places to visit. They are memory banks and creative engines for each person.

This comparative study demonstrates that historical awareness serves two distinct roles in writing. It gives the person a place in a bigger story of time and pushes characters to become their best selves. Through very different storytelling methods and cultural lenses, both Coelho and Desai demonstrate that history is more than just numbers and events; it's also people's ongoing search for meaning in the flow of time. Both authors agree that connecting with your past, whether it's religious or not, can help you better understand the present and yourself.

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