

Who am I in the world? – The Greatest Exploration of Self-Discovery: with reference to Paulo Coelho’s “The Alchemist”

Dr.N.Ratna

Faculty of English, V.O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, Indiaa

Abstract- Existentialism as an off shoot of post modernism deals with the compulsion of human beings needs to make choices in life. According to the existentialists, man is responsible for his living and he has to face the consequences of his living. In this regard, this paper attempts to study Paulo Coelho’s “The Alchemist” an existential work of art. The novel bursts with optimism and penetrates how the protagonist overcome his dilemma and the process of decision making which eventually concludes in providing him the feel of satisfaction and implicits the emergence of self-discovery as well.

Keywords: Optimism, dilemma, decision making.

Journey to the Self is an essential process that provides life with a meaningful existence. It is capable of answering many of the puzzles that life has imposed. It has been a haunting question for great souls as “who am I?” for aeons. The world has witnessed many sages and saints spending a major part of their life roving and meditating on the mountain tops to find out the meaning of their existence and enjoy the ultimate ecstasy of attaining self-actualization. The journey has taken them to a wider world of deeper truths.

Human beings always face many choices in conducting their life. These choices often put them into dilemma. They must make decisions to overcome the dilemma, no matter how complicated the decisions are. The complicated dilemma is usually caused by the fact that the process of decision making sometimes becomes very personal which means that one’s choice is occasionally different compared to other people’s choices in the society. Meanwhile, the society’s opinion, which is called as ‘the crowd’ in Kierkegaard’s existentialism, usually constructs people about what they should choose or not. The crowd also provides reward for the ones who are willing to follow it. On the other hand, it is the crowd who criticizes or punishes its members who do not follow its rules. This circumstance often causes many people are afraid of taking their individual choices when it is against the opinion of the crowd. Therefore, in many ways it demands a very strong will for people to make their own choices.

Paulo Coelho was born on 24 August 1947 in Botafogo, neighbourhood of Rio De Janerio. Before The Alchemist launched him to worldwide fame, the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho experienced a bumpy writing career. Clear connections exist between the story of The Alchemist and Coelho’s own life story. Just like Santiago, a comfortable shepherd who decided to abandon everything to pursue a dream, Coelho lived comfortably as a songwriter when he

decided to give up everything to pursue his dream of writing. Just as Santiago suffered many setbacks and temptations during his journey to Egypt’s pyramids, Coelho suffered a number of setbacks, including the disappointing reception of The Pilgrimage and the initial failure of The Alchemist, and experienced material temptations arising from his financial success as a songwriter. Yet, just like Santiago, Coelho remained focused on his dream, eventually achieving literary success beyond his expectation. Interestingly, Coelho did not gain fame and financial success as an author until well after writing The Alchemist. Although Coelho’s subsequent success more than validates the lesson he communicates through the story of Santiago’s journey, success such as Santiago finds in The Alchemist was something Coelho had yet to attain at the time he wrote the book.

Coelho invariably employs the motif of journey in all his novels. In his novel The Alchemist he apparently portrays the protagonists, a shepherd boy named Santiago’s, journey from home in Spain to the markets of Tangier in Africa and from there to the Egyptian Pyramids. Though the boy set out his journey in search of a treasure buried in the Egyptian Pyramids of which he was recurrently shown in a dream, Coelho metaphorically presents Santiago’s spiritual journey to realize his own self, his own destiny or his “Personal legend,” in Coelho’s term.

Personal legend is a prominent aspect that catalyses the process of self actualization. The realization of their personal legend enables Coelho’s characters to follow their dreams and pursue their paths of self-discovery. Coelho reiterates throughout his novels that every individual in the world has a personal legend and through achieving it, the individual reaches the soul of the world .Coelho considers the personal legend as one’s reason for living on this earth.

Thus, the Ulysses-like journey of exploration and self-discovery for a symbolic search for treasure becomes Santiago's mission on earth, which is nothing but to find God, implying happiness, fulfilment and the ultimate purpose of creation. Santiago remains undaunted in living up his personal legend through an adventurous journey of self-exploration. He confessed: "he had to choose between thinking of himself as the poor victim of a thief and as an adventurer in quest of his treasure" (The Alchemist 44).

Existentialism in the broader sense is a 20th century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in the world. Existentialism is a philosophical movement which emphasizes on individual existence to define himself and the world of his own subjectivity, wandering between freedom and choice ("Existentialism"). Santiago deals with the process of making choice as people often have in daily life is one of the issues discussed in Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism. Therefore, Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism will be applied in explaining Santiago's decision making process.

Coelho believes in the existence of a mysterious force that assist one in achieving the personal legend. The King of Salem tells Santiago, It's a force that appears to be negative but actually shows you how to realize your destiny. It prepares your spirit and your will, because there is one great truth on this planet: whoever you are, or whatever it is that you do, when you really want something, it's because that desire originated in the soul of the universe. It's your mission on earth." (The Alchemist 22-23) Journey in search of one's personal legend means search for one's own total consciousness. It is the journey of self-exploration and self-discovery. Coelho, through the words of the alchemist conveys, "There is only one way to learn and it's through action. Everything you need to know you have learned through your journey" (120). Indeed it is the journey that Santiago takes to explore the material riches and simultaneous discovery of himself anew. As he physically moves away from his home to distant places he was being newer to his heart realizing the dark corners of his soul. During his journey he earns money working in a crystal shop in Tangiers and wins fifty gold pieces in the oasis of Al-Fayoum by his prognostications. At the same time his spiritual journey enables him to experience love, through a desert girl Fatima. As he moves, there is an evolution that takes place in him liberating his old narrow perceptions and gaining wider awareness of life, thereby acquiring a grander experience of the Self, and establishes a greater harmony with the Universe. Thus, Santiago undergoes an amazing metamorphosis from an ordinary shepherd Self to the nobler Self of an alchemist. He admits, "I learned the alchemist's secrets in my travels. I have inside me the winds, the deserts, the oceans, the stars, and everything created in the universe. We were all made by the same hand, and we have the same soul" (154). Santiago's enlightenment reaches its full zenith when he reaches the Egyptian Pyramids. There occurs a visionary encounter towards the end of the story as the boy meets a gang of refugees in the pyramid. They beat him down for money and leave him there to die and as they leave, one of them remarks:

Two years ago right here on this spot, I had a recurrent dream too. I dreamed that I should travel to the fields of Spain and look for a ruined church where shepherds and their sheep slept. In my dream, there was a sycamore growing out of the ruins of sacristy, and I was told that if I dug at the roots of the sycamore, I would find a hidden treasure. But I'm not so stupid to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream. (171-72) For Santiago it is a moment of revelation that foretells him about the actual location of the treasure buried in his native land. It has powerful implications about looking into the roots and foundations of one's life. It is about voyaging outward to find the way back home. It also means trusting one's dreams even they seem to have slipped beyond one's reach. Thus, for Santiago to reach his treasure, he has to remember not to forget his sheep that symbolize his identity, his roots. It is here, after all, where his heart lies. He has to learn to accept change, to value simplicity and to trust his experience of daily life over bookish knowledge. It is also required of him to live in the present, to read God's will in signs and omens, to listen to his heart and to penetrate the Soul of the World. Santiago can learn all this only by travelling and returning all wise and enlightened. Finally, he needs to have firm faith in his goal in order to follow it through to its realization. As Santiago undergoes this spiritual transformation that parallels the art of alchemy, converting lead into gold, he finds his treasure that is his pristine, sublime self. It is in the Egyptian Pyramids that Santiago finds both his physical and spiritual journeys becoming fruitful as he is revealed that his treasure lies in the same spot where he had the recurrent dream of his treasure reminding him that the treasure lies where his heart is. Then there occurs a synchronization of both the outward and the inward journeys. This in turn reminds him of the necessity of recreating himself to attain his true, sublime self. His journey back to the ruined church in Spain symbolizes his being close to his heart. Thus, getting the treasure buried beneath the sycamore tree concludes his physical journey.

The outcome of the study is to know how Santiago's decision making seen from Kierkegaard's existentialism. Hence, the writer uses Kierkegaard's theory of existentialism to analyze the two aspects above. Existentialist says the main point of existentialism is the emphasis on individual existence to define himself and the world of his own subjectivity, wandering between freedom and choice ("Existentialism"). Kierkegaard's key words are existence, freedom, choice, responsibility and Anguish. Santiago's experiences when he deals with his dilemmas signify that he has the freedom of choosing because he has to consider each choice. Santiago's freedom is responsible freedom. This responsibility is revealed on his action to take all the risk of his choices and his commitment to stick to his decisions although he faces many obstacles. In the first dilemma, Santiago thinks about the two choices whether becoming a priest or a traveller. Being a traveller allows him to wander along the country. Moreover, Santiago thinks that travelling can give him many experiences about God and His being (8). Unlike becoming a priest which could limit his chance to get new experience, becoming a traveller will make him an open minded mind as he said, "I couldn't have found God in the

seminary, he thought, as he looked at the sunrise (10).” It is sufficient for him to have the knowledge which he gets from the seminary, the knowledge about God and man’s sin. The responsibility he has after he makes decision to become a shepherd is Santiago takes all the consequences such as being separated from his family. It is a new situation that he must face. Being a shepherd also means that he has to be alone, his sheep is the only friend he has. Those things do not make him sad and fell lonely. Being a shepherd also means that Santiago only has a temporary shelter. He brings a jacket and a book along his journey. Sometimes the jacket’s weight annoys Santiago but he tries to remember how helpful the jacket is, to warmth him when the night is cold (The Alchemist8). He also has a book which he reads in the day and he uses it as a pillow when he sleeps. (The Alchemist 3) Those illustrate that Santiago enjoys his days as a shepherd by accepting the consequences. It is the proof of his responsibility towards his decision.

In the second dilemma, Santiago also considers two choices whether to become a shepherd or to look for the hidden treasure. Being a shepherd does not promise him to be able to meet the merchant’s daughter again. However, the option of looking for the hidden treasure requires Santiago leaves his well-steady life as a shepherd because he already has sixty sheep. But this choice also does not promise that he could find the hidden treasure. Those two choices are understood well by Santiago. The following is Santiago’s consideration: Here, I am between my flock and my treasure, the boy thought. He had to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have. There was also the merchant’s daughter, she wasn’t important as his flock, because she didn’t depend on him. Maybe she didn’t remember him. He was sure that it made no difference to her on which day he appeared: for her, every day was the same, and when each day is the same as the next, it’s because people fail to recognize the good things that happen in their lives every day that the sun rises. (27) The statement above obviously explains that Santiago is aware that the flock is something he is accustomed to. Then, for him, the merchant daughter is not important as his flock. Those consideration means that the flock is the most important of all. Not only considering about the flock and the merchant’s daughter, Santiago also thinks about his will of travelling as the following: The boy felt jealous of the freedom of the wind, and saw that he could have the same freedom. There was nothing to hold him back except himself. The sheep, the merchant’s daughter, and the fields of Andalusia were only steps along the way to his Personal Legend.

Santiago tries his best to look for the way to get food as the proof of his commitment to stay in Africa. He must be tough to be able to pass the obstacle. This action shows that Santiago’s decision is something which has to do with responsible actions. When Santiago decides to work at the crystal merchant’s shop, Santiago does it seriously. His innovative ideas to expand the shop are the proof of his seriousness. His innovative ideas are he offers the crystal merchant to build the display for the crystal (52) and to sell tea in the crystal glasses (57). It obviously explains that

Santiago is responsible towards his choice. After Santiago earns much money, Santiago is in dilemma between going back to Spain and continuing the journey to the Pyramids. Santiago always wants to go back to Spain because he already understands the sheep; the sheep is not a problem for him (65). On the other hand, Santiago does not know anything about the desert where his treasure is located. However Santiago makes his own consideration as follows “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. I finally have enough money, and all the time I need. Why not? (65).” The statement explains that Santiago knows well the reason of choosing each choice. When Santiago decides to continue his journey to the Pyramids, Santiago knows the worst possibility of his choice that is he does not find the treasure. But he already considers it and thinks that it is not a big deal for him because he has already enough money and time to go back to Spain. This shows that Santiago thinks about each choice carefully. In the warehouse, Santiago is free to choose whether he continues his journey to the Pyramids or goes back to Spain. When he chooses to go to the Pyramids, he is worried of the future risk he may run. But then his meeting with the Englishman and the stranger empowers him to continue his journey to the Egyptian Pyramids. His decision to leave the warehouse is the proof of his consistency towards his previous decision to continue his journey to the Pyramids. In the last dilemma, Santiago decides to do something opposed to his fundamental wish, to marry Fatima. He decides to leave Fatima, the one whom he loves. It happens after Fatima asks him to find the treasure because for Fatima, a desert woman is the one who knows everything about waiting the one she loves to come back to her (98). This statement is also the same with the alchemist’s statement about the desert woman (118). After deciding it, Santiago is responsible towards his choice. He convinces himself that “men dream more about coming home than about leaving (123).” Santiago attempts to focus on his goal, to arrive at the Pyramids, find the treasure, then to come back to Fatima. Those analyses above show that Santiago’s freedom is similar to Kierkegaard’s concept about freedom. Eros is a kind of love that exists between two people where two souls are bound inseparable. It is this magnificent force that binds Santiago and Fatima in The Alchemist. Coelho has defined eros in The Alchemist as “something older than humanity, more ancient than the desert, something that exerted the same force whenever two pairs of eyes met” (88). Eros Love is described in the novel as “the pure language of the world” (89), which does not need any explanation. Because of that common Language of the world, the boy could understand that “he was in the presence of the only woman in his life,” (The Alchemist 89) exactly the same thing that she had felt without any form of communication in their first meeting. It is that magical, powerful force of love that enabled them to find out their twin soul. Coelho advises his readers that there is “the incredible certainty that everything under the sun has been written by one hand only. It is the hand that evokes love, and creates a twin soul for every person in the world. Without such love, one’s dreams would have no meaning” (89). It is this meeting with Fatima that enabled Santiago to have a better understanding of love as a universal language and leads him

into profound spiritual experience. Distinct from the perception of love as possession, Fatima believes that true love can never be on the path of one's journey to his dreams; she transforms the forces of eros in her to the mighty forces of philo and encourages Santiago to resume his quest as he was inclined to stay in the desert to be with her. Coelho presents love in *The Alchemist* as: The force that transforms and improves the Soul of the world...it is we who nourish the Soul of the world, and the world we live in will be either better or worse, depending on whether we become better or worse. And that's where the power of love comes in. Because when we love, we always strive to become better than we are. (143-44) He felt an in-depth love for Fatima so much so that he could visualize her even in a mere grain of sand. It is not the love that fades away in the absence but a kind of universal, spiritual love that flames intensely in the absence of the beloved. "Even the levanter wind coming from Africa to Andalusia is filled with the fragrances of Fatima and bears the touch of her kiss" (Mishra 103). Again the power of love is so intense that it can make impossible things possible. It is the powerful forces of love that enables Santiago to turn himself into wind. He confesses: "...there is a woman waiting for me. And that's why I have to turn myself into wind" (*The Alchemist* 153). Thus it is proven that "it is his love for Fatima goading him to unleash his ethereal might" (Mishra 103). And when he adds that it is love that "makes the game become the falcon, the falcon become man and man in his turn, the desert. It's what turn lead into gold, and makes the gold return to the earth" (*The Alchemist* 152). The love in the small boy acquires a new dimension of divine love, a love that can enable him to converse with the universe, a love that can help him achieve a meaning for his existence. Thus Santiago's love for the desert girl eventually transforms him to an alchemist who could turn himself into wind and thus perform miracles.

"Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other clause—that it must be lived forward". (Soren Kierkagaard). Santiago's life unveils the philosophy of Existentialism that the human existence is an investigation of the meaning of being. Santiago's journey symbolizes his search for the meaning of his own life. Dreyfus says that, according to Existentialism, the existence is inclusive of diverse possibilities from which man must make a selection and he should be committed to that selection. It also advocated that human beings are fully responsible for creating the meaning of their own lives and people actually make decisions based on what is meaningful to them rather than what is rational. Santiago's life extends to him a variety of possibilities from which he has to choose. He has to select from the alternatives like priesthood or shepherding, going to Andalusia or crossing the desert to reach Egypt, and finally, living in the Al-Fayoum oasis with Fatima or going to Egypt in search of his treasure. From all these alternatives he makes the wisest choices of shepherding, crossing the desert, and going to Egypt in search of his treasure. He is truly committed and responsible for his selections. It is obvious that Santiago is assertive of his basic interests and is also capable of dismissing the Sartrean existential angst of 'being for others'. Existentialism also preaches that human nature and human

identity vary depending upon the values and beliefs one holds. Santiago believes in Melchizedek's words that, "When you want something, the entire universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (Coelho 23). Even in the most difficult situation, this belief only gives him enough courage to pursue his path. It makes him a confident man capable of achieving his treasure. His identity itself is shaped by this belief.

Coelho inspires his readers to follow their dreams and listen to their heart for attaining the innate joy of life. His works are the invitation to live one's dreams, to embrace the uncertainty of life, and to rise to meet one's own unique destiny. He invites each one of us to embark upon the course of the warrior. For him, each of his readers is a warrior of light: one who appreciates the miracle of being alive, one who accepts failure, and one whose quest leads him to become the person he wants to be. That is, one who is still able to fight for his dreams, despite his every day worries. Coelho seems to be en route to fulfilling his own destiny, although he readily admits the road has not been smooth. His books are about the common people who have the doubts of winning the battle and moments of being utterly dejected. Regardless of what happens in lives, people have to persevere, survive, and fulfil the destiny. One has to take the risks and pay the price. The marvel in the writings of Coelho is that it has an uplifting effect when one is in a state of dejection. For him there is nothing "impossible," it is just a misleading word. According to him, people let themselves get discouraged, not because things are impossible, but because they actually want them to be. For him the good fight or joy is present when the people are ready to bring changes in their lives. Coelho thinks that true lessons are in one's own experiences and those experiences keep one alive. He sees his books as his way of sharing himself and his inner Self and that is why his readers feel that he understands them because they think like him. Thus, Coelho with his magical word generates awareness about things that are concealed within the Self. As a writer, Coelho believes that "The world itself has a soul, and at a certain moment, that soul acts on everyone and everything at the same time" (*The Alchemist* 147). And through his novels, he urges his readers to "Follow your dreams, transform your life, take the path that leads to God. Perform your miracles. Cure. Make prophecies. Listen to your guardian angel. Transform yourself. Be a warrior, and be happy as you wage the good fight. Take risks" (*The Alchemist* 150). All these pieces of insightful thought strewn in Coelho's novels eventually assist in the journey of one's self discovery, thus ensuring a permanent place for Coelho as a spiritual writer in the literary circle.

Thus, through all his novels, Coelho says that the fruit of the journey is the journey itself; the experiences and knowledge one gains throughout is the real treasure one can achieve through his/her life journey. In this journey, touching one's own heart or soul is the real greatness, the ultimate joy of life. Thus, Coelho has employed journey as a process of growth and transformation leading the individual to his/her spiritual growth and enlightenment. Through this paper entitled "Who am I in the world? The Greatest Exploration of Self-discovery: with reference to Paulo Coelho's 'The

Alchemist’,” the researcher attempts to explore various evolutionary processes and psychical phenomena taking place during this journey and the various factors that stimulate these processes.

It is quite worthy to praise Coelho's attempt to simplify the complex alchemical processes of spiritual transformation through his novels as in the life of a shepherd boy so that the readers get assured of applying in their daily life and can make an attempt to achieve self-actualization.

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