

Self-actualization through Travel in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

P.GEETHA

Assistant Professor of English
Jansons Institute of Technology, Coimbatore

Dr.OLIVE THAMBI

Assistant Professor of English
LRG Government Arts College, Tirupur

Abstract

Paulo Coelho, the universally renowned writer, is not a man of half measures, rather a man of extremes. He is an avid traveller. His travel is involved with two basic human instincts such as the drive towards movement in the external world and the reflexive drive toward movement in the internal world. He is an adventurer who has a constant hunger for new experiences. He believes that travelling thrusts a person to see the unknown places and provides a bounty of new information and ideas to expand one's mind. Understanding the true motivation of the adventure travelling, he states, "Something of the great human adventure that has brought Ulysses from Troy that had led a part of Don Quixote's experience, that had led Dante and Orpheus into hell, and that had directed Columbus to the Americans; the adventure of travelling towards the unknown" (The Pilgrimage 14). The research paper aims at exploring how Santiago, the principal character in *The Alchemist* evolves through travel experiences and attains self-actualization.

Keywords: Travel experiences, Journey, Evolution, Mind, Motivation, Adventure, etc.

Travelling is one of the most enriching and indispensable activities of human life. Man travels from place to place with a view to satisfying his basic needs or to continue to have his existence from time immemorial. Writing and travel have always been closely connected. Travel writing is an ancient impulse. People have been sharing accounts of their journeys ever since they first began to wander. As the world evolves continuously, a person who travels evolves his way constantly. Travel and travel writing too keeps evolving. Today's modern developed world has emerged due to the evolution of man's tendencies of travelling.

Modern travel narratives are more introspective and the perspective of travel has evolved remarkably from the outer world to inner journey. As quoted by the French theorist, Michel de Certeau, "Every story is a travel story- a spatial practice", it is a challenging task to limit the scope of travel writing. It becomes apparent that the mere physical or geographical expedition and their accounts do not form travel writing, but a personal journey through different situations and different cultures are also equally important. Therefore, travel writing can be perceived as that which is twofold in nature one, the physical journey, and the other accompanying inner journey.

The word Journey refers to both physical journey as well as inner journey. The inner journey involves emotional and spiritual journey and it includes a psychological path leading to self-realization. Spiritual Journeys are also a part of travel literature and it is often a metaphor for self-discovery. Self-discovery is an inner journey that occurs within. In this journey, the main character goes through changes and discovers something about them. It is about the soul's exploration of the world. Spiritual journey is often taken at a mythological level to find one's inner truth, to find God in oneself. Many writers connect their writings to reveal the quest for meaning in life. To name a few, the renowned Italian writer Dante and the classical writer John Milton and their works like *The Inferno* and *Paradise lost* unveil the spiritual journey of man and man in relation to God.

According to Abraham Maslow, the humanistic psychologist, attaining self-actualization is the full use of one's skills, capabilities and potentialities etc. He believed that all beings have the self-actualizing ability. Coelho like Maslow focuses on the inner potential of his characters. The characters choose to evolve themselves from one level of existence to another as they have long-lasting curiosity, intentions, instincts and awareness even if they

are bounded with obstacles along with the journey. Their path to self-actualization includes many obstacles, but they consider the obstacles as opportunities to renew their journey toward joy and fulfillment.

Journey, both spiritual and physical, acts as a very strong metaphor in Coelho's novels. In his novels, there is a psychological journey that is mirrored through a physical journey. By pulling the hero through a physical experience, Coelho stimulates a psychological transformation i.e. self-actualization. He emphasises "All the great classics of literature are stories of great journeys. It's always the search for Ithaca, it's the metaphor of birth and death, that great journey we all have to make, whether we want to or not" (Arias 173). Coelho's *The Alchemist* is an inspiring story of a shepherd from Andalusia who dreams of travelling the world in search of a worldly treasure. It is also about listening to one's heart and following one's dream. As the title signifies, alchemy is the primary theme. Even though alchemy is a study about materializing objects from a universal source of energy, the main aim of alchemy is not to produce wealth or to turn lead into gold but a strong process of transforming oneself.

Ordinary people wait for things to get right before they start travelling, but in *The Alchemist* the extraordinary boy, Santiago gave up a sheltered life of family to become a traveller. He chose a shepherd life, just because he wanted to see the world. His father wanted to convince him by saying that travel is a matter of money and courage and the one who travels without money are the shepherds. Santiago replied that then he would be a shepherd. With a view to achieving his personal legend and realising the ultimate that his destiny has to offer, he travels from his homeland, Spain, makes his way across the marketplaces of Tangiers, and into the great desert of Egypt. On his way, he visits new places, experiences love, learns lessons, loses and makes money, listens to omens, learns a different language, meets different people, finds himself in pleasant and unpleasant aspects of life. His journey is filled with tons of adventures, as the journey progresses, he meets a king, a desert woman and an alchemist, each adding to his life new twists and turns.

Santiago covers three countries during his journey. He travels across Spain, Africa, and Egypt to reach to his destination. He sets off in Tarifa, Spain, then he makes his way across to Tangier and Morocco. The Oasis that he

arrives after travelling with the caravan is in Faiyum and then he travels about 60 miles from Faiyum to the pyramids which are near Cairo. Ultimately, he discovers his treasure in Spain, so he travels back the way he had gone before. After finding the treasure, he intends going back to Faiyum to marry Fatima, the woman he loves. It takes Santiago around 2 and a half years to complete this task, so it certainly seems like he travels all over the world. He understands through the journey that it is not the destination that matters, but how one enjoys the journey.

Coelho has made an extensive use of the geographical features of various places in the novel. He has pointed out the distinct customs and lifestyles of two neighbouring continents through geographical symbols such as Andalusia, in the European continent and the Sahara desert, in the African continent. Andalusia's landscapes offer a space for shepherding, farming, trade and agricultural productions. Santiago's life in Andalusia as a shepherd is easy-going and pleasant to deal with. He has enough time to read books and there is no complexity in his life.

In the second location in Africa, Santiago's undergoes transformation from a shepherd boy to an adventurous man, capable of facing death many times with courage. The moors, who inhabited Africa, lead a daring and adventurous life in the capricious Sahara desert and it is mirrored through Santiago's challenging and adventurous life over there. Coelho provides a very vibrant image of the Sahara desert that is the novel's greatest geographical symbol. Travelling across the Sahara is the most important part of Santiago's journey which is the symbolisation of the risky part of his spiritual quest.

At the outset of his journey, Santiago is unaware of the natural surroundings of the desert. But as the journey progresses, he familiarises himself with the desert and accumulates facts and figures about it through his personal experience. His life in the desert brings out the very courageous part of his personality. The topographical understanding of the place helped Santiago to get reputation at his workplace. Listening to the advice of Santiago, the crystal merchant opened a tea shop at the top of the hill. As pilgrims were not able to find such a decent shop there, to get something to drink after such a climb, they visited the crystal merchant's shop and it became a grand success.

Towards the end, Santiago begins to meditate on the desert and then goes through the different stages of meditations on the wind, the sun, and the God in order to understand the soul of the God as his own soul. The physical features of the desert provide a base for his self-discovery. Coelho affirms that soulful travel can be meaningful and transformative. Santiago learns that adversity, trials, and tribulation bring about unprecedented growth. The most long-lasting memories often occur as a result of unexpected and unpredicted experiences. It is when things go wrong, when one encounters the unexpected, that one is most likely to be changed. He, in his own ways, experienced periods of disorientation and extreme discomfort during some stages of the journey, and yet it is precisely these challenges that leads to the most worthwhile and satisfying growth.

As the journey moves, Santiago evolved along the journey. He could converse with the soul of the world. He reached the state of an alchemist from a shepherd. He also understands the secret of life that there is no point in dwelling on the past, getting lost and anxious about the future, but letting go of it and being in the present and following one's heart will transform his life. Through the Alchemist words, Santiago understands that man is

connected with the world around him and "Everything on earth is being continuously transformed, because the earth is alive... and it has a soul. We are part of the soul" (75). Man evolves as everything in the world evolves. Santiago discovered through travelling that the universe has a soul and that anyone who knows the soul can also comprehend the language of things. Coelho presents Alchemy as the highest of form transformation and it is about penetrating into the Soul of World, and discovering the treasure that has been reserved for one. He says, "Everything in the universe evolved. And, for wise men, gold is the metal that evolved the furthest."(131). On the whole, *The Alchemist* is not only a chronicle of physical travel but also an inner journey of achieving self-actualization.

References

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