

Spirituality and Quest for self in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* & *The Zahir*

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Abstract

The novels of the popular Brazilian author Paulo Coelho The Alchemist (1988), The Zahir (2005) is different from many other books. Sitting somewhere between spirituality, self-help and fiction, it crackles with energy like overhead power lines. Each event, chance meeting or conversation is a charged window into something else – the fundamental teaching of Paulo Coelho. His thinking is rooted in the rejection of organised religion as well as in the inadequacy of atheistic existentialism in supplying enough meaning, value and purpose for living. His narratives skillfully and gradually draw the reader into a series of discoveries. These discoveries, which are the solutions to the problems and questions that the characters in the books face, are explanations of Coelho's own spiritual and moral views. While he might skillfully duck away from the contemporary paranoia of proselytizing, it is clear that Coelho wants to use his stories as a vehicle to communicate his spiritual and moral perspectives.

Keywords: Spirituality, Quest for self, Atheism, Existentialism, Paranoia, Perspectives

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian author who had changed the life of many people through his simple yet thought-provoking books. Before dedicating his life completely to literature, he worked as theater director, actor, lyricist and journalist. His fascination with the spiritual quest dates back to his hippie days when he travelled the world learning about secret societies, oriental religions, etc. In 1987, Coelho published *The Alchemist* which became one of the bestselling works of the Brazilian as well as world literature of all time. Other important titles include *By the river Piedra I sat Down and Wept*(1994) , *The Fifth Mountain*(1996), *Veronica Decides To Die*(1998), *The Devil and Miss Prym*(2000), *Eleven Minutes*(2003), *The Zahir*(2005), *The Witch Of Portobello* (2006) and a compilation of texts gathered under the title *Like a Flowing River*(2006).

. Coelho writes with a poetic and philosophical style, often using real life illustrations and symbolism. Coelho is a New Age writer and practitioner and says in an

interview, 'The material world . . . all our spiritual quests . . . we have to mix this instead of separating it, and leading a life that is not connected with the spirituality.' He is a gifted, popular-level existential observer and writer. His focus meshes with the questions and concerns of every generation like a hand with its favourite glove. A good storyteller gives two kinds of descriptions: what happens, and how the characters reacted, how they felt, what they did. Coelho moves between these two spheres like the blurred form of a trained gymnast transitioning from one set of high bars to the other. Using his insight here, Coelho builds up credibility that he will cash in later as he unfolds and extends the descriptions and they begin to crackle, like the power lines, under the weight of his fundamental teaching.

Coelho was born in Rio De Janiero in 1947, and he is both internationally famous and influential. *The Times* said: 'His books have had a life-enhancing effect on millions of people. *The Alchemist* is Coelho's best-loved book with over 27 million copies sold worldwide. It is the story of Santiago, a Spanish shepherd boy who dreams of travelling the world to find his fortune. He eventually travels to Tangiers and on into the Egyptian desert, where an encounter with an alchemist helps Santiago secure his own personal transformation. Santiago, an Andalusian shepherd boy, has a dream about finding a treasure near the Pyramids of Egypt. A gypsy woman and a mysterious king advise him to pursue his destiny.

With the courage of an adventurer, Santiago sells his sheep and travels to Tangier in Africa. After a thief steals his money, he takes a job with a crystal merchant. Crossing the desert on the next phase of his journey, Santiago meets an Englishman who is impressed with the boy's ability to follow his heart. At an oasis, Santiago is enchanted by a beautiful young woman named Fatima and realizes that love is the transforming power of the world. He earns more money by predicting an attack on the oasis. Following the advice of the king, the boy has learned to read omens.

On the last leg of the journey, Santiago is befriended by an alchemist who helps him understand the language of the desert and the wind. This comes in handy when the boy faces his most difficult test after they are captured by hostile tribesmen. Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* is a mesmerizing fable about the spiritual journey we must all take to fulfill our dreams and play out our destinies. Santiago is encouraged by the King of Salem (who at first seems to be a random old man whom Santiago meets in a random town) to walk the path of the Warriors of Light. Santiago journeys towards his treasure as the old man instructs. As he travels, he meets an Englishman who is also in search of his own treasure. Their conversation is an opportunity for Coelho to introduce some more interesting ideas:

When you want something with all your heart, that's when you are closest to the Soul of the World. It's always a positive force . . . Everything on earth is being continuously transformed, because the earth is alive . . . and it has a soul. We are part of that soul, so we rarely recognize that it is working for us. But in the crystal

shop you probably realized that even the glasses were collaborating in your success. (82)

Everything on the face of the earth, suggests Coelho, has a soul, whether mineral, vegetable, or animal – or even just a simple thought. Coelho is a monist and a pantheist. Coelho sees the story of *The Alchemist* as a way to reach and experience a deeper spiritual life. In the preface, Coelho writes:

I discovered that the symbolic language, which so annoyed and confused me, was the only way to reach the Soul of the World . . . This is why *The Alchemist*, too, is a symbolic text. In the course of the book I pass on everything I have learned. (vii–viii)

Coelho believes that in the experience of reading the book, you are offered his gems, his learning about spiritual matters.

The *Zahir* means 'the obvious' or 'unable to go unnoticed' in Arabic. The story revolves around the narrator, a bestselling novelist's search for his missing wife, Esther. He enjoys all the privileges that money and celebrity bring. He is suspected of foul play by the authorities and the press of having a role to play in the inexplicable disappearance of his wife from their Paris home.

Thereby, the protagonist is forced to re-examine his own life and marriage as well. The narrator is unable to figure out what led to Esther's disappearance. Was she abducted or had she abandoned their marriage? He comes across Mikhail, one of Esther's friends. The narrator with his help realizes that to find Esther, he must find his own self. Mikhail introduces him to a tribe who has unconventional ways of living. Through the narrator's journey from Paris to Kazakhstan, Coelho explores various meanings of love and life.

The Zahir chronicles his journey as he searches, sometimes obsessively, for answers. Coelho says that his aim with the book is to, 'try to explore the story we haven't been told, taking as my main character a successful writer who, when his wife suddenly leaves him, is forced to reassess his life.' The police suspect the author of being criminally involved in Esther's disappearance, but he is freed when he confesses that he was with his lover, Marie, during that day and night. Locating Esther, a journalist who fled Iraq, involves seeking out the mysterious Mikhail, an elusive Kazakhstani man, who is Esther's last known acquaintance. The story traces the lonely route of the author as he wanders through the backstreets of Paris howling at the moon, and explores his reflections upon his relationships with Marie and Esther. It also describes his experiences of Mikhail, who introduces the author to a mysterious underground group of spiritual seekers who reject conventional ways of living. Mikhail says, 'I have a mission to fulfil, and that mission is to spread the true energy of love throughout the world' (195).

Coelho explains that the 'Zahir' in Arabic means present, visible, or incapable of being unnoticed. 'It is someone or something which, once we have come into contact with them or it, gradually occupies our every thought, until we can think of nothing else. This can be considered a state of holiness or madness' (p. 1). The Zahir in this book is the idea of, or the longing for, a woman, but it could be anything:

The Zahir can be a person, a job, an objective, but the attempt to possess or achieve it never brings us happiness, instead, it becomes an unhealthy obsession. Unfortunately, this is an experience everyone goes through.

Esther, the Zahir. She fills everything. She is the only reason I am alive. I look around, I prepare myself for the talk I am to give, and I understand why I braved the snow, the traffic jams and the ice on the roads: in order to be reminded that every day I need to rebuild myself and to accept – for the first time in my entire existence – that I love another human being more than myself . . . she has shown me that I am capable of a love of which I myself knew nothing. (12)

The unnamed author and Coelho seem similar. Both are famous authors living in Paris writing books, published in many different languages that millions of people adore, and claim have changed their lives. How far we carry the similarity isn't clear though. The author in *The Zahir* finds that his missing wife becomes his Zahir, and that in the course of searching for her he goes through his own emotional journey which culminates in him truly finding himself.

The narrator slowly recognises that through everyday ordinary situations and events, the 'soul of the world' (the soul or consciousness that every thing has) is trying to communicate with him. This is where Coelho introduces us to his most substantive ideas as he describes events, and the author's reactions and reflections upon them. The story wraps itself around questions like, How does my reaction to love affect the way that I love? What does it really mean to love one person and to be loved by one person?.

This book handles the issues of love, belonging, obsession, relationships and understanding; taking the reader on a pretty incredible ride with the story of a couple in love who grow apart leaving the husband in a sea of loss, obsession, heartbreak and misunderstanding, on a journey to understand himself, his wife, relationships and life. Throughout this journey with the main character, the reader finds himself looking at his relationship with his loved one, analyzing it, connecting with the character on some points, understanding it, knowing where he might be going wrong and how he might correct certain things.

As well as these themes of obsession and love, Coelho also discusses themes like choice, feelings, suffering, guidance (through head and heart) and wisdom. One of his key themes is the tension between freedom and fidelity, and he uses the character of the

author to question if monogamy really is the best pattern for relationships. When the author is released from prison, he says:

I'm free. I'm out of prison, my wife has disappeared in mysterious circumstances, I have no fixed timetable for work, I have no problem meeting new people, I'm rich, famous, and if Esther really has left me, I'll soon find someone to replace her. I'm free, independent. But what is freedom? (8)

He laments what he perceives to be his slavery, then describes how he fought for his freedom – against parental expectations, with other boys at school, to get into the world of work, for the affection of his childhood sweetheart against the will of her parents, in the hostile world of journalism – and for the courage to launch into the adventure of writing a book. The narrator describes how he:

He heard other people speaking in the name of freedom, and the more they defended this unique right, the more enslaved they seemed to be to their parents' wishes, to a marriage in which they had promised to stay with the other person 'for the rest of their lives', to the bathroom scales, to their diet, to half-finished projects, to lovers to whom they were incapable of saying 'No' or 'It's over' . . . slaves to luxury, to the appearance of luxury, to the appearance of the appearance of luxury . . . whenever a door opened they would say: 'I'm not interested . . . How could they possibly know if they were in the mood or not if they had never tried?' (10)

The tension between freedom and fidelity is explored further as the abandoned author considers the possibility that his wife Esther has met another man: 'It was part of the rules not to mention any extramarital affairs . . . I never asked questions, and she never told me anything. We were both free, and we were proud of that' (p. 15). Describing the early stages of their relationship he says, 'The same conflicts I had with my previous wives began to surface: women are always looking for stability and fidelity, while I'm looking for adventure and the unknown' (19).

Coelho reflects on the human condition, recognising that human beings are not perfect, but not seeing this as a big deal. So in one interview he says, 'humans have problems, we are sometimes not as good as we should be.' But he doesn't seem to see this as very significant. In *The Zahir* he writes, 'This cannot keep us away from the spiritual path. We have to accept ourselves as we are and stop worrying, instead of trying to become perfect' (19).

Paulo Coelho also wants to pass on his views about how we receive spiritual guidance or wisdom. His perspective involves talking about both the mind and the heart: 'There are those who are vague because they do know what they're doing, but who also know that the language of alchemy is addressed to the heart, and not to the mind' (*The Alchemist* p. viii). Coelho thinks that spiritual guidance comes to us in a particular form –

not the rational answers that philosophers climb up their towers of logical abstraction to reach, and not the presentation of intelligible reasons that Christians use as they stand in the pattern of Paul and Jesus. For Coelho, spiritual guidance is more emotive.

One of the key stresses of Coelho's writing is that we need to take some time to reflect: to zoom out from daily working life and think about the big questions: Am I really happy? Is what I live out each day real? Is what I believe true? He's right that spending some time on yourself, without reaching the extremes of self-centredness or narcissism, can be an important part of dealing realistically with the blows that life sometimes deals us. It is an all embracing perspective which speaks to heart and mind. He tries to offer something for the mind to turn over, as well as something that appeals to, and engages with, our emotions. In fact, his writing is so existential, 'so feely', that the expression of the deeper philosophical and spiritual concepts is rarely more than a step away from some real-life situation that we can relate to.

Coelho's emphasis on the everydayness of spirituality. When he's engaging with the Greek philosophers in Athens, the apostle Paul says that God, 'is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.' We need to notice that a God who is totally and completely Other is hard to relate to. Norman Geisler writes, 'Pantheism appropriately stresses that God is really in the world, at least within the depths of the human soul.'. He also notes that, 'Pantheism acknowledges that only God is the biggest and the best. Everything else is less than ultimate and absolute in the supreme and amazing sense that God is. Everything is dependent upon God. No part of creation is completely detached or independent from God'.

Coelho in an interview said:

In a certain way I try to share with my readers my inner quest, that's basically my spiritual quest. I don't have anything to teach, I don't have anything to explain about the universe, I don't believe in explanations of the universe, but actually I do have something to share. It is how I am experiencing this strange and sometimes very tricky path . . . by sharing something, I realized that I'm not alone, that there is a lot of people that share with me the same preoccupations, the same ideas, the same ideals, and the same quest for a meaning for this life.

Most of his novels are about individuals who are on a quest for their personal destiny or the truth of life. His novel *The Zahir* also is the tale of a quest. But the theme is dealt in an innovative way in this novel. Unlike many popular as well as age old narrative in which the quest is usually undertaken by a male figure, to whom the female figure is usually an obstacle in his path or an object of his quest. Coelho portrays a woman who herself is a quester as well as a guide of the male quester.

In the "*The Zahir*", Coelho tells parts of his own life story, about love -or what we think love is-, about separation, loss, and finding oneself. As different as Coelho's approach to the subject seems at first, it very much falls into the same category as "*The*

Field" and "The Holographic Universe". It's about looking inside your self, about infinite possibilities, and ultimately about unconditional love.

Subtitled A Novel of Obsession, this tale is the philosophical and spiritual chronicle of one man's quest for self-discovery. Stunned by his wife's inexplicable disappearance from their Paris home and immediately suspected of foul play by the authorities and the press, the unnamed protagonist, a best-selling writer, is forced to reexamine both his marital relationship and his own life. What he eventually discovers with the help of a -mysterious stranger named Mikhail--a man he suspects is somehow involved in Esther's disappearance--is that he must first "find himself" before he can ever hope to find his wife. Although Esther is physically and emotionally lost to him, he rediscovers her as he retraces both her footsteps and the disintegration of their visceral connection. Finally able to release the past and his anger, he can accept the uncertainty of the present by traveling to Kazakhstan with Mikhail in search of Esther and the remote possibility of resurrecting a dormant love.

Thus the novel is the story of two quests- that of a man and of women- one embedded in the other. The quest that we see on the surface is that of the male character, who the narrator of the story is. He doesnot have a name in the novel. he goes in search of his wife, a war correspondent, who has disappeared leaving no trace. This search becomes one for the truth of his own life.

The reader's acquaintance with the narrator begins at a point when he is trying to confront the sudden absence of an integral part of his life- his wife whose presence he always took for granted. The man, denied of woman, grapples with the enormity of his rejection and in the process analyses his relationship with others and his own life in a genuine and desperate attempt to know himself.

As in *The Alchemist* (1993), Coelho continues to prove himself a contemporary fabulist, spinning irresistible stories while seeking enlightenment at the same time. Interwoven with details drawn from his life, the mesmerizing narrative offers a highly personal meditation on the meaning and the power of love. *The Alchemist* is written as a traditional quest plot. A quest is essentially a search for something which is usually long and difficult. The boy's quest for his "treasure" – a symbol for his destiny – is fraught with difficulties and it takes time to overcome them. His first set-back is when his money is stolen: "He wept because God was unfair, and because this was the way God repaid those who believed in their dreams." This outpouring shows that while the boy is brave to undertake the quest he is also sensitive and more than a one-dimensional hero. It helps the reader to identify with him Learning to cope with failure is an important issue in life.

The Alchemist is the story of a young, Spanish shepherd who sets upon a journey to follow his life's dream. The boy had previously studied at a seminary pursuant to his family's wishes but left because "he couldn't have found God in the seminary." He became a shepherd as that was the only way poor rural people of his country were afforded an opportunity to travel. The shepherd meets a mysterious old man who tells him that 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. To realize one's destiny is a person's only real obligation. All things are one. And, when you want something, all the universe conspires

in helping you to achieve it. The boy has had a recurring dream that there is a treasure awaiting him at the pyramids in Egypt. The old man encourages the boy to sell his sheep and follow his dream, his destiny, into Egypt. To make a long story short, the boy suffers many trials and tribulations during his journey but does indeed find his treasure. However, the treasure was not in Egypt but buried under the spot in Spain where his dream had originally come to him. A second person helps him along the way while he is in the deserts of Egypt, an Alchemist.

Many people have written about the meaning behind the story. In a work so compact, so well written, one can be sure those words have meaning and are there for a reason. All things are one. The soul of the universe is one with your own soul and every other soul that exists. Your destiny is to realize that you and the universe are one and, as you awaken to this truth, all the universe shall conspire to help you along this path. The treasure that lies at the end of our quest, at the end of the rainbow, is not material. The treasure is merely self-awareness of oneness with the universe. Just as the boy ultimately found the treasure not in a faraway land but, rather, in his own homeland, so too with us the treasure of self-realization is to be found within ourselves. The sheep who keep their eyes to the ground only interested in food and water? They represent all of us asleep in the material world who are totally unaware of the treasure that lies within our own hearts.

The alchemist in the Egyptian desert is a minor character in the book appearing on but on a few pages. Why is the book named after him? Did the shepherd boy become an alchemist, thus, the title refers to him? The boy never wavered from his mission of finding the treasure. How could he be thought of as an alchemist? The commonly-held definition of an alchemist is one in search of a mysterious substance (aka "the philosopher's stone") said to be capable of turning common base elements such as lead into pure gold. There is a spiritual component to alchemy and Coelho was referring to this aspect of alchemy in his book. We humans have a soul which is encased in gross materials of the physical world (our bodies). The vast multitude of humans (i.e., the sheep) know only the physical aspect of their existence. When an individual realizes his or her oneness with the universal soul, he or she sheds identification with the material world thereby raising consciousness higher to the purer spiritual realm. Put another way, the lead of our physical world is transformed into the gold of the spiritual. If we see the "treasure" as a metaphor for self-realization, then the boy does indeed become an alchemist in finding his treasure as he has learned how to turn his bodily lead into spiritual gold.

It is interesting that Coelho adopts a 'symbolic language' to communicate his ideas. He is right to stress the inability of man to exhaustively express what God is like. If God really is God – infinite, transcendent and above all limitation – then this emphasis is crucial. However, Coelho doesn't seem to want a God who is distinct from the cosmos; rather he sees God *as* the cosmos – 'the Soul of the World' that communicates with him. However, the possibility of a supernatural revelation (traditionally, for Christians, in the form of Jesus or the Bible) isn't mentioned, and as Coelho describes himself as a Catholic

Christian this is a very strange omission. For a Christian, the Bible is God's revelation of himself, and contains his spiritual guidance for life. Those questions about love, freedom, fidelity and the human condition all find their answers in the pages of the most relevant and incredible book ever written.

The novel *The Alchemist* is the tale of the young Santiago who sets out on a quest from his home to see the world. His father tells him before he leaves, "Go until you see that our castle is the greatest. That our women are the most beautiful." Santiago goes and his quest is not of finding something physical or extraordinary, but rather to find that the journey was the reward all along. The simplicity of it is what captures the minds of so many readers, regardless of their age or perspective.

This novel is just that; a statement of simplicity and the most basic aspects of human existence that can make each of us equally happy if only we take the time to stop and look at them for what they are. The young boy, whose quest takes him across continents to find the Alchemist, is seeking himself and a cause for that self. He doesn't set outstanding goals nor does he expect more of himself than any one person should.

The symbol ridden, myth infused journey is a statement of personal wealth and the journey to follow one's dreams but to find in them the meaning of one's existence, their own personal God, the seed deep within that makes life a cause worthy of living. The mysticism of it a mask through which we view all spiritual journeys, bogged down by the weight of such an endeavor. We film them over with symbols and images, dreams, and magics, but underneath it all is the same ideal, the same desire. And Coelho taps that desire, such that no matter the language translated into or from or the subject of his fable the message reaches out and touches the audience. Thus, Coelho invites you on a journey to become a real human being and to discover reality by accepting monism and its logical outworking.

One of the themes of *The Zahir* is the idea of chasing happiness. The Zahir is a distraction from finding that happiness. As Coelho says:

One of the great traps for human beings is 'the search for happiness'. Even though she's successful in every aspect of her life, Esther, the writer's wife, is not a happy person. But instead of doing what most people do, i.e. ignoring her feelings and keeping herself busy so as to avoid having to think about the meaning of life, she decides to go in search of this thing called 'happiness'. (16)

Using this quest format allows the author to use a universal kind of structure, found in every culture and reflects his message that mankind is all part of bigger whole, each individually interconnected over time and space. It also emphasizes his message that, 'we all have a journey to take in life and that if we take a path which is not ultimately for us, it is not irredeemable. We can always change direction, so long as we are willing to take risks and be brave'.

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