

Colonial Attitudes in *The Alchemist*


Churamoni Kandel

Department of English, Shree Vinduwasini Sanskrit Vidyapeeth (Campus), Pokhara, Nepal

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Corresponding Author: Churamoni Kandel, **Email:** churamoni39@gmail.com

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Abstract

*This research paper examines and analyzes the colonial attitudes embedded in Paulo Coelho's novel, *The Alchemist*. The author introduces the novel through an Orientalist perspective. Santiago, the novel's protagonist embodies a western gaze as he navigates the foreign landscapes. He employs local characters to serve as facilitators of his growth. This dynamic perpetuates a colonial hierarchy that privileges Western knowledge and experiences over non-Western perspectives. The novel portrays non-Western cultures as exotic, simplistic, and subordinate. These reinforce stereotypes that diminish their complexities and richness. In addition to the colonial attitudes, the novel portrays the universal themes like self-discovery, personal transformation, etc. Furthermore, the study delves into the implications of spiritual universalism. This spiritual universalism frames enlightenment through a Western lens. Additionally, the research analyzes the risks of erasing the cultural specificity of the societies depicted. This study employs a postcolonial theory to explore the marginalization of a culture of the non-Western societies depicted in the text. This cultural specificity of the non-West risks the erasure of their identities and histories.*

Keywords: Colonial attitudes, cultural representation, orientalism, postcolonial theory, Western gaze

Introduction

This research explores the colonial attitudes embedded in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (TA), to examine how the non-Western culture contributes to its overarching theme of self-discovery and spiritual growth. Despite the universal messages in the text like self - discovery, personal transformation, etc., this study explores the representation of Santiago's journey, and the non-Western spaces and characters he encounters. All

these reflect the colonial hierarchies from the Eurocentric perspectives. This study further explores the interplay between the novel's inspirational message and its underlying cultural dynamics, offering a nuanced critique of its portrayal of the "other." *TA* emphasizes on personal transformation and the pursuit of dreams that resonates with readers across cultures. It ultimately contributes to its global appeal. However, beneath the surface of its spiritual quest lies a complex undercurrent of colonial attitudes, particularly in its portrayal of Africa and the Middle East. While *TA* expresses its inspirational message, a deeper reading reveals how it perpetuates certain colonial tropes that ripe for postcolonial critique. On the one hand, *TA* focuses on a European protagonist journeying through exotic lands, which mirrors the traditional colonial narrative. On the other hand, it demonstrates the non-Western world as a mysterious, mystical space for the personal growth of the Western subject. This theme, which often goes unnoticed in mainstream readings of the text, warrants further exploration.

TA introduces a stereotypical landscape in North Africa. Colonial literature finds echoes of imagery in the text. As Santiago arrives in Tangier, he immediately confronts with the "strange sights and sounds and unfamiliar language" (Coelho 42). A new place overwhelms him that marks different from his homeland. This portrayal reinforces Edward Said's theory of "Orientalism," where the East is constructed as the "other"—a place of mystery, chaos, and fundamental difference from the rational and civilized West (87). By framing Santiago's experience through the lens of confusion and disorientation, *TA* not only positions the East as a space of intrigue but also of danger. It underscores a long-standing colonial notion that the West must impose order and meaning on non-Western spaces. It depicts the desert, in particular, as a mystical and perilous setting, and describes it as a place that "makes men go mad" (Coelho 79). It imbues with a sense of both danger and spiritual wonder. This description reflects colonial literature's fascination with the exotic, as it commodifies the non-Western spaces for Western readers' consumption. Huggan postulates "such portrayals reinforce Western superiority by framing non-Western cultures as sources of fascination and mysticism, stripped of their agency and complexity" (125). These representations turn diverse cultures into marketable products, catering to Western audiences while perpetuating stereotypes and power imbalances.

Coelho's *TA* portrays non-Western characters to reflect the colonial attitudes. For instance, he employs crystal merchant as a local people, to portray the passivity in relation to Santiago's journey. The crystal merchant provides Santiago with employment and guidance yet remains a peripheral figure, whose own dreams and aspirations are sidelined to serve the protagonist's development (65-66). This dynamic reflects Bhabha's concept of the "fixity" of colonial stereotypes, where colonized peoples are presented in static, unchanging roles that support the growth of the Western protagonist (101). Despite being central to Santiago's survival and progress, these characters deny their own narrative arcs; instead function primarily as vehicles for Santiago's spiritual enlightenment. In this way, *TA* echoes a common colonial trope: the idea of the Western individual undergoes

transformation in foreign lands, where the agency of local populations either marginalizes or ignores altogether.

Furthermore, Coelho implicitly frames Santiago's spiritual quest as superior to the more grounded concerns of the local people he encounters. While Santiago's quest for self-fulfillment and higher purpose motives him, characters like the crystal merchant who contents with their limited circumstances, symbolizes a kind of stagnation that contrasts with Santiago's dynamic quest. This dichotomy between the spiritual West and the pragmatic East reflects a colonial binary that historically positions Western culture as more evolved, capable of seeking and achieving higher purposes, while non-Western cultures relegating to a static existence. This not only reinforces the Eurocentric assumptions but also diminishes the cultural and spiritual complexity of the non-Western world, reducing it to a backdrop for Santiago's transformation. This paper challenges the dominant reading of *TA* as a universally uplifting story and instead situates it within the broader context of postcolonial literary critique.

Statement of the Problems

TA subtly perpetuates the colonial hierarchies by positioning the Western knowledge and experiences as superior to others. It relegates the non-Western cultures to passive, mystical, or stagnant roles. It reduces the complexity and richness of Africa and the Middle East to serve as a backdrop for the protagonist's journey. The non-Western characters serve the protagonist's growth at the cost of their individuality. This research explores how such attitudes portray the concept of colonialization in the text.

Research Questions

This study formulates the following research questions:

- a. How does *TA* portray Africa and its people in relation to Santiago's spiritual journey?
- b. In what ways does the novel reflect or challenge the colonial power dynamics between the Western protagonist and the non-Western world?

Objectives

The following objectives address the issues of the research and examine how the novel interacts with or challenges the traditional colonial narratives about the East.

- a. To analyze the portrayal of Africa and its people in *TA*, assessing the extent to which they represent through colonial stereotypes.
- b. To examine the power dynamics between Santiago, a European traveler, and the non-Western characters he encounters.

Review of Literature

The critical analyses of Paulo Coelho's *TA* span various interpretive frameworks. They offer insights that range from psychological and feminist readings to comparative literature

and eco-criticism. This study analyzes these interpretations to explore the research gaps in the text.

Numerous scholars analyze *TA* from a psychological perspective. They interpret Santiago's journey as an allegory of self-actualization. Drawing on Carl Jung's theory of individuation, Kallistos finds Santiago's quest for his "Personal Legend" representing "the hero's journey toward self-realization, akin to Jung's archetypal path to wholeness" (32). Santiago's dream of finding a treasure beneath a sycamore tree symbolizes the manifestation of his inner desire, which leads him toward greater self-awareness. As he moves through different stages of his journey, his transformation mirrors the process of individuation, where he comes to reconcile the conscious and unconscious aspects of his identity. This psychological interpretation positions *TA* as a story that reflects deep human truths about personal growth and transformation.

In contrast, feminist critiques on *TA* focus on the underrepresentation and passive roles of female characters in the narrative. While *TA* centres on Santiago's journey, it portrays women, particularly Fatima, and depicts her stereotypical roles that serve the protagonist's needs. She, who represents Santiago's love interest, relegates to the traditional role of the "waiting woman." According to Mendes, Fatima's character embodies the patriarchal notion of self-sacrifice, as she narrates to Santiago, "I'm a part of your dream, a part of your Personal Legend" (Coelho 96), thus reducing her identity to the protagonist's ambitions. This portrayal sparks feminist critiques of the novel, suggesting that it reinforces conventional gender roles where women act as passive enablers of male development.

A comparative literature perspective draws parallels between *TA* and earlier philosophical and literary works. Scholars like Wright explore how Coelho's narrative draws on classical literary traditions, including the works of ancient philosophers like Plato. Wright postulates, "*The Alchemist* borrows elements from Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where individuals seek enlightenment by moving from darkness (ignorance) to light (knowledge)" (212). Santiago's progression from a humble shepherd to a seeker of spiritual truth exemplifies a modern iteration of this philosophical journey, where personal transformation intertwines with the pursuit of higher understanding. Furthermore, Wright compares *TA* with Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, and finds "both novels deal with the theme of spiritual awakening, though Coelho's narrative is more accessible to contemporary readers due to its straightforward prose and modern setting" (215). Coelho situates Santiago's journey within a relatable framework, making his quest appear universally achievable, whereas Hesse's narrative leans on the spiritual intricacies of Eastern traditions.

From an eco-critical standpoint, *TA*'s depiction of nature plays a significant role in the protagonist's spiritual enlightenment. Coelho frequently personifies natural elements, imbuing them with mystical qualities that serve as guides in Santiago's journey. For instance, Santiago learns to communicate with the desert and the wind, eventually understanding that "everything on Earth is connected by a universal language" (77). This connection between human spirituality and the natural world draws attention from eco-

critics, like Smith who asserts “Coelho presents nature as a living, conscious entity that holds the key to ultimate wisdom” (143). It presents an eco-spiritual viewpoint, using the protagonist’s bond with nature as a symbol of the unity and interdependence of all living things.

In addition to these interpretive frameworks, postcolonial critics like Bhabha examine the novel portraying the non-Western cultures. Coelho’s depiction of “Africa and the Middle East as exotic, mystical lands, rife with danger and opportunity” (101) expresses a perpetuation of colonial attitudes Santiago represents. His journey through these landscapes reflects a Eurocentric worldview where the “East” is a space for Western self-discovery. This perspective highlights the underlying tensions between the novel’s global spiritual appeal and its problematic representations of non-Western spaces.

TA appeals readers through its simple language and universal themes of self-discovery and personal transformation. Jordis asserts “the novel resonates with a global readership because it taps into universal desires for meaning and purpose, which transcends cultural and geographic boundaries” (42). However, she also notes that this universalism comes at a cost, as Coelho often flattens cultural differences, reducing complex societies to mere backdrops for the protagonist’s journey.

Similarly, Sandra Cisneros explores the gender dynamics in the novel, focusing on the representation of female characters. She makes a study of Fatima, Santiago’s love interest, which embodies traditional gender roles that confine women to passive, supportive roles. She postulates “Coelho’s portrayal of Fatima as waiting for Santiago to return from his journey reinforces patriarchal norms, suggesting that women’s aspirations and destinies are secondary to those of men” (75). This critique examines the lack of female agency in the novel, contributing to the broader discussion of gender and power within the text.

Analyzing the spiritual and philosophical aspects of *TA*, Löwy connects the novel’s themes to Coelho’s own experiences with New Age spirituality. He asserts “the novel’s emphasis on fate, destiny, and the interconnectedness of the universe aligns with the core tenets of New Age philosophy, which often blends spiritual practices from different cultures into a single, overarching narrative” (101). While this universal approach makes the novel accessible to a wide audience, Löwy contends that it risks trivializing the unique spiritual traditions of the cultures Coelho depicts, thus, contributing to the novel’s colonial undertones.

TA portrays Santiago as “uniquely capable of deciphering the mysteries of the desert and uncovering the treasure of the pyramids” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 138). This narrative positions Santiago as an agent of power and discovery. It relegates the non-Western world to a passive and mystical backdrop, thereby perpetuating colonial hierarchies that elevate Western knowledge and experiences over local wisdom.

The novel relies on the stereotypical mysticism often associated with Middle Eastern and African cultures. Singh finds the desert “a key setting in Santiago’s journey, is portrayed as a space of spiritual awakening for the protagonist, a trope frequently

used in Western literature to exoticize non-Western landscapes” (89). This depiction, she asserts, aligns with colonial narratives that present non-Western cultures as mystical and undeveloped, awaiting discovery and enlightenment by the Western subject.

The above discussions lack detailed analysis of colonial attitudes embedded in *TA*. In the context of postcolonial theory, it fails to explore the deeper implications of non-Western cultures. It depicts colonial power structures with a little comprehensive analysis. It draws insufficient critical attention though it portrays non-Western landscapes and characters, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. Moreover, the novel needs an integrative approach that connects colonial attitudes with gender representation. Thus, this research aims to address these gaps by focusing on the colonial attitudes present in *TA*.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in understanding how *TA* perpetuates colonial ideologies. Postcolonial attitudes continue to shape contemporary global literature. *TA* demonstrates how its underlying colonial representation of Africa and the Middle East receives comparatively less scholarly attention. By critically examining the novel through a postcolonial lens, this study sheds light on the subtle ways in which Eurocentric and colonial ideologies permeate Coelho’s narrative, despite its focus on spiritual unity and global connectedness.

Furthermore, as *TA* reaches a global readership, it needs to recognize how its portrayal of Africa and the Middle East may perpetuate stereotypical views, influencing readers’ perceptions of these regions. This research thus contributes to the field of postcolonial studies by raising awareness of how colonial attitudes can manifest in literature that appears to be inclusive or universal.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a textual analysis approach, to examine the colonial attitudes in *TA*. Textual analysis allows for a critical examination of the novel’s language, imagery, characterization, and narrative structure. It helps to identify how colonial ideologies embed in the representation of Africa, the Middle East, and non-Western characters. By applying postcolonial theoretical frameworks, this study explores the ways in which the text reinforces or challenges colonial narratives.

The primary method of data collection involves the close reading and textual analysis of *TA*. It identifies the key passages expressing the colonial attitudes. This includes examining the characterization, imagery and symbolism, dialogue and narrative voice, etc. This study employs a postcolonial theory to study the theoretical concepts of orientalism, otherness and fixity. Furthermore, the research makes a textual analysis of data through thematic coding, to identify and categorize specific patterns related to colonial attitudes. The themes like exoticization of the East, power dynamics, stereotypical representations, etc. exemplify the colonial attitudes. The secondary sources of data involve the book-reviews, commentaries, academic journals, literary criticisms, online resources, etc. It employs

thematic analysis to analyze the sources of the research. It uses a systematic approach to coding and categorizing the sources to ensure the rigour of the analysis. It compares the findings from the analysis of primary and secondary sources, to enhance the reliability of the study.

Limitations

This study aims to provide a nuanced analysis of colonial attitudes in Coelho's *TA*. So, the primary limitation of this research fixes to a single text, *TA*. This singular focus limits the generalizability of the findings to other works by Coelho or to similar texts in the literary canon. This research limits to subjective interpretation. It employs a textual analysis approach to uncover the hidden meanings and themes. Although it incorporates various theoretical frameworks, it predominantly emphasizes postcolonial theory. Other critical lenses such as feminist, eco-critical or Marxist analyses provide valuable insights into the text, but it does not explore them in detail. It sets its contextual limitations. It disregards the historical and cultural contexts though it enhances the analysis of this study. It takes into account the evolving interpretations of the literary criticism. However, it does not account for the diverse interpretations and receptions of *TA*. Readers' perceptions on reading the text remain outside the scope of this analysis. The following discussions help this research to reach to its conclusion.

Orientalism and Exoticization of the Other

TA frequently illustrates the concept of Orientalism, a term coined by Edward Said to describe how Western literature and art historically depicts Eastern societies as exotic, mysterious, and inferior. The novel portrays Africa and the Middle East as mystical lands filled with enchantment and danger, reinforcing stereotypes that characterize these regions as "other." For instance, when Santiago arrives in Tangier, he encounters a world as both alluring and treacherous. It not only reflects a Eurocentric view of the East as a space of adventure but also of peril. Said postulates "the Orient is seen as a place of exoticism and backwardness, a representation that serves to validate Western superiority" (Said 67). Coelho portrays the desert and its inhabitants in ways that affirm this dynamic. Santiago's journey unfolds in a landscape shaped more by Western imagination than by the realities of African and Middle Eastern cultures. This depiction simplifies the complexities of these regions into a mystical and exotic backdrop.

The Role of Western Characters in Non-Western Spaces

The narrative centers on Santiago, a shepherd from Andalusia, who embarks on a quest for self-discovery, in a non-Western context. This positioning of a Western protagonist in a predominantly non-Western settings implies a colonial mindset where the West occupies a place of dominance and authority. Throughout his journey, Santiago often encounters local characters who exist to aid him rather than to drive their own narratives. For instance, the crystal merchant and the alchemist provide wisdom and guidance, but their lives revolve around facilitating Santiago's quest. Mendes asserts "the narrative structure

reinforces a colonial gaze, where local characters serve as mere facilitators for the Western protagonist's growth" (72). This dynamic exemplifies the colonial attitude of viewing non-Western individuals as tools for Western self-actualization, rather than as individuals with their own agency and stories.

Stereotypical Representations of Non-Western Characters

Coelho's representation of non-Western characters often falls into the realm of stereotypes, particularly in the portrayal of their behaviors and beliefs. Characters such as the crystal merchant and the tribal chieftain embody simplified archetypes that do not reflect the rich diversity of the cultures they represent. For instance, the novel employs crystal merchant as a passive figure, who contents with his mundane life and fearful of change. This representation perpetuates a narrative that suggests non-Western individuals lacking ambition or the desire for progress. It echoes colonial attitudes that view such societies as stagnant or inferior. Said examines "the stereotypical representation of the Orient is a means of justifying colonial domination by portraying the East as incapable of self-governance or development" (100). In this light, Coelho's character contributes to a colonial mindset that devalues the complexity and dynamism of non-Western cultures.

The Notion of the Journey as a Metaphor for Western Superiority

Santiago's journey in *TA* serves not only as a personal quest but also as a metaphorical representation of Western superiority and colonial attitudes. The narrative positions the protagonist's travel across the globe as a transformative experience that ultimately validates his Western identity. This perspective suggests, only through a Western lens one can achieve true understanding or enlightenment. As Santiago traverses foreign landscapes, the locals often appear as mere obstacles or stepping stones on his path to enlightenment. It reinforces a hierarchy where Western knowledge deems superior. Bhabha's concept of "colonial mimicry" (86), matches to this context where he finds colonized subjects imitating their colonizers. The novel finds the true wisdom and power lying with the Western protagonist, who learns to navigate and ultimately conquer these "foreign" spaces. This dynamic perpetuates colonial attitudes that reinforce Western exceptions.

Spiritual Universalism vs. Cultural Specificity

TA explores not only the themes of universalism and interconnectedness, it also glosses over the cultural specificities of the lands Santiago traverses. It portrays the spiritual lessons Santiago learns as universal truths that transcend cultural boundaries, diminishing the unique characteristics and complexities of the cultures represented. For instance, the depiction of the alchemist as a wise figure who embodies universal knowledge, undermines the depth of local traditions and spiritual practices. Mendes critiques this approach, asserting that "the portrayal of spiritual wisdom as a one-size-fits-all philosophy risks erasing the rich diversity of cultural narratives and practices" (65). By framing spiritual growth as a linear journey toward a universal truth, the novel perpetuates a colonial attitude that overlooks and simplifies the richness of non-Western cultures.

Conclusion

This study finds colonial attitudes portrayed in *TA*. Coelho depicts the East simplistically through the lens of Orientalism, presenting it as a mystical backdrop for Santiago's self-discovery rather than as a complex world with its rich histories and narratives. Through Santiago's journey, Coelho introduces non-Western characters, reduces them to archetypes, and subordinates them within a colonial hierarchy. This dynamic valorizes Western knowledge while marginalizing local wisdom. Furthermore, *TA* employs a notion of spiritual universalism that erases cultural specificity, suggesting that true enlightenment can only be achieved through a Western perspective. All these portrayals reflect a colonial mindset that reinforces Western dominance and diminishes the significance of non-Western experiences. Beyond the dynamics of the novel, future scholars can delve into how literature shapes cultural perceptions. For instance, they may explore Coelho's portrayal of the desert as a mystical yet oversimplified landscape.

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