

Quest for Destiny in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

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Abstract

In the novel, The Alchemist, Paulo Coelho explores how people attain their destiny. The novel revolves around the story of Santiago (the protagonist), a young Andalusian Shepherd. He dreams of buried treasure in Egypt while sleeping under a sycamore tree in an abandoned church in Spain. He undergoes difficulties and moves to Egypt to discover his destiny. In his journey, he gets assistance from disguised teachers. Ultimately, he finds his treasure not in Egypt, but in the abandoned church, back in Spain. The study has particularly used Jung's theory of shadow, anima, and personality as theoretical tools to analyze the narrative as it delves into the unconscious.

Key Words: Alchemist, dream, personal legend, alchemy

Introduction

The narrative begins with Santiago deciding to spend the night in an abandoned church with his flock of sixty sheep. He has recently refused to become a priest against the wish of his parents, and chosen to be a shepherd to know the world. In the ruined church, Santiago dreams of a child who tells him to travel to Egypt to get his treasure. He goes to the Gypsy woman to help him interpret the dream:

“I have had the same dream twice,” he said. “I dreamed that I was in a Field with my sheep, when a child appeared and began to play with my the animals . . . “The child went on playing with my sheep for quite a while,” continued the boy, a bit upset. “And suddenly, the child took me by both hands and transported me to the Egyptian pyramids . . . if you come here, you will find a hidden treasure.” (6)

The Gypsy woman tells Santiago that “dreams are the language of God” that the recipient can only understand as God speaks to him “in the language of the Soul” (7). However, the Gypsy woman tells Santiago: “you must go the Pyramids in Egypt. I have never heard of them, but if it was a child who showed them to you, they exist. There you will find a treasure that will make you a rich man” (8).

Analysis

Santiago wrestles in his mind between the cosmic presence of the dream and his realization of individuality. His confrontation is the outcome of divine intervention in one's life. J. Krishnamurti opines that the fundamental and lasting interest in life is 'me-first': You may say that it is more satisfactory to help another than to think about yourself what is the

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difference? It is still self-concern. If it gives you greater satisfaction to help others, you are concerned about what will give you greater satisfaction. satisfaction in all sorts of way subtle and obvious, is what we want. When we say we want freedom, we want it because we think it may be wonderfully satisfying, and the ultimate satisfaction, of course, is this peculiar idea of self-realization. What we are really seeking is a satisfaction in which there is no dissatisfaction at all. (53)

Krishnamurti believes that man is motivated by self interest all the time. Whether he does for others or for himself, he is driven by the force called self-realization. Jonathan Culler opines that modern thinking poses two questions on the identity and function of the self: “i) Is the self something given or something made? ii) Should it be conceived in individual or social terms?” (108).

Santiago meets Melchizedek, the King of Salem in the town square of Tarifa, who advises him to sell his sheep to travel to Egypt and introduces the idea of a Personal Legend: “It’s what you have always wanted to accomplish. Everyone, when they are young, knows what their destiny is” (12). The king further adds: “And, when you want something, the entire universe conspires in helping you to achieve it” (12). Melchizedek encourages Santiago to follow his dream by interacting his Personal Legend with the Soul of the World: “In order to find the treasure, you will have to follow the omens. God has prepared a path for everyone to follow. You just have to read the omens that he left for you” (16). Melchizedek presents him the stones named “Urim” and “Thummin”: “They are called Urim and Thummin. The black signifies ‘yes,’ and the white ‘no.’ When you are unable to read the omens, they will help you to do so. Always ask an objective question” (16). The stones force him to start believing in luck and destiny rather than his own self-actualization which leads him under the divine supervision.

After all his money is robbed in Tangier, Santiago works at the crystal shop for a year and learns much about the shopkeeper’s attitude towards life and the significance of dreaming. The shopkeeper is kind towards Santiago and takes his presence in his shop as an omen. He gives Santiago more money than he deserves because his business prospers with Santiago’s business tactics. He tells him the word “Maktub” that he “would have to have been born as an Arab to understand” (31).

Trekking across the desert, Santiago meets an Englishman, a student of alchemy who, like Santiago, is pursuing his “Personal Legend.” The Englishman further expands his knowledge and helps him to explore the universal language and learn the importance of omens: “Everything in life is an omen . . . There is a universal language, understood by everybody, but already forgotten. I am in search of that universal language, among other things. That’s why I’m here. I have to find a man who knows that universal language. An alchemist” (38). Santiago and the Englishman travel together across the desert in pursuit of their respective Personal Legends. Santiago now has a new zeal: “I’ve learned things from the sheep, and I’ve learned things from crystal . . . I can learn something from the desert, too. It seems old and wise” (40).

Santiago meets a desert woman Fatima at the Al-Fayoum oasis, and falls in love with her. He asks her to marry him but she insists Santiago to discover his treasure before they marry:

You have told me about your dreams, about the old King and your treasure. And you've told me about omens. So, now I fear nothing, because it was those omens that brought you to me. And I am a part of your dream, a part of your destiny, as you call it. That's why I want you to continue toward your goal. If you have to wait until the war is over, then wait. But if you have to go before then, go on in pursuit of your dream. The dunes are changed by the wind, but the desert never changes. That's the way it will be with our love for each other. (53)

At the oasis, Santiago also encounters the alchemist, who is rumored to be 200 years old and have the ability to turn any metal into gold. The alchemist further teaches him about Personal Legend. He says that people want to find only the treasure of their Personal Legends but not the Personal Legend itself: "Those who don't understand their Personal Legend will fail to comprehend its teachings" (65). The alchemist asks Santiago to sell his camel and buy a horse for his further journey: "Sell your camel and buy a horse. Camels . . . walk thousands of paces and never seem to tire. Then suddenly, they kneel and die. But horses tire bit by bit. You always know how much you can ask of them, and when it is that they are about to die" (64-65).

The Alchemist helps Santiago to reach the Egyptian pyramids: "When a person really desires something, all the universe conspires to help that person to realize his dream" (109). Santiago knows little about The Alchemist and the Alchemy but is compelled to agree on it. The alchemist says that for Santiago to find his treasure he must listen to his heart. When Santiago and the alchemist are captured by one of the warring tribes, Santiago turns himself into the wind to save his life. The Alchemist compels him to turn himself to wind to appease the tribal chief:

The men laughed. They were used to the ravages of war, and knew that the wind could not deliver them a fatal blow. Yet each felt his heart beat a bit faster. They were men of the desert, and they were fearful of sorcerers:

"I want to see him do it," said the chief.

"He needs three days," answered the alchemist. "He is going to transform himself into the wind, just to demonstrate his powers. If he can't do so, we humbly offer you our lives, for the honor of your tribe". (133)

The alchemist warns Santiago that if he cannot change himself into the wind, he will be killed without getting the treasure he is seeking for. Santiago asks the desert, the wind, and the sun to help him, but none know how to turn a man into the wind. He then remembers the alchemist's advice that he should listen to his heart and through it only he can make a communication with nature. When he does so, a miracle takes place, and he is able to create

a sand storm: “So the wind blew with all its strength, and the sky was filled with sand . . . it was difficult to see anything. . . it was worse than a storm at sea. Their horses cried out, and all their weapons were filled with sand” (84). By associating the freedom of the wind with his own freedom, Santiago’s own freedom gets strengthened. He now knows where his freedom lies, and he can now use it to explore what he wants: “there can be no simple answer to what man should do with his freedom. In one sense, he must himself create the answer by using his freedom to find out just what he wants to become” (Roberts 68).

The alchemist acts as a guide to Santiago. When he is sure that Santiago has learnt to hear the voice of his heart and is able to communicate in the universal language, he understands that it is the right time to send Santiago all alone in pursuit of his treasure. He takes him into the monastery and produces gold from a pan of lead. He divides the gold into four parts, and gives one to Santiago, and one to himself, and two to the Coptic monk, instructing him to give Santiago the other piece if he comes back beaten and robbed of his gold. The alchemist now abandons Santiago: ‘From here on, you will be alone . . . you are only three hours from the Pyramids’ (87).

Jung’s Theory of shadow, anima and persona is relevant in the analysis of Santiago’s dream in terms of “Jungian Psychology and its Archetypal Insights” (Guerin et. al. 177). Jung believes that “Mind is not born as *tabula rasa* (a clean slate). Like the body it has its pre-established individual definiteness; namely, forms of behavior” (qtd. in Guerin et. al. 178). The is forms of behavior or the individual definiteness has pre-established pattern, which helps a person to follow the natural instincts as a baby chicken runs from the hawk’s shadow due to its instincts. Coelho uses his characters with this unconscious psyche. Jung urges further that “archetypes reveal themselves in the dreams of individual” (qtd. in Guerin et. al. 178|179). Santiago’s dream is parallel to his archetype. Archetype is revealed in his dream as well. He has natural instincts to travel and his dream helps him to travel more. The theory of individuation by Jung is a psychological growing up, the process of discovering those aspects of one’s self that make one an individual different from other members of the species. Self-recognition needs extraordinary courage and honesty. According to Jung, “The shadow, the persona and the anima are structural components of psyche which makes an individual or self a different” (qtd. in Guerin et. al. 181). The self of Santiago is studied on the basis of these three structural components. The shadow is the darker side of the unconscious self, the inferior and less pleasing aspects of the personality, which we wish to suppress. Santiago’s shadow is not correctly responded. He does not want to assimilate it with his personality. He has been stunted in his psychological growth because he is unable to confront his shadow, recognize it as a part of his own psyche, and assimilate it into his consciousness. He persists, instead, in projecting the shadow image: first in the form of the prodigal son, then in the form of the destructive wind.

Santiago’s persona or the heroic figure collapses when he leaves everything for the sake of his dream and does not mind to forsake the dream when he confronts his night dream. Just his persona has proved inadequate in mediating between Santiago’s ego and

external world, so his anima fails in relating to his inner world. It is only fitting that his soul-image or anima should be named Fatima. His trouble is that he sees Fatima not as a beloved but mother, as is revealed when he gets both motherly care and love from Fatima. Jung points out that during childhood; anima is usually projected on the mother. The persona and anima are taken as the two sides of ego. Wilfred L Guerin points out: "the persona is the actor's mask that we show to the world- it is our social personality that is sometime quite different from the true self" (182). The same false sense of personality is the beginning of the death of true self.

Santiago's persona is both flexible and false. The projection of Santiago as a boy with will and dream is the social mask. He considers himself a good family man and a lover. In truth, however, he is much less heroic man than a mere puppet in the hand of destiny. His behavior from the start to end is that of the adolescent male. In a way, it is the combination of persona, anima and shadow from individuation and this very individuation can be taken as self. The right combination of all these components cannot be seen in the character of Santiago. So, it is not an exaggeration to call it the death of self.

There are many instances that dream plays an important role in the death of self or individuality. Coelho quotes the story of Bible to compare Santiago. When the tribal chieftains of the desert know the coming danger they seek help from Santiago:

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: we were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathers around mine and bowed down to it" (Gen. 37:5-7).

This dream of Joseph ignites the hatred from his brother and they sell him into Egypt and he has to work as a slave. He loses all his fundamental rights. He cannot think about his self and his individual aspiration dies before flourishing. In the same way Santiago's dream forces him to leave his sheep and set out in search of treasure. Like Joseph he also gets many troubles and tribulations in his journey. He has to travel life-threatening journey with caravan. He forgets about his self destination and compels to lead his life according to the wish of others. Firstly, he is compelled to communicate with sheep that neither understand him nor talk to him. His humanly nature is in bet here. Secondly, he follows a gypsy woman rather than his father, and by doing this he is challenging family and social relationships. Thirdly, he works under crystal merchant and assumes him as a father figure. Fourthly, he travels through desert and lives monotonous life and works against nature. He transforms himself into the wind which is supernatural. Lastly, he returns to Fatima. He leaves everything for the sake of his dream but at last comes back to the same point i.e. family obligation which he forsook for the sake of his dream.

The dream can be real as Santiago dreams about the treasure and it comes true at last. Though, he cannot get in the place shown in the dream. The same reality of the dream snatches the freedom of his self. "Dreams are caused by wishes, according to Freud; not wishes in the conscious" (qtd. in Ratcliff 120). Santiago's dream becomes the essence of

his failure as an individual as it leads him to do the things he does not like. Santiago rejects this and contends that he can learn everything he needs to know about alchemy through his day-to-day life. When he learns from the desert to look inside him and silence his petty fears. By silencing these fears, he is able to finally see that he is one with the world around him and that his Personal Legend is a harmonious part of that world. This is evinced in a magical fashion when Santiago is able to communicate with the elements, in the climactic scene in which he turns himself into the wind.

Conclusion

Coelho suggests that those who do not have the courage to follow their Personal Myth are doomed to a life of emptiness, misery, and unfulfillment. Fear of failure seems to be the greatest obstacle to happiness. This is where Coelho really captures the drama of man, who sacrifices fulfillment to conformity, who knows he can achieve greatness but denies doing so, and ends up living a life of void. Santiago heads at the dictation of his heart, and finally gets to the pyramids in the full moon night. He is overjoyed and thanks God for making him believe in destiny, and sending the king, the crystal shopkeeper, the Englishman and the alchemist to direct him to the direction of his dream. He is thankful to God to give him his ladylove, Fatima, a woman of the desert who had told him that love would never keep a man from his destiny. Santiago again hears his heart, and spots the place where his tears have fallen, and a scarab beetle has scuttled, and begins to dig. He gets assaulted and robbed of all his gold by some Arabian war refugees.

Santiago reads and interprets all the voices he hears. He understands the universal language that is directing him towards the deserted church from where he began his journey. Back in Spain, he finds his treasure buried among the roots of the trees in the very abandoned church. He digs the sacristy beneath the sycamore tree and uncovers a chest of gold coins and precious gems and stone statues. The discovery of the treasure has symbolical connotation. It highlights that our Personal Legends lie beneath our roots and foundations of our lives, but to discover them, we need to voyage outward to learn the universal language by hearing the voice of our heart and penetrating the Soul of the World.

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