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EXPLORING MYTHOLOGY IN PAULO COELHO'S *THE ALCHEMIST*

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ABSTRACT

Paulo Coelho is among the most universally read authors in the world. Coelho is a contemporary Brazilian author who describes his characters' spiritual journeys using extensive symbolism. Coelho developed into a sort of literary spiritual mentor. His formula was straightforward and efficient. Instead of making adventures in words, he has used simple words which attract large number of readers. *The Alchemist* is one among them. It is a tale of a young shepherd named Santiago travels to Egypt in search of a treasure. Additionally, he meets different individuals and gains knowledge. *The Alchemist's* main themes include: aspirations and dreams, destiny, love, spirit unification, self-discovery, knowledge, religion, spirituality, and omens. This paper analyses the mythology in Paulo Coelho's novel *The Alchemist*. Myths are found in every culture in the world and are used to explain the development of civilization. Mythology is the study and interpretation of fables of a culture known as myths and it also deals with various aspects of human conditions: good and evil; the meaning of suffering; human origins; the life and death; the afterlife; the celestial stories of the gods. Paulo Coelho exemplifies various myths in *The Alchemist* which makes the readers aware of mythology.

Key Words: Myths, dreams, treasure, destiny, Personal Legend, Soul of the World.

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian writer. His second book *The Alchemist* has brought him a great fame which has millions of copies and also holds the Guinness World Record as the most translated book in the world. In 1986, Coelho has set off on the well-known Road to Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage in Spain after visiting Europe in 1982 and finding a spiritual guide. This event has changed his life and has made him write his first novel, *The Pilgrimage*. He has dedicated his life for writing. He states the effect of his pilgrimage, “When I reached Compostela, at the end of the Road to Santiago, I thought, what am I going to do with my life? That’s when I made the decision to burn all my bridges and become a writer” (web). His second novel, *The Alchemist* has made him the most loved author in the world. Some of his best-known works are *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Fifth Mountain*, *Veronica Decides to Die*, *Manual of the Warrior of Light*, *Eleven Minutes*, and *The Zahir*.

Mythology in literature examines how various stories and literary works draw on myths, legends, folklore, or religion as sources of inspiration, influence, or allusion. Myths are narratives that describe the beginning, nature, or the world’s past and its inhabitants. These narratives frequently feature supernatural entities, incidents, or symbols. A tale can be made better and more appealing by mythology, which gives it more depth and appeal. Relating a narrative to one's own culture, beliefs, or experiences can also help readers connect with it. Thomas Bulfinch says, “For Mythology is the handmaid of literature; and literature is one of the best allies of virtue and promoters of happiness” (web).

The Alchemist is the tale of a young shepherd Santiago from Andalusia, who starts a journey looking for his own Personal Legend. It takes him from his homeland to the Egyptian Pyramids. He meets series of characters who help him or teach him valuable lessons. Melchizedek and the alchemist serve as mentors, the Englishman shows the result of gaining knowledge through books and the crystal merchant demonstrates the kind of life ignoring the Personal Legend. *The Alchemist* takes place in a world of everyone who has a Personal Legend and a common soul is shared by everything from the living things to the inert matters.

The themes of discovering one's destiny and pursuing one's aspirations can be explored in this novel. In order to convey a message of inspiration and hope to all people, the book draws on a variety of mythical and theological traditions. The Alchemist incorporates mythology frequently because it adds a symbolic and allegorical depth to the narrative. The discovery of one's destiny and the pursuit of one's ambitions have a larger message that is tied to the narrative of Narcissus. The prologue of the book takes the tale of Narcissus and offers an alternative interpretation to the myth. The lake that Narcissus falls into in the novel is depressed because it can no longer see its own beauty mirrored in his. This implies that everything in the world is connected to the Soul of the World, and that vanity is not only a characteristic of humans but also a natural one. In the prologue, the lake talks about its own Personal Legend while talking about Narcissus, "I weep for Narcissus, but I never noticed that Narcissus was beautiful. I weep because, each time he knelt beside my banks, I could see, in the depths of his eyes, my own beauty reflected" (At xiv).

Alchemy is an important component of the mythology in *The Alchemist*. It is the practice changing matter, particularly metals, into more valuable forms. The Englishman is searching for the 'Philosopher's Stone' and also the 'Elixir of Life' because it is said that alchemy can grant immortality. Both of these have their roots in the occult alchemical practice of transforming base metals into gold. Santiago learns that alchemy is a procedure that involves both physical and spiritual aspects from the alchemist who later on serves as his tutor. He asserts that everything in nature is soulful and that alchemy is the universal language. Alchemy, according to him, is a means of achieving one's Personal Legend.

The idea of Personal Legend, which is comparable to the Hindu concept of dharma, is another mythical component in the book. Dharma refers to one's moral code or cosmic order as well as their responsibility or purpose in life. The book's overarching theme is dharma, which Coelho defines as "following one's Personal Legend" (At 90). He claims that there are specific signs we come across along the journey that point us in the direction of realizing this Personal Legend and that the Universe conspires to make this happen. "And, when you want something,

all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it” (At 21). Santiago gains the ability to follow his heart and believe in his instincts, which lead him to his destiny. He also learns to get over his doubts and worries, which are what stand in the way of the realization of his personal legend.

The applications of signs and symbols from various religious traditions are also the mythological elements in the novel. For instance, Santiago dreams about a treasure hidden beneath the Egyptian pyramids, age-old structures that stand for the might and mystique of the pharaohs. He also encounters Melchizedek, who presents him with two stones and also claims to be the ruler of Salem. These are all allusions to the biblical character Melchizedek, a priest-king who blessed Abraham and also the tools the Israelite high priests used to interact with God. Fatima, who bears the name of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s daughter and stands in for Santiago's genuine love, is another person he meets. Fatima says to the boy, “It’s the name of the Prophet’s daughter” (At 90). The crystal merchant has desired to go on a trip to Mecca. Similar to the Koranic idea of feeding a person without any benefit, the crystal merchant says, “The Koran requires me to feed a hungry person” (At 44). The merchant says about the five obligations given in the Koran. Additionally, he sees a vision of an army advancing on an oasis, which turns out to be a prophecy. This is how Coelho adds the Christian, Islamic and Jewish elements in the novel.

The signs or symbols that portend the future or the will of the gods are known as omens. They play a significant role in Santiago's quest to recover his wealth and live up to his personal legend. Santiago gains the ability to trust his heart and intuition as well as to pay attention to the omens. In the book, Santiago runs into a few omens, including: A butterfly appears close to Santiago and Melchizedek during their first meeting. Butterflies are a sign of good fortune, according to Santiago's memory of his grandfather. The evidence of omens can be seen in, Before the boy could reply, a butterfly appeared and fluttered between him and the old man. He remembered something his grandfather had once told him: that butterflies were a good omen. Like crickets, and like expectations; like lizards and four-leaf clovers. (At 28)

Melchizedek sends Santiago two stones called the 'Urim and Thummim' to aid in his interpretation of the omens. Santiago is told to ask basic inquiries because they stand for yes and no. Melchizedek cautions Santiago, nonetheless, to rely less on them and more on his own judgment. When Santiago gets to the oasis, he notices two hawks engaged in aerial combat. He sees an army advancing on the oasis. The tribal chieftain hears him out, believes him, and gets ready for the assault. Santiago prevents the devastation of the oasis after the vision comes true. When Santiago arrives at the pyramids, he notices a scarab beetle scurrying across the sand. He takes a decision to dig where he has first seen the beetle after recalling that scarabs are regarded as a representation of God in ancient Egypt. He discovers only a chest of Spanish gold money. On meeting the alchemist, Santiago discovers that in order to prove his potential to the desert and the tribal warriors, he must transform himself into the wind. The wind offers to share its secrets with him when he requests for assistance from it. Santiago is also informed by the wind that it is aware of his love for Fatima and that it will convey that love to her. The alchemist employs the idea of dreams as a vehicle to represent the link between people and the 'Soul of the World', which is the underlying spirit that unites everything.

Under a sycamore tree in an abandoned church, Santiago has a reoccurring dream about the pyramids. He encounters a child and the child has transported him to the Egyptian pyramids and informs him that there is a hidden treasure there. Santiago is inspired by this idea to leave his cozy existence and go off on his adventure. The dream exposes Santiago's Personal Legend and also the message from the 'Soul of the World'. The dream of the desert is the one that Santiago observes two hawks engaged in aerial combat before hearing a voice alert him to an impending attack on the oasis. Santiago's ability to speak with nature is demonstrated by the dream. Santiago dreams of Fathima, a girl who resides in the oasis. He imagines himself accompanying her on a desert walk before merging with her. Santiago is head over heels in love with Fatima and wants to stay with her as a result of this dream. The dream represents a message from the 'Soul of the World' that Santiago has found his soul mate. Paulo Coelho says the finding of soulmate is also a part of destiny.

In conclusion, Paulo Coelho's book *The Alchemist* employs mythology to convey enduring truths about life and the nature of people. The book demonstrates that everyone has a special destiny and the capacity for greatness, but that these things can only be attained with courage, faith, and tenacity. The book also demonstrates how every entity in the whole world is interconnected and meaningful, and how one can find their own soul and purpose by learning to understand the symbols and signs of nature. It encompasses a wide range of creative and intellectual endeavours.



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