

Physical Journey Leads to Spiritual Growth: A Study of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

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A physical journey provides the traveller an opportunity to respond to various circumstances, favourable as well as unfavourable, and in this way, an opportunity to learn and grow intellectually and emotionally. This is a journey which results in spiritual growth. Santiago's physical journey from Andalusia to the Egyptian Pyramids in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* is about the maturing of a boy, about his spiritual growth, until he becomes an alchemist. Alchemy is the transmutation of metals like lead into gold, but the highest and the noblest alchemy means the self-transformation. It implies to the transformation of energy, that is, the lead of negative human energy is changed into the gold of Devine human energy. Physical journey has the quality to accelerate the spiritual growth and, as such, it is an integral part of alchemy. Growing spiritually is a life-long process and physical journey is one among the factors that contribute to the spiritual growth of an individual.

Paulo Coelho's international best-seller *The Alchemist* tells the simple story of Santiago, a shepherd in Andalusia, who embarks on a journey to the Pyramids of Egypt through the vast desert of Sahara. This long physical journey changes him from a little educated shepherd to a knowledgeable young man. His physical journey, in fact, is towards his destiny and he undertakes the journey with courage, determination and resilience. Despite numerous difficulties on his way, he never gives up and audaciously continues with

his journey. His physical journey, finally, trains him in discovering his 'Personal Legend' which is the way to realize and understand the secrets of the Soul of the World.

When the book opens, Santiago is a shepherd in Andalusia. At the very outset, we are told that he is a regular reader of new books as he tells himself that "he would have to start reading thicker books; they lasted longer . . ." (1). The dream, which the boy sees twice, has also been referred to on the very first page. We have also been detailed that the boy, whose name is mentioned by Coelho once only, does not like the life "where each day was like the other" (5). All this shows that the boy is not an ordinary shepherd but a man of temerity and fortitude with a different attitude towards life: "His purpose in life was to travel, and, after two years of walking the Andalusian terrain, he knew all the cities of the region . . . He had studied Latin, Spanish, and theology. But ever since he had been a child, he wanted to know the world, and this was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man's sins" (8). He has a strong desire, in fact a dream, to see the world, to "see the castles in the town where they live" (9). Every human being in this world has dreams, but (s)he has to abandon the dreams when reality kicks in. However, the way in which Santiago carries out his personal physical journey to realize his dream teaches that persistence and courage enable man to discover individual path towards his treasure or destiny.

The whole physical journey of Santiago, in fact, is the story of his spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is a process which manifests itself in personal change and personal progress. This process includes improvement in awareness, beginning with the end in mind, setting goals and believing in skills and potentials. During his physical journey, the boy passes through different stages of the process of spiritual growth and several factors contribute to make his physical journey a journey of illumination of heart. At every stage of his long journey, he learns more and more about himself and about the Soul of the World, and thus, comes closer to the realization of his dream or destiny.

We know that Santiago's mind is perturbed due to a dream which he sees twice at the same place, a dream about the hidden treasure somewhere near the Pyramids of Egypt. But before he knows where the treasure exactly is, he wakes up. He fails to find any meaning in the dream. It seems to him that the dream is telling him to go and accomplish his lifelong desire. It "is the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting" (11) and, he decides to see an old Gypsy woman in Terifa who could interpret dreams. The old woman interprets the dream and asks him to go to the Pyramids: "There you will find a treasure that will make you a rich man" (15). But, both the boy and the reader, till now, are not aware of the fact that richness, here, means a spiritual maturity, a juncture of life when one begins to recognize the Soul of the World. The strange interpretation of dream perplexes his mind more than before. The Gypsy woman is, thus, the first contributor who contributes to the spiritual growth of

Santiago. Had she not interpreted the dream that way, the boy would certainly have abandoned his idea of going to the Pyramids. His spiritual growth, in actual, thus begins from the very interpretation of his dream. Although he does not trust the old lady, yet his mind cannot resist her interpretation.

Right from the beginning of the story, we know that the boy has a quest to know anything and everything. But we observe that the word 'destiny' is unfamiliar to him as he fails to respond when Melchizedek, the King of Salem dressed like an Arab, introduces the word to him. Knowledge comes to him from the King. The King describes 'destiny' to him:

It is what you have always wanted to accomplish. Everyone, when they are young, knows what their destiny is. At that point in their lives, everything is clear and everything is possible. They are not afraid to dream, and to yearn for everything they would like to see happen to them in their lives. But, as the time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their destiny . . . It's a force that appears to be negative, but actually shows you how to realize your destiny. It prepares your spirit and your will, because 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 real obligation. All things are one. And when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it. (22-23)

The immature mind of the boy fails to perceive such noble and high thoughts, but

the King illustrates his statements (or preaching) with the story of the baker. In fact, the King had observed that the boy was trying to realize his destiny but was about to give up at that point. It seems that the Fate or God or perhaps some mysterious power talks to the boy in the form of the King of Salem. The King's speech on destiny comes as an incentive for Santiago. Such motivation is always required for success. The speech has a deep impact on the boy's mind and, thereafter, he is not able to concentrate on anything else, as Coelho describes: "He was tense and upset, because he knew that the old man was right" (26). Santiago understands that in order to realize his destiny, he "had to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have" (28). He knew that there was nothing to hold him back except himself and this was to overcome soon. His training in following the omens in order to find his destiny continues: "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" (30). This inspirational speech by the old Arab King plays a significant part in the spiritual growth of Santiago. It is the King who asks the boy to read and follow the omens which is the way to realize the destiny. The King also gives Santiago two special stones, Urim and Thummium, a white and a black stone, standing for 'no' and 'yes' respectively. He also tells the boy the story of the shopkeeper's son to exemplify his philosophy, concluding with a piece of advice: "The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world and never to forget the drops of oil on the spoon (in the hand)" (34). Thus, we observe that in

addition to the boy's own quest to find his hidden treasure or meet his destiny, the King's message also has a deep impact on his mind and consequently, he leaves for Africa in search of his destiny. The physical journey thus begins and helps him grow throughout his adventurous voyage.

His next stop is Tangier, a coastal town in Africa. A couple of bitter experiences in this strange city, change his life change suddenly and drastically. All his hopes, his courage and his faith in God shatter. A strange notion comes to his mind: "I'm going to hate those who have found their treasure because I never found mine. And I'm going to hold on to what little I have, because I'm too insignificant to conquer the world" (41). His mind is too immature to face the odd realities of the world. But, we know that he is not a boy who can relinquish so easily. Soon he realizes that he has "to choose between thinking of himself as the poor victim of a thief and as an adventurer in quest of his treasure" (44). He is shocked and discouraged to learn that there are thousands of kilometers between Tangier and the Pyramids, and it is almost impossible for him to reach there. His decision to earn money and go back to Andalusia, buy a flock of sheep and become a shepherd again show that he could not carry on the burden of his physical journey further.

However, as the time passes, Tangier proves to be a hidden treasure of knowledge to him, and there, while working for a crystal merchant in his shop, he learns many new things. He learns that there is one universal language, the Language of the World, the knowledge of which could help understanding the world. He also comes across and learns 'muktab', the written. His exchange of ideas with the

crystal merchant enriches his thoughts. His only dream at that moment was to go back to his familiar places in Spain. But a better understanding of the world help him realize that this dream was becoming less important for him because perhaps it was not his real dream; his real dream was to cross the entire desert to seek his destiny and soon he realizes that “just he had conquered this place (Tangier), he could conquer the world” (64). He, thus, decides to join a caravan of about two hundred men, which was going to cross the desert. Tangier plays an important role in Santiago’s spiritual growth. It makes him maturer in thought as he gains knowledge, the knowledge which he reaps from experience.

The next stage of Santiago’s spiritual growth, during his physical journey, is his meeting with a highly learned Englishman whom he meets on the desert caravan. The Englishman is in search of a two hundred years old alchemist. His passion for knowledge and his relentless thrust to know and learn the secrets of alchemy enthuse Santiago to pursue his own dream of discovering his treasure. The Englishman’s quest clears many of his doubts about his decision to follow his dreams: “. . . making a decision was only the beginning of things. When someone makes a decision, he is really diving into a strong current that will carry him to places he had never dreamed of when he first made the decision” (71). The boy learns that the Englishman, like him, is also in search of the universal language. The boy always has a learning attitude and he primes himself to learn from the desert and the caravan too: “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” (76). His tendency to learn from everything enables him to learn many things from the desert, the Englishman and his books, the camel-driver and the caravan. He reads out all the books of the Englishman and comprehends that all things in this world are the manifestation of one thing only. He also learns about alchemy: “. . . if a metal were heated for many years, it would free itself of all its individual properties, and what was left would be the Soul of the World. This Soul of the World allowed them to understand anything on the face of the earth because it was the language with which all things communicated” (84). This idea seems to have make him wiser and maturer. On his physical journey in the desert, he learns several new things about the world, the language, the beginner’s luck, the signs, the omens and the destiny. This vast knowledge assists him in his spiritual growth.

Al-Fayoum, a large and beautiful oasis in the desert, where he falls in love with Fatima, changes him completely. It fills him with great gusto and enthusiasm. Fatima also heats up his spiritual growth: “That’s why I want you to continue towards your goal . . . 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” (102). This is the true love, which never gets in the way of Personal Legends. Santiago’s growth on the oasis can be perceived by his success in reading an omen in the fight of the hawks. For the first time in his life, he was able to concentrate and read the omens properly. As Santiago continues learning things from the alchemist, we observe maturing well into a knowledgeable man. We see that though the Englishman was in

search of the Alchemist and that the latter was also waiting for someone as his real disciple, but it is Santiago who proves himself his real disciple. It is on the Al-Fayoum oasis that the boy meets the Alchemist. The Alchemist augments Santiago's mind by giving him knowledge of life, omens, desert, destiny, love, language of the world, action and above all, the alchemy. It is the Alchemist who helps the boy decipher the language of the world and helps him understand that we are all connected to the Soul of the World. He persuades the boy to continue his physical journey with the courage of an adventurer and edifies him to listen to his heart in order to understand and speak the Language of the World: "You will never be able to escape from your heart. So it's better to listen to what it has to say. That way, you'll never have to fear an unanticipated blow" (136). Santiago practices hard and eventually masters the art of listening to his heart. In fact, the Alchemist is already familiar with the potentials and abilities of Santiago and he knows that all what that boy needs is simply an encouragement to move in the right direction; "You already know about alchemy. It is about penetrating to the Soul of the World, and discovering the treasure that has been reserved for you" (144). As they continue their journey towards the Pyramids through the desert, they are stopped by several horsemen and taken to a military camp. It is at this point that the Alchemist proclaims that Santiago is a powerful alchemist and can change himself into wind. Santiago "had no idea how he was going to transform himself into the wind. He wasn't an alchemist" (148). The boy is, thus, put to a test by the alchemist. The Alchemist knows that "the threat of death makes people a lot more

aware of their lives" (149). This is exactly what happens with Santiago. We see him at the peak of his maturity as he is able to communicate with the desert, the wind and the sun. He is even ready to speak and communicate with the hand that writes, that is, the Lord Himself. It is the point where he realizes the existence of spiritual alchemy:

"This is why alchemy exists," the boy said. "So that everyone will search for his treasure, find it, and then want to be better than he was in his former life. Lead will play its role until the world has no further need for lead; and then lead will have to turn itself into gold."

"That's what alchemists do. They show that, when we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better, too." (158)

The Alchemist bids Santiago good bye as soon as he realizes that the latter has accomplished the process of his spiritual growth. Although his spiritual growth is almost complete, yet his physical journey is not. Nevertheless one thing is sure that everything in Santiago's subsequent life will be in his favour because he has realized that life is favourable and generous when we pursue our Personal Legend. When he reaches the Pyramids, he fails to find any treasure there. Instead, he comes to know that treasure, in fact, lies where he had started his physical journey from. But he is not irritated and annoyed. He knows that though he is not able to find the material wealth, he has discovered the spiritual wealth. His true treasure is that he has become an alchemist, a real alchemist, who knows how to achieve spiritual alchemy. Had he not started his physical journey to the Egyptian Pyramids, he

would never have grown spiritually. His physical journey through the desert, to realize his dream, helped him in his spiritual growth. During his long journey, from the green fields of Andalusia to the Pyramids of Egypt, through the vast desert of Sahara, the lead is transmuted into gold.

We see the shepherd metamorphosed into a powerful alchemist at the end of his physical journey. The journey itself proves not a wandering in different lands but a hidden treasure for him with all the knowledge he gained and the discoveries he made along the way.

References:

Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1998.