



## *Discovering the Self: A Study of Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist*

*Hunain Sabir<sup>1</sup>, Huzaira Akmal<sup>2</sup>*

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### Abstract

*This study explores the theme of self-discovery in Paulo Coelho's internationally acclaimed novel *The Alchemist*. Through the journey of Santiago, a young Andalusian shepherd, the novel presents a philosophical and symbolic narrative of personal growth, spiritual awakening, and the pursuit of one's "Personal Legend." This paper examines how the process of discovering the self is portrayed as a transformative journey that transcends physical boundaries and material desires, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of one's true purpose in life. Drawing on existential and psychological frameworks, particularly those of Carl Jung and Abraham Maslow, the research analyzes Santiago's experiences in terms of self-actualization, inner calling, and the integration of the conscious and unconscious self. The novel's use of allegory, symbolism, and mysticism is also investigated as key narrative strategies that guide the protagonist and the reader toward introspection and enlightenment. By tracing Santiago's internal and external quest, the paper argues that Coelho not only illustrates the universal human desire for meaning and identity but also offers a literary blueprint for navigating life's uncertainties through faith, perseverance, and self-belief. This study concludes that *The Alchemist* serves as a modern spiritual parable, encouraging readers to embark on their own journeys of self-discovery and to listen to the "language of the world" that speaks through intuition, dreams, and the heart.*

### Keywords:

*Self-Discovery, Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist, Personal Legend, Spiritual Journey, Self-Actualization, Symbolism, Existentialism, Inner Transformation, Psychological Growth.*

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, The Department of English, Sadiq Public School, Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

[hunainsabir95@gmail.com](mailto:hunainsabir95@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar, The Department of English, Sadiq Public School, Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

[huzairakashif0@gmail.com](mailto:huzairakashif0@gmail.com)



## Introduction:

*The Alchemist*, written by the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho, was originally written in Portuguese language, first published in 1988, and was translated into 67 languages. The novel is translated into English by Alan R. Clarke in 1993. *The Alchemist* is one of those novels in which the protagonist is jaded of his mundane existence and the feeling of crisis of his spiritual existence. He prompts to be in the search of the meaning of his life. As Arias explains, Coelho guides the hero through a tangible journey that triggers an inner psychological shift namely, self actualization. He highlights that the most renowned literary classics often revolve around epic journeys. It is consistently a quest for Ithaca, symbolizing the cycle of life and death a profound voyage that every individual must undertake, willingly or not. (173)

“Spiritual evolution is the evolution of consciousness, a progression of the soul’s manifestation in material existence” (Aurobindo 65). According to Schneider it is a progressive and consciously attained personal integration through self excel within and towards the horizons of definitive concern. Spirituality thus, refers to the experience of conscious determining to integrate life in terms of self transcendence towards the ultimate value.

Some kinds of spirituality do not make any direct reference to God or religions rather refer to self-actualization. We can find this kind of spirituality in Coelho’s novels in which the protagonists do not set out in the search of God or some supernatural power, instead they go in the search of self, the meaning of their existence, and the power that resides within them; the spirit. In this search for their souls, Coelho’s protagonists undergo a spiritual transformation; from material existence to a sublime one.

The problem statement is to show how the protagonist of the novel undertakes a journey that leads him to self discovery.

## OBJECTIVE(s) OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to:

1. Examine the theme and Santiago’s journey towards self-discovery in Paulo Coelho’s ‘*The Alchemist*’.

## RESEARCH QUESTION(s)

According to the introduction, the study will answer the following question:

1. How does Santiago’s journey illustrate the process of self-discovery?

## ANALYSIS

In the domain of motivational literature, Paulo Coelho’s masterpiece *The Alchemist* stands out as a significant work. First published in 1988, this enchanting narrative delves into timeless themes such as personal discovery, destiny, and the pursuit of dreams. Today, let us journey through the sands of this remarkable story. (n.p.)

*The Alchemist* is a book that paints an experience which is timeless and never dated. Coelho undertakes the importance of a journey that is both physical and spiritual. This study focuses on that journey towards self discovery and spirituality that the protagonist of the novel, Santiago, undertakes.

Paulo believes that every human existence has a particular role, assigned by God, and he has to perform that role by following his dreams. *The Alchemist* is the book that beautifully portrays man’s struggle to fulfill that role and to find the true meaning of his self. Through his journey across borders, Santiago encountered the forces of globalization and transnationalism. His experiences abroad played a vital role in shaping his personal legend and ultimately led him to uncover his true treasure his own self. (17).

The book is divided into two parts, first one describes the protagonist’s discovery of his personal legend and how he overcame the misfortunes by controlling his own destiny through interpreting and reading omens, while the second part describes his physical as well as spiritual journey to know where his actual treasure is.

Santiago, a young Andalusian shepherd, dreams of a life filled with travel and adventure. Defying tradition and his parents' hopes for him to enter the priesthood, he chooses to explore the world a pursuit he values more than religious knowledge or spiritual practice. His journey begins with a recurring dream, in which a child leads him to the Egyptian pyramids, saying, "If you've come here, you will find a treasure." (Coelho 14). The protagonist's recurring dream can be seen as what Joseph Campbell describes as a "call to adventure." This dream marks the beginning of Santiago's significant transformation throughout his journey. According to Campbell, such a journey represents the hero's transformative quest into unknown and unfamiliar realms. (53). The dream compels Santiago to reflect on his existence and pursue what is missing from his life. His heart and soul begin to yearn for spiritual fulfillment. In response, he chooses to leave behind his home, family, and all material possessions that now seem meaningless. Embracing the life of a shepherd a path that enables him to travel freely he begins his quest.

Santiago holds the belief that living with purpose is the true aim of life. Embarking on his journey, he faces numerous challenges, encounters mystical elements, evolves into an alchemist, and ultimately uncovers the spiritual treasure within himself. The allure of the world and the depths of the unconscious lead him to grasp the true meaning of life and attain a deeper understanding of the self. To disclose the secrets of heart and soul, there are many ways. According to Coelho, three basic principles are listening to heart, following the omens, and understanding the interconnecting nature of the things of the world. He has used many concrete and abstract symbols to represent various disciplines which became the basis for Santiago's achievement.

Through the character of the King of Salem, Coelho conveys the idea that in youth, individuals are naturally aware of their Personal Legend—a sense of purpose that inspires enthusiasm and drive to achieve meaningful goals. Both Santiago's destiny and the King of Salem serve as motivators, urging him to pursue his dreams.

*The Alchemist* illustrates how omens, which arise from the Soul of the World, act as guiding signs in the journey toward fulfilling one's dreams. By paying attention to these signs and with the assistance of the crystal merchant, Santiago experiences significant progress. The episode in the crystal shop demonstrates that humans possess the ability to transform, shape, and enhance their lives through conscious effort.

Melchizedek, as portrayed by Coelho, symbolizes the 'Great Spanish Inquisition' and embodies the dual role of priest and warrior. He helps Santiago understand that true self-realization leads to a recognition of the soul's connection with the universal spirit similar to the concept of Brahman and that the material world is ultimately an illusion. In describing the essence of the Soul of the World, Melchizedek states, "All things are one." (Coelho 23).

Human nature and identity are shaped by the values and beliefs an individual embraces. Santiago firmly adheres to Melchizedek's idea that "When you truly desire something, the entire universe works in your favor to help you attain it." (Coelho 23). Coelho suggests that when we remain caught between the concept of *Maktub* ("it is written") and the notion of free will, we hinder our ability to uncover the boundless mysteries of life. Santiago holds the belief that "the stories of individual lives and the history of the world are authored by the same hand." (Coelho 75). Santiago remains committed to following his heart and the Soul of the World. He deeply believes that his *Personal Legend* is not solely his own, but intricately connected to the universe, which will guide him toward fulfilling his dreams and discovering his true self.

In his quest for the treasure, Santiago engages with individuals who aid him along the way. He actively seeks guidance, meets those who assist in his journey, and continuously searches for paths that align with his purpose. These interactions become essential elements of his spiritual quest. Through communication, he gains insights that surpass mere worldly knowledge. As he progresses, he begins to understand that true happiness does not lie in

material wealth, but in inner peace and living with purpose. According to Mishra (2012), “The Ulysses-like journey of exploration and self-discovery for a symbolic search for treasure becomes Santiago’s mission on earth, which is nothing but to find God, implying happiness, fulfilment and the ultimate purpose of creation” (167)

Love is a crucial factor that guides an individual on the journey toward self-discovery. Santiago becomes engaged to two different women, each representing a contrasting form of love. His initial experience with love is a spiritual connection with the merchant’s daughter. However, it is only when he arrives at the oasis that he encounters true love Fatima. She expresses her unwavering support, willing to wait for him indefinitely while he pursues his dreams and Personal Legend. The key message is that true love never hinders a person from following their destiny and aspirations. (Coelho 115).

When Santiago finally recognized his true self, he also developed the ability to communicate with supernatural forces and nature itself. In his conversation with the wind, Santiago reflects, "I have learned the alchemist's secrets during my travels. I carry the winds, the deserts, the oceans, the stars everything that exists in the universe within me. We are all created by the same hand, and we share the same soul." (Coelho 140). Santiago reaches a moment of profound self discovery. He gains the ability to control the wind and communicate with the sun. He comes to understand that his soul is an integral part of the universe and of God, and that the soul of God is the same as his own. In this realization, he recognizes that he possesses the power to perform miracles. (Coelho 145).

As Jyoti Mishra suggests, Santiago’s journey encompasses both his physical and spiritual transformation, freeing him from his former, limited views of life. His perspective expands to embrace grander experiences and a deeper connection with the universe. In this way, Santiago undergoes a profound metamorphosis, evolving from a simple shepherd into a noble, dignified alchemist, possessing profound wisdom and a deeper understanding of the cosmos. (190-191).

The novel’s conclusion marks a triumph for Coelho. Santiago’s journey doesn’t end in a traditional sense, as he finds himself back in Spain. He discovers that the treasure he has been seeking all along was not hidden in the pyramids, but buried in the abandoned church where his journey began. This realization teaches us that we must look deeply into our origins to understand what we are truly searching for and to uncover the foundation of our lives. Santiago’s outward journey mirrors his inward quest to discover his true self and grasp universal truths. Ultimately, it shows that all we need is to maintain faith in our personal legends.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through his novels, Coelho illustrates that genuine happiness is found in self discovery. As an author, he appears to be on a personal quest for understanding, much like his protagonist. The Alchemist is regarded as a transformative book, capable of altering people's perspectives on life and reshaping their thoughts and perceptions. According to Raina, The Alchemist symbolizes humanity’s relentless pursuit to find one’s place in the world and the ultimate search for life’s meaning and the mysteries of the universe. (278)

The novel explores the protagonist's spiritual quest and concludes that spiritual dilemmas can only be addressed through self-discovery and spiritual healing. Santiago's journey from the pyramids back to Spain leads him to uncover the true treasure the treasure of life itself. Along the way, he undergoes numerous transformations. To find our true selves, we must understand the value of change, embrace the struggle to grow, trust in the experiences and paths we take, recognize the lessons within suffering, comprehend the essence of love, live fully in the present moment, and most importantly, conquer our fears. By listening to the heart, interpreting omens, and connecting with the Soul of the World, we can discover our own soul as part of all we have experienced.

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