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PAULO COELHO - AN EXISTENTIAL AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

Paulo Coelho, the renowned Brazilian author has interminably been categorised as an inspirational writer. His books have the capacity to bring in a fresh breath of air into the lives whose existence has become dull and meaningless. Every time he takes up a different issue, which is common to all, envelops it up in a wonderful philosophic story thus, showing the readers a ray of hope. The impact it has created, have made his novels time and again the international best seller. Coelho, while motivating his readers considers the existential questions, the ones that are debated by philosophers and counsellors. This paper of mine intends to talk over Paulo Coelho as an existential author as he discusses various problems in his two famous novels *THE ALCHEMIST* and *VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE* moulded in the form of beautiful stories.

KEY WORDS: Paulo Coelho, novels, existentialism

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WHAT IS EXISTENTIALISM?

Existentialism is a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical approach which emphasizes the existence of human beings solely as the outcome of one's choice. The path that the individual, being, a free and responsible agent chooses, determines their future developments. It emphasises the fact that there is no particular reason for such an existence. It even disregards the existence of all pervasive God or transcendental force to guide this existence. Everything that one sees today is the result of the decision taken by the individual, rather the choice made by the individual in the past.

The works of Soren Kierkegaard, Fredric Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers and Edmund Husserl are considered the precursors of existential philosophy though it was not labelled as existentialism at that time. The deep pessimism and void brought down by the World Wars and the Great Depression of 1930 put to question the very essence of human existence. The prevailing social scenario lead Jean Paul Sartre to lay the foundation of his monumental work *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*(1943) where he demonstrates his principal – free will exists. His work was partly influenced by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* which was again a development of Edmund Husserl's analysis of human consciousness.

Sartre's introduction to *Being and Nothingness* has been put together in a book *Existentialism and Humanism* which is regarded as the defining text of Existential movement. The book encapsulates his slogan 'existence precedes essence' meaning that there is no external controlling factor to define the individual goal

or character; that the essence of life is decided solely by the individual. Existence is “self-making-in-a-situation” (Fackenheim 1961:37){FackenheimE.,1961.Metaphysics and, Milwaukee: Marquette university press}. Human beings differ from all other entities for our existence is not fixed by the type of entities they are. Neither nature nor culture can constitute one’s entity. It is solely the desire to exist which, in the process forms the identity. According to Sartre, “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards”

#### **Existentialism and the Novels of Paulo Coelho:**

With the advancement of technology and the increasing fret and fever of life existential themes have invariably penetrated deeper into the society constantly trying to prove what it is to be human. An idea expressed by Paulo Coelho about existentialism is that, “The world needs what existential psychotherapy has to offer, the culture is crying for vivification, for enlightenment and to awaken and to transform. In order to meet that need, we as Modern Existentialists must learn to speak the language of the people and introduce them to the works of existentialism on their terms” This exactly what he has done through his novels.

Coelho has repeatedly used existential themes in his novels especially in *THE ALCHEMIST* and *VERONICA DECIDES TO DIE* as has been found from the results of an online survey conducted in the summer of 2014 to categorise the key existential films, novels and books. Of the 288 nominations for the existential novels Paulo Coelho’s *THE ALCHEMIST* and *VERONICA DECIDES TO DIE* have been classified as existential novels.

*THE ALCHEMIST*, first came into publication in the year 1988 and has since been translated into 80 different languages making Coelho the Guinness World Record holder for being the most translated living author. It is the story of an Andalusian shepherd boy who makes a long journey from his homeland in Spain to the deserts of Egyptian pyramid in search of some hidden treasure, himself unaware of what the treasure is. Santiago starts on his adventure without knowing the destiny or the route to achieve it. He leaves behind his family tradition of priesthood only to find an answer to his recurring dream of being a shepherd. Santiago, gives priority to his own choice, he listens to his heart. He is not guided by the external forces though they tend to be an obstacle in the course of his life. On his way, he meets several people like the Melchizedek – the king of Salem, the shopkeeper who gives him the job, the English man of the caravan, Fatima with whom Santiago falls in love, the Alchemist – the possessor of the elixir of life, the Gypsy woman who knows about the pyramids of Egypt. Each one of them put different impressions on his mind for example the old king Melchizedek inspires him through the ‘Personal Legend’, which is “what you have always wanted to accomplish. Everyone when they are young knows what their Personal Legend is”. He goes on to add “when you want something all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.” This enchanting line forms the theme of the book and reverberates through the story. Through this line Coelho wants to convey to his readers how the dreams of youth are all lost in the maze of existence as one matures with age. As maturity curbs us from listening to our own self, we are unknowingly lured into a riddle, an escape from which is not known. In the story too there comes a time in the journey of Santiago where he finds it difficult to pursue his ambition because the hurdles that come on his way try to chain him down to one place but then he meets the crystal merchant who makes him aware of the consequences of unfulfilled dreams. So, in spite, of having several hardships he does put an end to his quest. Thus, Coelho takes up a simple tale of the pursuit of one’s destiny and turns it into a magical fable by the use of incidents and situations that depict human destiny and divine intervention. As Sartre says ‘free will exists’, so does the ‘Will’ of Santiago carry him on his way to success overcoming the hurdles that lie in between. Malcolm Boyd the author of *Are You Running With Me, Jesus? And Modern Maturity* columnist has rightly judged the book saying: “This fable is a roseate amalgam of spiritual quest, existential puzzle, lovely sensitivity and deep strength.” Santiago solves all the spiritual and existential riddles through self- awareness and self- exploration only to find a wise Santiago.

His other novel *VERONICA DECIDES TO DIE* published in 1998 too, is wrought with existential issues. It is a poignant novel of a beautiful girl by the same name. She is a woman in mid- twenties who in spite, of having almost everything in life such as a job and a good family finds life meaningless to live and surrenders to death by overdosing herself with sleeping pills. She does not die. She comes to consciousness in a mental

asylum in Villette where Dr. Igor informs her that the poison will eventually lead her to her death in the course of five days. The proximity of death slowly regenerates a new urge to see life again, may be, this time for a limited number of days as Coelho says: "In order to appreciate life, one must taste death..." In the hospital she thinks about life, she questions about life to the people she meets like – Zedka who has clinical depression, Maria who suffers from panic attacks and Eduard who is schizophrenic. Veronica's five days stay in the hospital is her metamorphosis to the new life ahead. In the hospital she recollects the days of her first love, she again starts playing piano and finds her love and satisfaction in Eduard. She takes interest in the problems of others only to find that she is not suffering from any illness. Though the book is woven around insanity but for the greater part it deals with the deliberate choice to live- a choice, we all have to make at some point of life.

Coelho, through the story tries to answer some of the questions that lie hidden in the deeper recesses of our mind, the answer to which a common man searches throughout one's life. At a point in the novels he reminds his readers "You are someone who is different, but one who wants to be same as everyone else. And that in my view is a serious illness. God chose you to be different. Why are you disappointing God with this kind of attitude?" Here he shows us how each of us is unique and how we tend to forget this when we try to equate ourselves with other fellows and open the doors to unforeseen miseries. The competitiveness within us makes us overlook our unique potentialities and at the end we try to make ourselves a replica of someone else which forms the root of all our problems.

At another point he teaches us to believe in ourselves, believe in our beliefs, our ideals which we alone can bring to maturity. This he brings out through a conversation between two inmates of the asylum: "Anyone who lives in her own world is crazy. Like schizophrenics, psychopaths, maniacs. I mean people who are different from others.'

Like you?'

On the other hand,' Zedka continued, pretending not to have heard the remark, 'you have Einstein, saying that there was no time or space, just a combination of the two. Or Columbus, insisting that on the other side of the world lay not an abyss but a continent. Or Edmund Hillary, convinced that a man could reach the top of Everest. Or the Beatles, who created an entirely different sort of music and dressed like people from another time. Those people--and thousands of others--all lived in their own world" The novel is filled with numerous inspiring quotations, quotations which make us think of life, think it in a different way and find a new meaning to the mundane existence and if possible add colours to it.

### **Conclusion**

Both the novels not only inspire us to go ahead with our dreams (The Alchemist) and think of the why and how of existence (Veronika Decides To Die) but also goes much deeper within the consciousness of the characters and places him/her in life like situation and through the use of interior monologues and dialogues discuss, the probable thoughts that always cloud the mind of the readers. Paulo Coelho in each of his novels takes up different situations and makes his characters respond in the same way as any other human being would have done in that situation and then tries to come to a conclusion by using some deep philosophy but not the ones which have been used by the philosophers. His books are deeply imbued in philosophy, a philosophy which the readers feel to be their very own. While reading the novels the readers find themselves inseparable from the characters because the issues, the problems that are dealt in the novel are common to everyone. Thus, Coelho diffuses existential issues through the stories of the novels without being deeply philosophical and making it easy for every reader to untie the knots of life and live every moment of it.

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