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MADMAN, HIPPIE, WARRIOR, MAGUS AND THE ALCHEMIST: PAULO COELHO'S
INTENSE LIFE THROUGH HIS BOOKS

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ABSTRACT

The Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho is popular worldwide mainly because of his best-selling and inspiring novel *The Alchemist*. He is considered as a spiritual guide by many. However, his books deal with a lot of issues of everyday life. All these issues are what he had experienced throughout his life that he shared through his books. This paper examines everything that Paulo Coelho faced that made him a writer, an inspiration, a mystic and a spiritual guide to his readers. His intense life is analysed through his books. He has been sent to an asylum by his parents. He shared his experiences in his book *Veronika Decides to Die*. Later, he never mind being labelled a madman. His backpacking days, along with his involvement in drugs and introduction to Sufism are explored in his book *Hippie*. His spiritual awakening on the road to Santiago de Compostela are shared in his book *The Pilgrimage*. *The Alchemist* was written metaphorically on the same journey Coelho has taken where he finally met his inner self and found his treasure in himself. He himself walked the path for his personal legend to find the simplicity of life which transformed his life. He shares his personal experiences through his books which are experienced by his worldwide readers as well. His works brought a newness and motivation to meaningless and dull existence of many.

Keywords: Coelho, Spirituality, Madness, Hippie, The Alchemist, existence.

Introduction

It was on 24th August 1947 that an inspirational writer Paulo Coelho was born. He was born in Rio de Janeiro, a city in Brazil. He was delivered by forceps as he had swallowed his own faeces. He was declared dead and for his last rites only a nun could be found. Before the sacrament, a sound was heard, a mewling and it was realised that the child was in coma and not dead. That was Paulo Coelho's first struggle with life. His father was Pedro Coelho de Souza, an engineer and his mother was Lygia Coelho de Souza.

Thrice he was sent to an asylum by his parents as he was a very rebellious teenage and would fight for his choices in life. His experiences of that period are projected in *Veronika Decides to Die* through characters like Zedka who goes through depression or Mari, who gets panic attacks or Eduard who is given shock treatment.

Out of the three times he was admitted to the hospital, he was let go for the first time and he escaped the other two times. He ran away to another city and when he was left with no money he came back home. After he is back home, he starts filling his house with strangers and would get blind drunk. In *Veronika decides to die*, there seems to be the similar episode that happens with Eduard.

"Eduard, the solitary boy who had never once brought friends home, was now filling the house with strange people, all of them badly dressed and with untidy hair, who listened to horrible music at full blast - endlessly drinking and smoking and showing a complete disregard for basic good manners."¹

Eduard does not wish to follow his father a Yugoslavian ambassador's footsteps. His father, on the other hand, all his life was trying to make a smooth road for his son. Eduard meets an accident and develops a keen interest in painting. When his parents strongly oppose his passion, tied between his love for his parents and his passion, he ends up losing his sense of reality. As a schizophrenic, he is admitted to Villette.

At an early age, he started writing. His parents didn't want him to be a writer. After getting out of the asylum he was enrolled into a law school. He knew he could not flourish as a lawyer or anything else. Away from the parental vigilance, Paulo Coelho entered a new world where he consumed every kind of drug and found it to be his personal freedom. Between 1973 and 1982 Paulo Coelho composed 120 songs together with Raul Seixas¹. Coelho was part of the age of Hippies which believed in love and peace and their love for drugs, sex and Rock and Roll. Protesting his country's military rule, he wrote songs. They were played by Brazilian musicians. For his songs and political activism, he was sent to jail three times. He was wrongly accused and arrested by the then Brazilian dictator government in 1969 and was physically tortured for a week. He said: "*It left me in fear and broken and it took me 7 years to put the pieces again.*"²

The skinny Brazilian young man also left home and lived as a Hippie, in search of freedom, peace and meaning of life. He shared his experiences in his most autobiographical novel Hippie. He travelled through Chile and Argentina hitchhiking and later ends up in Amsterdam. He rides the Magic bus that goes to Kathmandu. In his travel he meets Karla. Though, their travel is cut short at Turkey where he also explored Sufism, with Karla on his side, he undergoes transformation, and finds the choices that help him to set course for his life afterwards. Talking about spirituality and the need to leave everything with a little madness, he writes,

"A man in search of spirituality knows little, because he reads of it and tries to fill his intellect with what he judges wise. Trade your books for madness and wonder—then you will be a bit closer to what you seek. Books bring us opinions and studies, analyses and comparisons, while the sacred flame of madness brings us to the truth."³

He wanted to be a writer, even when it had taken years for him to realise that dream. He was so desperate to be a famous writer that he got involved in occult and the rituals of the devil. He expected that a pact with devil will bring him success and will make him the famous writer he has always dreamed of becoming. He was sure that this was the right way for him. His frustration and his inability to achieve his dream of becoming a writer by himself was getting to him and he was convinced there was nothing wrong in selling his soul to the devil to get what he wanted. He did taste success. He met Raul Seixas and wrote lyrics for successful records. Money was pouring in and he married his first wife Gisa. Paulo thought it was all because of the occult and the magic he was performing. When one night he felt a darkness around him in his room, he panicked and went back to his roots, his beliefs in Christianity. This initiation into the occult and his return from it made Coelho experience a deeper understanding of this world. He realised where his roots are and how important his religious beliefs are, once he was back from the experience of the underworld. He devoted more of his time to Christian beliefs. He also wrote a book on his experiences with Black Magic. However, when his current wife Christina read it, she asked him to burn it as it is nothing but 'pure evil', and he did what he was told. Nothing of that book remained.

¹ Raul Santos Seixas was a Brazilian rock composer, singer, songwriter and producer. He is sometimes called the "Father of Brazilian Rock"

In his twenties, he was divorced twice. He went to the UK to fulfill his dream of becoming a writer. But going away from home didn't help and he ended up getting divorce a second time. Coelho met Christina Oiticica, his current life partner in 1968. They decided to travel Europe in the year 1981. While travelling, in Germany, Coelho visited a concentration camp. It was here that he felt an energy and a sign that his life is going to change. He met a man he referred as J in his autobiography who invited him to be a member of RAM. RAM is a catholic order that stand for Regnus Agnus Mundi². He accepted and J became his Master and, on his orders, he journeyed to the road to Santiago in Spain. The route starts in France at Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and ends in Spain at Santiago de Compostela which covers seven hundred kilometers. He claimed that he walked most of the journey for months. There are also claims that he rode a comfortable taxi and is lying. However, Coelho asked his readers to believe whatever version they want to believe. He wrote his experience of this journey in his first book *The Pilgrimage*. Coelho completed that book in two weeks. He writes in this book, "*Teaching is only demonstrating that it is possible. Learning is making it possible for yourself.*"⁴ Coelho tells how one can take an inner journey by taking a physical journey or a Personal Legend. He believes that "*We always know which is the best road to follow, but we follow only the road that we have become accustomed to.*"⁵ He described himself as a Magus³. He also believes that anyone who is following his Personal Legend and can read the Language of the Soul, is a Magus. He also believed that everyone's experiences are different from another,

"We are always trying to convert people to a belief in our own explanation of the universe. We think that the more people there are who believe as we do, the more certain it will be that what we believe is the truth. But it doesn't work that way at all."⁶

Coelho not only applied rationality and spirituality in his personal life but the popularity of his books can be found majorly because of the combination of spiritualism and rational thoughts. It is rare for an author to take a different path from the traditional ways and convey that one can find oneself by following his heart, can meet with the creator by reading the language of the soul, can have a spiritual experience while keeping the rational thoughts intact. In fact, according to Coelho, rationality and spirituality are not different but goes together. It might be correct to say that Coelho has followed a marketing strategy to sell his books where he, a master of RAM, followed the meditative practices, on the other hand, he made contacts with people in politics and business. He took a holistic approach of selling his life and personal experiences through his books.

The Pilgrimage was successful but it was his second book that made him a household name. He published *The Alchemist* in the year 1988. It was not a huge success then. It was translated into French and topped the charts in France. In 1994, HarperCollins published *The Alchemist*. It turned into an international bestseller. Coelho has written 30 books till now which include three autobiographical novels, three are collections of quotes, teachings and essays, and rest are fictional work. His books are translated in 88 languages. They are published in more than 170 countries and sold hundreds of millions of copies and read by 600 million people worldwide. It stayed on New York Times' best-seller list for 425 weeks and is still on Los Angeles Times' Best-seller list for 12 years and 2 months.

In 2003, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, an international book signing was organised. Paulo Coelho signed 53 translations of his *The Alchemist* that entered him in the Guinness Book of World Records to sign the most translations of one single title in one sitting.

His books are considered as spiritual guidebooks. He was declared United Nations Messenger of Peace in 2007. UNESCO, for their Intercultural Dialogues and Spiritual Convergences, has appointed Coelho as a Special Counsellor. He is a messenger of spiritual quests in this postmodern world. His millions of readers include

² RAM stands for Regnus Agnus Mundi, which is translated as "Lamb of the Kingdom of the World - or Rigour, Adoration and Mercy" RAM is a spiritual tradition that is about 500 years old and was born in the heart of the Catholic Church. It is known as the "feminine way" and aims at revealing the feminine side of the personality of a person. However, there is no record of this order within Catholic Church which suggests it can be literary creation of Paulo Coelho.

³ a member of a priestly caste of ancient Medes or Persia, also, a sorcerer.

Madonna, Bill Clinton, Julia Roberts, and Ronaldo. Will Smith, Actor and Producer of the movie based on his book *The Alchemist* called this book, 'his first literary love affair'⁷.

Paulo Coelho's autobiographical novel *Aleph* was published in 2011. It also talks about his existential crisis when he travelled again on his Master's suggestion and took Trans-Siberian train. He was in search of finding his 'authentic self' again. Coelho considers this book as his journey and a non-fiction instead of a fiction. The character as a mouthpiece for Coelho sends the message that it's only through love and forgiveness one attains comfort and that paves way for self-satisfaction and self-discovery.

Some have called *Aleph* as Coelho's mid-life crisis. In an interview given to the newspaper independent, he called this book a journey of his soul to present, past and future. *Aleph* appeals to its readers as this journey of past, present and future has spiritual and mystical dimensions to it. In one of his interviews, he called *Aleph* the most difficult book for him to write.

"Writing *Aleph* was the most difficult task for me. I took the journey in 2006 and I wrote after 4 years. I understood this point that contains all points. But I didn't know how to write about it as it is so complicated. In 2010, I had this epiphany and I decided to write. I was not sure how my readers will connect with this book, but I knew I had to write it."

In this journey Coelho is accompanied by few other people. One of them is his translator Yao. Coelho likes Yao for his common interest in Aikido and for his calm demeanor. Yao has lost his wife and Coelho constantly sees the sadness in him. Yao seeks help of Shamanism to reach his dead wife. At one of the stations, Coelho accompanies Yao to a Shaman to witness a ritual. Spiritual practice of Shamanism,

"... involves a practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to perceive and interact with a spirit world and channel these transcendental energies into this world"⁸

Paulo also goes to the streets with Yao and starts begging. In Japan, it is called takuhatsu (begging pilgrimage). He explains that there is a Zen philosophy for begging where the beggar, the giver and the money are part of an equilibrium. It's not just the beggar who is begging because he has the need but the giver, too, giving the alms out of the need to earn merits. Whereas the alms serve as a link between the two. Paulo Coelho in his novels blends the different concepts from around the world and present it in simple term. It won't be wrong to say that he even introduced a lot of philosophical concepts to his readers, who later go on and explore more about them.

Coelho before going back to Catholicism has tried to experiment with all other religions. He was fascinated by Eastern religions. Yogic philosophy, Hare Rama Hare Krishna and Buddhism fascinated him. At the age of eighteen, the book that made a huge impression on him was *Mahabharata*⁹ He got into Indian Cosmogony and followed oriental spirituality. Coelho believed in building bridges among different cultures. He has been influenced by different religions, different cultures and he accepted everything with open arms. Talking about Islamic teachings and Sufism he says,

"Islam has a lot of fantastic stories and they transmit a lot of teachings through stories, but when you want someone to understand something that is not forcefully in your culture, you use stories. The Sufis, they have their master of story-telling and [the same in] Arab culture: You can go back to Arabian Nights, [which] had a huge influence on me, Scheherazade and all the other stories, so then I started understanding and loving Arab culture."¹⁰

He was the first western writer who was officially invited to visit Iran since the Islamic Revolution. "I looked at all the Iranians that came for my lecture. I looked in their eyes and realised we all share the same faith and I could see the hope for living in a better world."¹¹

In his recent book *The Archer*, he has shared with his readers his love for archery. For him, it is not just archery, but a form of meditation. "It works wonderfully, because every time you have to open the bow, you can see the universe," said writer Paulo Coelho in an interview.

Conclusion

Paulo Coelho's works have been an inspiration to his readers. It brought a newness and motivation to meaningless and dull existence of many. He has a way of writing his stories which takes up the issues which are shared by all who read him. He himself walked the path for his personal legend to find the simplicity of life which transformed his life. He shares his personal experiences through his books which are experienced by his worldwide readers as well. Through his books he has established a bond that brings together Universe and humans. He writes a simple story but one can see his knowledge about different disciplines in his stories. He handles mythology, philosophy, history, psychology, mysticism, spirituality, geography and existentialism. Through these multi-disciplines, he satiates the deep-rooted thirst of his readers to walk on the road of finding themselves. In the words of 1994 Noble Prize winner for Literature Kenzaburo Oe, Coelho is well versed with the "Secret of literary Alchemy."¹²

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End Notes

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