

A Study of Symbolism in Life and Narratives of Paulo Coelho

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ABSTRACT

Paulo Coelho is one of the most popular and successful writers in the world. In this chapter, the life and works of Coelho are discussed. A brief sketch of the works of Coelho is given here as it will help to contextualize the succeeding study. Intuition is defined as a form of knowledge which materialises as awareness of thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. It is a key to a deeper understanding and meaningfulness. Intuition, used as a psychological function, supports the transmission and integration of perceptions from unconscious and conscious realms. This study uses a psychobiographical single case study approach to explore intuition across the life span of Paulo Coelho. Methodologically, the study is based on a single case study, using the methodological frame of Dilthey's modern hermeneutics. The author, Paulo Coelho, was chosen as a subject of research, based on the content analysis of first- and third-person perspective documents. Findings show that Paulo Coelho, as one of the most famous and most read contemporary authors in the world, uses his intuitions as a deeper guidance in life, for decision-making and self-development. Intuitive decision-making is described throughout his life and by referring to selected creative works.

Keywords: psychobiography, Paulo Coelho, intuition, life study, rationality, writer

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Introduction

Paulo Coelho is appreciated by some as an 'alchemist of words' and by others as 'a mass culture phenomenon' and he is considered by Patricia Martín (2002) as the most prominent author of the present century. Readers from over 180 countries, regardless of their creed and culture, have turned Coelho into the world's best-selling author. The Brazilian author, Paulo Coelho was born into a middle-class family on 24th August 1947 in Rio de Janeiro. From his childhood, he was consumed with a passion for becoming a writer. He was inspired by Jorge Luis Borges and Henry Miller. He nurtured a fondness for the theatre and dreamt of an artistic career. His own life has in many ways been varied and rare as the protagonists of his internationally applauded novels. Like them, Paulo Coelho has followed a dream in a quest for fulfillment. His own dream to be a writer met with frustration throughout much of his early adult life. He served in various professions, some of them materially satisfying but spiritually unfulfilling. Paulo Coelho says, "I always knew that my personal legend, to use a term from alchemy, was to write" (1998: 173). His parents Pedro and Lygia joined Paulo Coelho in the Jesuit school of Ignacio in Rio de Janeiro when he was seven years old. They wanted him to be an engineer like his father. But young Coelho hated the forced worshipping at his school. He discovered his skill for writing when he won a poetry contest. His parents' refusal to compromise with him made him become rebellious and he frequently broke his family rules. He experienced the harsh discipline in education and religion. He came out of the Jesuit school, losing his religious faith. Coelho later remarked about the behaviour of his parents that "It wasn't that they wanted to hurt me, but they didn't know what to do.... They did not do that to destroy me; they did that to save me" (2008: 15).

Coelho's discovery of Miller's Tropic of Cancer (1934) aroused a rebellious spirit in him while growing up and he started flouting his family rules. Juan Arias in his book Paulo Coelho: Confessions of a Pilgrim, describes Coelho as "a rebellious boy and young man, eager for experience, soyl son of '68, at a time of openness and madness, always in search of something that would fill him from within, never allowing himself to be dominated by familial or social conventions" (2007: 31). Unfortunately, for his parents, he appeared mad and eccentric and he was forced to go to the psychiatric hospital more than three times at the age of seventeen, where

he underwent electroconvulsive therapy. Even though the experience of the mental asylum was traumatic, Coelho never begrudged his parents. He used to decode their actions as the desperate act of love and never resented his parents. Further, he said to Gama Nkrumah in an interview, "My parents were trying to protect me against the risks of being an artist" (2005). Paulo Coelho's father lived long enough to see his unconventional son become an international celebrity, whereas his mother passed away suffering from Alzheimer's. Unlike Coelho, his sister Sonia was more complaisant and later, she became a great scientist. According to the wish of his parents, he enrolled in the law school and abandoned the dream of becoming a writer. After one year, he dropped out, and was attracted to the hippie culture which was popular in the 1960s. Paulo Coelho was pulled by family conventions on one side and self-assertiveness on the other side. His heart won and he became a hippie. He grew his hair long and got addicted to drugs and led an extreme life. In 1970, he relinquished his studies, travelled widely through South America, North Africa, Mexico, Peru and Europe. His interest grew towards the human search for spirituality. Two years later, he returned to Brazil, and experimented with journalism, theatre and songwriting. He was closely associated with the Brazilian musician and composer Raul Seixas. Their music changed the face of the Brazilian rock scene. This was a defining moment in Coelho's life as it was the first time in his life that he made money. Coelho confessed in an interview with Juan Arias and revealed that he was introduced to the works of the English mystic Aleister Crowley. With him, Coelho planned for the creation of the "Alternative Society." In 1974, he was imprisoned for 'subversive' activities for a short time by the military dictatorship then ruling in Brazil.

Symbolism in Paulo Coelho's Novels

In the preceding chapter, the life and narratives of Paulo Coelho were discussed followed by a review of research studies. In this chapter, the objective of the researcher is to explore the symbols used in the select novels of Paulo Coelho: *The Alchemist*, *Brida*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Devil and Miss Prym* and *The Witch of Portobello*. The most common symbols used in his novels are geographical places, unnamed characters, dreams, journey, numbers, forests, mountains, deserts, animals and water. Symbolism in literature is a complex phenomenon that deliberately extended the evocative power of words to express the emotions, sensations and excitements that lie beyond everyday awareness. Charles Baudelaire's (1821-67) creative symbols brought the invisible into being through the visible, and linked the invisible through other sensual perceptions, notably smell and sound. The high priest of the French Symbolist Movement, Stéphane Mallarmé, theorized that symbols were of two types. One was shaped by the projection of inner conflicts onto the world outside and the other was the nascent words that slowly pervaded the consciousness and expressed a state of mind initially unknown to their creator. The talented writers use literary techniques in a unique way to exemplify the mastery in writing. The word 'symbol' is derived from 'symbolism', a stem from the Greek 'sumblon' which means emblem, signs, token or mark. The Greek verb 'sumbolein' means 'to grow together' and 'to cast jointly.' A symbol is the concrete representation of an abstract reality. Symbolism goes far beyond words, a combination of words, concepts and gestures. Colours, geometrical figures, certain sounds, smile, look, dance, odours and sound can nurture symbolism. Wayne Rollins in *Jung and the Bible* says, "Symbols carry with them not only denotative associations noted by consciousness but connotations registered primarily at the level of the unconscious, a fact that helps explain a rational but perduring power that a given symbol may exert over long periods of time" (2013: 60). Symbols can sometimes be personal. In fact, certain authors and critics may assign symbols particular meanings which can vary from one writer or critic to another. N. Friedman, in his essay "The Symbolist Novel: Huysmans to Malraux" describes a symbolical word or phrase with an inner meaning: "They [symbols] may derive from literal or figurative language in which what is shown... means, by virtue of some semblance, suggestion or association, something more or something else." This quote is extended and he adds: "Symbolism resembles figures of speech in having a basic doubleness in meaning between what is meant and what is said . . . but it differs in that what is said is also what is meant" (1976: 1252). Like T.S. Eliot, Paulo Coelho's novels are endowed with numerous symbols. T.S. Eliot employs four basic characteristics of symbolism. The first and the fundamental characteristic of the symbol is its figurative feature. The second characteristic of the symbol is its perceptibility. The third characteristic of the symbol is its innate power. The fourth and the last characteristic of the symbol is its acceptability. Metaphor, symbol and myth have one thing in common which we have called existence and essence. More simply Findal defines symbol as "an outward device for presenting an inward state" (1958: 37). Paulo Coelho meticulously incorporates his symbols in his novels. The impact of Eliot can be observed in Paulo Coelho's use of symbolism.

Paulo Coelho has been regarded as one of the greatest symbolists in Latin American literature. Symbolism in Coelho's novel is not only a way to enrich his writings and but also to create added layers of interest. His symbols are derived from religious and occult studies which include magic, omens and prophetic dreams. Symbols are not merely denotative, but also connotative and evocative. In addition to the literal meaning they also conjure up a host of associations before the mind's eye. Thus, symbols make the language rich and expressive. There are three major types of symbols observed in the novels of Paulo Coelho. They are natural symbols, personal symbols and philosophical symbols. Some symbols are historicized or contextualized because their meanings can

vary based on time and space. Moreover, there are other types of symbols such as magical, mystical and so on. Mystical symbols have a philosophical background, and in this respect, most of them can come under the category of philosophical symbols. Personal symbols are those inherent in particular writers and persons. Some writers such as James Joyce, Baudelaire and so on have their own symbols. That is why they assign a number of concepts, ideas, systems of signs and specific forms of symbolism. Paulo Coelho's symbols comply with his vision of the world, literary sensitivity, ideological convictions, and particularly the exploitation of language. Though there are a number of symbols in this universe, the researcher has chosen to reflect upon the most important ones namely natural, personal and philosophical symbols. In this context, Paulo Coelho, who is a Roman Catholic by birth, focuses much more on the Biblical symbols. All the three types are interlinked with Biblical touch. Symbols are the fundamental features of Coelho's life and art, and they have assisted him well throughout his journey in his life. For example, before he started writing he found a white feather. He felt that the feather was a good sign to write. He writes simple stories full of archetypes, explains about the struggle between joy and misery, light and dark, trust and the void — some are accounts of his own spiritual quest, others fables drawn from the same well. In one of the interviews with *The Talks*, he was asked, “Is it true that you always look for a white feather before you start writing?” Then Coelho answers, “That’s true for starting the book. Meaning there’s a tradition back to *The Pilgrimage*, my first book in 1987. Back then I was not sure if I should write the book or not, I was in a moment of doubt. I was in Madrid and I said, if today I see a white feather, that’s the sign that I should write” (2015: 1). Paulo Coelho uses various symbols to highlight the themes of his novels — *The Alchemist*, *Brida*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Devil and Miss Prym* and *The Witch of Portobello*. Paulo Coelho's ability to use all the three major symbols — natural, personal and philosophical symbols — is discussed through his characters, objects and nature as they are the representative symbols which support the major themes of his novels. Symbols used by Coelho have an extended meaning beyond the prosaic illustrations of realities. As Jack Richardson remarks: “Symbols are educational devices for evoking complex ideas without having to resort to painstaking explanations that would make a story more like an essay than an experience” (2006: 165). Simple in style, Coelho develops layers of the story that unfold their symbolic and allegorical meanings page by page. According to Celia Fulco, “Paulo Coelho masterfully includes identifiable symbols in his works that increase the power of each novel's message. Each theme he includes is supported by the presence of symbolism that adds significantly to the impact the message has readers on his readers” (2009: 5).

Geographical Places as Symbols

a. The Alchemist Paulo

Coelho throws light on the geographical features of various places in all his novels. All the places in his novels are symbolic representations. He depicts the culture, religion and lifestyle of the people through these places. In *The Alchemist*, Santiago starts his journey from Andalusia in Spain which is in the European continent and he reaches the Sahara Desert which is in the African continent. Physical features of Andalusia stand for farming, shepherding, trade and production of agriculture. Santiago as an Andalusian shepherd leads a happy and peaceful life. He enjoys reading books and shares his experiences with the sheep. Later, the setting is shifted to Tarifa, where he envisions a Gypsy woman's help in his recurring dream. With the advice of the soothsayer and an old king Melchizedek, Santiago travels towards Tangier, Africa, where he transforms from a shepherd boy to hopeful thinker. Then his journey from Tangier to the Sahara Desert and Egyptian pyramids transforms him into an adventurer. Thus, the places mentioned in the story symbolically narrate Santiago's spiritual transformation.

b. Brida

Paulo Coelho shifts his focus towards the environment in his novel *Brida*. Environment plays a key role in practicing rituals and Ireland is famous for Sabbats and fire festivals. Everybody remembers by listening to the name of Dublin, its various traditions, magic and rituals. When Paulo Coelho was young, he was attracted to the occult ways and even practiced some of them. Dublin is one of the symbolical places in *Brida*. In his real life, Paulo Coelho met a woman named Brida O' Fern who travelled the Road to Rome. The mission of her journey is to develop compassion and mediation whereas Paulo Coelho walks the Road to Santiago, the Way of Saint James to develop discipline and strength of will. Dublin has been the educational hub to many of the people for a long time. Brida hails from Dublin and she struggles to find answers to some questions about spiritual practices and the rituals. She tries it in different ways by attending various courses in Dublin University but in vain. This makes her realize that she has to search for a teacher to get the guidance to find out the answers. Moving in this direction, she finds two of her teachers namely -- the Magus and Wicca. She has learnt from them, the 'Tradition of the Sun' and the 'Tradition of the Moon.' Both the teachers help her transform from an ordinary university lass to a perfect witch. Meeting both teachers in Dublin and entering the nearest forest symbolise the base for her quest for spirituality. The practicing rituals like 'Tradition of the Sun' and 'Tradition of the Moon' symbolise the obstacles that Brida

has to overcome in her life. The environmental description of Dublin mentioned in Wikipedia stands evidence to the fact that the environment of Dublin symbolically reflects the transformation that takes place in *Brida*.

c. By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept

Paulo Coelho was popular with the concept of religion in his book *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*. John King substantiates the religious beliefs of the people of Latin America through his book *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Latin American Culture* (2004). The rich form of folk culture in Latin America studied by both folklorists and anthropologists is the system of beliefs, festivities, rituals and artifacts connected to popular Catholicism and more broadly to the syncretic religious forms and practices which have developed with the encounter among Native American, European and African cultures.

Paulo Coelho sets his novel, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, in Spain where the majority of the world's religious and philosophical movements took place. Spain is basically a Roman Catholic country. It has a wealth of historic churches and cathedrals, many in dire necessity of restoration, including the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela which is one of the most prominent sacred places in Christendom and a place of pilgrimage since the ninth century. The places Paulo Coelho refers to in *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* belong to Spain's Catholic missionaries. The protagonist, Pilar, is born in Soria which is a conservative town. After her basic studies, she moves to Zaragoza where she attends the school and has been still studying in the university. Getting vexed with the monotonous way of living, she wishes to escape from it and goes in search of true love. In this process, she reaches Madrid, the city where she reunites with her unnamed friend. Both the protagonist and her friend started their journey from Madrid to Saint-Savin, Saint-Savin to Bilbao and Bilbao to the Pyrenees. In the course of their journey, her friend motivates her to regain her lost faith and spirituality. Their journey ends as they reach the riverbed of Piedra which can rid a person of pain and suffering. Pilar's wish to find the greater meaning in life gets fulfilled and she undergoes transformation in the process of visiting these places of prominence.

d. The Devil and Miss Prym

In *The Devil and Miss Prym*, Paulo Coelho introduces a village with 281 inhabitants. Viscos is located in France. The real population in the year 2007 was 45. Paulo Coelho's protagonists are always longing for some other places rather than where they are living. They feel these places are the symbol of inactivity and boredom. In this novel, Viscos is a very small village where people live on farming and hunting, the youth of this village has left for the towns, abandoned their aged parents to survive on their own. It is an old village (all the inhabitants are old), the inhabitants of the village believe that in the coming years, Viscos will no longer exist as all the villagers started migrating to the nearby towns. Viscos symbolizes the customs that affect the choices people make when being torn between the two forces of good and evil; likewise, the village also symbolizes the morality that reflects the ability of decision making.

e. The Witch of Portobello

Though Paulo Coelho's key character Athena in *The Witch of Portobello* is born in Romania and brought up in London, the culture of Latin America is reflected through her. Athena learns and practices music and dance to get the vital and divine energy to meet the tasks of her personal and professional life. Dance is the secret of the development of her character. In this context, discussion of the Latin American culture is inevitable. This culture gives utmost importance to carnivals and festivals. Music and dance are given priority. The same is observed in Coelho's novel *The Witch of Portobello*.

Paulo Coelho shows a different phenomenon in the novel by making the characters involved directly and not from the point of view of a protagonist or narrator. Sherine Khalil, known as Athena, is adopted from an orphanage in Sibiu, Transylvania, by Samira R. Khalil and Giancarlo Fontana of Beirut. At the time of war, they shifted to London through the island of Cyprus. Athena marries her classmate and gives birth to a baby boy and her dream is to give the baby her warmth and affection which she missed in her childhood. She moves from London to Dubai which is a symbol of modernism and progress. There she learns modern techniques in Calligraphy and its Blank Spaces. She tries to fill up her Blank Space by searching and meeting her biological mother in Bucharest in Romania. After finding her biological mother in Romania, a place of mixed culture, she returns to London and becomes a spiritual leader. At first, when she gives birth to a child she thinks like an ordinary woman but later her visit to various places makes her think in a different perspective. Her adamant nature and her desire to know about the deeper meaning of life makes her tread a divergent path. By the chosen path, she transforms herself into a witch. Thus, each geographical land plays a crucial role in the development of the story in Coelho's novels. These places symbolically drive the main characters towards their destiny. They also drive the reader to think from the perspective of local customs and culture of the setting. The places represent the inner force and tension in the

characters' qualitative and quantitative order. Dreams, goals, love, ambitions, and so on enforce the characters to travel widely to know themselves and ultimately towards transformation.

Unnamed Characters as Symbols

Namelessness is a trending device in the greatest novels of all time. The significance of unnamed characters in literature is widely varied. Some of the authors typically decline to name certain characters for their own artistic reasons. According to Javier A. Galvan (*Latin American Dictators of the 20th Century: The Lives and Regimes of 15 Rulers*, 2012) the idea of 'unnamed' may be a person or a place. The Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias (1899-1974) who wrote the most salient novel *Mister President* during the 1930, is an example of this kind. At a time when there were censorship issues in Guatemala, Asturias wrote the novel as a response to the repressive regime of Estrada Cabrera. The plot takes place in an unnamed country in Latin America and the main character, the President, is unnamed. Galvan says,

Therefore, readers can create their own perceptions of the protagonist in the novel. Furthermore, the lack of a name provides the character with a certain mystery and universality that allows it to extend to other potential authoritarian rulers. Readers can often relate to the narrative because this novel reflects the story of multiple dictatorships that were prevalent throughout Latin America (2012: 36).

Vargas Llosa's greatest work of literature, *The War of the End of the World* (1981), is a historical novel of epic grandeur intended for the era of the end of ideologies. Its main anecdote is crafted with a mastery unprecedented in Latin American Literature. Kristal says, in *Temptation of the Word: The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa*, "Llosa invented an unnamed character — an opportunistic journalist — based on the biography of Euclides da Cunha" (1999: 126). A number of Latin American and the other writers used the concept of namelessness. In the 17th century, Daniel Defoe's *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724) was famous for pseudonyms. The *Aspern Papers* (1888) by Henry James, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman of the 19th century and *Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne du Maurier of 20th century fiction are familiar to readers with their unnamed narrators. The most notable unnamed characters in literature are Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* (1997), Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). So unnamed characters are the popular devices in literature not only in Latin American fiction but also everywhere in the world. Unnamed characters can be identified by a letter, number, job or common trait to symbolize a hidden meaning in the novel. Sacks quotes in *The New Yorker* about the rise of the namelessness narrators,

Novels or stories with nameless protagonists are often dystopian, but leaving a character unnamed is also a way to show that he or she is experiencing a personal crisis of identity. Instead of the person's name, we focus on how he or she is affected by a drastically different world, a different culture, a new job or new relationship (2015: 7).

Conclusion

In this study, an attempt has been made to show how Paulo Coelho employed literary devices to convey his philosophical and spiritual themes. Before analysing Coelho's use of literary techniques – symbolism and magical realism – a suitable effort has been made to know about the literature of Latin America and the life and narratives of Coelho. Gregory Cowles writes in *The New York Times* (2016) about the life of Paulo Coelho succinctly, that he has flirted with death, escaped madness, dallied with drugs, withstood torture, experimented with magic and alchemy, studied philosophy and religion, read voraciously, lost and recovered his faith, and experienced the pain and pleasure of love. In searching for his own place in the world, he has discovered answers for the challenges that everyone faces. He believes that, within ourselves, we have the necessary strength to find our own destiny. Coelho's five novels *The Alchemist*, *Brida*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* and *The Devil and Miss Prym* and *The Witch of Portobello* are selected for research work. Paulo Coelho enhances the profundity of his works with rich symbolism and he uses symbols generously to convey the meaning that add more depth to his novels. His symbolism has a myriad of origins as well as forms. His symbols create countless connections and sometimes his novels share the same or similar symbols as well. This can be exemplified through five of Coelho's works wherein geographical places, unnamed characters, dreams, journey, numbers, forests, mountains, deserts, animals and water play highly symbolic roles. By providing a deeper examination of these novels, the immense importance of symbols in Coelho's writings is clear.

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