

# The Creative Launcher

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## Overcoming Trials and Tribulations by Faith and Love: Elijah as a Reluctant Prophet in Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain*

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### Abstract

Faith plays a very important role in someone's life. Dealing with hard situation, people should keep their faith in God as the Supreme power and earn the positive value like love as the motivation of life. As people we should not lose our faith as everything in this world will not happen just in an instance, which according to Fowler: "Faith is very fundamental in someone's life". Inevitably, in real life there are so many people who dealt with failures and lost but still they remain strong and survive. By earning the growing of faith and love of God, people will choose to keep struggling with positive thinking and find the way out of the commotion. *The Fifth Mountain* by Paulo Coelho is a retelling of the biblical story of a 23 year old prophet (Elijah) who is projected as the reluctant protagonist and also acts as a representation of human being. Elijah is made to flee his home and his country to face an endless stream of trials. He is one of the great prophets in the Old Testament. He is the only prophet who is not dead, but instead carried by chariots of fire into heaven. He finds refuge and love, only to have his dreams defeated emotionally. He not only loses his body, his earthly love, but his faith is shaken and he doubts the existence of God. Therefore, related to the topic above, this paper will bring forward how Paulo Coelho turn Elijah's trials into an inspiring story which brings out the universal themes of how faith and love can triumph over suffering.

**Keywords-** Reluctant, Faith, Love, Global, Religion, Misfortune

### Introduction

*The Fifth Mountain* (1996) is a novel by Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian novelist. The novel contains at its heart one of the most popular sayings of Coelho, "when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (*The Fifth Mountain* vii). It is a retelling of the biblical story of a 23 year old prophet (Elijah) who is projected as the reluctant protagonist and also acts as a representative of human being. Elijah is regarded as a reluctant prophet who, by subverting what was offered on a platter, refused his calling. Elijah

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is made to flee his home and his country to face an endless stream of trials. He is one of the great prophets in the Old Testament. Elijah finds refuge and love, only to have his dreams defeated emotionally. He not only loses his body, his earthly love, but his faith is shaken and he doubts the existence of God. The author, by making Elijah his mouthpiece, tells the reader that God does not want us to do things that he asks for, instead he gives us trials and tribulations so that we can nurture an interrogative stance throughout our search for him. For a considerable portion of the story we see Elijah is very compliant, obeying everything God angels say. Throughout, the novel Coelho explores the issues of faith that are meaningful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as were in the ninth century.

Elijah's journey is not easy. He must be facing many obstacles in achieving his goal. Elijah, as the representation of humankind, put all of his life in God's hand. Instead of getting from God, Elijah has to face never-ending test in his life. Finally, Elijah can see God's grand design for him after overcoming his test. During hard times, God performs miracles through him.

The novel is an account of a man touched by the hand of God who must succeed in gaining control over his temptation and frustrations within himself- that is his shattering trial of faith. The text is very simple, but the message is very powerful, that is, the tragedy in life should not be considered as a punishment but a challenge of the spirit, that too amidst the confusion of war and political turmoil. It also talks about the moving account of man who passes through numerous frustrations and hurdles that shatters his soul completely, yet he wins the trial of faith on the face of it. Elijah realizes that his destiny is not being chosen by him but by God. It teaches us to be aware of the spiritual life and to have a powerful relationship with God. The novel is a testament to certain factual details and religious conditioning of life. The novel is also about self-confidence and an equally strong desire for self-fulfilment by helping each other. At the end of the novel, Elijah ultimately finds the strength to overcome his trials and tribulations. And thus, he is filled with the realization that God is in his own heart. The novel also fascinates the readers with the long and twisting journeys searching their own path and new ways of understanding the world to the core of existence, depicting human destiny and divine interventions.

Connolly proposes, "men read to discover themselves and their world to assess their special roles in the universe, to learn the meaning of personal struggles in which they are engaged". In the novel, Elijah instructs, warns, directs, guides, encourages, acts as a mediator, teaches and counsels, and announces judgements. He also knows the will of God, so that he could convey it to the nation. He is not only a seer, a clairvoyant, but also deftly skilled in interpreting dreams and visions. He brings the word of God to the people of God and calls the people to respond. He is a watchman who warns God's people of the upcoming trouble. When the prophet knows the heart and mind of the Lord, he speaks the word of the Lord to his people. He stands before the person as one who has stood before God. It is assumed that because his words come from the heart of God, they are powerful and effective.

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The plot revolves in the ninth century B.C. during the year 870 B.C. Elijah was in his early twenties and fleeing for his life, when the Phoenician Princess of Tyre, Jezebel, married Ahab the king of Israel. After ascending to the throne Jezebel asked Ahab to replace the worship of the Lord with that of the Gods of Lebanon. Jezebel was hell-bent in changing the religion being practised in Israel. So he started to slay all the priests and prophets of Israel so that there will not be anyone left to preach and worship the God of Israel. She even ordered the execution of all the prophets who refuse to worship the pagan God Baal. An angel of God commanded the prophets to flee Israel. Elijah was ordered by God to make a tiring journey across the desert and take refuge in the Phoenician city of Zarepath, which its inhabitants call Akbar. Elijah seeks safety in the land of Zarepath, where he unexpectedly finds true love in a young widow, who offered him lodging to stay with her and her young son. Like her countrymen, she was a worshipper of Baal. But the people of the town of Akbar were against her by providing shelter to an Israelite prophet because they not wanted any confrontation with princess Jezebel but the tradition of the town that were against it. Still, she and the Israelite gradually form a warm bond, through neither challenges voice nor their feelings. But this newfound love is cut short since Elijah sees all his hopes and dreams in shambles as he is swept into a whirlwind of events that threatens his very existence. He encountered numerous hurdles as being tagged as an outsider but eventually he was accepted by the society. In Akbar he spends major portion of his life and undergoes the years of transformation. It was through the widow that he learnt to love, an emotion that later on gives him strength to cope up with tremendous loss and fanatical forces. He even prepared favourable conditions for the Messiah's coming and after fulfilling his destiny in worldly life, he leaves for heaven. Elijah finds himself at the centre of a military and political maelstrom that challenges his faith and forces him to confront the unavoidable.

Soon the army of Assyria was on the border of Akbar to invade the city. But Akbar was a business town and their army was not very strong. Besides they had been in peace for more than 200 years. Elijah was appointed counsel to governor and they both started to consider dialogue and peace measures. But the commander of army and high priest wanted war. Finally there was war and Akbar was destroyed. The widow whom Elijah came to love also died. Elijah took her son with him and started to reconstruct the city of Akbar. Elijah fought against God and just like Jacob was blessed by the lord after a night of struggle when Jacob refused to accept defeat, Elijah was also blessed by God. After so much of struggles the angel of the Lord returned to Elijah and said that the Lord is pleased by his struggles and thus God blessed him. The angel also said that the Lord has ordered Elijah to go to Israel and restore the religion, faith and the worship of the Lord and remove Jezebel. He ordered the execution of the prophets who had betrayed the lord. As time passes by, the situation in Akbar is getting more silent than usual. People, especially the old ones, are afraid of the coming battle. The only inhabitants of Akbar now were the old, the children and the widows and the ladies. The workers such as the traders and the artisans decided to leave for a moment

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until the condition gets better. Even, men and adults had ran away and youth was slain in the war. Elijah rebuilt the city, and became commissioner of the city. He taught everyone to read and write and built a library where they kept the written record of their history. They wrote about the entire story as they wanted their coming generations to know that defeat was not accepted hence they rebuilt the city. Jezebel sought him everywhere but he fled to the 'fifth mountain' and remained there. Later Syrians invaded the country and killed Ahab, and Jezebel took refuge in her palace. She was later captured. According to the bible, Elijah remained on the mountain and later went to heaven. Yet, Elijah should be obedient to wait until the Lord gives him the permission. It feels dilemmatic though. According to Murphy, the following expression can really show how obedient Elijah is in putting forward his opinion.

The merchants and artisans made plans to go to Sidon and Tyre until calm was restored. "it is easy for them to leave". He thought. Merchants can transport their goods everywhere in the world. Artisans too can work, even where a strange language is spoken, "but I must have the Lord's permission". (128).

As far as the story is concerned, Elijah is a character in the bible. We come across an amazing struggle and hard times that Elijah makes against his life and devotes his life in God's will. The life of Elijah gives motivation and deep lessons and values of faith and love at the highest order. This man flees from his country, to escape death, go to a hostile place, lives and wins their people, witnesses the destruction of the very place that gave him shelter and then rebuilds the ruined city of Akbar and restores the worship of 'One God'. Throughout the story he fought against God and God blessed him finally.

Elijah is such a nice child for both of his parents. He wants to please them as much as he can. He tries to do whatever his parents ask him to do. Elijah never questions when his parents tell him that being a prophet means dangerous. Here, according to Murphy, Elijah is characterized as an obedient child because it can be seen from his speech with others.

When they left that place, his father and mother demanded that Elijah never tell anyone what he saw and heard; to be a prophet meant having ties to the government, and that was always dangerous. In any case, Elijah had never heard anything that might interest priests and king. (9) When he was born into this world, Elijah was gifted by God with such a talent to hear the voice of angels and speak to them. Being brought to the presence of the Israel priest by his parents, the priest said that Elijah can be identified as a holy man. This type of characterization, according to Murphy again, can be classified as characters as seen by the other.

Since childhood, he had heard voices and spoken with angels. This was when he had been impelled by his father and mother to seek out a priest of Israel who, after asking many questions, identified him as a Nabi, "a man of the spirit", someone who "exalts himself with the word of God" (9). In the novel Elijah is sometimes torn between the desires to serve God

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and the needs of those he has come to love. In details, Paulo Coelho depicts Elijah's thought and doubt beautifully.

Faith plays a very important role in someone's life. Dealing with hard situation, people should keep their faith in God as the supreme power and earn the positive value like love as the motivation of life. Elijah teaches the people in Akbar that everything they demand must be fulfilled by the Lord. The secret is that they might never know how it can be. Therefore, Elijah asks them to be patient. As people should not lose their faith as everything in this world will not happen just in an instance, which according to Fowler, that 'faith is very fundamental in someone's life'. Inevitably, in real life there are so many people who dealt with failures and lost but still they remain strong and survive. By earning the growing of faith and love of God, people will choose to keep struggling with positive thinking and find the way out of the commotion. One said:

Even to understand angels. We also want to talk with them that we don't listen to what they're saying. It's not easy to listen: in our prayers we always try to say where we have erred, and what we should like to happen to us. But the Lord already knows all of this, and sometimes asks us only to hear what the universe is telling us. And to be patient (127).

Cooke proposes that "faith brings personal fulfilment in terms of maturity and in term of faith, maturity demands love" (20). According to Fowler, "faith is defined as an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts, and actions" (14).

Elijah chooses to define his own faith that rooted in his own experience of thought or feeling to God. Therefore, Elijah's faith comes from his power of thought, observation and judgment. He believes that he is so blessed to learn the meaning of tragedy in his life. Therefore, his faith gives him an extra power to struggle and alter the suffering moments into the positive actions.

Rise and go on proving that thy struggle hath meaning, because thou hast known how to cross the current of the unavoidable. Many navigate it and founder; others are swept to places for which they were not fated. But thou confrontest the crossing with dignity; thou hast guided path of thy vessel well and transformed pain into action. (207)

Coelho believes that life is an act of faith. He illustrates his philosophy wonderfully in one of his finest work "*Brida*". Spending the night in forest 'Brida' learnt about the Dark Night. She learnt that the search of God is like a dark night. None of us knows what might happen even the next minute, and still we go forward. It's only when we trust and have faith. We just don't see the mystery contained in the next second. And that every moment in life is an act of faith.

Similarly the novel "*By The River Piedra I Sat Down And Wept*" explores the theme of faith, love, a journey symbolizing the route towards self discovery and miracles of

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following the heart's true path. Through this novel Coelho gives a message that, when it comes to love and God there are no rules.

By the end of the story, it is shown how Elijah's faith can ultimately triumph over all the tragedy. The essence of the tragedy has significantly drawn him nearer to the Almighty One. His confession to praise 'Him' reveals that Elijah lives by his rational faith. It is the fruit that he has possibly harvested from the field of tragedy. Thus, as the story goes faith plays such a fundamental role in Elijah's life. Before he departs from the city of Akbar, Elijah has already reconciled with God. What he has been through so far really opens his eyes that God is all-powerful. Elijah admits that he can do anything, and nothing is forbidden to him.

In Christian teaching, values such as faith and hope are regarded as the supreme values among any other values (Corinthians 13:13). Therefore, the essence of the 'fifth mountain' would be relevant to the Christian value. What is the meaning of Christian value? According to Kauffman, the word "Christian" can be defined as "one who believes in Christ and follows Him" (112). According to Rahner and Vorgrimler, the term value, or better to be seen as ethics, is defined as "the science of moral; it seeks to analyze and explore the moral facts from which the norms of human behaviour may derive" (151-152).

Taken from the life story of Elijah in the bible, the author successfully composed another style of enjoying God's words. He undergoes some important Christian values conveyed by his profound personality. Based on what he undergone, Elijah becomes a role model that people should have the rational faith. It is by faith which built the personal experience with God, instead of something that imposed by religious teaching or any other people are saying. His own destiny will be determined by his own ability. Similarly, the theme love also correlates with the works of Paulo Coelho. Fromm defines the term "Love as an attitude, an orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not toward one 'object' of love" (46). In Christian teaching, the essence of love is to "labor" for something and "to make something grow" (23). Therefore, love and labor are inseparable. People love for they labor and they labor for that which they love. Coelho is a firm believer in the power of love. According to him, love is the only force which has the power to change the world. One of Coelho's character .i.e. Santiago in his finest work "The Alchemist" tells the wind, sun and desert that:

When you love...there's no need at all to understand what's happening, because everything happens within you, and even men can turn themselves into wind...if you know about love, you must also know about the soul of the world because it's made of love. It's not love to be static desert, nor is it love to roam the world like wind. And it's not love to see everything from distance, like you do (Sun). Love is force that transforms and improves the soul of the world.

When I first reached through it, I thought the soul of the world was perfect. But later, I could see that it was we who nourish the soul of the world, and the world we live in will be either better or worse, depending on whether we become better or worst. And that's where



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the power of love comes in. Because when we love, we always strive to become better than we are. (155-9).

Elijah experiences that his love for the lord grows bigger after he made Elijah to struggle with his life. He wants to show that he passed from his test. In the light of knowledge, God orders his obedience, but sometimes he wants people to find out what he actually demands from them. Elijah perceives that his struggle with the Lord is the same as when people struggle with men and women whom they love in their lifetime. For it is that struggle with the divine that blesses them and makes them grow. Elijah tries to define the essence of the tragedy for human existence on earth. By struggling, Elijah learns to find out the purpose of the tragedy that happened to his life. While other people choose to give up and end up in despair, Elijah determines to confront Him. Elijah says that sometimes it is necessary to struggle with God. Sometimes tragedy enters into one's life; it might be the destruction of a city, the death of a son, an unproved accusation, and a sickness that left one lame forever. Struggle here, according to Formm, means 'the one's experience with God who is considered as the highest value and the most desirable good'.

Told by the lord's angel, Elijah finally won God's love. Elijah successfully undergoes what the Lord demands. Courageously, he chooses not to give up and determine his actions so as to learn that tragedy, in the light of knowledge, is a challenge for personal development instead of a punishment. Precisely, related to the development of the individual, Elijah can show what Cooke proposes that faith brings personal fulfilment in terms of maturity.

What makes God smile contentedly is that he desires that each person takes into his hands the responsibility for his own life. Elijah has already learnt that he has given his children the greatest of all gifts. Those are the capacity to choose and determine their acts. According to Elijah, only those men and women with the sacred flame in their hearts have the courage to confront him. And they alone know the path back to his love, for they understand that tragedy is not punishment but challenge. (204).

Thus, in conclusion, Paulo Coelho '*The Fifth Mountain*', reveals the secrets of his mission to pass beyond the limitations of the past, breaking free from rigorous habits and to practice the impossible with intense feeling and passion. The ultimate strength of Elijah in the novel is to overcome all misfortunes that are rooted in basic human desires. In the beginning of the novel, Elijah is very submissive, obeying whatever the angels of the Lord says to him. But finally he realizes that whatever he does is not according to his choice but by God's decision. Thus, ultimately, he decides to abide by his own will and desires.

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