

Conquering One's Own Kingdom: Analysing the Postmodern Spiritual Condition in Paulo Coelho's *Aleph*

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Abstract

Paulo Coelho is the famous bestselling novelist of New Age visionary fiction who has conquered the world with his works of spiritual quests. His novel *The Alchemist*, sold over 30 million copies, is a modern fable that emphasizes the spiritual journey of following a person's dream. His other novels like *The Pilgrimage*, *Veronica Decides to Die*, *Zahir*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Devil and Miss Prym*, *The Winner Stands Alone*, *The Witch of Portobello* and *Aleph* are equally significant spiritual quests undertaken by people from different walks of life. The paper intends to study the postmodern climate of spirituality from the textual perspective of Coelho's visionary novel *Aleph* (2011).

Keywords: Paulo Coelho, *Aleph*, Visionary Fiction, Postmodern Spirituality

Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed an epochal shift in cultural and political ideals named as postmodernism pioneered by thinkers and critics like Jameson, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida etc. The postmodern condition has been characterized differently by different critics but can be summarily grouped as an altogether engagement with time and space. The paper intends to study the postmodern climate of spirituality from the textual perspective of the Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho's novel *Aleph* (2011).

Paulo Coelho is the famous bestselling novelist of New Age visionary fiction who has conquered the world with his works of spiritual quests. Stephen M. Hart notes that Paulo Coelho's immensely popular magical realist fiction, *The Alchemist*, has already sold over 31 million copies. As a modern fable about following a person's dream, it is allegorized in the form of an adventure in search of a treasure that appeared in the dream of a shepherd boy Santiago. His other novels like *The*

Pilgrimage, Veronica Decides to Die, Zahir, By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept, The Devil and Miss Prym, The Winner Stands Alone, The Witch of Portobello and Aleph are equally significant spiritual quests undertaken by people from different walks of life.

Religion as an institution of human spirituality has evolved drastically from its pre-historic, archaic roots to the strongly organized forms like Hinduism, Christianity, Islam etc. The new age spirituality of the contemporary religious scenario, ranging from gnosticism to nihilism, paganism and to neopaganism, takes root in a strictly postmodern ethos of eclecticism, cultural hybridity, and anti-essentialism.

It is often claimed that New Age spirituality as a postmodern spiritual condition is distrustful of the apologetic of metadiscourses. On the contrary, the eclecticism and hybridity with which it is constituted, actually places a greater emphasis on metanarratives of dream, memory, myths, rituals, magic and mystery. While modern religion practices morality to a greater extent as the binding factor of its people's gatherings, practices of primitive and indigenous religions were often licentious – feasts of Dionysius, Bacchus, festivals of orgy etc. Yet modern or postmodern practitioners of the so called New Age spiritualism bring back to the mainstream the discarded elements of pagan or indigenous religious customs and traditions.

The New Age spirituality, defined as “an emergence- in the wake of the sixties counterculture- of a large-scale, decentralized religious subculture that drew its principal inspiration from outside the Judeo-Christian tradition” (Lewis ix), aimed to resist the hegemonic ideologies of conventional religions. In New Age spiritual insight, the traditional, centralized and territorialized spatiality is replaced by decentralised, globalised and pluralistic spatiality. As a decentralized spiritual culture, it has a thorough base in indigenous worldviews and hence an increasing interest in rituals and healing practices and shamanism. The culmination of paradoxical elements of the ‘faith popcorn’ filtered from spiritual structures across the globe reflects the postmodern spiritual condition in contemporary visionary fiction.

Visionary fiction is a postmodern spiritualized version of the fairy tale. Set in the mundane world of everyday life, the story outlined in visionary fiction unveils aspects of this real world that are in stark contrast or deviance with the ‘normal’ assumptions of the common man regarding his place of habitation. Yet they serve the purpose of aiding the reader to recognise those aspects and forces of reality s/he ‘normally’ presumes and even transforms her/his vision of her/himself and her/his world. With this in perspective, visionary fiction makes close connections with New Age fiction in so far as both employ adventures and monomyth narratives laden with personal spiritual meaning:

If the novel's spiritual focus is passive, that is, it features an external power (an institution, dogma, charismatic leader, practice or talisman) that affects the

individual, it is religious or new age or spiritual fiction. If the focus is active with the spiritual power generated and motivated from within the individual and flowing outward to positively affect the environment, it is visionary fiction. (Gurian)

Following Gurian's note on the traits of visionary fiction as loaded with "mystical experiences, visions, . . . clairvoyance, . . . hallucinations, metahallucinations, precognitive dreams, . . . psychic and paranormal experience, . . . channelling and past life realisation", and given the established New Age spiritual context, Paulo Coelho's fiction can be generically shelved under 'New Age visionary fiction'.

In New Age visionary literature, the choice of themes can be vital in ensuring their popularity, the frequent motifs being spiritual healing, motivation and self-betterment. The fact that this category is avoided with caution from critical analyses gauges a sort of intellectual inferiority that they are assumed to possess in comparison to mainstream literature. While one ponders over the function of literature, it is to basically amuse and entertain which the New Age literature does not fall short of.

Postmodern Spiritual Climate in *Aleph*

Paulo Coelho's visionary novels, including *Aleph* (2011), celebrate personal spiritual quests and adventures. They have for the past few decades gained popularity in readership as well as have become icons of mystic and stimulating tales of inspiration for a more general public. At the literary or superficial level, they are light reads that transport the reader back and forth from the real world to a 'magical real', fabulous world. As such, these novels, as noted by *The Times*, "have had a life-enhancing impact on millions of people" and find place in consigned to self-help and motivational backracks.

Coelho's fiction abound with discontented individuals longing for a transformation and most of them accomplish this through journeys either chosen by themselves or imposed on them by harsh situations. His novels focus on the lives of women and men alike, the commonality being the dissatisfaction they experience in their lives. Hart comments that Coelho's fiction promotes the idea that each of us has a magical answer to life's secret buried deep down within us, and that it is up to us to search the reality around us until we finally discover what it is (Hart 226).

The most recurring theme of New Age literature, as mentioned before, is that of spiritual enlightenment. This is often narrated as a spiritual quest wherein the seeker of spiritual truth or joy undergoes several phases, of initiation, of trials and of ultimate redemption all facilitated through the medium of journey. Since the sojourner's physical journey entails a spiritual journey in a parallel or consequent way and prepares the emergence of a new perception or consciousness, the present study analyses the construction of a metaphysical discourse in contemporary New Age spiritual condition.

Aleph is an autobiographical account of Coelho's travels across 9288 kilometres in the Trans-Siberian railroad from Moscow to Vladivostok which he started on his master's advice to conquer his kingdom. His kingdom of life is threatened by the battling emotions of unhappiness and frustration. His master says: "Go and re-conquer your kingdom, which has grown corrupted by routine. . . You're not here anymore. You've got to leave in order to return to the present" (9). He is constantly reminded of an image of the past in which he was not able to follow his heart while obeying his authorities. He says to his master, "In that prison cell, I was just obeying the orders of someone who seemed to know God's will: you" (Coelho 11-12). Later we understand that Paulo was a priest in the previous incarnation, who loved a woman but was not able to stand for her in her crisis. His act of cowardice has kept eternal happiness from him even after centuries of time have passed.

The visionary nature of the novel appears in the motif of reincarnation and the consciousness of it. His master was his companion in the previous incarnation and was cursed for his act of cruelty too, but we understand how he got himself relieved out of it. The writer is frustrated with this guilt which has added to the monotony of his life. He likens his life to the Chinese bamboo plant that has reached the fifth year, the peak time, of its growth. The desire to overthrow spiritual stagnation he experiences in life is metaphorically consummated in the image of the Chinese Bamboo:

Apparently, once the seed has been sown, you see nothing for about five years apart from a tiny shoot. All the growth takes place underground, where a complex root system reaching upwards and outwards is established. Then at the end of the fifth year, the bamboo suddenly shoots up to a height of 25 metres. (Coelho 22)

So, obeying the words of his master, he decides to arrange book signing sessions for his readers in Russia. The journey is a very rough one. However, the mere act of changing the routine started to work miracles on him. For instance, a cold shower on the train felt to him like washing away not the dirt of the body but also of the mind and a meal felt like not merely feeding the body but for enjoying companionship:

Now things are changing, imperceptibly, but they are changing. Meals are times when I can venerate the presence and teachings of friends; walks are once again meditations on the present moment; and the sound of the water in my ears silences my thoughts, calms me and makes me relearn that it is these small daily gestures that bring us closer to God; as long as I am able to give each gesture the value it deserves. (Coelho 47)

On the way, he meets a young woman called Hilal, a talented violinist, who is later presented as his beloved of a previous incarnation. She, like Paulo, is a person with mental agony, is a woman who is oppressed with excruciating mental wounds. She confides to Paulo that she needed his help

and that the journey was her salvation. The words of Hilal are painfully sketched in the following passage in the novel:

Life has been very hard on me, but, at the same time, it has taught me a great deal. You can't see it, but my body is covered in open wounds that are constantly bleeding. I wake each morning wanting to die before the day is out, but I continue to live, suffering and fighting, fighting and suffering, clinging on to the certainty that it will all end one day. Please, don't leave me alone here. This journey is my salvation (Coelho 59).

As befitting to a visionary novel, Karma interferes in the travel and both of them share a mystic voyage together. Hilal is presented as the woman, stereotyped as witch and executed and killed by the Inquisitor, represented in the current incarnation as the master. The girl was killed merely because of the deliberate neglect of the priest, in the previous incarnation of Coelho. In their magical journey through the mystical space called 'Aleph', Paulo gathers courage to ask for her forgiveness and conquers the kingdom of his happiness once again.

Further, prophecy as a motif in visionary novel is utilized cleverly by the author. His wife is given a prophecy regarding an accident that Paulo would encounter: "The soul of Turkey will give your husband all the love she possesses, but she will spill his blood before she reveals what it is she is seeking" (Coelho 18). It comes true in the end of the novel, when Hilal hits him with a lamp and drags him to the train station to experience the magical place of 'Aleph' situated inside the cabin, and Paulo is finally able to ask for her forgiveness.

The anti-reductionist ideology of New Age is reflected in its beliefs of holism and anthropotheism. Holistic vision sees man as positioned in an integrated whole and anthropotheism places emphasis on the inner consciousness of man with its great potential whereby every man becomes his own god. It emphasizes on the therapeutic function of nature that can successfully heal the tormented mental realms of man. Further, the New Age ideology is also eco-centric, tying it together with the (pantheistic) ecosophy put forward by Arne Naess, which is not confined to the balance between just man and nature but between matter and consciousness as well.

In a Sufi prayer that he quotes in the novel, Coelho utilizes this eco-centric vision to elucidate the comfort man finds in nature. He reflects the need to stop ourselves from the hustling thoughts and devote the moment to show gratitude to nature for our existence. Contrasting the frustration and monotony given by the modern technological advancements, one finds peace, joy and harmony in all the elements of nature. He gives a picturesque description of the elements as manifestation of God's wisdom and justice: "O God, when I listen to the voices of animals, the sounds of trees, the murmurings of water, the whistling of wind or the boom of the thunder, I see in them evidence of

Your unity; I feel that You are supreme power, omniscience, supreme knowledge and supreme justice” (Coelho 3).

The literal role played by magical realism is as an authorial tool for defamiliarizing the stale perceptions of the reader by aiding them to take fresh views in a new light. However, very often fiction writers consider the cultural role played by magic in rendering the transformations experienced by their characters. The holistic vision and pantheistic philosophy is evident in Coelho’s ‘magical real’ space called ‘Aleph’. Also called as ‘Qi’ in Chinese, the Aleph is the mythical-magical point, as Paulo says, “at which everything is in the same place at the same time” (Coelho 79), “a sacred place. . . filling me with peace and love, two things that rarely come together” (ibid 78).

In the mystical point of ‘Aleph’, Paulo sees besides himself, elephants in Africa, camels in deserts, snow melting in Switzerland, monks, pilgrims in Santiago de Compostela, shepherds, cities and forests – all “simultaneously very clear and very large, very small and very quiet” (Coelho 79). Its physical location here is the vestibule area of a moving train, where the eyes of the perceivers – Paulo and Hilal – serve as mirrors or windows to these apparently discordant visions, extending to the aforesaid concept of universal communion with the world: “. . . Our eyes have become the mirrors of our souls, mirrors not only of our souls perhaps, but of all the souls of all the people on this planet who are at this moment walking, loving, being born and dying, suffering or dreaming” (Coelho 79).

The concept of the world as a mirror to the self has resonances with Sufism and that of communion with the world echoes the New Age holistic vision of the sacredness possessed by the self. The depth of the ‘Aleph’ signifies the physical fathoms one has to cover to reach a previous incarnation at the superficial level, and on a metaphoric level it symbolises the enlightenment pervading the realm of spiritual darkness of the disillusioned individual. Coelho explains his use of the “symbolic language of mankind – like angels and devils, dark forest, high mountains and wolves, gold and buried treasure. There is a part of everyone, whatever their cultural background, that connects with symbols and omens [...] it is an alphabet you develop to talk to the soul of the world” (Mooney qtd in Hart 8). It is through this eco-centric medium of language that he uses to conjure the spiritual enlightenment in the readers’ minds.

The novel is a typical example of visionary fiction with its clear references to mystic energy flows, magical practices of channeling and even prophecies regarding the future. However, it is more reflective of the postmodern spiritual condition. It reminds us of the tiny steps we forget to take towards self-actualisation and self-upliftment in the present scenario of competence and busy schedules. With an intertextual reference to his own novel *Alchemist*, Coelho compares the process of breaking the routine and setting off a journey to find new meaning in life to an adventure in search of treasure:

The magical and the extraordinary are with me and with everyone in the Universe all the time, but sometimes we forget that and need to be reminded, even if we have to cross the largest continent in the world from one side to the other. We return laden down with treasures that might end up getting buried again, and then we will have to set off once more in search of them. That's what makes life interesting – believing in treasures and in miracles (Coelho 281).

In brief, this analysis can be concluded that the visionary fiction of Coelho, with its representation of the contemporary spiritual condition, finds a miraculously relaxed entry into the hearts of the readers. Coelho's use of the technique of magical realism bestows in his novels a tinge of the so-called "New Age Philosophy" and visionary states of appearances. In his famous statement in *Aleph*, "life is the train, not the station" (11), Coelho has summarized the brisk but inevitable journey of life that is important rather than the destination or the halts or even the boarding points. In reconnecting with the landscape and with the people around him, Coelho, guised as the protagonist of the visionary novel, inspires the readers to embark on their own spiritual journeys to break the monotony of routine and refresh themselves with a renewed perspective of life.

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