

The Triad of Man, Universe and God in Paulo Coelho's novel *The Alchemist*

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Paulo Coelho is a transcendentalist influenced by the aspects of romanticism such as self-examination, the celebration of individualism, and the extolling of the beauties of nature and humankind. His novel *The Alchemist* expounds a direct connection, or correspondence, between the universe or the macrocosm and the individual soul or microcosm. It exposes that divinity permeates all objects such as animate or inanimate and the purpose of human life is the union with the ultimate Soul. The novel holds intuition as the highest human faculty. It states that fulfilment of human potential could be accomplished through mysticism or through an acute awareness of the beauty and truth of the surrounding natural world.

The *Alchemist* is a symbolic representation of the triad of Man, Universe and God. The relationship they share among one another is gradually exposed through the protagonist Santiago's journey in pursuit of a treasure. His quest starts at a material level and runs through the spiritual realm and ends in the stage of supreme goal of life, i.e. Self-realisation. Through Self-realisation, the protagonist Santiago reaches the state of pure Consciousness where this triad is realized as an inseparable whole.

In the material world, Santiago selected the path of action, knowledge and devotion to know about himself, the universe and God. He desires direct experiences from the world because life is a stream of experiences to him.

Santiago's path is of action because he learns from the alchemist that there is only one way to learn and it is through action (Coelho 132). Since his ideal is selfless, his body works more and releases more energy which turns out his work more dynamic. He never wastes this energy through unproductive channels such as worrying about the past, being anxious over the fruit of action and also by getting excited in the present. Of course he thinks about the past to recollect how he became a shepherd, but it is just to boost his confidence by affirming that his choice was right. So he never loses his concentration on the present action. Thus his mind becomes free from the bulk of all the other meagre desires. Gradually he develops a sense of dispassion or a feeling of renunciation. It is evident when he sells his sheep, when he accepts his death many times without any bitterness and also when he leaves Fatima to go in search of the treasure though he can lead a very luxurious life in the Al-Fayoum oasis itself. Santiago possesses the qualities such as humility, unpretentiousness, purity, steadfastness,

constancy in Self-knowledge, self-control, balance of mind in desirable or undesirable things, non-attachment, resorting to solitary space, disinterested in gathering, and perception of true knowledge which are necessary to achieve Self-realisation (Parthasarathy 203). He understands the unity in diversity and reflects on the elemental force that each and everything in the universe possesses.

Santiago's path is that of true knowledge because throughout the journey he uses all the means such as direct perception, inference, comparison and tradition to gain knowledge. Through his direct perception, he masters the art of shepherding. He sees that the presence of certain plants indicates the presence of water; similarly the presence of certain birds indicates the presence of snakes. Thus he uses the means of inference to acquire knowledge. He compares the quality of crystals with that of human mind that both can be cleansed to make a transparent plane where light energy can be sent through and reflected according to the input. The difference is that in the latter, the process happens in a metaphysical level, i.e. light energy as spiritual energy can be sent and reflected. Santiago also compares spiritual enlightenment with the process of alchemy. Alchemy is about the conversion of lower metals to higher, while spiritual enlightenment is to raise consciousness from lower level to the higher. Through this he understands that when people strive to become better than what they are, everything around them becomes better too. From the eldest chieftain in the Al- Fayoum oasis, he learns that the Egyptian people always observe 'Tradition'. The 'Tradition' saved them from famine, made them the wealthiest and teaches them how to cross the desert. By joining the caravan which goes to Egypt, Santiago learns how to cross the desert by following the 'Tradition'. In the beginning of the journey, he promises in the name of Jesus Christ that he will abide by the rules and never disobey the leader of the caravan since disobedience in the desert means death. With the help of intuition, he followed their 'Tradition' by predicting an attack on the oasis like Joseph, who being a stranger in Egypt, interpreted the pharaoh's dream of thin and fat cows as famine and glut.

Santiago's path is of true devotion because he always respects the hand that wrote everything and his life activities are completely devoted to the ideal he had set i.e. 'knowing the world' which includes a consideration for all the created beings along with the created world or universe.

The novel represents the Universe as a living organism. This living aspect of universe is expressed in the novel by the term 'Soul of the world' which is a homogenous mass of pure consciousness. It is immaculate, unconditioned and same in all beings. This consciousness functions through Santiago's gross body, subtle body and causal body to express itself as the 'waker', 'dreamer' and 'deep-sleeper' respectively.

Thus the microcosm Santiago can be viewed as a combination of these individual expressions of the consciousness such as the 'waker', dreamer and deep-sleeper. When the consciousness functions through the aggregate or totality of all Gross bodies, all Subtle bodies and all Causal bodies, it expresses itself as the 'Cosmic-Waker', 'Cosmic-Dreamer', and 'Cosmic-Deep-sleeper' respectively. Thus it is evident that the macrocosm Universe is the combination of these cosmic expressions of pure consciousness (Parthasarathy 156). The consciousness of the microcosm is conditioned but the consciousness of the macrocosm is unconditioned. There exists a subject-object relationship between the microcosm Santiago and the macrocosm Universe. Being the subject, he explores the object Universe through experiences.

Life is treated as a continuous cycle of three states of consciousness such as waking, dream, and deep-sleep. Like every human being, Santiago also undergoes through these states. As a 'waker', he experiences the waking world which consists of things, beings, emotions and thoughts. In the waking world, he experiences different pleasant and unpleasant things and thinks of issues such as whether the Andalusian girl might be getting married to a better person than him or not, whether to sell his sheep to go to Africa, whether he should go back to Andalusia with the money earned from the crystal shop in Africa, whether to leave Fatima to go in search of the treasure, whether to tell the leader of the tribal war about the reason for him digging near the pyramid. The entire waking world disappears soon after the consciousness of waking state leaves.

In the dream state, he becomes the dreamer and experiences the dream world which provides him the vision of a treasure near the Egyptian pyramids. This dream world also disappears when the dream state of consciousness leaves.

In the deep-sleep state of consciousness, like any other deep-sleeper, he experiences sleep without dreams along with a blankness or nothingness which also disappears with the departure of the deep-sleep state of consciousness. Soon after waking from such a deep-sleep in the desert, once he feels that his heart began to tell him things that came from the soul of the world. It says that all people who are happy have God within them and that happiness could be found even in a grain of sand because the universe has taken millions of years to create it. Likewise, everyone in this universe has a treasure awaiting him (Coelho 137-138). This foreshadows the emergence of the fourth state of consciousness in him, which is the infinite Bliss possessed by everything in the universe.

The journey in the novel provides a plane of contact for the consciousness of the microcosm Santiago, with the consciousness of the macrocosm. In the process of the external pursuit of treasure, Santiago

as the 'waker' contacts with the Cosmic 'Waker' through consciousness. In dream sleep, he as the dreamer unites with the Cosmic Dreamer through consciousness. Finally he as the deep-sleeper merges with the Cosmic Deep-sleeper through consciousness. The Cosmic Dreamer and the dreamer in Santiago communicate through dreams. While interpreting Santiago's dream, the gypsy woman echoes that dreams are the language of God or soul, which can be understood only by the dreamer (Coelho 13). When the dreamer in Santiago unites with the Cosmic Dreamer, both consciousnesses also merge and thereby he acquires the knowledge from the Soul of the world that there is a treasure awaits him in Egypt. It is evident that his condition of merging is possible with everyone because the leader of the refugees in the desert also has the dream about the same treasure, but he sees the exact place of the treasure. Yet, he is unaware that the Cosmic Dreamer's consciousness can merge with his own consciousness in dream sleep to reveal the truth. So he underestimates his dream as a false illusion and makes fun of Santiago who crossed the entire Sahara desert in search of the treasure. The Cosmic Dreamer operates in Santiago through the dream-sleep state and endeavours to reveal the place of the treasure. But when the place of the treasure is about to be revealed, Santiago loses his contact with the Cosmic Dreamer and wakes up from sleep. The rest of the projection of the truth from the Cosmic Dreamer is received by the dreamer in the leader of the refugee camp. Santiago, in his dream, sees up to the Egyptian pyramids but fails to see the exact location of the treasure whereas the leader of the refugee camp gets the exact location of it through his dream and both these dreams occur more or less in the same period. Santiago has faced many hazardous situations such as losing all his money, facing death many times and severely beaten up while digging near the pyramid. This implies that those who endeavours to go in search of their treasure or destiny with strong will, courage and faith will be tested many times through many means by Nature, only to make them meritorious to achieve it. Santiago's experiences prove this and also show that he who understands the Cosmic 'Waker' through the universal language and he who understands the Cosmic Dreamer through dreams can be successful in his pursuit since his desire is the desire that is born in the Cosmic Consciousness. Keeping this in mind, the Alchemist repeats that deep rooted desires are first born in the soul of the world.

Being a shepherd, Santiago is well acquainted with the silence that overwhelms everywhere. Through this silence only, he learns the language without words, through which he communicates to everything that surrounds him. This helps him to develop a meditating or contemplating mind which ponders on various grave issues about man, God and the universe. Thus he acquires the internal discipline of reflection and contemplation on the eternal truth. Through this silence,

he tries to exact the dreamer personality within him even in the waking state of consciousness. The ‘waker’ personality within him identifies itself with the dreamer personality because of the influence of his deep desire to explore the world. This desire appears to the dreamer personality under the guise of a treasure. Thus the two personalities within him or the two states of consciousness, along with the third state which projects ‘nothingness’ establish a harmony. This harmony is prevailed and strengthened by the constant contemplation and reflection on the different aspects of both the microcosm and the macrocosm. The fourth state is the pure Consciousness or the Self that holds together all the other three personalities. During deep sleep, he enters the fourth state of Consciousness and gets away from the false egoistic limitations.

Santiago listens to his heart but uses his intellect to drive his mind towards his goal. At times he allows the senses to rule him and complains to the alchemist that “my heart is a traitor” (Coelho 135). He asks the alchemist why one should listen to the treasonous heart. He receives the answer that treasons are the blows that come unexpectedly (136). The alchemist teaches him that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself and every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity. So no heart suffers when it goes in search of its ultimate goal (137). Though his heart constantly repeats the fear of failure, his intellect subdues his senses and the fear vanishes as he realises himself as pure Consciousness by meditating on the cosmic symbols such as earth, wind, sun and God. Santiago loses his individuality and identifies the soul of the world as the part of the soul of the God and realises that it is his own soul. The transformation of Santiago to the wind ‘Simum’ reflects the idea that when things or beings lose their individuality, they can be one with everything in this created world.

Santiago appreciates the ‘love without ownership’ as the transforming power that can renovate a man from the lower material level to the higher spiritual level. By meditating on desert, wind and sun, he comprehends that love is not to be static like the desert, not to roam the world like the wind and not to see everything from a distance like the sun. It is the force that transforms and improves the Soul of the World because when one loves, one always strives to become better than what one is and along with this, everything in the surroundings also becomes better. Everything has its destiny and one day that destiny will be realised. In order to realise the destiny, one should try to become better until one identifies oneself with the Soul of the World.

Santiago’s contemplation and reflection on the relationship between the Universe, Man and God can be expounded as follows. If the microcosm is linked to a drop of water, the macrocosm would be the ocean. Though both the drop and the ocean are water, the person who

understands the water in the drop only can understand the water in the ocean. Hence that person only can understand the water everywhere (Parthasarathy 157). Similarly the person, who understands the Self within, realises the Self in one and all and finally realises Divinity i.e. the all-pervading being or God. This is reflected when the alchemist advises Santiago that the marvels of creation can be seen by contemplating a simple grain of sand (Coelho 138). Santiago, by contemplating a part of the desert, understands the whole of the desert; by contemplating on the breeze that moves around him, understands the phenomena of wind that roves through the world; and by contemplating the Sun that provides life by standing faraway in detachment, understands the greatness of divinity which created everything and preserves everything by being both immanent and transcendent. Finally he contemplates on the hands that have created everything in this Universe because He only knows why He created them. At this point of time he doesn't possess any thoughts including that of Fatima, the greatest of all his achievements, because his individuality merges with the all-pervading reality or God. This is the absolute bliss or treasure which is awaiting everyone who strives for it. It is always beyond the highest pleasure the body could ever sense, the greatest happiness the mind could ever feel and the subtlest knowledge the intellect could ever conceive (Parthasarathy 156-157). Thus by discovering the Consciousness around which the microcosm and the macrocosm revolve, Santiago attains the Divine power. The 'panentheistic' theory of perception is employed in the novel to affirm that God is greater than the universe since He is both immanent and transcendent i.e. God transcends the universe and also interpenetrates it (Puligandla 215).

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