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Magical Realism: An Aide in Exploring the Self in ‘The Pilgrimage’ and ‘The Alchemist’

Anjali Parmar

Research Scholar,

Career Point University Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh.

&

Dr Saurabh Kumar

Associate Professor,

Division of Languages and Social Sciences,

Career Point University Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh.

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Abstract:

Magical Realism is a significant technique of expression by the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho. Widely regarded as the modern spiritual writer, Paulo Coelho has dexterously portrayed his protagonists’ journeys for attaining wisdom and further instilling unwavering hopes and aspirations in the readers. The present study is an amalgamation of mysterious and actual matters that leads the heroes toward the accomplishment of their quest. While pursuing their desired motives, the protagonist, Santiago in *The Alchemist* and Paulo himself in *The Pilgrimage*, encounter various perils and pitfalls and overcome every obstacle with the help of a guide and ubiquitous elements of nature. These challenges faced with a strong determination and undying spirit for achieving the ultimate goals. Ultimately, the protagonists attain perfect harmony and oneness with the self and the world.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Quest Motif, Perils and Pitfalls, Transformation.

Introduction

Acknowledged as the modern spiritual writer, the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho has become widely acclaimed for his unique style of expression. Paulo remains open and straight forward about the ups and down faced by him in his life. He has quite often accepted and exposed his misdemeanours in various talks and interviews. His journey as a writer begins at the age of forty when a stranger suggests him to undertake a long journey to Santiago-de-Compostela in North-Western Spain; during the entire journey his confrontation with the self, made him aware of his intrinsic passion for writing. The result of this realisation can be seen in his work, *The Pilgrimage* which genuinely expressed his own experiences. Paulo Coelho is

a gifted writer of 'Latin American' streak whose works contain the impact of Boom Literature (1960 to 1967). Due to the socio-political changes after the 'Second World War', the writers started adopting the conventions of fable, myths and symbols. Magical Realism was one of the techniques adopted by many writers like Paulo Coelho. According to Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, Magical Realism is "a style of writing that mixes realistic events with fantasy" (Hornby 937). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* describes the origin of the term "magic realism" by mentioning the history of a school of painters in the 1920s and the adoption of the term by Jorge Luis Borges from Argentina, Marquez from Colombia and various other writers from Chile, Germany, Italy and England. (Abrams 195-96). Paulo has used this technique fabulously in his works, primarily in *The Pilgrimage* and *The Alchemist*. The sphere of magical realism prevails in *Brida* and to some extent in *The Valkyries*. In *Brida*, the female mentor Wicca dexterously guides her about the 'Tradition of the Moon'. It even is able to create a magical scene on the phone with the help of tarot cards, consisting, "... men with bronzed, oily bodies...sporting masks like the giant heads of fish...clouds" and then a sudden shift of the scene to the enormous buildings and "a few old men" (*Brida* 52-53).

This bond of magical realism with various exercises and practices is a wonderful juxtaposition of imagination and reality that makes inner journey of the protagonists so purposeful. In both works the elements of nature play the role of a guide, friend and protector who never disappoints the seeker and enlightens his path towards achieving his goals. In his interview with Brian Draper, Paulo stated that at the age of forty he explored the road to Santiago and brought this journey forth in the form of the book titled *The Pilgrimage* (Draper 1). Later, Paulo wrote his most famous work, *The Alchemist* (1987) and many more under this extensive impact. Readers and the critics admire his style of expression around the world.

The Pilgrimage: An Exploration of Persona

The novel *The Pilgrimage* is a work that has played the role of a milestone in his career as an author. Its revolutionary and innovative technique formulates the platform for a momentous journey, which makes Paulo a living legend. The novel introduces a new perception of living by exploring various miraculous techniques essential for a wondrous life. This work encompasses many rituals, beliefs, legends and exercises. In *The Pilgrimage*, the magical realism has been interwoven ingeniously to bring out the best of the nature and of Paulo. At the very outset of the novel, the author has stressed the role of the spiritual guide who can interact with the elements of nature. Nature plays the role of a guide and a nurturer

in this autobiographical fiction. Paulo, his guide and some disciples gather at Itatiaia in Brazil to witness the ritual of “RAM... R for rigor, A for adoration and M for mercy; R for regnum, A for Agnus and M for mundi” (2). After performing this ritual, there would be an investiture from the master of the order of RAM. Before this declaration he is offered a new sword and all the preparations have been done for the journey, he sets forth on. The protagonist’s master creates a strange light using his magical powers. When the ritual is perturbed by Paulo’s haste to attain the power, the light disappears and all this seems to be very much visual before the eyes of the readers. Paulo’s inquisitiveness to get the sword makes him unworthy of having it, the master stops the ritual. Paulo seems to be powerless as he has already surrendered his earlier sword, and is not allowed to hold the new sword.

To regain his power and status, Paulo has to start a journey to the road to Santiago. Soon, it becomes clear to him that he is not the first person to follow the journey but many disciples have to go through this journey that is assisted by a guide under customary traditions. The purpose is to test certain traits and experiences of an ordinary man’s routine life and daily struggles. Before attaining the title of the master of RAM the person has to assess his abilities by identifying virtues and removing vices from inside, so that being a master, the duties and responsibilities can be performed infallibly. He starts his journey to Spain. As per the instructions from his master, he meets Mme Lourdes, a sorcerer who gives him a hat and a cape with scallop shells. Soon, he meets his guide, Petrus who will accompany him throughout his journey to the road to Santiago-de-Compostela and will teach him the RAM exercises. Various exercises taught by the guide would make Paulo worthy of regaining his sword. During this pilgrimage Paulo will go through various convenient experiences. These experiences will prepare him for his future accountabilities. Petrus proclaims, “When you travel, you experience, in a very practical way, the act of rebirth” (32). He tells Paulo about the places and people that will be new to him and he would face language and cultural barriers. He has to prepare himself for any situation that comes in his way. Subsequently, he would start valuing every simple and ordinary things and incidents just like an ordinary person who struggles for survival.

Chiefly, the exercises taught by Petrus will bring Paulo close to the elements of nature and subsequently will generate harmony within. Every time when he performs some exercise, he learns something new and overcomes his flaws and foibles. The seed exercise helps him in unburdening his mind and soul of all worries that had occupied his mind even before the start of the journey. This exercise teaches Paulo to leave his comfort zone and enjoy exploring the

outside world. Paulo feels colossal changes after imagining himself a seed, who does not want to remain buried inside as he needs to comprehend something up there (26). The desire to explore the outside world changes this seed into a plant. Now, Paulo focuses more on his journey and the surroundings rather than just pondering over his personal and professional life. He feels a strong sense of love and admiration towards the surroundings. The beautiful landscapes start attracting him to the extent that he overlooks to notice the revisiting of the same hill many times. During his journey, Paulo is taught various other exercises and rituals by Petrus. Another exercise related to the element of nature is the water exercise, which Petrus teaches him in order to rouse his intuition power. He has to make random and unplanned lines in a puddle of water with his finger without seeking for any expectation or outcome. At first, the exercise seems meaningless to Paulo but soon he starts enjoying it. This exercise has freed his mind of all thoughts and worries. The water exercise makes him experience ecstasy that can be attained only through meditation and relaxation (86).

Petrus has one more exercise to teach his disciple: the burial alive exercise. While performing this exercise, he has to imagine his burial. During this practice, he has to imagine every peril coming to his way. This looks pretty horrible to imagine one's death, the mourning, suffocation inside the coffin, suffocating smell of the flowers and total alienation except for the company of the disgusting worms on his body. Paulo is bathed in his sweat, however, he feels calm and relieved after performing the act assigned by his guide. While performing the exercise, he feels the strength of nature and this experience helps him to overcome his fear of death. The most frightening exercise turns out to be a joyful night, filled with peace (131). Moving further, both Paulo and Petrus reach a scenic place with beautiful flora, waterfall and the formation of the rainbow. Suddenly, the guide takes fancy of climbing down the waterfall. Being younger and enchanted, Paulo abruptly gets ready for the task. His guide has not ordered him for the adventure, yet Paulo seems enthusiastic to be the part of this new found adventure. In order to exhibit his strength, Paulo acts like a volunteer. Nevertheless, soon the sudden and strong gust of wind shakes his balance and he seems to fall down. All his valour converts into a shaking hallucination. Luckily, a hand holds him tight before he loses his balance. His guide offers him great help. Rather than feeling grateful, Paulo furiously complains about not extending help earlier. At this, Petrus remarks that by using his power, he had invoked the wind to blow strongly. The purpose seems to very obvious, the guide wants to check the strength of the body and mind of the protagonist. He further comments that Paulo was not ordered to do the task and he did it just to show his

valour, without reflecting over the depth of the situation. At this point, Paulo remembers the time of his training of the tradition, which was based more on intellectual level. This training seems to be based more on miracles. He reminds himself that his master also had extraordinary power to control the elements of nature. He has witnessed his master performing practices like “moving the objects without touching them and materialising the spirits to create patches of blue sky among clouds” (24). All this seems to get visualised and the readers find no reason to raise any qualm or incredulity at the miraculous power of the mentor.

Magical realism is recurrent in his encounters with a black dog during the journey. In the first meeting, both the dog and Paulo seem to understand one-another’s language. The docile dog suddenly becomes furious and violent. The protagonist perceives the intention of the staring animal and continues with gibberish uttering as a weapon to weaken the enemy. This trick works and the dog runs away. In the second meeting, the dog represents multidimensional fears like anxiety, fear and insecurity. At this point, he happens to listen “the voice of Astrain”, his “guardian angel” (117) who warns him not to be afraid of the attacking dog. Such threats would often come and go in daily life. Therefore, rather than feeling nervous, the protagonist should strengthen his mind and prepare to face any danger. Soon he overcomes his fear and is filled with enthusiasm. However, the dog’s attempt to attack is undone by the sudden intervention of a young nun who comes in between out of nowhere. Her voice becomes the reason for the dog’s withdrawal from the place. The protagonist is shocked. At this Petrus remarks, “Don’t start creating fantasies in a world that is already extraordinary” (118). Such miraculous experiences are the part and parcel of this extraordinary journey which are pretty normal from the viewpoint of his mentor and guide. Petrus discloses, “In the life on the Road to Santiago, certain things happen that are beyond our control. When we first met, I told you that I had read in the gypsy’s eyes the name of the demon you would have to confront the demon was the dog” (119). Further, Petrus tells that the dog named Legion will reappear and the protagonist has to defeat it. During the third and final encounter, Astrain helps the protagonist by proposing, “I could confront a dog only by transforming myself into a dog” (166). So he turns himself into the dog, fights back, bites and scratches the actual dog and finally defeats it. His guide and a shepherd witness the fight and help the protagonist regain his true identity and spare the poor animal. The role of Astrain as a guarding angel and a messenger is of great relevance to create a fantastic atmosphere of the juxtaposition of fantasy with reality. Furthermore, magical realism is prevalent in the

elements of nature where the trees, waterfalls, earth and even stones act as a guide and a healer. During the journey, when Paulo feels exhausted, the guide makes him sit erect by taking support of the tree-trunk which heals him instantly (152). Moving further, the protagonist is told by Petrus that his role as a guide and a companion has accomplished. Now, the protagonist has to move further all by himself. He has been taught all the required techniques of survival and soon he would achieve his goal after a last trial. The seeker of the sword reaches a church led by a lamb. The lamb becomes his "guide" (222) and after entering the chapel, he finds his master smiling and holding his sword. Now, the sword is keen to come in his possession as he entirely deserves to fight the good fight.

The Alchemist: A Call from the Unknown

In *The Alchemist*, Santiago, a young shepherd boy, takes shelter in an abandoned and ruined church with a sycamore tree, which has grown inside the broken sacristy. His concern for the safety of his sheep is obvious and his passion for reading books makes him a unique shepherd, with a strange thirst for knowledge. Something unusual happens to him frequently. While sleeping in the abandoned church, he sees a recurrent dream and the boy wakes up like every time before the dream ends. He loves his sheep and reads the books for them. He has been educated and got mastery in Latin, Spanish and Theology. His parents were proud of him and wanted him to become a priest. But Santiago had his dreams and desires. He wanted to explore the outside world. So, he preferred to become a shepherd rather than "knowing God and learning about man's sins" (8). Now, he feels elated to live his dream every day. Each day brings a new panorama of a new landscape and adds more to the joy of this inquisitive boy. An older woman interprets his dream and advises him to search for the treasure. Next he meets a strange old man named Melchizedek. The man introduces himself as the King of Salem. He encourages the boy to chase the dream and states, "...when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (21). Melchizedek offers help to the boy and motivates him to pursue his dream and destiny. Santiago decides to continue pursuing his legend of finding treasure at the pyramids. He joins a caravan heading toward Egypt and subsequently meets an Englishman. The Englishman aims to become an alchemist. He learns a lot from an Englishman during the journey. The Englishman tells Santiago about the Philosopher's Stone that can turn lead to gold, and a liquid called the Elixir of Life that can cure all ills. The Englishman is travelling with the caravan to reach Al-Fayoum in order to meet a 200-year-old alchemist. During his stay in the desert, Santiago witnesses an omen that portends an attack on the historically neutral oasis. He falls in love

with a beautiful girl named Fatima. Destiny favours Santiago and he meets the alchemist. The alchemist advises Santiago to leave Fatima and continue his journey to the pyramids. "Fatima is a woman of the desert," said the alchemist. "She knows that men have to go away in order to return. And she already has her treasure: it's you. Now she expects that you will find what it is you're looking for" (113). At the same time, the alchemist and Santiago continue through the desert, the alchemist shares much of his wisdom about the people of the desert, the power of the nature and God. Before reaching near the pyramids, Santiago and the alchemist confront tribe of Arab soldiers. The tribe soldiers capture them. In exchange for his life and the life of Santiago, the alchemist hands over Santiago's money to the tribe and makes the soldiers believe that Santiago is a powerful alchemist who will turn into wind within three days. Santiago feels alarmed because he has no idea how to turn into the wind, and over the next three days, he contemplates the desert. The boy further pleads with the desert to help him. Like a true friend, the desert offers its sand to him and suggests him to seek help from the wind. The boy approaches the wind and convinces it to favour him for being his associate in attaining his love, Fatima. By blowing strongly, the wind changes the bright sun into a mere "golden disk" (141). Now, Santiago communicates with the sun but to his dismay, the sun shows an inability to do so and suggests pleading "the hand that wrote all" (144). In the storm, he disappears and reappears at the opposite side. The tribesmen let them go by seeing Santiago's miraculous capability. At this point, the boy realises that the soul of the world is the soul of God, who resides in his soul. Finally, the boy succeeds in his mission with the aid of the desert, the wind, the sun and the Almighty and comes closer to achieve his dream. Santiago continues his journey to the direction of the pyramids in a hope to get the treasure. The lines said by the alchemist seem to be very apt at this juncture that always listen to the heart. It knows all things, because it came from the "Soul of the World" (145), and it will one day return there. He proceeds to Spain to find the treasure buried under the tree, plans to return to Al-Fayoum and reunite with his love, Fatima. Santiago turns into a triumph hero who has proved wise enough to decode the esoteric wisdom of human life and existence.

Conclusion

Magical Realism becomes instrumental in bringing forth the beauty and meaning of the above-selected works. Paulo Coelho remarkably portrayed the journey of life as a quest for self discovery in *The Pilgrimage* and the search of hidden treasure in the form of true love in *The Alchemist*. In both the novels, Paulo Coelho has marvellously described an outer journey which helps both the protagonists to attain the self alongwith the fulfilment of their

worldly objectives. The adventurous and perilous outer journey becomes instrumental in bringing forth the beauty and meaning of the works. The realm of magical realism plays the role of an aide in the protagonists' lives to accomplish their goals and achieve the most desired dream of life. Undoubtedly, the protagonists are any ordinary men with an extraordinary quest. Paulo has dexterously rendered his protagonists' journeys to attain wisdom and further instill unwavering hopes and aspirations in the reader's mind. His heroes go through all the perils and pitfalls and ultimately fighting a "good fight" to attain perfect harmony and oneness with the self and the world.

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