

Quest for Identity in Paulo Coelho's Novels: A Selected Study

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Abstract

The present paper throws light on identity quest in the novels of Paulo Coelho. The protagonists of the novels of Paulo Coelho are predominantly in quest of their identity. Whether it is Andalusian shepherd boy Santiago of The Alchemist, Maria from Eleven Minutes or Esther of The Zahir. The study of his novels represents the perceptive in dealing with characters' quandaries and the progression of decision making. The process of decision making and journey of characters indicate the formation of identity. We find that when Santiago does his own decision making he is able to overcome his dilemmas as well as it also leads him to the understanding of identity search. In addition, Santiago's decision making in The Alchemist is related to his quest for identity whereas Esther of The Zahir escapes from a marriage in order to discover the real purpose of her life and Maria from Eleven Minutes experiences pain, pleasure, and love and decides the accurate path for her life.

Keywords: Identity, Quest, Decision making, Journey.

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian born author and the writer of *The Alchemist* and many other quest novels. He has sold an approximate 65 million books in 150 countries in 60 languages. In 1987, Coelho wrote a book, *The Alchemist*, over the path of one two-week spray of inspiration. The allegorical novel was about an Andalusian shepherd boy who follows a spiritual journey in which he learns to speak the "Language of the World" and thus receives his heart's wish. The book fascinated slight consideration at first, until a French-language translation unexpectedly jumped onto bestseller lists in France in the early 1990s. New translations followed, and soon *The Alchemist* became an international happening. The book has sold, by Coelho's count, roughly 35 million copies, and is now the most translated book in the world by any living writer. Since the publication of *The Alchemist*, Coelho has produced a new book at a rate of about one every two years.

Quest for Identity remains the main theme of Paulo Coelho novels. *The Alchemist* is a novel written by Paulo Coelho which tells about the great efforts of a young Spanish boy named Santiago. The novel represents the decision making practice done by Santiago to conquer his predicaments. The matter that is discussed in this study of *The Alchemist* is Santiago understands how to deal with his quandaries and the progression of decision making and identity quest. His journey ultimately results in giving him a kind of contentment and indicates the emergence of self identity as well. We find that when Santiago does his own decision making he is able to overcome his dilemmas but, on the other hands, it also leads him to experience identity formation from a shepherd boy to a thinker. Moreover, Santiago's decision making is related to his quest for identity. It puts him on a situation in which he tends to ignore the crowd's opinions but, however, still considers opinions from the community. Santiago's subjectivity still plays an important role although he still listens to the community's opinion because Santiago keeps making his own consideration in the process of making decision. The journey of Santiago is itself the symbol of quest for identity "Santiago's journey from the Andalusian grassland to the Egyptian pyramids is adventurous one in the sense that he comes across strange people, strange places and strange situations which many times bombard his mind with doubts with regards to his success in reaching his destiny." (Chaturvedi, 121)

Coelho in his other novel *The Zahir* again exhibits the quest for identity through the narrator and his wife Esther. The narrator of *The Zahir* is a famous writer who lives in Paris and takes pleasure in all the privileges, wealth as a famous person. Before meeting Esther he was in continuous search of true Identity. He had a dream to become a writer but not courage:

I continue my search for love, I continue writing songs. When people ask me what I do, I say I'm a writer. When they say they only know my song lyrics, I say that's just part of my work. When they apologize and say they've never read any of my books, I explain that I'm working on a project—which is a lie. The truth is that I have money, I have contacts, but what I don't have is the courage to write a book. My dream is now realizable, but if I try and fail, I don't know what the rest of my life will be like; that's why it's better to live cherishing a dream than face the possibility that it might all come to nothing. (Coelho, p. 15)

When Esther comes in his life he finds the real aim of his life and becomes a writer "I know that "it" comes from Esther's heart; my love is reborn, I write the book because she exists, because she has survived all the difficult times without complaint, without ever once seeing herself as a victim (Coelho p. 20). Esther, whom he is married for ten years, is a war correspondent who has been missing along with a friend, Mikhail. Was Esther abducted, murdered, or did she simply escape a marriage that left her dissatisfied and unhappy? The narrator doesn't have any response, but he has so many questions of his own. Then one day Mikhail finds the narrator and promises to reunite him with his wife. In his challenge to

suggest a lost love, the narrator discovers something unexpected about himself. Their marriage has hit a dry spot and she is restless, wanting to move on in search of her own happiness. When Esther disappears, he is tormented and traumatized by the mystery of what has happened to her. Has she been kidnapped, killed, or has she left him for another lover? The mystery of Esther's absence is unsolved for him until he discovers himself. It is very hard for him to let go of his feeling that she is the only one who fills his life with meaning. "Well, Esther fills up every space in my life. I thought that by writing about my feelings, I would free myself from her presence. Now I love her in a more silent way, but I can't think about anything else. I beg you, please, I'll do anything you want, but I need you to explain to me why she disappeared like that" (Coelho p. 57).

Esther is not only in search of her identity quest but she also inspires the author for knowing himself "Apart from the normal conflicts in any marriage, I am contented. I understand for the first time that all the frustrations I felt about previous love affairs and marriages had nothing to do with the women involved, but with my own bitterness. Esther, however, was the only woman who understood one very simple thing: in order to be able to find her, I first had to find myself. We have been together for eight years; I believe she is the love of my life," (Coelho p. 24). Though the writer is exceedingly confident and thriving in his life yet there is something which has been missing. He is philosophical and continuously in the process of assessment of his own character:

I'm free now and I was free in prison too, because freedom continues to be the thing I prize most in the world. Of course, this has led me to drink wines I did not like, to do things I should not have done and which I will not do again; it has left scars on my body and on my soul, it has meant hurting certain people, although I have since asked their forgiveness, when I realized that I could do absolutely anything except force another person to follow me in my madness, in my lust for life. I don't regret the painful times; I bear my scars as if they were medals. I know that freedom has a high price, as high as that of slavery; the only difference is that you pay with pleasure and a smile, even when that smile is dimmed by tears. (Coelho p. 11)

But the desertion of his wife made him think about himself once again. He and his wife have been together for several years then Mikhail, the last person Esther was seen with, contacts the narrator and promises to take him to her. Mikhail, a young man who works with unhappily married couples, has his own spiritual perspective on love. Through the character of Mikhail also a quest for identity is perceptible. *He goes on to tell us that sometimes, the one thing that prevents our amazing success in life is the fear of our true potential.* Writer's thoughts speak to us of his love for Esther and his constant feelings of loss. He tells us they used to enjoy an openly unfaithful and casual marriage. His relationship to her also did not admit to a high level of communication. Yet he lives a perfectly normal life, attends his social functions, enjoys wealth and tends to his girlfriend Marie. While it is hard to argue with the

matters of the heart, I found it unjustified that he should miss her so much. He is just profoundly questioning as to why she left him devoid of any description:

For a while, I'll think obsessively about her, I'll become embittered, I'll bore my friends because all I ever talk about is my wife leaving me. I'll try to justify what happened, spend days and nights reviewing every moment spent by her side, I'll conclude that she was too hard on me, even though I always tried to do my best. I'll find other women. When I walk down the street, I'll keep seeing women who could be her. I'll suffer day and night, night and day. This could take weeks, months, possibly a year or more (Coelho p. 14).

The main character and protagonist, seems to be deceitful, conceited and delusional. His wife, a war journalist, has disappeared without a trace. Two years have passed and has written books, become renowned, has at least one girlfriend and lives a rich moderate life. Yet we find him on the edge of gloom and suffering, apparently since he cannot identify the accurate intention for Esther's loss. Why would she not reveal the motive for leaving him, if in fact she did leave him? She becomes the Zahir for him, the obsession and the only way out of his gloom and anguish. The book takes us through his strange and bitter path in a half-attempted search of her, and along the way, a search of self identity. The search for identity has made it a fascinating journey; the characters are continuously in search of identity. The inner journey of narrator to find his true identity takes him to the new possibilities.

Eleven Minutes is the story of a young girl named Maria who is in constant search for her identity. She leaves her Brazilian abode to go to Geneva, Switzerland, in expectation of immense quest and great love. Her situation does not prove to be what she had hoped and she pursues a career in prostitution in order to make money quickly in order to return home. During her time in Switzerland, Maria experiences pain, pleasure, and love and decides the accurate path for her life. Maria works as a prostitute at a club on a street in Geneva, which is famous for such places. She has many clients and makes a lot of money, which she plans to use to fly back home to Brazil in a year's time. Throughout her time in Geneva, Maria experiences many types of sex, but does not permit her soul to come in into the progression.

Maria falls in love with the painter who, in a wildly romantic motion, meets Maria at the Paris airport when she is going to Brazil. Even though it is not apparent that she will marry the painter, at least Maria has found mutual love, something she thought would elude her all her life. For the first time in a long time, Maria loves with her soul as well as with her body. Maria's self transcendence has been shown while searching her identity.

Maria chose to be an adventurer in search of treasure – she put aside her feelings, she stopped crying every night, and she forgot all about the person she used to be; she discovered that she had enough willpower to pretend that she had just been born and so had no reason to miss anyone. (Coelho p. 43)

Maria grows up in a small town in the interior of Brazil where folklore, superstitions, and traditional roles for women are woven into the culture. Although she is good at school and

always tries to better her situation by reading books, Maria's only goal is to fall in love, marry, and raise a family. Maria has several experiences with young love but her true love never appears, leaving Maria to believe that she is destined to live without that most essential part that she believes most people discover. Maria is dissimilar from other girls in her town in that she desires quest, but it is not until she has graduated and has worked two years in a draper's shop that Maria can save enough money for a small break. Maria goes to Rio de Janeiro, where she is approached by a Swiss entertainment businessman and is persuaded to fly back to Switzerland with the man and work in his nightclub as a samba dancer. Instantly upon her entrance, Maria learns the reality regarding the agreement and will be given a smaller amount of money that she had expected, forcing her into a way of life much more constrained than the one she had imagined. The problem about human survival and their acts to continue their survival are the central opinion of their journey in search of identity. When the man discovers that Maria has dated a man she had met at the club, she is fired. Fortunately, the man helps Maria get a generous severance package and Maria is able to live for short time whereas she looks for employment. Maria signs up at a modelling agency and meets a client to converse a fashion show, but Maria ends up sleeping with the man for money. This is the beginning of Maria's career as a prostitute, something she does because it is good money for relatively little investment.

The writer portrays a study about human journey in *Eleven Minutes* novel which shows the struggles of Maria as the main character who is constantly in search of her true identity. She conquers her pain and overpowers the susceptible women in her:

Instead of feeling depressed, she felt proud - she was fighting for herself, she wasn't some helpless person. She could, if she wanted to, open the door and leave that place for good, but she would always know that she had at least had the courage to come that far, to negotiate and discuss things about which she had never in her life even dared to think. She wasn't a victim of fate, she kept telling herself: she was running her own risks, pushing beyond her own limits, experiencing things which, one day, in the silence of her heart, in the tedium of old age, she would remember almost with nostalgia - however absurd that might seem. (Coelho p. 74-75)

Maria has her own freedom and decision toward things in her life. She takes the consequences and in the other side, she is aware that there is another more powerful being which is beyond her grasp. This story reveals that Maria has passed through boundaries in her life to be an authentic individual. She flies to Geneva inexperienced, decides to become a prostitute, and gets addicted to pain as source of pleasure and struggle to conquer her own self of love. Even though she has to maintain pain, suffering, guilt, and struggling, she has succeeded to find her authentic self.

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