

AN EXISTENTIAL READING OF PAULO COELHO'S NOVEL, THE ALCHEMIST



JAVEED AHMAD RAINA, MA., SET, ENGLISH. (UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR)
Teacher (J & K School Education Department)

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to read Paulo Coelho's novel, The Alchemist in the light of Jean Paul Sartre's lecture, "Existentialism is humanism". Existentialism as a philosophical theory emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his/her own development through acts of the will. As man is focal point of attention for all existentialist thinkers. This is why existentialism is also called Humanism. This current study aims to show how Coelho's protagonist explores the existential quest for ultimate meaning and purpose of existence. It will analyse how action, freedom and choice are fundamental directives for determining one's place in the universe. The author will also present Coelho's own philosophy of personal legend through textual references and will figure out the deviations from Sartrean theory. The Alchemist is a novel by Brazilian author Paulo Coelho originally written in Portuguese. It follows a young Andalusian shepherd boy, Santiago, into the desert on his quest for a dream and the fulfillment of his destiny. From his home in Spain he journeys to the markets of Tangiers and across the Egyptian desert to an encounter with The Alchemist. The story of the treasures Santiago finds along the way teaches us, as only a few stories have done, about the essential wisdom of listening to our hearts, learning to read the omens strewn along life's path, and, above all, following our dreams and the personal legend.

Keywords: *Existentialism fate free will personal legend spiritual quest*

Introduction

Existentialism is an intellectual movement that exhibits itself in all aspects of modern culture. It flowered in response to the horrors of the Second World War which clearly weakened the western notions of progress, good & evil. The philosopher, novelist, and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980) developed a secular form of existentialism that rejected the supernatural, and insisted that existence is prior to essence – there is therefore no human essence that we are born with. It is our actions and total experience that define human nature, and as we make ourselves, we make humankind.

Humans must therefore act, even when faced with force, evil, despair and death. It is this ability to act that makes us human, and allows us to endow the universe with values.

Discussion

The novel's protagonist Santiago's life unveils the philosophy of Existentialism that the human existence is an investigation of the meaning of being. Santiago's life extends to him a variety of possibilities from which he has to choose. He has to select from the alternatives like priesthood or shepherding, going back to Andalusia or crossing the desert to reach Egypt, and finally, living in the Al-Fayoum oasis with Fatima or going to Egypt in search of his treasure. From all these alternatives he makes the wisest choices of shepherding, crossing the desert, and going to Egypt in search of his treasure. He is truly committed and responsible to his selections. It is obvious that Santiago is assertive of his basic interests and is also capable of dismissing the Sartrean existential angst of 'being for others'. Existentialism also preaches that human nature and human identity vary depending upon the values and beliefs one holds. Santiago believes in Melchizedek's words that, "When you want something, the entire universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (Coelho, 21). The discussion between Santiago and Melchizedek reveals certain existential tenants that foster Santiago's self belief, that thinking begins with the human subject and man is endowed with a free choice to determine the meaning of the universe. When Santiago seeks answer from the old man (Melchizedek) about the world's greatest lie? The wise old man replies: "It's this: that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what's happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate. That's the world's greatest lie." (Coelho, 17) Sartre's existentialism also posits that existence precedes essence. He regards "grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, it is actually the excuse to escape from responsibilities." (Satre, 6) Santiago is guided by his conscious will rather than the fate. He has willingly taken the road to discover his self by going through a long voyage into the distant deserts. His adventure is full of vicissitudes, but without any sign of "deterministic excuses." So the first striking parallel we get is that Melchizedek's words echoes Sartrean philosophy that 'man is nothing else but that which he makes himself. (Satre, 3) At times Paulo Coelho is advocating his own philosophy through the voice of an old man (Melchizedek). He believes that everyone know their destiny and firmly believe that everything is possible in this world, but as the time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their destiny. He says that:

"The mysterious force appears to be negative, but actually shows you how to realize your destiny. It prepares your spirit and will because that desire originated in the soul of the universe. It's your mission on earth...the soul of the world is nourished by people's happiness. And also by unhappiness, envy, and jealousy. To realize one's destiny is a person's only real obligation. All things are one." (Coelho, 21)

This passage shows that Coelho's protagonist is more than a mere existentialist, a persona whose doctrine is multi-disciplinary and whose quest is not just to find the treasure but to fulfill a greater obligation. He has been nourished by the "soul of the

universe" and his soul in vice-versa nourishes it. His journey is to find his origins and observe the oneness of all things. Santiago's mystic/pantheistic belief here differs from Sartre's argument that existence precedes essence if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. (Sartre, 3). Santiago believes that "life stories and the history of the world were written by the same hand."(Coelho, 73). He is optimistic that in order to be one with the "soul of the universe," he has to follow his free will and listen to his heart. He also realizes that his dreams or personal legend are not just his but part of the "soul of the universe". Although Santiago shares different set of beliefs yet his basic search is Sartrean in nature-to find out the meaning of the universe by vehemently working on his personal legend. Again, When Santiago is robbed of the only money he has. It is at this point that he contemplates going back home and surrendering his personal legend. He finds himself adrift and desperate. The boy (Santiago) is finally hired by a crystal merchant, a middle aged resident of Tangier. This Crystal Merchant is Santiago's foil. He had a personal legend to make a hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, but his personal legend is not backed by what Sartre calls man will only attain existence when he is what he wills to be. (Sartre, 3). He simply wishes to travel Mecca without transforming his wish into a more powerful will, a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision. The Crystal Merchant's in-action is contrasted with the Santiago's firm belief in goal oriented action. In the following passage, Crystal Merchant says to Santiago:

"You dream about your sheep and the Pyramids, but you're different from me, because you want to realize your dreams. I just want to dream about Mecca. I've already imagined a thousand times crossing the desert, arriving at the Plaza of the Sacred Stone, the seven times I walk around it before allowing myself to touch it. I've already imagined the people who would be at my side and those in front of me, and the conversations and prayers we would share. But I'm afraid that it would all be a disappointment, so I prefer just to dream about it."(Coelho, 52, 53)

Coelho, through this contrast wants to convey that as long as we dwell between Maktub (it is written) and free choice we won't be able to explore limitless secrets of the life. Santiago on the other hand shows extraordinary will power to defeat inner demons of fate and voices of despair. He does not rely upon pre-destination doctrine instead believes Descartes dictum, "Conquer yourself rather than the world," (Sartre, 8). He is not just an idealist and a dreamer, but an interpreter of dreams that tell about far off lands man can conquer. He has acquired mastery over his self not by just wishing but through his actions coupled by a strong, prior and spontaneous will.

Another major revealing instance of Sartre's existential thought is provided by camel driver who entirely lives in the moment. He does not fear death or the possibility of dying, even though his caravan travels through the tribal wars in the desert. Santiago learns patience from the camel driver, and how to do each thing on its own time. The camel

driver is of the belief: "Because I don't live in either my past or my future, I'm interested only in the present. If you can concentrate always on the present, you'll be a happy man. You'll see that there is life in the desert, that there are stars in the heavens, and that tribesmen fight because they are part of the human race. Life will be a party for you, a grand festival; because life is the moment we're living right now."(Coelho, 81)

Similarly, Sartre while echoing Descartes dictum that I think, therefore I am, believes in the present moment that there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self.(Sartre, 10). The existentialist thinkers do not believe that man's future is already written. They vehemently challenge this notion and stress that we have neither behind us, nor before us any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse. (Sartre, 6). They even go to the extent of saying that if the future is laid up in Heaven, that God knows what it is, it would be false, for then it would no longer even be a future. (Sartre, 6)

Again, Santiago's musings on human heart and its connections with God which echoes Coelho's own firm belief in Christianity lays stress on eternal existence of God. In the following lines we would be better able to understand the point of difference between Santiago's belief in God and Sartre's departure. Santiago says:

"Every second of the search is an encounter with God," the boy told his heart. "When I have been truly searching for my treasure, every day has been luminous, because I've known that every hour was a part of the dream that I would find it. When I have been truly searching for my treasure, I've discovered things along the way that I never would have seen had I not had the courage to try things that seemed impossible for a shepherd to achieve."(Coelho, 125).

Sartre advocates Existentialistic Humanism as a replacement for God. He considers humankind as self-surpassing and self-creating creatures. He believes that man is all the time outside himself, pursuing transcendent aims beyond himself. His argument that man is the future of man acts as a substitute for God. He writes that:

"there is no legislator but man himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realize himself as truly human." (Sartre, 15)

Paulo Coelho's protagonist deals with the subject of love same way as Sartre believes. Santiago engages with two different women that exemplify the disparity between love and true love. His first encounter with love proves to be just a spiritual attraction with the Merchant's daughter. He realized that this kind of love kept him from pursuing his personal legend. He meets his true love when he arrives at the Oasis and converses with Fatima. She is willing to wait forever for Santiago to accomplish his personal legend. You must understand that love never keeps a man from pursuing his destiny (Coelho, 115). Fatima is not least worried of his separation instead helps him to strengthen his courage. Santiago's meaning of love is:

“Because it’s not love to be static like the desert, nor is it love to roam the world like the wind. And it’s not love to see everything from a distance...Love is the force that transforms and improves the soul of the world”. (Coelho, 143) Sartre also regards love as a force that persuades a man to express the manifestation of perfection in the object. To assert the necessity of an action oriented modal of consciousness and human existence, he expresses his belief that: “But in reality and for the existentialist, there is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving; there is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art.”(Sartre, 9) Paulo Coelho through the character of the Alchemist conveys the central design of action oriented pursuit alluding Plato’s theory of forms. He is of the opinion that a simple grain of sand reveals the marvels of creation. He while echoing Plato explains the genesis of the world and concludes what he means by action:

“The wise men understood that this natural world is only an image and a copy of paradise. The existence of this world is simply a guarantee that there exists a world that is perfect. God created the world so that, through its visible objects, men could understand his spiritual teachings and the marvels of his wisdom. That’s what I mean by action.” (Coelho, 121) Here, Coelho upholds the Platonic concept of the universe while as Sartre’s concept of universe is complete subversion of Plato’s theory. However, we find that Santiago’s observation of the objective world through an un-failing self belief and the power of wisdom is a testimony of existentialism.

When Santiago recognized his “self” through the encounters with the objective world, he was able to converse with the supernatural powers. In one of his conversation with the wind, he confesses that: “That’s not true,” the boy said. “I learned the alchemist’s secrets in my travels. I have inside me the winds, the deserts, the oceans, the stars, and everything created in the universe. We were all made by the same hand, and we have the same soul. I want to be like you, able to reach every corner of the world, cross the seas, blow away the sands that cover my treasure, and carry the voice of the woman I love.”(Coelho, 140) Finally Santiago reaches to the culmination of his self discovery, he was able to blow wind and communicate with the sun. The boy reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw that it was a part of the Soul of God. And he saw that the Soul of God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles. (Coelho, 145)

This Passage Reminds us of Sartre’s Famous Argument That

“The man who discovers himself directly in the cogito also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence...Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of “inter-subjectivity”. It is in this world that man has to decide what he is and what others are.” (Sartre, 11)

Conclusion

This novel as a whole is the symbolic representation of man’s insatiable quest to search his place in the world and the ultimate search for meaning of life and the universe. It deals with the expedition of Santiago in literal, symbolic, intellectual and

spiritual level. Santiago yearns to travel in search of a worldly treasure as extravagant as any ever found. His voyage across different continents allegorically reveals that man is the master of his destiny. This magical and mesmerizing work offers rich analysis and can be interpreted through various theoretical approaches. Santiago's journey is suggestive of the fact that strong will power, courage, determinism, passion and persistence are the only way to self realization. It symbolises man's insatiable spiritual quest and suggests a four-fold way to make one's dream satiable. The four basic principles are listening to the heart, following the omens of the world, comprehending the interconnecting nature of the things in this world, and realising the importance to follow the personal legend.

So, Santiago's life long struggle to achieve his personal legend is the testimony of the existential belief that man is not just a stone or fungus (Sarte, 3), but something a higher being responsible for the whole course of his action. The central protagonist of this novel took bold decisions from the very beginning. He decided against the wish of his parents who wanted him to become a priest instead he took a path trodden by many but explored by few. His wide knowledge of Latin, Spanish and theology also helped him to understand different aspects of human nature in relation to the phenomenal world. His pursuit for a hidden treasure is not a materialistic search for wealth, but a higher pursuit aimed to attain self mastery over the hidden treasures that lie within the man. Human being itself is a great treasure who only needs the keys of alchemy to unlock the wonderful reservoirs of the human universe. Santiago did what his instincts directed him to do. When he left his native Andalusia for the apparent and latent pilgrimage to Egypt he never looked absorbed despite being robbed of by thieves from the single penny he had. He worked on his impulses with such an urgency and persistence that makes us realize how far we can go in the seemingly meaningless world. He defied the fate (Maktub) with his strong, prior will, courage and determination. His commitment to follow the personal legend with an un-failing determination offers the world a better approach how to kill the inner demons that always keep us from attaining success. His alchemy was not the goal of the life but it is his life that becomes a centripetal force, to merge with the "universal soul" in order to become one with it. Santiago's treasure is symbolic of the treaurelands that lie unexplored within every human being.

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