

**SPIRITUAL TRACES IN PAULO COELHO'S 'THE ALCHEMIST'**

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**Abstract**

*Spirituality, which is an integral element in all cultures and traditions, is just not a theory or practice. It is a lifestyle modeled out of culmination of ideas rather than definite truth. It focuses on the human soul viewing that human beings are more than mere biological organisms. Spirituality sets out ways in which the human soul can be nourished: by meditation, by living morally good, by realizing the power and the presence of the Divine within oneself. Faith is the fundamental part of Spirituality. Faith need not be based on something that has proof. The Divine presence in oneself is experienced, not empirically proved. For this, an unwavering faith is essential. Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist is about the journey of the protagonist in search of treasure. During the journey, he finds himself, his personal calling, and that the treasure is within oneself. The researcher elucidates about finding one's own self and realising the presence of the Supreme Being within the shoes of literature.*

**Keywords:** *Spirituality, morally good, Divine presence.*

Higher Education &  
Research Society

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*“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”*

“**M**an indeed is the miracle of the world because in him is realized the epiphany of the spirit; and this spirit brings radically new values into the universe – thought and love, choice and commitment, communion.” (Mouroux 115) In the present materialistic world the end product and the goal of man is to succeed in all that he aims at which results in a competition. This competitive world destroys the value of relationships which acts as the fundamental basis for human life. In the run for position and power, many a man or woman lament on the meaningless of their lives. But instead of regaining the power to be back on track, they waste their days blaming. It is as with the ordinary man and woman so with the so called extra ordinary. Life is living. pain, agony, struggle and challenges cannot be silenced. It is part of life. Men and women had loved, lived, suffered, died and achieved immortality. During lifetime, there is intimation to immortality every other minute. There is a need of creative work in order to turn life meaningful. Human beings have the innate craving for accomplishing. It is not for just accomplishing something, but something that is lasting, to contribute to the well being of others and the society.

Spirituality provides a sense of purpose and meaning to life and concentrates on the well being of a person both physically and mentally. A sound mind exists in a sound body. The problems of today have become so complex that people loses the power to endure. An effort to gain hold over one's own life is even not attempted. Future is in our hands. Everyone living today holds a responsibility in the future. It is the attitude of the present generation that determines the survival of generations to come. But this responsibility can materialize constructively only if people realize the value of their own lives, understand the result of their endeavors and battles, and believe in the spiritual, mental and psychological powers bestowed in

them. The philosophical question of *'who are you'* matters a lot as it is the key factor of spirituality.

Spirituality is related to faith as the ultimate reality. All reality and all things are rooted in faith and in each individual belief. *Spirituality focuses on the virtues of a person.* This paper focuses on Spirituality as the immediate need of the present as for many, life goes out of track. It is only in man that the options of being animalistic (living to satisfy the needs of the flesh) or to live morally good lies. To live morally well, human beings have to suppress and control many desires and have to live thoughtfully. *Spirituality is not a practice, it is a way of life or lifestyle.* The focus area is on the notion of spirituality in general and not particularly religious spirituality, contemporary spirituality or traditional spirituality. A detailed study on the outlook of different religions on spirituality and how far faith is significant in being a spiritual person are the other focus areas dealt with in this paper. This paper also answers the question, "why should one believe in God". Moreover we could find that literature serves spirituality in many ways and goes hand in hand, even to be frank literature made the spirituality to reach the peak level where it has been attained now. Literature helped the faithful to emerge in their faith and helped in leading their lives.

The text used as the base for this paper is *Paulo Coelho's "The Alchemist"*. The protagonist in the novel is an Andalusian shepherd boy Santiago who goes to the Egyptian pyramids in search of a treasure. He listens to his personal calling, follows his dream and moves forward which is a message for all humans. Personal calling is God's blessing, it is the path God chose for one to travel on Earth. But the prudence with which humans understand the right path is where the whole aspect of spirituality lies. Man's supreme perfection lies in union with God in Love. Spirituality knows the presence of the Supreme Being in oneself, acting wisely and strongly moving forward according to the inner call. There occur moments in life when the personal call remains so buried deep within that it is invisible. But that does not mean it is absent. It is all based on how one realises the true essence of the inner call and the response to it.

There are many limitations while attempting a study on this topic. Spirituality is a highly complex topic as it is very much personal to each individual. Definitions for spirituality ranges from experiences to existential searches for meaning of life. The level of a person being spiritual cannot be measured using a yard stick. Spirituality, even though is a general idea which is based

on the realisation of the power within self and acting according, is generally understood keeping religion as base by majority of people. Therefore the study has to be made without interrupting religious beliefs. Materials on spirituality are available. But majority of the materials on this topic are also based on understanding spirituality through religiosity. Different religions have different thoughts about spirituality. But on a general note, it is seen as the same.

The book *The Alchemist* written by Paulo Coelho has spiritual aspects in it. Paulo Coelho is an enchanting storyteller, inspiring people all over the world to see beyond the ordinary and into the remarkable. When talking about spirituality, he states that all religions ultimately lead to the same God and therefore all deserve the same respect. His writings in general, have the themes of *spirituality, religiosity, introspection, quest, relationship and love*.

Being spiritual is not being necessarily religious. One can be religiously spiritual. Being religious is to have a strong belief in the doctrines and follow the rituals of a particular religion. Being spiritual is the journey to explore the inner self, realisation of the power within oneself, faith in one's ability and understanding the power of the Supreme Being within oneself. The term spirituality throughout ages has been given different perceptions by different people. It is a sacred feeling, the search of the heart for the Divine. A spiritual person should necessarily know to accomplish the tasks in life systematically. An organised life is a sign of a healthy lifestyle of a person. Being spiritual does not mean that one will not confront the passions, love, hatred, desire, aversion, joy, sadness, courage, fear, hope, despair and anger. Passions are natural, good and necessary. They act of the will and hence ambition works. But if passions are ill ordered, it can have destructive results. They produce blindness of the soul. Instead of being guided by reason, worldly pleasure will take over. Ill ordered passion can torture the soul. Therefore, spirituality calls for the detachment from materialistic world and to work on the spiritual realm where the human soul find ultimate salvation.

## **SPIRITUALITY: ITS DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES**

Spirituality relates to the human spirit or soul, viewing humans as more than mere biological organisms depending on materialistic needs. It refers to the search of the divine in oneself, which generally is understood as 'the Transcendental Being'. Human beings are mortal, identified by the body. But the body is a temporary vessel that carries the soul of the person

which is immortal. The biological body thrives on worldly requirements, and has materialistic aspirations but the soul depends on one's connection with the divine for its enrichment. The fact that man, for all intents and purposes is an animal is irrefutable. As a direct result of that we are faced with a fervent need to fulfill the desiderata of the flesh. This leads to a constant conflict between body and soul, as many times the gratification of the body crosses moral boundaries which define spirituality. Imposing a boundary between the wants of the body and the essence of spirituality can be quite a challenge because we confront the animalistic desires which are part of our instincts. Thus spirituality is not an instant achievement. It is rather a way of living, brought into practice by constantly admonishing our innate inclination towards fulfilling the wants of our body. Spirituality thus focuses on nourishing one's soul, by understanding the obscure nature of our aspirations, understanding them and working on elevated qualities, thus building a strong relationship with the divine. However, Spirituality is notional. Since antiquity, spirituality has been viewed differently in different parts of the world. The definition for the term spirituality has been phrased and rephrased on numerous accounts and yet it holds a different meaning for every individual. Spirituality has evolved with our understanding of ourselves, the divine and the bond we share. A look at different traditional spiritualities tells us that the underlying factor of each is the quest of the human spirit for something that is deeper than the ordinary surface reality of life. They try to ensure that one leads better life here on the Earth by a promising of a blissful afterlife, thus furnishing us with a hope of overcoming death, pain and loss. Spirituality is seen in all aspect of life, extending from philosophy to psychotherapy and other sciences. It is multifaceted and hence is defined differently by different disciplines. Theories from theology talks about spirituality as being one with God through faith and by following religious rituals and practices. Psychology relates Spirituality on finding the meaning and the purpose of one's existence. Sociology relates spirituality with the society and the relationship one holds with the surroundings. It talks about the 'influence factor' of an individual on others and on the society, highlighting the interdependence of the totality of existence. Medical theories link spirituality with one's physical well-being, implying that wellness of the mind can only exist alongside with the wellness of the body. Spirituality is not definite, it is independent. There are different forms of spirituality. In fact, each person has it individually, different from the other. But there are certain common factors as spirituality is universal. The base of all definitions of spirituality is knowing and loving oneself completely. The ultimate realisation of the 'self' leads to the

nourishment of the soul. Spirituality is interlinked with morality- it is not a theory, rather a practice and a commitment. It is the effort to attain self knowledge. Hence it involves an inward journey of realisation and transformation. Religions define this journey as a journey to the ultimate reality or Divine, the longing to be united with the Supreme Being.

According to the telefinalist hypothesis, man must continue to evolve towards spirituality. He must free himself from the domination of his animal instincts and from the crude ideas inherited from his direct ancestors, vestiges of the first conflict between nature and conscience. He must fight against the battles of the world and his actual efforts must be brought to bear on his fight and he must draw the necessary strength to gain hold on his soul.

The main elements of spirituality include a truthful effort to moral living, an ultimate practice of non violence and correlation within oneself, with other including all life on earth. Spirituality in itself is related to every religious and non religious ideas as it is directly related to life and being.

### **REALISATION OF SELF IN ‘THE ALCHEMIST’**

In the novel, the young shepherd boy Santiago undergoes a lot of struggles to accomplish his dream and to reach his destination. His journey takes him through a wide range to experiences and obstacles from the very beginning. From bitter ones like being robbed, struggling in the desert for food, water and shelter, being confronted by enemies, witnessing wars and attacks, to the exhilarating experience of falling in love. Every time when he falters, his faith holds him firm.

Faith according to definition given in the Merriam Webster dictionary is ‘a strong belief or trust in someone or something’, ‘belief in the existence of God: strong religious feelings or beliefs’. Faith can also be defined as ‘a confident belief in the truth’. A belief in a person, thing, deity or the doctrines of any religion without the slightest empirical evidence of its physical or abstract existence can be an explanation of faith. It is the fundamental element of all religious and spiritual groups, facilitating the life of a common man. Faith is a major factor that dictates our activities and behavior. An unwavering faith in one’s own ability facilitates a person to reach staggering heights.

Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* is about one's quest, seeking and pursuing the purpose of one's life "All I know is that, like Santiago the shepherd boy, we all need to be aware of our personal calling. What is personal calling? It is God's blessing, it is the path that God chose for you here on Earth. Whenever we do something that fills us with enthusiasm, we are following our legend." (Coelho vii, viii) The writer explains about the four obstacles that are faced in identifying one's personal calling. Firstly, he says that every child at a very tender age is being given the idea that everything one desires for is impossible. A child grows up with this idea seeded into him/her, which during the course of time fosters fear and guilt. Second obstacle is love. Love results in the fear of hurting others as a result of which human beings compromise on their dreams. Once it is realised that love is a stimulus and not a bond, people confront the third obstacle, fear of struggles and defeat. The writer gives a solution for this. He asks his readers to have patience in difficult times. "The secret of life, though, is to fall seven times and get up eight times." (ix) The fourth obstacle is realizing the dream for which we have been fighting all our lives. In this story of the shepherd boy Santiago, journeys to the pyramids of Egypt in a quest to find a hidden treasure but ends up finding himself. "But if you believe in yourself worthy of the thing you fought so hard to get, then you become an instrument of God, you help the Soul of the World, and you understand why you are here." (x)

The story of Santiago can be related to the story of every individual. The story of quest towards Santiago's personal legend is accompanied by four major factors. The first one is the world's greatest lie. In the conversation between Santiago with the old man, the boy asks him what is world's greatest lie to which he responds, "its 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 is the world's greatest lie."(17) The writer talks about faith in oneself which contradicts with idea of fate. Faith stands for loyalty and hopes in belief systems which does not usually have an empirical proof and fate is a belief that things are inevitable and predestined about everyone and it is simply our destiny to submit to it. Fate in a general sense is used as an excuse by many who are lazy enough or ignorant in finding ones personal calling in life. Secondly it is about the soul of the world. "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it." (21) It actually means that the success of anyone in any attempt depends completely on the amount of dedication the person has got towards what she/he wants. Towards success, the path is always thorny. But realisation of what one truly wants and the heartfelt effort to achieve it will

trivialize all the hardships that come in the path towards success. Thirdly Santiago experiences love. “He learned that the most important part of language that all the world spoke- the language that everyone on earth was capable of understanding in their heart. It was love. Something older than humanity, more ancient than the desert.”(88). Love is being defined by the writer as the pure language of the world. Love never keeps a man from pursuing his destiny. If the person abandons his pursuit, then it is not true love, the love that speaks the language of the world. “One is loved because one is loved. No reason is needed for loving.”(116) The fourth point is God. As Paulo Coelho is a practicing catholic, all his writings have biblical references. “Wherever you heart is, that is where you’ll find your treasure.” (123) He mentions the presence of God in an individual’s life and the major role God plays throughout the journey of man towards his/her destiny. Throughout Santiago’s journey, he strongly believes in the presence of the supreme Divine with him. When he reached the desert with the caravan and was trapped there for time being, he was not losing hope. “Maybe God created the desert so that man could appreciate the date trees, he thought.” (83) The readiness to sacrifice something let to the achievement of everything. The author is successful in presenting a novel full or insights and wisdom which lead someone to self actualisation and realisation.

In the novel, the writer brings forth many thoughts for the reader to think and analyse. First and foremost thought is that it is not the lucky people who are the successful people, but those who are wise enough to identify and use the opportunities that come their way. The moral that as one discovers the new things in life and move forward, it is not appropriate to forget whatever one had that made him/her happy is another insight by the writer. The major reality that true knowledge is acquired from life and not from books is understood from the novel as Santiago finishes his journey and finds out the treasure. Another thought which is usually mistook my people is about success. The writer reminds the readers that success is a journey, not a destination. As one aspires to achieve a particular goal, one the way he/she learns a lot of things and achieves many other goals which makes the journey successful. Never give up, the journey may be tough and tedious, tiring and boring, but for the joy of the ultimate success, one has to be strong enough with a build up mind towards the final destination.

The title of the novel “The Alchemist” supports the idea of self realisation, quest and spirituality. The art of transmutation of self and transmutation of energies is Alchemy. Alchemy



is a wide area which includes transforming negative energy into positive, studying the basic principles of energy, keeping the body and mind healthy and reaching enlightenment. Alchemy is a philosophy as well as science. Alchemy works with different layers, physical, emotional and spiritual. Spirituality talks about enlightenment and same with alchemy. Enlightenment is the perfect alignment of Physical, Emotional and Spiritual selves. It studies about turning of ordinary things into extra ordinary things like lead / straw into gold. An Alchemist is the one who researches on this art or the one who practices alchemy. A spiritual alchemist is a person who searches for links with the divine, the spiritual direction, connection and the growth- it takes a lifelong path of self knowledge. The underlying thread of spiritual alchemy is being one with the Divine and the ability to hear the voice of the soul. For this, a constant practice of silence within oneself is most essential. Only in silence one can hear the inner voice. There should be a balance between emotional and spiritual aspects, this facilitates the smooth listening of the inner self. The spiritual alchemist acknowledges the fact that it is only through self knowledge that one attains true freedom. In a nutshell, spiritual alchemy is a path of integrity and authenticity.

Looking into the psychological aspect of the power within oneself, it is rightly said that what lies before us and what lies behind us are tiny matters when compared to what lies within us. Mind has an immense power to design, decide and implement. The subconscious mind works below the level of the conscious mind which can be otherwise called as Universal mind. It activates human thoughts. Its power, energy and strength is immense than human beings can guess. This energy is given many names throughout history, as the Power, the Source, the Light, and the Almighty. It is in the ability of human mind to convert human thoughts into things. All reality is rooted in faith and convictions. Achieving anything lies on how firmly the intensity of the want and belief in its attainment is perceived by the human mind. In this materialistic world, people equate their self to the possessions they have. The essence of being is not in the money earned, the identity of man is represented in spirit which is our essence and soul that is immortal.

A psychological transformation is impossible without a spiritual awakening. Human beings does not create thoughts, it is there. What human mind desires with full enthusiasm, it is manifested in human life. These are manifested by the same spirit that created the thoughts initially in the mind. So even if it is good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust, is manifested in

the human mind by a power greater than human power. Knowing this is the great wisdom and great salvation which spirituality talks about.

World since years is being ruled by materialistic philosophy. In the world where men killed each other for power and position, life always gives a reason to pause and think, “what is the meaning of all these?”. The problem creature of earth is always man. Man is not a problem, but a mystery. But this mystery can always be solved when he is kept face to face with the unfathomable mystery we call God. Substantial love, which is the best synonym for God is the solution for all human mysteries. God is the best solution of man’s troubles. God is love and he is the best solution for life and living. Every man is unique and unrepeatably individual. The individual is not a mere singular instance of the universal but a true embodiment of universal nature with the special richness of his own personality. If man does not use the privilege offered to him and does not understand the greatness of ones own role, he has not achieved the right to the title of true man.

Spirituality focuses on the well being of a person by his body and soul. Body is spatially, temporally, momentarily restricted. But spirit is movable across places and is able to surpass time. Body is mortal and for the world, spirit is immortal and is for eternity and hence does not belong to this world. Spirit is not measured as it is transparent; it is defined in terms of intelligibility, perfection and actuality. But the reality is that human being is a unity of body and spirit. Spirit becomes the actuating principle of the body as it facilitates, unifies, possesses and develops it. Spirit with the body subjects itself to all feelings, changes- biological, psychological and social wherein spirit is itself incomplete without the body.

Life in this world is a struggle. One wavers between the bodily lust and pleasure and the urge towards moral good. Often what pleases body is not morally good. This is the fight of the spirit against the flesh. This struggle is most often hard and troubling. Therefore quiet often the spirit of the man undergoes conflicts between the soul and its Maker. Spirit is not just tied down to the earthly matter body, it is part of the Omniscient Infinite Spirit God.

Thus the researcher suggests that it is not enough to nourish the body. Body is a vessel to safeguard the soul. Soul is immortal and therefore nourishment of the soul by living morally good, listening to one’s personal calling, realising the voice of the Divine and accomplishing the

tasks during the lifetime systematically must be seriously taken care of by individuals. Life in this world is the journey of the soul to the higher realm. So it has to be lived dutifully. There is a scope for future research by comparing the elements of Spirituality in different religions in detail and Spirituality as a single entity.

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