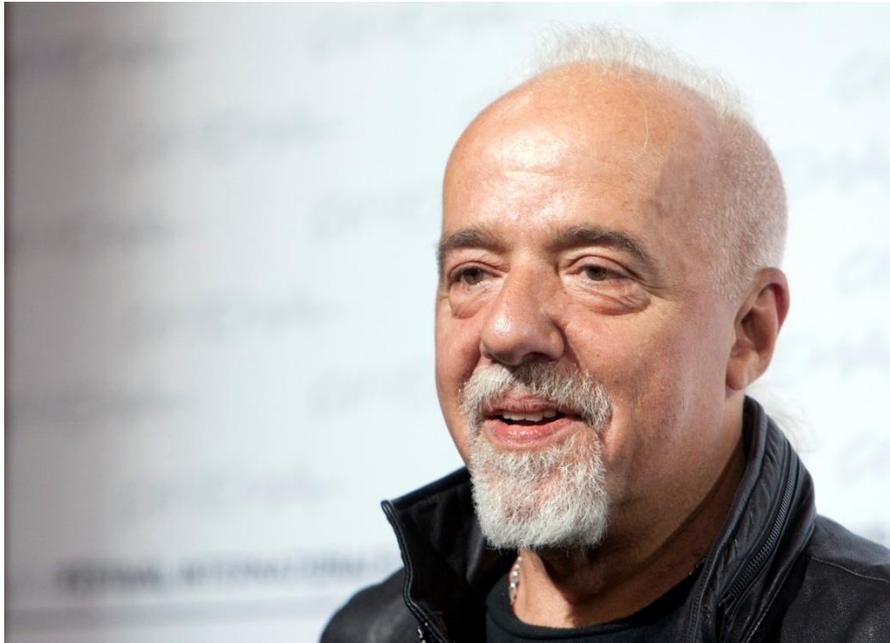


Expression of Personal Experience in the Novels of Paulo Coelho

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Paulo Coelho

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Abstract

Paulo Coelho, one of the most popular Brazilian writers of recent times, is best known for his practice of writing about life lessons in the light of spiritual and mystical realms. His writings are usually optimistic and full of references to miracles and positive endings. He is not only a wonderful writer but a gifted and a brave person who has an amazing ability to write about feelings that one is even afraid to mention. As he aware of many common human experiences, he writes his novels with strong universal themes such as the importance of love, the need for adventure, the joy of fighting for one's dream, etc. He uses his characters as his mouthpiece to answers some of the life's basic questions and his readers are able to see themselves reflected in the eyes of his characters. He considers the experiences and the knowledge he gained through experiences are the real treasure. His novels are based on many of his own experiences. He gets inspiration from his life experiences, people he knew and the places he visited. Hence, this paper aims at exploring the extraordinary life experiences of Coelho and how it's expressed in the Selected Novels.

Keywords: Paul Coelho, Personal Experience, Expressions, Life experiences.

Depiction of Experience in Fiction

Literature expresses the experiences of human beings through literary devices such as, poetry, prose, short story, novel, essay, criticism, biography, autobiography, memoirs etc. It deals with man and his experiences which are expressed in artistic, imaginative, creative, and meaningful languages. It paves the way to reminisce his memories and thus he can re-experience the memory or experience through words. It also allows him to share his experiences through descriptions in his words and to learn through his experiences. By reading the literature of various societies man can learn lessons from the life of other people because he can see through other people's thoughts and memories.

Bringing personal experience of writers to writing enriches and deepens the experience of the readers. Personal experience functioned as a muse for their art at some point, resulting in works that describe observations they made, recall childhood moments, include other writers as either subject or addressee, detail moments of personal discovery and express an appreciation for their surroundings. From time immemorial, man remains a raconteur of his own chronicles. He tells and writes his own personal account, his own journey, his own world and his own likes and dislikes. It is both believed and proved that writers are able to produce a great and moving work only when they reveal their most private thoughts and feelings in their writings. The influence of personal experience and reminiscences can be seen in the works of almost all the writers.

Hudson on Personal Experience

Hudson says, "Personal experience is the basis of all real literature." According to him, literature is an expression of personal experiences and he utters, "A great book is born of brain and heart of its author; he has put himself in his pages; they partake of his life, and are an instinct of his individuality" (15). He recalls Milton's famous quote, "a good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on the purpose of a life beyond life" (15). Hence it is imperative to know the author in order to understand a work of art as literature is life-blood of the author." For him, "Literature is the vital records of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about these aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language" (10).

In order to judge great books, one must distinguish between what Carlyle calls 'genuine voices' and 'mere echoes' (16). He means to say that in great books the writers speak for themselves, whereas in ordinary works they speak on the reports of others. So readers must distinguish essential difference between the literature which draws its life directly from personality and experience, and that which draws its life mainly at second hand from contact with the personality and experience of others. Thus, the second type of literature is, as Turgenev says, "smell of literature," but as the student of literature, the works of the "fullest of original vitality" are of chief concern (16).

Hudson states that as literature is an expression of the writer's personality, one must start one's reading with the writer's personality. A work of literature is the record of the writer's

personality. These records of the writer's personality cannot be understood without understanding writer's life. Hence it is essential to take this personal trait as a 'corpus' or organic whole. One must consider the works of the author not separately but as a whole body – "not simply as works, but as his work" (19). He also articulates that there should be sincerity, originality, and, genuineness of expressing life in great literature as without this, a literary work becomes inanimate. He firmly believes, "without sincerity, no vital work in literature is possible" (17)

Literature Becomes and Accomplished Art

Originality of experience makes literature "far more accomplished art" (17). Hence he suggests readers to penetrate as profoundly as into the personal life of the author. Their reading should be an actual intercourse between the author of the book and themselves. They should observe how the world of experience fascinated him, and how it is interpreted through his personality. While going through a book, the reader become familiar with the character, viewpoint, strength, weakness, and, accent of the writer's personality. Consequently, the study of literature is actually a study of the writer's personality.

Paulo Coelho de Souza

Paulo Coelho de Souza, the Brazilian writer was born on 24th August 1947 in a sophisticated upper middle class family in Rio de Janeiro. He was the eldest son of Petro Queima Coelho de Souza, an engineer and Lygia Araripe Coelho, a home maker. At a very young age, he showed that he had an original way of thinking. Once when her mother asked him why he was being naughty that day, he replied "it's because my guardian angel isn't working. He's been working very hard and his battery has run out." (Morais, 30) He hated studying but loved reading and writing. At the age of 12, he bought a pocket diary in which he began to make daily entries. Gradually he also began to write things he had done and experienced. This is how he has sketched about his likes and dislikes in his diary:

"I really like studying, but I also like playing. I've never been interested in opera or romantic music. I hate rock-and-roll, but I really like popular Brazilian music. I only like carnival when I'm taken to fancy-dress balls. (Morais, 40)

He enjoyed the regular practice of writing about himself or things that happened during the day. He started recording everything either in a diary kept in a spiral notebook or by dictating into cassette recorder and keeping the tapes. His diary entries unveil that he is a voracious reader. He had recorded in his notebooks about the books he had read and his commentaries about the books. When he was thirteen or fourteen, he showed his deep desire that he would never lose to be a writer. When Paulo Coelho told his mom that he wanted to be a writer, he was discouraged by his parents, who saw no future in that profession in Brazil. Realizing his growing inclination towards art and literature and lack of interest in academics, he was admitted by his parents to a strict Catholic Jesuit School of San Ignacio, where he learned to be disciplined. It is there he developed a strong aversion to the obligatory nature of religious practices.

His parents wanted him to be an engineer but they were disappointed when he took three years to finish off the final year of his secondary school. His spirit of rebellion reached its zenith after his reading of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and was admitted to a mental hospital thrice

for his own good from where he managed to escape all the three times. Later, he was released from the mental asylum and he was enrolled in a law school, but dropped out to indulge in sex, drugs and hippie life. During the hippie movement of 1968, he got involved in all the progressive movements and became attracted to Marx, Engels and Che Guevara and took part in elections and demonstrations. As a hippie, he travelled all over Latin America, in quest of new spiritual experiences and idealizing Carlos Castaneda.

Writing still remained a passion for him and he began to dabble in journalism. Thus, he founded a magazine called *2001*. Even though it lasted only for two issues, it made a remarkable twist in the life of Coelho. It became instrumental in introducing him to the great music producer and singer Raul Seixas. Together they produced a number of songs, and this was the first time that the moment of glory kissed the writer. His most famous song, *Geeta*, which was based on the *Bhagavad Gita* sold about five million copies. This companionship enabled Coelho to earn enough money as well as fame. Along with this he worked for the Rio newspaper *El Globo* till 1974. In 1974, he published his first book, *The Theatre in Education*.

Alternative Society

In 1973 Coelho and Raul Seixas joined an Alternative Society, an organization that defended individual's rights to free expression, and began publishing a series of comic strips, calling for more freedom. Members of the organization were detained and imprisoned. Coelho was kidnapped and tortured by a group of paramilitaries. This experience affected him profoundly. After being released from the military camp, Coelho took a firm decision to lead a new normal life, stopping the use of drugs and practicing black magic. He worked for some recording companies. In 1976, he moved to England with the instinct of becoming a writer to work for some Brazilian magazines as correspondent. There he decided to write an autobiography, but unfortunately lost the manuscript, the result of a year's work, in a London pub, thus leaving it unpublished. He tried his hand at writing but didn't start seriously until after he had an encounter with a stranger. The man first came to him in a vision, and two months later Coelho met him at a café in Amsterdam. The stranger suggested that Coelho should return to Catholicism and study the benign side of magic. He also encouraged Coelho to walk the Road to Santiago, the medieval pilgrim's route.

Pilgrim's Journey – Mental, Physical and Spiritual

In 1981, he married Christina Oiticia, a painter after three failed marriages. He is an ardent traveler. Coelho initiated his fifty-six day journey with his spiritual master in 1986 to Santiago de Compostella, a medieval pilgrim's route between France and Spain. Along this journey, Coelho is guided by a man named Petrus who has achieved the title of Master and is now called upon to lead other prospective masters. During their pilgrimage, Petrus teaches some exercises and rituals that are known as the practices of RAM. He also teaches that the true path to wisdom can be identified by three things. At first, it must involve agape, and it has to have practical application in one's life and finally it has to be a path that can be followed by any one.

During his pursuit, Paulo encounters many interesting people to help his efforts. They are Mme Lourdes, Father Jordi, Alfonso, Andrew, and a lamb. Legion, a gypsy, and a couple of small boys try to divert Paulo from reaching his goal. His journey is not only related to mental

but also physical and spiritual. He was instructed by his master to walk the entire seven hundred kilometers without taking any short-cuts, or he will risk being denied the acquisition of his sword for the final time. Besides walking the entire road Paulo must also climb up a fifty-foot waterfall, battle a demonic dog, and raise a fallen wooden cross. Amidst these physical tests, Coelho must learn to search his spirit for the wisdom to understand the truth behind his sword.

The Pilgrimage

The walk and the spiritual awakening he experienced during the journey inspired him to write *The Pilgrimage*. The book describes his experiences and his discovery that the extraordinary occurs in the lives of ordinary people. It was formerly entitled as *The Diary of a Magus* and later retitled as *The Pilgrimage* and thus started his literary career establishing him as one of the bestselling authors in the world, securing him a place in the Guinness Book of World Records and an acclaimed author of international repute.

The Alchemist

The novel *The Alchemist* is about a shepherd boy who travels far from home seeking a mysterious treasure which he dreamt was hidden in the dusty lands of Egyptian pyramids. He sets off a journey with a view to finding his treasure. Eventually he discovers that the treasure lies not in the pyramids but in one's own heart and there is no need to search for it in the outside world. The novel has fetched him immense popularity far and wide and established him as one of the most famous Brazilian novelists. It appeals to readers from many different backgrounds. It conveys a very powerful message of following one's dreams. It also reinforces the idea that if one is passionate about something, the whole universe conspires in helping the one to achieve it. The novel also teaches the power of positivity in a very subtle and effective way.

The novel is based on many of his own experiences as a writer and as a human being. His personal desire to travel, to read books and learn new things are expressed in the novel and he adds some imagination to make his work interesting. Through Santiago, he expresses his own self,

“His purpose in life was to travel, and, after two years of walking the Andalusian terrain, he knew all the cities of the region. He was planning, on this visit, to explain to the girl how it was that a simple shepherd knew how to read. That he had attended a seminary until he was sixteen. His parents had wanted him to become a priest, and thereby a source of pride for a simple farm family. They worked hard just to have food and water, like the sheep. He had studied Latin, Spanish, and theology. But ever since he had been a child, he had wanted to know the world, and this was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man's sins. One afternoon, on a visit to his family, he had summoned up the courage to tell his father that he didn't want to become a priest. That he wanted to travel.” (The Alchemist, 7-8)

The Valkyries

The Valkyries depicts Coelho's forty days adventure in the Mojave Desert with his wife. In the beginning of the novel, he meets his master J and receives directions to travel from Brazil to the Mojave Desert, to speak to his guardian angel. During his journey with his wife Christina,

they meet the Valkyries, a group of warrior women who travel the desert on motorcycles. They also came to know a young man who lived in a trailer and the Valkyries, who belonged to the same spiritual tradition as Coelho.

The book helps readers to discover Coelho the man, more than his other novels as it deals with exorcism of personal demons and discovering one's strength. It speaks to the human condition in the way it reminds that each one has the tendency to "kill what we love the most." Christina who accompanies Coelho, in her own way, faces her own inner struggles and attains spiritual enlightenment. Coelho touches on the theme of forgiveness, the complexity of the human condition, the ability to overcome the biggest fears and the most destructive flaws. Penning this book required a huge amount of courage and self-awareness because he knows well that his personal life and past indiscretions will be read by all his fans. This closeness to his readers makes Coelho different from other authors. To understand this book, readers should have some knowledge about Coelho's view on religion, a Christianity-based theology called "the Tradition" that combines magic and spirituality.

By the River Piedra I sat down and wept

The book *By the River Piedra I sat down and wept* is about a 29 year girl named Pilar, whose expectations from life are getting a job, marrying, having kids and living a normal life. Her life takes a turn when she meets her childhood friend who is now a spiritual leader, who has spent 12 years of travelling around the world, learning different cultures, religions and the representations of feminine aspects of God in different cultures. They both set off on a journey through the French Pyrenees. During the journey, he tries to teach her whatever he has learnt but the main objective was to declare his long cherished love for her.

The experience of her seven days journey had a profound impact on her life. The journey offers her a chance to regain both her faith and love. She gradually comes to realize that the man she loves is being called upon to choose between her and his spiritual calling. True love helps them discover themselves and they find a meaningful existence through love. The book is viewed as autobiographical as it carries many of Coelho's life themes such as spiritual path, RAM practices, the feminine side of God, the dilemmas of faith and belief, the fight for one's dream and the combat of fear.

Veronica Decides to Die

The novel, *Veronica Decides to Die* (1998) is about Veronica, a beautiful young woman from Slovenia who decides to commit suicide by taking many sleeping pills as everything in her life was same and everything in the world is utter chaos and she couldn't do anything about it. Instead of dying, she awakes in "Villete", a mental hospital in Ljubljana. She has been told that she has only one week to live because the pills had caused irreversible damages in her body. During a week, Veronika experiences a number of changes in her perception towards life and death, in her beliefs, her attitudes and her personality. She learns the meaning of life and how to live more happily. The presence of Veronika in the hospital has influenced all patients and encouraged them to think about their own life and value it more and has encouraged them to leave the hospital to achieve their dreams.

In the end, the readers discover that Veronika did not suffer from any damages. It was only an experiment of Dr. Igor who decided to shock her by death to make her value the life she had and it was successful because it helped Veronika see the world in a new light. The final message given by the author is interesting: life is worth living despite contradictions one can notice around, one just has to change one's perception of life, face the difficulties and overcome one's fears in order to make sense to those contradictions. The book touches on one of the significant experiences of Coelho. He recollects his experiences in the mental hospital, the electroshock therapy, the violence of his father and his relationship with his parents. Coelho is of the opinion that no life is complete without a touch of madness. He says a little madness is necessary to take one more step. He explains,

“When love is not total madness, it is not love. I am not saying that madness is love. But a good, true, intense love is not complete without madness.” His unique perspective of madness is revealed through Veronica. Veronica says, “I want to continue being mad, living my life the way I dream it, and not the way other people want it to be. (31)

The Zahir

The Zahir is a 2005 novel and it's about an unnamed narrator who is obsessed by finding his wife, Esther who is a war correspondent who has just returned from Iraq. “According to the writer Jorge Luis Borges, the idea of the Zahir comes from the Islamic tradition and is thought to have arisen at some point in the 18th century. Zahir means visible, present, incapable of going unnoticed in Arabic. It is someone or something which, once we have come into contact with them or it, gradually occupies our every thought, until we can think of nothing else. This can be considered either a state of holiness or of madness.”(Faubourg Saint-Peres, Encyclopaedia of the Fantastic, 1953) The narrator of the novel starts searching for wife and his search becomes an obsession which he calls “the zahir”. He encounters Mikhail, his wife's friend, during a book launch. He learns from Mikhail that Esther had left him in a search for peace as she had trouble in living with him. The author realizes that in order to find Esther he must first find his own self. With the help of Mikhail, the narrator experiences a new spiritual perspective that enlightens him about the various meanings of love and life.

The narrator's experiences reflect Coelho's life experiences and his search for his true path in life. Coelho says, “Everything that's written in my books is part of my soul, part of the lessons I've learned throughout my life, and which I try to apply to myself. I'm a reader of my own books. They show me things that I already knew, even if only unconsciously.” (p.125) According to him, a book should be self-explanatory. He states, “if a book isn't self-explanatory, then the book isn't worth reading. When a writer appears in public, he should attempt to show the audience his universe, not try to explain his books; and in this spirit, I begin talking about something more personal.” (248) He describes his real experiences in his novels in order to become free from his past and to share his vision of the world. The following conversation with a journalist in *Zahir* reveals Coelho's main objective of writing books.

“Let's talk about your new book. What's the main message?”

“If I wanted to put across a message, I’d write a single sentence, not a book.”

“And why do you write?”

“Because that’s my way of sharing my feelings with others.” (The Zahir, 281)

Aleph

The book *Aleph* is an autobiographical account written in a novel format. When Coelho was interviewed by The New York Times, he was asked how autobiographical the book *Aleph* was. He replied,

“One hundred percent. These are my whole experiences, meaning everything that is real is real. I had to summarize much of it. But in fact I see the book as my journey myself, not as a fiction book but as a nonfiction book.”

The book *Aleph*, tells the story of his own epiphany while on a pilgrimage to Africa, and then to Europe and Asia via the Trans-Siberian Railway, he initiates a journey to revitalize his energy and passion. On his way, he unexpectedly meets Hilal, a young violinist, whom Paulo loved five hundred years before and betrayed in an act of cowardice which prevents him now from finding real happiness in his life. Coelho with Hilal initiates a mystical voyage that teaches love, forgiveness, and the courage to overcome life's inevitable challenges. The novel is centered on the idea of finding redemption from the mistakes of past lives.

Real Life Connections in the Novels

The above novels of Coelho’s reflect many elements and experiences that he himself experienced in his life. As seen in the biographies, many connections can be made between the novels and Coelho’s own life. Some of the characters in the novels can be attributed to some of Coelho’s own interpersonal relations. The works are not only the reflection of the society which he belongs but also the reflection of the struggle and the obstacles he faced in life. He says,

“In the *Alchemist* I’m the shepherd, the crystal merchant and even Fatima. In other books I’m always the main character. I am even Brida. In two books I’m completely myself: *The Valkyries* and *The Pilgrimage*. The fact is, the majority of my books, although they’re literary narratives, are not fiction. They are actual things I’ve experienced. The same holds true with *Veronika Decides to Die*. It’s nothing more than the fictionalized experience of the terrible story I told you, of the three times I was committed to an asylum.” (Arias, 172 - 173)

In an interview with *Life positive 2000*, he stated that his books are the outcome of his own experience not his wisdom. He adds, “Experience is all a person has so it must be shared. This is our reason to be here, to share. I believe that any artist or person has only to share something that he has already experienced, regardless of whether the experience was in the symbolic realm or in the so-called 'reality'.” He shares his life experiences to free himself from the past. What Hudson states about literature is true, Coelho’s works are the expression of his personality. His novels cannot be understood well without understanding his life. It is imperative to understand his emotions, his likes and dislikes, his motives, his way of thinking, his temptations, his spiritual inclinations, political beliefs and all that he endured and learned in life, to understand his works better.

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