

The Doctrine of Karma in Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist

S.P. Nayak¹ and K B Ahirwar²

Govt. Polytechnic College, Nowgong (M.P.)

School of Studies and Research Center in English, MCBU Chhatarpur (M.P.)

Corresponding Author: spnayaknwg@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Paulo Coelho's story "The Alchemist" deals with how actions and their outcomes interrelate with pursuit of one's "Personal Legend". This almost-chemical-work transforms deep philosophical ideas into a work of art that minerals its way into classical reads whose narratives deal with destiny, self-awareness, and the supreme power of individuality. Indeed, at the core of this metamorphic narrative resides the conception of Karma, a thread so subtly woven into the very fabric of the account. Santiago, a shepherd boy, is called away into his journey by his dream, and prophecies presented to him by a mysterious old king. For Santiago, it is not treasure in the material sense that constitutes a true victory. Indeed, the treasure he attains from many encounters throughout his quest is wisdom and insight into himself. "The Alchemist" portrays Karma as a mechanism of probative interaction between the cosmos and the individual. Santiago learns a vital truth: that the treasure he seeks is not buried beneath foreign soil but rather lies within the rich abundance of his being. The quest for his Personal Legend becomes a process of the hero's self-realization-the struggle towards the superlative inner-self. The novel thus becomes a mirror reflecting the ageless wisdom that one's fate is not a preordained destination but rather a faintly sky-like horizon molded from within by the sails of one's growth and directions from one's own actions. This paper seeks to elaborate on the process of analyzing how "The Alchemist" openly avows the Traverse of Karma.

Keywords: Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist, The Karma Theory, Destiny, Vedic Wisdom, Spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Paulo Coelho's amazing novel, The Alchemist, narrates Santiago, a shepherd boy from Spain, on his journey through the desert in search of hidden treasure. The desert that exists in the novel is not a

common desert; Coelho transforms even the most arid terrain into a land of fantasy where every element is mysterious and able to convey its emotions. The author accepts what preceded Santiago's search for love, faith, and treasure, which together form a silhouette of experience. The narrative hints at the stories of magic, relegating fantasy to the domain of folklore and ushering in a life thereafter in which dreams are never abstract. While talking to Santiago, the Sun tells him, "It's true that everything has its destiny, but one day that destiny will be realized. So, each thing has to transform itself into something better, and to acquire a new destiny, until, someday, the Soul of the World becomes one thing only." (143) At the heart of Santiago's fairy tale, there is the doctrine of Karma that holds the whole plot. The theory of karma has a deep influence in Indian philosophy. The importance of karma is explained in detail in the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and other religious texts. Karma literally means 'work' or 'deed', and it is connected to every aspect of human life. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Shri Krishna told Arjuna:

karmaṇyēvādhikāraṣṭē mā phalēṣu kadācana
mā karmaphalahēturbhūrmā tē saṅgō'stvakarmaṇi
(Bhagavad Gita 2.47)

That is, "You have authority only over action, not over its consequences."

Influence of Vedic Spirituality on Paulo Coelho is no secret. Long before attaining popularity as an author,

Coelho collaborated with famous singer and musician Raul Seixas as a lyricist and composed many songs. His most popular song 'Gita', released in 1974 was inspired from "The Bhagwad Gita." Karma is the cosmic ledger balancing our deeds; Coelho weaves it into sand dunes, revealing very intricate patterns. There is an action, after that a reaction; there is a choice, followed by a consequence. Santiago's variegated experiences with the crystal merchant, the Englishman, and the Alchemist, all bear witness to this cosmic play. It is a mirror held to our lives, prompting us to seek our personal legends, to listen to the language of omens, and to recognize the alchemy that transforms leaden moments into golden memories. It seems that Santiago is infused with the teachings of Lord Krishna, what He told Arjuna:

ananyāscintayantō māṁ yajanti sumanaśḥ
tēṣāṁ nityābhiyuktānāṁ yōgakṣēmaṁ vahāmyaham
(Bhagavad Gita 9.22)

That is, "Those who worship Me with devotion, meditating on My transcendental form—to them I carry what they lack and preserve what they have."

As Santiago gazes up at the stars, he gradually learns that the whole universe conspires with him, in his favor, for the sake of fulfilling the desires of the heart. The small grains of the desert submit only to the wind but also to the secret voices of the heart's wishes. And so, we travel the roads with Santiago, our hearts longing for him; our souls hum along with the alchemy of existence. Sanitiago, like Arjuna,

sometimes finds his determination shaking, but Coelho designed his protagonist fortunate enough to get the inspiration and guidance from wise people, as Arjuna was fortunate to get Lord Krishna as his guide. This guidance keeps him on the path of righteousness and makes him stay determined to achieve his destiny. Coelho's narrative goes beyond borders, as it speaks the universal tongue of the spirit among humans across cultures. It is a testimony to our collective quest for meaning, an epic adventure quenched by existential thirst, and an unwavering belief that magic exists in the world if we may just take sight of it.

THE ESSENCE OF KARMA

1. The Inseparability of Action and Outcome

The doctrine of Karma, which stands at the center of almost all extant religious creeds shares a similar message pointing out that actions are not singular events; they carry with them built-in consequences. The epic voyage of Santiago symbolizes the unpredictable territory of life and depicts the notion that growth does not occur when it is easy to come by. It comes from strength after all! The doctrine of Karma strands into the plot line of Santiago's journey. His encounters with thieves, his roaming across the extensive desert and iterations over omens; every incident leads to the effect utterly modifying an outcome. While trading in the market of Tarifa, Santiago meets Melchizedek, an enigmatic King who reigns over Salem, who seeds the concept of Personal Legend, which reveal to every human their Unicorn

Path. The time, space and setting of Santiago's journeys are also a manifestation of the law of Karma. His every action, be it heeding omens, listening to the universe, or doggedly searching for his treasure - determines who and what he is. The idea is beautifully put forward by Coelho, "And when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it." (21). Santiago's search for the hidden treasure mirrors our own quests of meaning and fulfillment, as does karma foretell, for each one is an act in the great web of reality, and every creation a reaction. Similarly, the ancient doctrine of Karma also states that no action is solitary; each action follows the other and echoes as a chain thereafter. This universal law is beautifully articulated by Paulo Coelho in his lyrical masterpiece where Santiago, a shepherd whose dreams are larger than life itself, goes on odyssey carrying with him the secret to manifest prosperity out of nothingness. Santiago's journey presents a grand experience of the reality of Life. It reiterates that growth never sprouts from the seeds of luxury or ease, but it germinates from the soil of adversities and tribulations. Santiago exhibits a similar determination as is warranted in ancient vedic scriptures:

uttiṣṭhata jāgrata prāpya varānnibōdhata

kṣurasya dhārā niṣitā duratyayā

durgam pathastatkavayō vadanti (Katha Upanishad

1.2.6)

That is, "Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached. The path is as sharp as the edge of a razor,

hard to tread and difficult to cross, so say the wise.” Coelho entwines carefully, the threads of Karma into Santiago's quest, encouraging us to reflect on how our actions ripple through time. Trekking across the sands of this vast desert that is as endless as a sea and mysterious like a night sky—and he runs into none other than the sage ruler of Salem - Melchizedek, who tells him, “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.” (17) The theory of the world system accepts Santiago as a pilgrim to Santiago, in both material and spiritual aspects and thus his fate accumulates around Karma. His decisions to follow or ignore the omens, whether and how much faith he places in fate as opposed to his desire for treasure - all these steps paint the shades of his destiny through the colours of his faith and hope. The tale captures the energy of a cosmic coalition as the hidden treasure Santiago ceaselessly hunts for, is really more symbolic of his inner yearnings for meaning and fulfillment; something that echoes the age-old wisdom of Karma. Thus, as we walk alongside Santiago, through the deserts of our doubts and the oases of our triumphs, we witness the intricate ballet of Karma. Every step is a note in the symphony of existence, every decision a verse in the poem of life.

2. Pursuing One's Personal Legend

In “The Alchemist,” Paulo Coelho introduces the idea of a person's ‘Personal Legend’, which might be

understood as defining an individual's niche or a calling that they have in life. His idea is akin to the concept of Dharma, as described in “The Bhagwad Gita” and other vedic scriptures. Dharma or ‘Path of Righteousness’ is an inseparable entity of the doctrine of Karma. Coelho postulates that deep within every person lies a particular dream, which is supposed to be realized. Within the young protagonist Santiago, his Personal Legend is embodied by a recurring dream about finding the treasure near the pyramids in Egypt. This dream sends him on a journey of ups and downs, decisions, and meetings that eventually help him find out about himself and mature in a way that is very deep. The concept of following one's Personal Legend is as much about self-discovery as it is about reaching a certain goal. During his journey across vast varied terrains, Santiago learns more about himself and develops spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. It is not an easy path; he faces obstacles that put his resolve and faith to the test. Coelho suggests, however, that those challenges are prominent features on the road to growth, building resilience, and wisdom. When Santiago pushes all his energy in digging near the pyramids and finds nothing. It symbolizes the Vedic notion that there is no treasure outside, the real treasure lies within oneself. Similarly, the robbers beat him and snatch the piece of gold, but this doesn't make much difference as he gets the real information about the treasure. So, the story justifies the feeble power of physical strength when compared to the enormous

power of knowledge. A part of Coelho's essential vision is that when a person finally sets out on his or her Personal Legend, the universe "conspires" to assist that person by providing guidance and signs throughout. This thought parallels the view that everything is interconnected, and following one's real purpose puts a person in tune with larger forces working in the world. It is in Santiago's story that Coelho brings out the idea that, as important as reaching treasure is, it is ultimately the journey that will bring fulfillment. The idea proposed by Coelho, falls in line with the Sanatan doctrine of Karma, that also sounds exactly similar and states that the true treasure is not in physical attainments but in wisdom and spiritual development that are acquired along the way. As he fulfilled his Personal Legend, he found harmony within himself and with the world, proving a deeper happiness that lies in following one's true calling. The result of Santiago's actions brings him not only external success but also inner peace and understanding. This principle is in line with the principle of the Gita which states:

karmajam buddhiyuktā hi phalam tyaktvā manīṣiṇa:
janmabandhavinirmuktā:padam gacchantyanāmayaam
(Bhagavad Gita 2.51)

That is, "a person who acts with wisdom is free from consequences and never suffers loss."

Santiago transforms himself by listening to his heart, welcoming uncertainty and learning from each encounter. His quest is not for material wealth but rather for self-discovery. The author deftly weaves his

protagonist as partly a traveller, and partly a metaphorical seeker of meaning in Life. While journeying across the desert, he not only attains maturity by navigating tribal battles, falling in love, handling strangers and facing adverse conditions, but also develops a heightened sense of abstract feelings like fear, doubt and failures of his own. Dealing with all these situations and making choices shows us the doctrine of Karma in action. The plot demonstrates the quintessence of the doctrine of Karma as the deeds of the protagonist echo that every act of ours is a ripple in Time that changes, who we are, and what the world around us becomes. Unfurling its pages like a sacred scroll, this is no ordinary journey of a shepherd boy, this is rather an alchemical quest for the gold that lay in his very own soul. Coelho, with the skill of a master weaver, braids Santiago's external journey through ancient dreamscapes together with the maze-like corridors running alongside his mind - discoursing where he dwells within his heart; and cunningly uses this heart-felt draw to lead him to his Personal Legend. Uncertainty is his constant companion, and every encounter - with tribal warriors as well as an enigmatic alchemist turns into a mirror image of his interior. His journey dons several masks: the fear of unknown, risk of failure and hesitance to abandon familiar habitat; but it stands testament courage. The power of Santiago's agency resides in his choice to keep getting up after being knocked down, again and yet further, still

brutally beaten by life but not without hope for redemption and to interpret the language of the world around him. His wins against fear are no ordinary victories; it was the universe coming in alliance with him and affirming his decisions rebounded through time. They remind us that whenever fear comes knocking on our door, let it in with open arms as it has its part to play within the cosmic order.

CHALLENGES AND CHOICES

1. Fear and Destiny

Yet, it is usually the fear that stands in our way of achieving our potentials. Santiago's experiences with fear are very much similar to those all of us face, which are fear of the unknown, fear of failure, and fear of leaving comfort zones. Coelho further reminds us that fear is a self-imposed limitation; he says, "We are afraid of losing what we have, whether it's our life or our possessions and property. But this fear evaporates when we understand that our life stories and the history of the world were written by the same hand." (73) Thus, overcoming his fear, Santiago aligns himself with his destiny. Santiago knows it very well that fear rooted in uncertainty can drive actions that may alter one's path, and aligns with the vedic wisdom about the connection of fear and destiny:

yaducchandasah karma kurute

yatsvabhavaṁ dhātē

yat śraddhā bhavati tadbhavati (Brihadaranyaka

Upanishad 4.4.6)

That is, "what one does according to their desires,

what one embraces as their nature, and what one believes in—that becomes their destiny." His journey is a classic example of the thin line between fear and courage, the very definition of Karma. It is through this that Santiago's journey is an extended metaphor about the human experience of fear and how that relates to personal growth and one's destiny. Coelho's fable instills into sense the idea that fear is the terrible thing that stops people from pursuing their dreams is an internally imposed restriction that keeps a person from fulfilling his or her potential. The different fears that Santiago has to confront are symbolic of those faced by humans universally: the fear of entering the unknown, fear of failure, and resistance to being out of one's comfort zone. These are fears that are not mere impediments but also constitute the internal scuffles that every individual needs to sort through. Coelho treats fear as something not greater than a person, but rather as a test to be conquered in the character development of Santiago throughout his journey. Coelho does not consider fear as an entirely negative force, he rather conceives it as an essential element that contributes in the maintenance of cosmic harmony. His conception exhibits a clear impression of ancient

Indian wisdom:

bhīṣāsmādvātaḥ pavate bhīṣodeti sūryaḥ

bhīṣāsmādagnīścendraśca mṛtyur dhāvati pañcamah

bhayādasya tapati sūryaḥ

bhayādindraśca vāyuśca

bhayādagnīśca mṛtyuśca (Taittiriya Upanishad 2.7.1-2) That is “out of fear of the Supreme, the wind blows, the sun rises, fire burns, and even death hastens in its duty. The sun shines out of fear of the Supreme; Indra and Vayu function due to fear. Even fire and death perform their duties because of fear.” In this sense, it is the struggle against the tribal chieftain and the Alchemist, which symbolizes the duality of fear: both as an alien enemy and as a phantom that haunts from within. These nodal points in the story paint the interactive relation between fear and courage, almost pointing to the idea that the moment one decides to face his fears is, in essence, to embrace his Personal Legend, or what we would call one's ultimate purpose. Coelho believes that one gets closer to meeting their destiny as one overcomes fear. The Alchemist tells Santiago, “Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second's encounter with God and with eternity.” (124)

It is in this alignment that the doctrine of Karma finds its premise that what one does and thinks has direct consequences on the path that life will take. Santiago's victories over fear are not his alone but also karmic affirmations, which help to move him toward his destiny. “The Alchemist” by Coelho, therefore, becomes a literary investigation of the fragile balance that exists between fear and courage and how this delicate balance is intrinsically related to the

realization of one's Karma and personal legend.

2. The Power of Individual Agency

Coelho's fable brings into sharp focus the fact that every individual has a Personal Legend—a journey of sorts. The universe is full of signs and chances, but it all comes down to the personal conversion of an individual to act upon those signs. Santiago had choices: to believe in “The Alchemist”, to read the omens, to listen to his heart—all personal choices that keep him on the path so essential in the Karmic doctrine. His decision to turn himself into the wind and speak with the sun shows that everything in life is interlinked, as are consequences of actions. It also gives us a lesson that destiny can be achieved only through action. Inactive people lose their destiny and their inaction may lead to benefiting others who do not deviate from the path of righteous action. The treasure hidden beneath the old church was actually destined for the robber who tells about his dream to Santiago, but his inaction results in transfer of his treasure to Santiago. As Lord Krishna speaks:

ajñāśh chāśhraddadhānaśh cha sanśhayātmā

vinaśhyati

nāyaṁ loko 'sti na paro na sukhaṁ sanśhayātmanaḥ

(Bhagavad Gita 4.40)

That is, “But persons who possess neither faith nor knowledge, and who are of a doubting nature, suffer a downfall. For the skeptical souls, there is no happiness either in this world or the next.” The wisdom of “The Alchemist” repeats the eternal truth of Karma. In that

beauteously interwoven tale, there was an underlying web of individual fate, where every thread represented a path, called one's "Personal Legend." The universe unravels its infinite wisdom into a canvas of omens and opportunities, which it hangs in front of every individual; yet it is the grave responsibility of every soul to listen for the heavenly murmur and act upon it with willful intent. It is this sense of agency that the karmic doctrine comes across with through the person of Santiago, our intrepid shepherd, whose choices-to believe in the mysterious alchemist, to decipher cryptic languages of omens, or to listen to the deep murmurs of the heart are the crucibles within which his fate is forged. When Santiago decides to turn himself into the very wind and converse with the resplendent sun, he is bathed in a bright moment of alchemical triumph-the deep interrelationship between action and consequence. With its resonance to the universe's harmonic frequency, "The Alchemist" shares wise insights and maxims. His aphorism is the echo of eternal verity of Karma-the fact that the universe itself joins in as an ally to the man who dares to pursue with courage and conviction the destiny ordained for him. Hence, Coelho's magnum opus celebrates not only the journey of self-actualization but also reveres the ability of an individual to navigate the celestial currents of Karma and to steer one's life vessel towards the shores of his Personal Legend with the oars of free will and the

compass of more inner wisdom.

CONCLUSION

"The Alchemist" is a fable that stirs the readers to contemplate one's own quest, dreams, and the role of Karma in their life. The story reminds us that, however important our actions are, our pursuit of our Personal Legend is equally vital because both fall under the cosmic order. The Vedic wisdom reiterates that the real power lies within, but to achieve the access that power everyone has to undergo trials and tribulations. Dreams are the method of God's communication with us and the ability to decipher such dreams does not lie in any language, but in one's determination to continue righteous actions to achieve the destiny. As Santiago learns, the universe conspires to help him when he dares to follow his heart and takes the journey. In Santiago's odyssey, Coelho weaves a parable of Karma: every choice and each action ripples out into the world and influences the course of the protagonist and with it impacts his destiny. The story takes on a metaphysical tone by establishing the existence of Cosmic order and the inter-relativity of the actions of every individual towards the realization of their Personal Legend - a notion harking to the karmic law of cause and effect. Yet Coelho does not make his protagonist a toy at the mercy of destiny; rather, Santiago is an agent of free will, in control of making his life as the course it would take by his decisions taken and actions performed. The theme seems echoing in line with the divine teachings of Lord Krishna to Arjuna, about Karma and its outcome.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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