Paulo Coelho’s Women and Indian Mysticism

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Abstract: Paulo Coelho is one of the most popular novelists of our times. Needless to say that he has impressed the world with his fictions flavoured with mysticism originating from very basic human instincts and emotions. His lucid narration brings to life many female characters culled from the mundane realities of existence. The only difference is the awareness of ‘self’ which launches these seemingly monotonous women protagonists into an abstract world where the meaning of life is inconsistent and somewhat secondary to the development of the self. This paper reviews some of Coelho’s novels with prominent female characters where they evolve and reorganize their circumstances by the dint of their knowledge of the self, directed by a male voice. The debate of Coelho bringing in men to guide the females is somewhat clichéd. But after the feminist debate what truly remains is the essence of the self- its journey from falsity towards truth, from darkness towards light and from mortality to the realm of the immortal – the basics of the “Pavmana Mantra” from the Brihadaryanaka Upanishad. This paper also links Coelho’s take on the consciousness of death in one of his novels to the famous “YakshaPrahsna” (Question of Yaksha) from The Mahabharat.

Keywords: Coelho, Brida, Veronica, Pilar, Inidan Mysticism, Pavmana Mantra, Mahabharat.

I. Introduction

Famous for his mystic quest-novel O Alquimista (Eng. Trans. The Alchemist) (1988), Paulo Coelho, a Portuguese language author, holds the Guinness Book of World Records for the most translated book by a living writer. His exhaustive range of fiction tending to incline towards the nuances of the spiritual self of human beings in contemporary times, very much akin to the philosophy of the Vedas is expressed in twenty five novel over a period of more than four decades. Paulo Coelho has won numerous international awards along with the Crystal Award by the World Economic Forum, for selling 150 million copies of his literary bulk in more than 150 countries (224 territories). His magnum opus, The Alchemists has been translated into 80 different languages. This paper attempts at providing an overview of Coelho’s representation of women and their gradually empowered existence as characters in his select novels: Brida(1990), By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept (1994) and Veronica Decides to Die (1998), with an apt reference to Indian mysticism concerning the growth of the self towards spiritual emancipation. Therefore through the portrayal of his women’s characters one can entertain the possibility of deciphering Coelho’s own maturity as realist writers. Coelho has often been questioned regarding his singular writing mechanics which demonstrates a “lot of sensitivity, sometimes even pathos, and a trend not often seen in many of today’s New Age books, which focus more on a feel-good, rose-tinted worldview” (More, ). From the feminist perspective the inclusion of the idea of a female consciousness and its unique comprehension of the world and existence took up a major section of the twentieth century to seep into mainstream discourse. Prior to that, it was addressed justifiably as a burning issue which needs immediate remedy. But with Coelho, the naturalization of the feminine consciousness amidst the hubbubs of the twenty-first century is a welcome improvement. The dexterity of Coelho’s lyrical prosereveals an intricate meshwork of how common people especially women relate to spirituality on a daily basis and their stages of the development as they proceed towards spiritual emancipation. They grow by the dint of their original reflexes, from a bundle of confused senses towards illumination of mind and soul. Leading our discussion into the domain of Indian mysticism, one might infer from reading Coelho’s novels that they are replete with spiritual statements often of miraculous nature reflecting a kind of mental enlightenment of their protagonist very much akin to the spiritual journey of a soul or atman from creation to its fusion with the Brahm or the Godhead where the soul achieves knowledge of the self, free from the bounds of time and space.

The task constructs upon the knowledge of the author’s own life and sufferings (briefly alluded to) which had influenced much of his fiction and shaped a part or whole of his characters. Refuting the possible arguments regarding Coelho’s bearing as a male writer Vijay More observes:

It is impossible to know Paulo Coelho without understanding the part played in his life and work by the feminine element. He admits that women have occupied and continue to occupy a
The hymn is one of the oldest and most significant Sanskrit texts out of 108 Upanishads existing in Hinduism: the “Pavmana Mantra”, (Deussen, 23). The word “Pavmana” in Sanskrit means “being purified” by means of drinking Soma, a Vedic ritual drink. The hymn is also referred to as “pavamana abhyàröha” where abhyàröha literally means “ascending”. The sense is that of a prayer given the Upanishadic technical terminology. Originally set to be chanted prior to the ritual of a Somä sacrifice by the patron of the deed, the hymn reads as:

Om asatomásadgamaya,
tamasomājyotirgamaya,
mrtyormāamrtaṅgamaya,
Om shanti, shanti, shantihi

Following is the English translation readily available on public domain:

Om, from falsehood lead me to truth,
From darkness lead me to the light,
From death lead me to immortality,
Om peace peace peace

The ablative cases of the root words are used to identify the relationship of “from and to”. “Sat” signifies “truth” in the Vedic sense. “asat” means “falsehood”, “jyoti” means towards light, the root word “jyoti” simply meaning “light”. Derived from the root word “tamas” or darkness the word “tamaso” denotes “from darkness”. The term āmrtaṃ means immortality. The ablative case of the root word mṛtyu meaning death is used as mṛtyor meaning “from death”, “gamay” stands for the act of inspiring a person “to go”.

The hymn is of considerable importance in discussing the interpretation of Coelho in the Indian mystical context. The term “sat” earlier discussed as truth is different from the colloquial meaning. It signifies the eternal concept of truth being “the Absolute” or “Brahman” which is beyond the boundaries of time and space. Moving on to the couple of next line, darkness is identified with death and temporality whereas the true essence of

fundamental space in his life. He, who has for the most part trodden the path of the warrior of light, of the struggle, in sympathy with his masculine identity, decided one day to discover the woman who is also within him. And that was when he met a new element of his life head on: Compassion, letting himself be carried out by life without always having to defend himself. It was also when he discovered the feminine part of God. (More)

The paper also draws from The Upanishads and The Mahabharata with which the said characters identify. Moreover, when attempting to discuss literature in its translated state, one is bound to answer for the authenticity of the text and its representation in translation. In that case, the texts referred to are translated either by Alan R. Clarke or by Margaret Jull Costa from Portuguese to English.

Coelho was born in Rio de Janerio, Brazil on 24th of August 1947, to devout catholic parents. His dream of becoming a writer from his early adolescence was frustrated by his dominating parents. In an interview with MarkiaShaerl Coelho says that his mother expressed her disappointment saying, “My dear, your father is an engineer. He’s a logical, reasonable man with a very clear vision of the world. Do you actually know what it means to be a writer?” Despite his mother’s response he cherished his ambition and grew more introvert for which he was admitted to a mental institution. His early encounter with a social structure which forbade a person to speak and listen to one’s inner self had already began to shape a purposive world.

II. Popular Female Characters of Coelho

Beginning with ahomely, docile Fatima in The Alchemist (1988) to the enchanting spy of the World War IIThe Spy (2016) Paulo Coelho has created an array of intriguing female characters who seem to bleed when pricked. The socio-cultural, psycho-sexual language of the dominated class of women find a soulful expression in the novels of Coelho. Culled mostly from ordinary walks of life the metamorphosis of Coelho’s female characters within the framework of the narrative is a spectacle of women empowerment both socially and spiritually. However, the best part of Coelho’s characterization is not the reality to which these women are chained but the sharp consciousness which they project and apply to carve wings out of their own circumstances. Coelho bestows upon his female characters an epic stature of transcendence from the worldly to the imperishable which mothers forth a sense of self-awareness among his women readers who had given up on life pertaining to their submissive state of existence.

From a cursory reading of Coelho’s novels one may easily perceive the golden thread of amelioration of the burning problem of women’s assertion of their self-realization amidst the code of conduct dictated out to them by the contemporary society, neatly woven throughout the narrative texture. The contemporary social picture plays a secondary role in gradual development of the main plot of Coelho’s fictions. Yet if we minutely observe his female characters such as Fatima, Brida, Pilar, Veronica, Maria, Athena, Ewa, Gabriela, etc., we can extract a dominating social corpus as the backdrop which each character struggles with and successfully outgrows.

III. Indian Mysticism: The Pavmana Mantra

Coelho’s novels under discussion seems to resonate with a four line hymn culled from BrhadārātyakaUpaniṣadone of the oldest and most significant Sanskrit texts out of 108 Upaniṣads existing in Hinduism: the “Pavmana Mantra”, (Deussen, 23). The word “Pavmana” in Sanskrit means “being purified” by means of drinking Soma, a Vedic ritual drink. The hymn is also referred to as “pavamana abhyàröha” where abhyàröha literally means “ascending”. The sense is that of a prayer given the Upanishadic technical terminology. Originally set to be chanted prior to the ritual of a Soma sacrifice by the patron of the deed, the hymn reads as:

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immortality is symbolised by the path of the light. The prayer reflects the mood of most of Coelho’s women characters. Fatima is a homely docile girl of a merchant who lives in a village and is the love interest of Santiago the shepherd. One finds little development to her character. She perpetuates her role as an awaiting reward for the shepherd boy who is in a journey. Fatima’s only concern lies with marrying the boy, devoid of any performance as such. The character of Fatima acts like a marker from where Coelho had started out originally. His subsequent women characters are far more mature and privileged as well as endowed with an existential mode of comprehending the world and its inhabitants. In his next novel *Brida*, the titular figure is much empowered with a self-awareness by which she explores her mind and body through magic. It is definitely a step up of characterization of women figure in his novels. Fatima and Brida are as common and mundane as any which build up the text-reader relationship. However, Brida’s presence as a living being responding to the abstract ideas of self and beyond guided by the figure of the Magus projects an idea of a woman incapable of unravelling her own consciousness convoluted by the materialistic demands of reality and requires a male counterpart to show her the way into the domain of spirituality where by providing the Magus with a God-like stature.

In the novel *Brida* (1990) Brida is a young Irish girl. She is interested in magic and aims to become a true witch minus its negative connotations perhaps in a Pratchettian sense. Her quest leads her to meet like men and women who have pursued magic in its various natural forms which is a spiritual emancipation beyond the realm of common address. Brida begins her apprenticeship in spirituality under the supervision of a wise man referred to as the ‘magus’. He teaches her to trust her own instincts and spirit in order to master the fears of one’s existence in reality. She also encounters a wise woman who teaches her to break ranks with her initial inhibitions and dances to the underlying music which connects natural reality.

Brida’s struggle to strike out a balance between her personal life and her desire to pursue the tradition of witchcraft allows her little space to breath. Her gradual movement towards freedom leads Coelho’s female readers who have been bowed down by the patriarchal prescriptions towards hope of breaking out of the mundane and embracing their own lives as a gift to treat it likewise. Coelho’s ruminations on destiny is simple and therefore easily identifiable. It is a part of women’s existence in the male-dom to reflect on their subjugation as their destiny. But to hope for a better future is what allows them to keep moving. The conflict in Brida’s life is a common tale. But her spiritual emancipation among the woods and under the moonlit sky is a dream worth following. With reference to the “Pavmana Mantra” Brida is in search of light, she looks askance at the world to overcome the mortal realm of existence. She searches for a teacher and find the Magus. He leads her onto the path of the light, into truth and beyond. Brida is able to overcome her initial inhibitions and conflicting decisions and respond to the music of the world. She becomes natural as she grows towards light. Her prayer comes true.

The novel addresses women’s spirituality and subverts the stereotyping of the word ‘witch’ which is used to identify a woman who has allowed herself to become a channelling the divine. The fact that she is led onto the path of self-realization by a male figure ‘magus’ however, allows the patriarchy to assert their claims as pathfinders and real guides to the path of knowledge and underestimates the eligibility of a woman to find her own way out.

*By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* (1994) depicts the characters of an intelligent scholar named Pilar. She is depressed within her academic domain where she finds little meaning beyond print and paper. She has been a sceptic regarding the code of conduct of women dictated by the society. In order to minimize her everyday battles with the predominating mould of society she had sacrificed her happiness and cut herself according to the coat the society like to wear. Her routine and monotonous existence seeks for a miracle, something out of the obvious within the perimeters of her day-to-day life. One day she receives a phone call from her childhood playmate urging her to meet him. He has now become a famous spiritual leader who can perform miracles and claims to have a direct connection to the Virgin. He confesses to have been in love with Pilar since childhood which really comes as a shock to her. Pilar is overjoyed and finds love and spiritual guidance with him. The preacher tries to tell her all his stories of roaming around the world through the past ten year so that she could open up and face herself, be what she really feels inside. Eventually she starts to realize that the man she has held onto is suffering because of his dilemma to choose one of the two: Pilar or his life as a spiritual guide. They embark on a pilgrimage to the sacred sites in French Pyrenees. The subsequent decisions they make reflect the redemption love can offer. The question of believing takes up quite a few pages in the novel where the preacher asks Pilar to really believe and not to be a sceptic. She must believe in miracles for them to happen or she must believe in herself to face life head on.

Apart from the fascinating tale Coelho addresses the mental subjugation of women and incorporates a religious character to bring into discourse the subtler ideas a woman keeps to her own self. Those vulnerable ideas she feels solely private is in actuality her own personae which hides within the mind to evade the brainwashing
by the patriarchal setup. Visibly Pilar has tailored herself accordingly to suit her surroundings, Coelho rejects such actions and advocate for a natural existence which is every woman’s birthright. The character of the male priest however, is a cliché as well as a common fact. In India, mostly women who had received minimum education and is economically inert has a tendency to visit a holy man stationed in a nearby temple, aashram, mosque, church or any other religious sanctum when she finds herself in irreconcilable circumstances. Many conservative family believe in the immortal as she helps out Zedka who has left people Veronika 13 strength within her. “The Mystical Element”, Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit Dictionary (1899) “Meaning of the mantra Asatoma Ma Pavmana Mantra” © 2018, AIJRHASS All Rights Reserved

The “Pavvana Mantra” equally applies to Pilar who had been cloistered in her own world living out her life somehow or the other. Her darkness of ignorance about the simplicity with which the world unleashes little miracles every now and then—as claimed by his spiritual lover—had been locking her up all the while. The priest helps her to open up and embrace her own identity. Pilar is no longer in the darkness and the untruth pertaining to her living the life she had been prescribed by the society. For once in life she steadies up to take her own decisions and embrace her true self. From the realm of the mortal she begins to believe in the immortal as she witnesses his lover channelling the Virgin through his mortal frame.

VI. Veronica Decides to Die And Resonances from The Mahabharata

In Veronika Decides to Die (1998) Veronika is a beautiful Slovenian woman who has a life with the pink of perfection in it. The monotony of her flawless existence without any spark of excitement or adventure drives her to make an abrupt decision of committing suicide. She takes an overdose of sleeping pills and waits to fall asleep when a magazine article “Where is Slovenia?” attracts her attention. She crosses out her suicide letter addressed to her parents and writes a letter instead to the magazine justifying her suicide because people don’t bother at all about Slovenia or its location. Her attempt fails and she wakes up from coma in ‘Villette’ a local mental institution. The doctor informs her that she will live for a very short time. She begins to understand the true worth of her life as she affects the other vulnerable patients at the hospital. She helps out Zedka who has clinical depression, clams Mari who gets frequent panic attacks, and finally falling in love with Eduard who is schizophrenic. Amidst them she finds a purpose and helping them out of compassion heals her soul which has nothing to lose by now. By facing the certainty of death which comes as a surprise to normal people Veronika wins over it and tries to make most of the moments she has to herself. Her emancipation from the socially accepted perfection allows her expression and experiences she has never had before encompassing love and loathing. However the story goes on and the reader realizes that Dr. Igor, her psychiatrist was experimenting on her by furnishing her with a lie. Veronika was perfectly healthy but in order to “shock” her into loving her life he had given her that extra detail which cancels out negativities and guides an individual towards freedom of self.

The novel is reminiscent of the ‘YakshaPrashna’ episode of the VanaParvachapter of The Mahabharata where Yudisthirafaces the realistic as well as philosophical questions of the Righteous Crane or Yaksha. To the question “who is the friend of a dying man?” Yudishthira answers with “Charity” and “What is the ultimate wonder” Yudishthira replies with “Death”. These two questions are very much apt in the context of Veronika. She helps others out while knowing that she is dying and as death becomes less of a surprise her life gets meaning. She is able to transcend death and all the while she finds the strength within her. The consciousness of death is what makes Veronika’s life worth living.

VI. Conclusion

The above discussion is evidence to the fact that Coelho’s female characters under scrutiny has evolved through the narrative space and time in order to grow from darkness towards light “tamasomájyotirgamaya.” Apparently, the Pavvana Mantra is one of the basic themes of Coelho’s novels. However, it is inaccurate to claim that the mystical elements which mark Indian thoughts responsible for the development of international fictions. Instead one may refer to it as the resonance of similar ideas about life and times of humanity inhabiting this lonely planet.

Works Cited


