MAGICAL REALISM IN PAULO COELHO’S THE ALCHEMIST

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ABSTRACT

Paulo Coelho is a popular Brazilian writer, whose works have received attention from literary critics in recent years. He is a non-conformist and a seeker of the new things. He has written many great works, his readers are worldwide, his work consisted of major themes in literature, and he had brought out the condition of common people in the society. The technique of foreshadowing is often used in his works. His work consists of major themes such as love, battle between good and evil, supreme power, foreshadowing, magical realism. Paulo Coelho’s The Alchemist is considered to be one of his best in his times, it describes about a shepherd boy’s journey in search of treasure. The story brings out the suffering and joy, throughout his travel till he finds out his treasure. It is very different to the other books on magic realism challenge. There are a number of ways in which The Alchemist overlaps with the ideology and techniques of magical realism in the use of the omen to structure the story and its vision of magic just palpitating beneath the surface of things. It is therefore quite a simple book, with strong messages following the destiny and worrying about what might stop from acting to reach the treasure.

Key words: treasure, omen, vision, destiny, magical realism

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The term ‘magical realism’ became highly fashionable since 1920. On the face of it is an oxymoron’s describing the forced relationship of irreconcilable terms. In recent years the term ‘magical realism’ has become most popular among many other genres, referring to a particular narrative mode. It offers a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of western philosophy. It is expressed in many postcolonial and non-western works of contemporary fiction by, most famously, writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie. It is a aspect that has made it most pertinent to late twentieth-century literature.

The term “magical realism” was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism an art category. According to him in “Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism”, “It was a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the
enigmas of reality” (7). In Latin America in the 1940s, magical realism was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature. “Magic Realism” was a term first coined in 1949 by the Cuba novelist Alejo Carpentier to describe the matter-of-fact combination of the fantastic and every day in Latin American fiction. Later exemplified by novels like Gunter Grass’s The Tin Drum (1959) and Marquez’ One Hundred Years of Solitude and also applied to paintings by famous painter Michael Parks. Rob Gonsalves a Canadian painter often categorized as surrealistic but injects a sense of magic into realistic scenes. The premise of Brenda Cooper’s book, Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye, reiterated throughout the book in different ways, is that “magical realism arises out of particular societies-postcolonial, unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical views of the world co-exist” (216).

Paulo Coelho uses the technique of magical realism in The Alchemist. He brought about magical aspect in a clear manner. Santiago, an ordinary shepherd, embarks on a journey to realize his Personal Legend.

Santiago, the protagonist of The Alchemist, operates the story of his own life in a way that is reminiscent of Joseph’s role in the Old Testament, although he takes divination one step further. He is able to interpret objective phenomena, rather than simply dreams, as omens of future events. The young shepherd meets an extraordinary man who claims to be the King of Salem. Melchizedek is his real name; a mysterious king who wears a golden breastplate. He is a character from the Bible. In The Alchemist, Melchizedek helps those who are at the point of discovering and following their Personal Legends. Melchizedek is a mysterious individual who turns out to be a high priest of the Old Testament because he possesses the Urim and the Thummim, the two magic stones, one black and one white, which is given to Santiago by Melchizedek.

Santiago’s journey is widespread with magical realism; the ordinary and extraordinary are constantly blended. “Urim and Thummim” (39). These stones are a fortune telling device that in a tight spot will help Santiago by giving him a clear yes-or-no answer to his queries. The stones are used only once, however, because knowing too much about the future can be a hindrance: life is full of obstacles, and it does not help to know the suffering one will have to endure along the way. It is enough to know that there is no such thing as luck or co-incidence. All things happen for a reason, and all are a part of the mysterious chain.

Melchizedek explains that “there is a force that wants you to realize your Personal Legend… in order to find the treasure you will have to follow the omens” (27-8). Magical realism calls for people to take an active role in pursuing their dreams by paying attention and acting on lessons learned in life; success without effort will not happen.

Upon Santiago’s first experience of loss and bad luck, Santiago finds comfort when the stones tell him the king’s blessing is still with him. When Santiago tries to ask too much of the stones, they fall through a hole in his sac as a reminder that he is supposed to make his own decisions. After spending nearly a year with the crystal merchant, Santiago feels strength transmitted from the old king through the stones and is once again encouraged to continue his journey.

When Santiago sees a hawk swooping down to make a kill, he knows the oasis will be attacked, suddenly, one of the hawks made a flashing dive through the sky, attacking the other. As it did so, a sudden, fleeting image came to the boy: an army, with its swords, riding into the oasis. The vision vanished immediately, but it had shaken him. Like Joseph, Santiago is a foreigner. The chieftains want to know why this has happened; “Who is this stranger who speaks of omens?” asked one of the chieftains, eyeing the boy. It is I,” (101) the boy answered. And Santiago told what he had seen. It is precisely
because Santiago is a stranger because he sees with the eyes of a foreigner the land he inhabits that he is able to divine the future, to see the divine within the everyday.

Santiago will be shown many signs along the way that he will have to properly interpret in order to move forward. Some of these omens are a butterfly that represents both change and freedom, the hawks that portend danger in the oasis, and the scarab beetle Santiago finds at the pyramids that tells him where to dig.

In Santiago’s life, he has to overcome many naysayers, such as his father and the crystal merchant, who tell him his dream is impossible. “Even if you cleaned my crystal for an entire year… even if you earned a good commission selling every piece, you would still have to borrow money to get to Egypt. There are thousands of kilometers of desert between here and there” (44). These characters are older people who have, for one reason or another, let fear kill their own dreams. “There is only one thing that makes dreams impossible to achieve: the fear of failure” (135).

The other magical aspects were wind, desert, heaven, and the creator. They play a highly magical role; the boy being caught in a camp was made a pact to turn himself into wind. On the day before he is expected to turn himself into the wind, Santiago climbs to the top of a cliff. He looks out at the desert and senses that it can feel his fear.

On the third day, Santiago brings the tribal chief and his officers to the cliff. Again he looks across the desert, and this time Santiago asks for the desert's help in becoming the wind. The desert replies that it can provide its sand to help the wind blow, but no more; the desert needs assistance from the wind itself. Soon, a breeze tickles Santiago's face. The wind knows what the boy needs but regretfully tells him, "We're two very different things" (139).

Santiago has learned much from the alchemist, however. He protests that he and the wind aren't very different at all. For one thing, they share the same soul. Intrigued, the wind nevertheless insists that people can't turn themselves into the wind. Sensing that the wind might ultimately relent and grant his wish, Santiago tells it, When you are loved, you can do anything in creation. When you are loved, there's no need at all to understand what’s happening because everything happens within you, and even men can turn themselves into the wind. As long as the wind helps, of course. (140)

Suggesting that Santiago asks heaven for help, the wind then creates an enormous sand storm called a simum.

Now Santiago beseeches the sun to help him turn the wind for the sake of love. The sun acknowledges that it knows about love. Then the sun complains that people always want more, implying that this is a bad thing. Santiago disagrees, saying that "Each thing has to transform itself into something better, and to acquire a new Personal Legend, until, someday, the Soul of the World becomes one thing only. (143)

The sun decides to transform itself into a brighter sun. The eavesdropping wind then decides to blow harder. Still the sun can't turn Santiago himself into the wind. "Speak to the hand that wrote all," (144) the sun finally suggests. Santiago begins to pray, and in praying he understands that he isn't alone in not comprehending the universe completely. The sun and the wind and the desert also don't entirely know their reason for being. Finally, Santiago reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw that it was a part of the Soul of God. And he saw that the Soul of God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles.

Santiago is able to speak to the desert, the wind, and the sun; he convinces all of these entities to help him prove to the tribal leaders that he is an alchemist. And finally everything changed like the chieftains expectation.
In various guises this idea that individuals are often unaware of the magic staring them in the face and need a nudge to see it weaves its way through Coelho’s novel. This is especially evident at the point of anagnorisis when, after years of searching, Santiago suddenly realizes where the treasure is hidden. Thus, when Santiago is discovered digging for treasure near the Pyramids, he is attacked and nearly left for dead.

Finally, magical realism in the novel comes full circle when a robber boy tells Santiago that his treasure is really to be found at the starting point of his journey the shepherd’s barn in Spain. But then the leader of the robbers comes back and says to him: “You’re not going to die. You’ll live, and you’ll learn that a man shouldn’t be so stupid” (155). Two years ago, right here on this spot, the leader had a recurrent dream, too. He dreamt that he should travel to the fields of Spain and look for a ruined church where shepherds and their sheep slept. In his dream, there was a sycamore growing out of the ruins of the sacristy, and he was told that, if he dug at the roots of the sycamore, he would find a hidden treasure.

The robber said Santiago, “But I’m not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream” (155). Again, while the Egyptian sees nothing in his dream, he interprets it as meaningless, the foreigner, the Spaniard, sees that it contains the truth. The real suddenly has burst open to reveal its magic. Santiago discovered his treasure, which was the whole time just beneath his feet near the sycamore tree. The leader is the unknowing recipient of treasure, and although the answer comes from within him in the form of a dream, he is unable to decipher its meaning. It is the foreigner who is able to decipher the rebus that comes from the unconscious.

The system whereby the subject’s unconscious needs to be interpreted the other is echoed by the rule whereby the events of a national culture need to be deciphered by a foreigner to function as omens. There are a number of ways in which The Alchemist overlaps with the ideology and techniques of magical realism in the use of the omen to structure the story and its vision of magic just palpitating beneath the surface of things. The novel re-enacts the drama of cultural hybridity that lies at the core of magical realism.

Santiago is rewarded by the universe for his tenacity and enthusiasm. The universe conspired to help him as he helps himself by learning patience, staying the course, and properly interpreting the omens along the way.

REFERENCE