



Research Paper

From Darkness to Light: A Journey to Self Discovery, Meaning and Fulfilment in Life in Coelho's Alchemist and Hesse's Siddhartha.

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ABSTRACT: *Self discovery is a journey: from the unknown to knowing one's calling, the meaning and purpose of life. This research paper aims to explore the journey from ignorance to knowledge by analysing Hermann Hesse's 'Siddhartha' and Paulo Coelho's Alchemist. Though travel narrative is essentially a record of a journey from one place to the other and the corresponding experiences, self discovery is also a type of travel narrative; an intellectual journey from the absence of knowledge to a realm of enlightenment. The protagonists of the selected works are in a similar search for the self and finally reach/attain the higher self. My paper examines this journey and the related experiences.*

KEYWORDS: *Enlightenment, Ignorance, Journey, Self, Unity*

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I. INTRODUCTION

'Travel Memoir', 'Travel Journal' or 'Travel Literature' according to Jan Borm, is not a literary genre "but a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is travel" (2004,13). But to set the boundaries for the genre would be difficult. In *Travel Writing In Africa*, Tim Youngs writes,

"Travel writing feeds from and back into other forms of literature. To try to identify boundaries between various forms would be impossible and I would be deeply suspicious of any attempt at the task."

Though essentially Travel Narrative is about journeys, expeditions and cultural experiences, the genre is highly hybrid. Petrarch wrote about his ascent of Mount Ventoux comparing the climb with 'his own moral progress in life'(Wikipedia).

Spiritual Journeys hence form a part of Travel Literature. A journey from ignorance to enlightenment; and from darkness to light, self discovery is the journey that happens within. The inward journey that one takes is so important and crucial that Rainer Maria Rilke once said "The only journey is the one within." This paper aims to explore few such spiritual journeys; Santiago's journey of self discovery in *Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho and Siddhartha's search for enlightenment in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

Coelho's *Alchemist* is the mystical story of the shepherd boy Santiago who sets on a journey in search of a treasure as seen in his recurring dreams. He travels from Spain to Egypt in search of his Personal Legend, faces several hardships and setbacks. But the people he meet in between and the experiences teach him to listen to his heart and understand that he is also but a part of the Soul of the Universe.

"The boy didn't know what a Personal Legend was. It's what you have always wanted to accomplish. Everyone, when they are young, knows what their Personal Legend is. At that point in their lives, everything is clear and everything is possible. They are not afraid to dream, and to yearn for everything they would like to see happen to them in their lives. But, as time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their Personal Legend."(Coelho,76)

Journey, both spiritual and physical, acts as a very strong metaphor in *Alchemist*. Coelho himself says on the importance of journey, "Journey has a very strong symbolic significance in people's life" (Arias 197). He adds, "Using the metaphor of the journey, I see life as a caravan. I don't know whence it came or where it's going to end up" (210). Santiago sets out on a journey, goes through bizarre experiences and finally evolves as a transformed/enlightened human. Through Santiago's journey, Coelho gives his readers the hope that they too can reach self-actualization by following their dreams. He assures the readers that "when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (20). He urges the readers to follow their intuitions and to

start their journey in pursuit of their dream. Through Santiago, Coelho asks his readers to stop merely existing and to start living the purposeful life.

Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha speaks of a similar spiritual journey; a journey to self actualization and an understanding of life. Siddhartha who is born to a Brahmana family is introduced to the ways and customs of their order at an early age itself. But he was not satisfied. So he leaves his home and starts on a spiritual journey, following the ascetics/Samanas and rejecting the physical needs and desires of life. Even the new hard way of life fails to provide him the enlightenment or awakening that he yearned for.

"Siddhartha learned a lot when he was with the Samanas, many ways leading away from the self he learned to go. He went the way of self-denial by means of pain, through voluntary suffering and overcoming pain, hunger, thirst, tiredness. He went the way of self-denial by means of meditation, through imagining the mind to be void of all conceptions. These and other ways he learned to go, a thousand times he left his self, for hours and days he remained in the non-self. But though the ways led away from the self, their end nevertheless always led back to the self." (Siddhartha 38)

Through Govinda, Kamala, Kamaswami and Vasudeva, Siddhartha experiences different worlds, the ways of Buddhism, worldly pleasures, wealthy life of a successful merchant but none of them provides him the Nirvana that he yearned for. He realises that Enlightenment doesn't come from teachings and preachings, but it should come from within.

Vasudeva the ferryman helps Siddhartha understand his spiritual journey better. He asks Siddhartha to listen to the river. Sitting by the river, Siddhartha discovers the polarities of life and the unity of it all. He learns the secrets that the river provides. He realises that just as the river flows, life also flows without a beginning or an ending. Our existence is a mere part of this timeless interconnected cycle. Everything in life is part of this cycle and a rejection of any one of it cannot bring meaning to life, rather, the unity of it all brings wholeness to it.

II. CONCLUSION

The two works, Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* talk about two simple men on their spiritual journey. Travelling through various experiences and people, they reach their final destination; a place of serenity and calmness. They reach the awakening they had been seeking and urges the readers as well to embark on an enlightening journey.

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