

Literary Symbolism of Wind in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

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Abstract

Paulo Coelho's works are known for their motivational qualities and the use of literary symbolism. Regarded as a work that inspires its readers, his novel The Alchemist narrates the troublesome journey of a young shepherd boy searching for a treasure, guided by omens and natural signs to succeed. As Coelho used various natural elements as signs and symbols throughout The Alchemist, the symbolism of wind stands out in the novel. This research paper closely analyses how the natural element wind symbolises spiritual influx in Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist. It further probes the complexity of symbolising wind in the context of natural signs.

Keywords: Fiction, Novel, Paulo Coelho, Symbol, Wind, The Alchemist

Introduction

The wind is commonly regarded as the movement of air from one geographical location to another over a period of time. Be that as it may, the wind has also been used as a symbol over the course of arts and philosophy. As symbols are objects or actions that mean something more than their literal meaning (Chandel 31), they allow creative writers to add layered meanings to a particular story (John 112). The meaning of wind as a symbol thus varies according to the contexts in which it is used. A contemporary writer who has adopted the wind as a symbol in his works is Paulo Coelho de Souza.

The Brazilian author uses extensive symbolism and figurative language to introduce his philosophical ideas. Symbols structure a significant part of his works, and their meanings could be perceived from the context of the novel's storyline. One of Coelho's many works that use extensive symbolism is *The Alchemist*. First published in 1996, it details the troublesome journey of a young boy named Santiago in search of a hidden treasure. The shepherd boy follows certain natural signs called 'omens' to reach his destination, where he realises that his treasure is nowhere other than in the backyard of his own house. As Coelho followed his usual style of using symbols in *The Alchemist*, natural signs or omens, including elements such as wind, fire, water, and plantations, act symbolical in the novel. The use of wind as a literary symbol thus becomes important in the context of natural signs, and this research paper closely analyses how the wind is used as a symbol in *The Alchemist*.

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The Wind in *The Alchemist*

The novel begins by portraying Santiago as a young, happy boy living peacefully as a shepherd. However, as time progresses, Santiago can be seen meeting a gipsy and an old man named Melchizedek, who claims himself to be the king of Salem. The gipsy predicted Santiago's future that he would track down a treasure close to the Pyramids in Egypt. While Melchizedek also ascertained the same, his words made Santiago search for the hidden treasure. Coelho involves wind as a symbol through the protagonist Santiago during such a journey.

Before his journey, Santiago is seen sitting at the top of a castle contemplating his meeting with Melchizedek when the wind begins to pick up. As Coelho writes, "He knew that wind: people called it the levanter, because on it the Moors had come from the Levant at the eastern end of the Mediterranean" (Coelho 29). "The levanter was getting stronger, and Santiago felt its force on his face" (Coelho 30). He then starts associating the wind's smell with certain people and objects. He thinks "The wind had brought the Moors, yes, but it had also brought the smell of the desert and of veiled women. It had brought with it the sweat and the dreams of men who had once left to search for the unknown, and for gold and adventure - and for the Pyramids" (Coelho 30).

Santiago then feels jealous of the wind and wants the same freedom of movement. He later reaches Egypt, where his money gets stolen. Santiago had to work at a crystal shop to compensate for his loss, and some free time at the shop made him sit idle and listen to the wind. At that time, Coelho again addresses the wind as the wind that brought the scent of the desert. Similarly, when Santiago had to move across the desert to reach the pyramids in a caravan, he felt that only the sound of the 'eternal' wind accompanied him, along with the sound of animal hoofbeats.

Santiago preferred to be alone most of the time, listening to the wind throughout his journey, as he was not concerned about reading a book or talking to people. He found observing the caravan and listening to the wind more interesting. When Santiago's caravan stopped at an oasis because of an ongoing war in the desert, he meets a girl named Fatima. The boy listened to the sound of her voice, and thought it to be more beautiful than the sound of the wind in the date palms (Coelho 72). They eventually fell in love, and Fatima says she wants her husband to be someone as free as the wind that shapes the desert dunes.

After the meeting with Fatima, Santiago is again seen listening to the wind when he sees some hawks drifting on that wind. 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 at the ready, riding into the oasis (Coelho 75). Santiago considered his vision an omen and shared his experience with a camel driver, who took him to the chieftains of the oasis. The omen was considered a warning sign of an upcoming war, and the chieftains asked the men of the oasis to be ready with arms. However, Santiago's life was also in trouble, as he would be killed if his vision did not turn out true. After some time, he heard a thundering sound and was thrown to the ground by a wind he had never known (Coelho 80). Santiago sensed the presence of an Alchemist before him, completely dressed in black.

Santiago's vision turned out to be true, and tribespeople attacked the oasis. The oasis successfully defended the attack, and the chief of the tribal group that launched the attack was hanged on a palm tree, where his body twisted in the desert wind (Coelho 83). Meanwhile, Santiago spends time with the Alchemist, who teaches him many things about the desert. He was surprised to

know that the Alchemist already wanted to meet him. “Why did you want to see me?” the boy asked the Alchemist. “Because of the omens,” the Alchemist replied. “The wind told me you would be coming and that you would need help” (Coelho 84).

Santiago again spends the rest of his time listening to the wind, as the wind brings the sounds of the oasis. He tried to hear Fatima’s voice through the wind, hoping that she would send her kisses on it. As Coelho writes, Santiago believed “she would have to send her kisses on the wind, hoping that the wind would touch the boy’s face, and would tell him that she was alive. That she was waiting for him, a woman awaiting a courageous man in search of his treasure” (Coelho 89). The wind also brought in a sweet, sickly smell of blood and reminded the boy that the language of omens was always ready to show him what his eyes had failed to observe (Coelho 90).

Santiago and the Alchemist later get caught by some tribespeople while travelling through the desert, misunderstood as spies. However, the Alchemist introduced the boy as another alchemist to the chief of that tribespeople, saying that the boy could transform himself into the wind. Under the Alchemist’s will, the tribespeople granted Santiago three days to transform into the wind. Santiago starts conversing with various natural elements on the third day, such as the desert and wind, as a part of the ‘process’ of converting himself to the wind. During the conversation, the desert tells him, “I’ll give you my sands to help the wind to blow, but, alone, I can’t do anything. You have to ask for help from the wind” (Coelho 104). Coelho then writes:

The wind approached the boy and touched his face. It knew of the boy’s talk with the desert, because the winds know everything. They blow across the world without a birthplace, and with no place to die (Coelho 104).

The boy told the wind that his heart had taught him how to speak to the desert and the wind. “I have inside me the winds, the deserts, the oceans, the stars, and everything created in the universe. We were all made by the same hand, and we have the same soul” (Coelho 105). He adds, “The wind came from no place at all, nor did it go to any place; that’s why it was stronger than the desert. Someone might one day plant trees in the desert and even raise sheep there, but never would they harness the wind” (Coelho 104). As a proud being, the wind was irritated as a young boy standing before it wanted to turn himself into the wind. Moreover, Santiago continued to talk to the wind, describing love. “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” (Coelho 105). The wind eventually started blowing stronger and harsher out of irritation, and the people watching Santiago from a distance thought he was transformed into the wind.

Coelho uses wind one last time towards the novel’s end when Santiago finally reaches the Pyramids. Santiago started to dig near the Pyramids to find the hidden treasure. He struggled to continue digging as he fought the wind, which often blew the sand back into the excavation. However, he was approached and attacked by a group of refugees from the tribal war. One refugee told Santiago that he had a dream similar to that of Santiago and that a treasure was hidden in the fields of Spain under a Sycamore tree. Santiago understood where his treasure was and thought about the Alchemist, who knew everything. He heard a voice on the wind that said, “If I had told you, you would not have seen the Pyramids. They are beautiful, aren’t they?” (Coelho 116). He eventually got his treasure from the backyard of his own house, and the wind began to blow again. It was levanter, the wind that came from Africa. Coelho describes that

it didn't bring with it the smell of the desert, nor the threat of Moorish invasion. Instead, it brought the scent of a perfume Santiago knew well, and the touch of a kiss - a kiss that came from far away, slowly, until it rested on his lips (Coelho 117).

Wind as a Cultural Symbol

Looking at the above instances, one could see that Coelho has attributed certain functions to the wind, such as that of a carrier, messenger and driving force. When Santiago decided to pursue his search for treasure, the wind blew on his face as a driving force. He considered that wind a natural sign through which the universe asked him to start his journey. When Santiago was on the way to the pyramids, the wind became a carrier of memories and belongings of different people. It brought in the memories of Moors, the smell of the desert, veiled women and men on adventures. The wind became a carrier of memories through the scents it already had, also reminding Santiago of his past life as a shepherd.

Santiago travelled through the desert to an unknown destination. His only companions throughout the journey were an Englishman and an Alchemist. He realises that his fellow traveller Englishman is also pursuing something unknown, the process of alchemy. He avoids talking to him much to give him time and resorts to listening to the wind, giving him a sense of direction. At that time, Santiago was using the wind to reassure himself that he was in the right direction, as the wind acted as a natural sign of the universe to start his journey. Moreover, it also gave him memories and reminded him of many people whose scents were brought by the wind. When Santiago wanted to transform himself into the wind to save his life, the wind blew faster to deceive the tribal people and make them think Santiago was transformed into the wind. However, the same process also helped Santiago converse with the desert, wind and the sun, understanding them better. Listening to the wind gave Santiago visions that helped an entire oasis defend itself from the enemy. The wind also made Santiago meet and spend time with the Alchemist, who imparted wisdom.

Wind as a Spiritual Symbol

Mystically, the wind's characteristics made it a symbol of empty-headedness, fickleness and instability. It is also an elemental force belonging to the Titans, which speaks strongly enough for its blind violence (Chevalier et al. 1111). The Book of Psalms (148:8) in the Old Testament and the Koran (34:12) equate winds with angels as God's messengers. According to Hindu cosmological traditions in the Laws of Manu, the wind was born of the spirit and engendered light. It was laden with all pure and potent scents and tactile properties (Blachère 350). In Ancient Persia, Zoroastrian tradition, the wind played the part of world foundation and keeper of cosmic and moral balance. In Islamic tradition, the wind confines the waters, but its substance, of cloud, air and countless wings, also underpins them (Blachère 246).

The Biblical tradition regards the wind as God's breath that brought life to the first man. Winds were also the instruments of God's power bringing life, punishment and teaching. The Ancient Greeks pictured the winds as boisterous and rebellious deities shut up in the deep caverns of the Aeolian Islands (Chevalier et al. 1112).

When wind occurs in dreams, they herald the imminence of some important event or change about to take place. Spiritual energies are symbolised by a bright light, well-known by the wind. When the storm gathers, one can foretell that there is a great movement of spirits. From

religious experience, we know that the godhead may appear in the shape of a gentle breeze or of a great storm. It would seem that Orientals alone can understand the significance of the empty space in which the wind blows and which paradoxically they regard as a powerful symbol of energy (Alleau 200).

Wind as an Emotional Symbol

Santiago faced a gentle wind breeze when he started to think about his treasure. The wind intensified with Santiago's thoughts about the treasure; hence, in the given context, the wind symbolises a spiritual energy that wants Santiago to possess the treasure. As stated above, such a connotative meaning finds its roots in the Hindu and Christian traditions, as the Hindu tradition regards wind as symbolic of spirit and engendered light, while the Biblical tradition regards it as God's breath that brings life.

Adding on, Gorakh Popat Jondhale identifies Coelho's plot setting through a journey where he structures the development of his protagonists.

“Paulo Coelho powerfully constructs his plots in the form of an odyssey. He positions his characters in imbalanced situations where they feel discontented and puts them through a struggle to obtain meaning out of meaninglessness. He guides them through transcendence leading to spiritual awakening; ultimately portraying them as evolved self” (Jondhale 47).

Santiago was unaware of the whereabouts of his destination before the journey. He was in an imbalanced situation, depending on mere words and natural signs like the wind until he found his treasure. The wind directed Santiago's pursuit of the treasure and gave him more experiences, memories and life lessons than any monetary gains. Unlike the Englishman, Santiago was given wisdom about life and alchemy at the end of his pursuit, making him someone like the Alchemist. As the wind accompanies and guides him to the treasure, it becomes a tool for Coelho to direct the protagonist towards wisdom along with a treasure.

Conclusion

The role of the wind as a carrier, messenger and 'director' ultimately helped Santiago fetch his treasure and gain some wisdom. Hence, the wind helped the protagonist transform into a different personality for the greater good. *The Alchemist* is a novel written in the context of Arab culture, wherein the protagonist, Santiago, is undertaking a journey to an Arab land. The characters Santiago meets are also from the same Arab culture and follow the beliefs of Islamic tradition. As it was seen that the wind equates with God's messengers, it is also considered a sign in Islamic tradition, and its occurrence is not accidental. They flow by the decree of the creator or God (Humayun). According to the Koran, “And in his directing of the winds are signs for a people who reason” (45.5). Talking about what the winds are signs of, the Koran says that the wind brings the rain clouds that benefit mankind: “And of His signs is that He sends the winds as bringers of good tidings...and perhaps you will be grateful” (30.46). The wind thus becomes a sign of blessing as it brings prosperity, making humans grateful to God. Moreover, the Koran also ascertains that God sends storms as a warning to remind people that they still have an opportunity to change for the better (10.22).

As a story set in the background of Islamic traditions in an Arab land like Egypt, Paulo Coelho has effectively used the meaning of wind associated with Islamic traditions in *The Alchemist*.

However, since the Biblical and Hindu traditions also attribute similar connotations to the wind, the symbolism of wind in the novel could be understood from the perspectives of its existing meanings in the above three traditions. The wind symbolises God's power and care in the novel, as God uses the wind to guide a young boy trying to find his treasure. The boy's journey primarily depended on the wind, which was a blessing and guided him. His constant interaction with the wind also helped him realise the opportunity to improve himself. Thus, because of its functions in *The Alchemist*, the wind symbolises God's power and care, representing Godly love.

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