

# The Alchemist/S the Bhagavad Gita: A Rendezvous

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**Abstract** This paper endeavors to trace the metaphysical and structural analogy between Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and the perpetual Indian epic *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizing on the cardinal principles of *Bhagavad Gita* employed in the novel. This study also intends to throw light on the universality and the timelessness of the principles of *Bhagavad Gita* as depicted in *The Alchemist* that are most crucial in the present day global context.

**Keywords:** *Bhagavad Gita, The Alchemist, Intersexuality, Personal legend, Comparative Literature*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Paulo Coelho de Souza (born 1947) is a Brazilian novelist, journalist, theater director, actor and a lyricist. He is also a holder of the Guinness book of world records for being the most translated living author for his book *The Alchemist*. He wrote his first work *The Pilgrimage* inspired by his journey to Santiago de Compostela. The following year *The Alchemist* was published and was soon hailed as one of the bestselling books in history. *The Bhagavad Gita* is a dialogue between Sri Krishna, the Divine Incarnate, and Arjuna, the representative of mankind. It is the boiled down essence of the Vedas and Upanishads. The philosophy of life, love and destiny depicted in *Gita* is beautifully portrayed in the *Alchemist*. It cannot be said that the central thread of the *Alchemist* was adapted from the *Bhagavad Gita* but there is an almost striking similarity in the ideas put forth by both the texts. It can be said that the spiritual and philosophical themes of the novel are anchored in the *Bhagavad Gita* knowingly or unknowingly. And this research paper attempts to trace the analogy between the two using the theory of intertextuality.

## II. OBJECTIVES

This paper proposes a comparative study of both the texts based on the following objectives:-

1. Analyze both the texts in a critical light. Trace the metaphysical and structural analogy between
2. the two texts based on the theory of intertextuality.
3. Compare and contrast the individual points of view in both the texts.
4. Appreciate the relevance of the principles employed in both the texts especially in the contemporary global context.

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## III. HYPOTHESIS

A comparative analysis of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and the *Bhagavad Gita* revealing the influence of the *Gita* on *The Alchemist*.

## IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed research methodology includes a comparative study of the novel *The Alchemist* written by Paulo Coelho and the timeless Indian Epic *Bhagavad Gita* in the light of the theory of Intertextuality. The term 'Intertextuality' first coined by Julia Kristeva, proposes to look at a text as a heterogeneous amalgamation of texts and not as a unilinear phenomena. It brings out the interconnection between works of literature that impacts the reader's interpretation of the text. Intertextuality plays an important part in understanding a text because it helps in knowing how other texts have influenced the author and how the other texts are employed in a text to create meaning. There by it helps the reader in understanding the texts in a more meaningful and deeper way. Michel Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* says - "the frontiers of a book are never clear cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full-stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (1976). Thus in this research paper, Intertextuality is employed as a tool to explore and analyze the two texts and bring out the similarities in both.

## V. ANALYSIS

Long before establishing his career as a writer, Coelho proved himself as an excellent lyricist. In 1974, he produced a number of songs in collaboration with the great singer, composer and music producer Raul Seixas, known as the father of Brazilian Rock. This was when the moment of glory first kissed his career. His most famous song "Gita" from this collection which was also titled as "Gita" was sold five million copies. It was the great Indian epic *Bhagavad Gita* that inspired Coelho to write this song. He says "the moment I read it, I fell in love with the book. It continues to be my book for all times. When I first discovered it, I wrote the song 'Gita' (Coelho). This album was released in 1974 much before he started writing the *Alchemist* in 1988. According to him, the song "was about a moment in the 'Bhagavad Gita' when Arjuna asks Krishna, 'who are you?'" (Coelho, 2018). This self interrogation is exactly what Coelho tries to stimulate in the protagonist of the novel Santiago and through him, subsequently in the mind of the reader. *The Alchemist* is the story of an



Andalusianshepherd boy named Santiago who after serious contemplations bids goodbye to his present life and goes on a quest to realize his personal destiny. This quest which Coelho refers to as “following one’s personal legend” and as “Dharma” in Gita is the very essence of the book. By the term “personal legend” Coelho means understanding one’s objective in life and pursuing it. In the novel it is Melchizedek, the king of Salem who enlightens Santiago about Personal Legends. Melchizedek, by his own account, essentially inspires everyone who is in a dubious situation in their journey of pursuing their personal legends. Although in the novel he appears to Santiago as a man of flesh and blood, it is said that he appears to people often as a symbol. Thus Melchizedek can be seen as an incarnation of the same divine consciousness that Krishna stands for in the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna’s advice to Arjuna in the Karma Yoga to do one’s duty without being attached to the fruit of it will help one attain the supreme, falls in line with Coelho’s realizing one’s personal legend. Both in the novel and the Bhagavad Gita a threefold evolution can be seen. Santiago grows from his innocent eagerness to acquire knowledge and finally finds his way to fulfillment and sagacity. This can be seen as a variation of the trio Karma yoga, Bhakti yoga and Jnyana yoga imparted to Arjuna by Krishna. Santiago has a choice to live a life he was comfortable with or to go in pursuit of his personal legend. He could have went on with his life, as happy as it was with his flock of sheep, uninterrupted. But instead he decides to go in quest of his personal destiny which would be an obscure act and a valiant venture. Man always has a tendency to stick on to what is known to him; what is safe and certain. His natural tendency is to stay away from the uncertain. To quote from the Alchemist-“Here I am, between my flock and my treasure, the boy thought. He had to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have” (Coelho, 1998). Santiago chooses to leave his comfort zone and go in pursuit of his personal legend. This very decision itself is reflective of the cardinal philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita which Krishna imparts to Arjuna that knowing yourself is superior to everything else. One of the evident similarities in both the texts are its chief characters. In Gita it is lord Krishna and Arjuna while in The Alchemist it is Santiago and The Alchemist. The alchemist undertakes the task of helping Santiago find his hidden treasure. He supplements Santiago’s journey towards the goal. A teacher student relationship develops between them similar to the one developed between Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. But then there are several teachers who clear the path for Santiago to reach his destiny including the old king and the crystal vendor. All these people whom he meets along the way appear to be different embodiments of the same reality that helped him achieve success in his journey. On one level they are his spiritual mentors or gurus but they are more like incarnations of God who appear on earth when righteousness hits its lowest point. To quote from the Gita: “whenever and wherever a decline of righteousness and a predominance of unrighteousness prevails; at that time I manifest myself personally, o descendent of Bharata (Gita, 4.7)” This resonates the old king’s declaration that, “I am always nearby when someone wants to realize their

personal legend” (Coelho, 1998). Without these Guru’s it would be very doubtful if both Arjuna and Santiago would even realize their destinies, let alone reach there. They are not only given lessons on realizing their destinies but are also taught about many other things required by a human being to live a fulfilling and satisfactory life. Finally, both Santiago and Arjuna succeeds in their endeavor by following the right paths as has been imparted to them by their mentors and doing their duties no matter what difficulties came up their way. Another striking similarity in both the texts are the lessons of oneness that resides within all the souls that has been taught to both Arjuna and Santiago. Santiago in a conversation with the wind says that “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, 1998). This is exactly what Krishna means when he says “I am the Atma residing in the heart of all beings. I am also the beginning, the middle, and the end of all beings (Gita, 10.20)”. The concepts of Atman and Brahman have found their way into the book in the form of “The soul of the World” and “the soul of the God”. By contemplating on the soul of the world the boy was able to realize that his own soul was no different from the soul of the God and that they are only different manifestations of the same truth. The ultimate truth that the Jeevathma (human soul) is a part of the Paramatma has been rendered to both Santiago and Arjuna. To quote from the Alchemist “The boy reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw that it was a part of the Soul of the God. And he saw that the Soul of the God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles (Coelho, 1998).” In the book there is instant when the boy is in conversation with his heart and the heart tells him that everyone has their own legend but the heart rarely speaks to the people because they don’t listen to their hearts anymore. This, whether Coelho intended it or not can be said as a good interpretation of the Kaliyuga or the last of the four stages in the cycle of Yugas according to Hinduism. When the dharma is at its lowest point. One of the poignant truths revealed in this book is that “love never keeps a man from pursuing his personal legend” (Coelho, 1998). This seems to run parallel with the concept of love without attachment as said in the Bhagavad Gita. Detachment and love is a central idea in the Alchemist. The alchemist at one point asks Santiago to continue his journey without getting attached to the pleasures of the oasis including his relationship with Fatima. He also warns Santiago of the possible consequences if he chooses to stay in the oasis. People usually tend to associate love with attachment but the alchemist says to Santiago that “you must understand that love never keeps a man from pursuing his destiny. If he abandon’s that pursuit, it’s because it wasn’t true love... the love that speaks the languages of the World (Coelho, 1998)”. This advice of the alchemist falls in tune with Sri Krishna’s counsel to Arjuna “he who has no attachments can really love others, for his love is pure and divine (Gita, 3.19)” Karma yoga or the yoga of action has been emphasized through out the novel. It is through this relentless action, which is defined as “quest:” in alchemist and as



“karma” in Gita that both Santiago and Arjuna attains victory. A famous quote said by Krishna in Bhagavad Gita “If you don’t fight this righteous battle, then forsaking your own duty and fame, you will incur sin (Gita, 2.33).” In The Alchemist, Coelho says “The wise men understand that the natural world is only an imitation and a copy of paradise ... God created the world so that, through its visible objects, men could understand his spiritual teachings and the marvels of his wisdom” (Coelho, 1998). Though compact this sentence is boiled down essence of the Maya, the deceptive force that keeps a soul tied to the eternal cycle of birth and death. Finally, Coelho’s voice seems a direct echo from the Bhagavad Gita when he says “We are afraid of losing what we have, whether it be our life, possessions or property. But this fear evaporates when we understand that our life stories and the history of the world were written by the same hand” (Coelho, 1998).

## VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude it can be said that The Alchemist is a manifesto of lifemanagement which teaches us that it is the unconquerable human spirit which is most crucial in the contemporary society. It puts forth the idea that following one’s dream or destiny will fill one’s life with a sense of purpose and fulfillment that will eventually lead to self-discovery and realization. Alchemist shows us the path to self-actualization or spiritual fulfillment through self-awareness, self-exploration, heart-searching, and action which is same as depicted in the Gita. A close comparative reading of the two texts reveals that Coelho places high values on the Gita and its principles which he defines as “a treasure about the importance of accepting our challenges” (Coelho, 2013). Rooted as it is on the bedrock of the perpetual principles which is cardinal to human life and its ultimate purpose, the Gita is becoming even more pertinent in the contemporary global context of ever growing consumerism and rising violence.

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