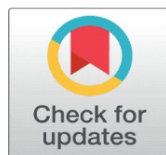


# AWAKENING THE TRUE SELF: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MYSTICAL TRADITION IN PAULO COELHO'S THE ZAHIR

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## ABSTRACT

The mystical tradition often rooted in ancient wisdom and spiritual practices draws its influence from various mystical elements, notably Sufism and other esoteric traditions. The novel, *The Zahir* delves into spiritual elements, self-discovery and interconnectedness of individuals offering a mystical journey that grows beyond the surface of everyday life. The novel is about the story of a renowned author whose wife had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. It describes the search for her from South America to Spain, France ending in Central Asia. The journey leads him to a new understanding of the nature of love, the power of destiny. Paulo Coelho wrote *The Zahir* while he was making his own pilgrimage through the world in between January and June 2004. The concept of forgetting personal history is one of the main concepts of the novel and it is a part of many initiation of tradition which is closely tied to the idea of embracing the present and future without being burdened by past mistake or regrets. This paper attempts to analyse how the influence of mysticism helps to shape the true self of the main character in the novel, *The Zahir*.

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Mysticism is a vague or ill-defined religious or spiritual belief especially associated with a belief in the occult and direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience such as intuition or insights. The mystical life involves the emergence from its capture of the field of consciousness and the conversation or rearrangement of his feeling, thought and will to this new transcendental Centre of life. Each mystic owes much to his spiritual ancestors from his tradition and from him develop another language.

Paulo Coelho's writing drew inspiration from various spiritual and philosophical tradition and among them, Sufism is one of the prominent traditions. Sufism is the Islamic tradition of attaining a greater awareness or presence within. According to Sufis' the great teachers, poets, artists and inventors never aims deliberately at the inspiration, but obtains from unknown source, perhaps from unconscious contact with the creative plain of being. It tries to explore the theme of self-discovery, interconnectedness and the search for a higher meaning in life. He presents mysticism as a path to uncover the true self, a concept central to many traditions.

Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir* is a novel about love, loss and journey of self-discovery. The novel draws upon various mystical traditions, including sufism, a branch of Islam, for its emphasis on personal connection with the divine. It is about the experience of the narrator in search of his disappeared wife, Esther which serves as a catalyst to the narrator to explore the true identity of his self. Unlike Jorge Louis Borges' novel, *Zahir*, which is a romantic metaphor of a "blind man, a Compass, tiger or a coin", Paulo Coelho's *Zahir* has a name "Esther" (51).

Paulo Coelho presents the unnamed narrator whose initial focus is on finding his wife, who left him "two years, nine months, eleven days and eleven hours ago" (331), but as the plot moves up he presents the character who is forced to re-evaluate his life throughout the story. The narrator remembers the past of his life. Even though the writer is not always "faithful of husband", he still truly loves his wife for the eight long years they have been together. She had everything in life, and yet she was unhappy; although she could easily go through the rest of her life pretending that this unhappiness didn't exist, she was terrified of falling into a depression from which she might never emerge "(204).

Even though he did not express his grief over the disappearance of his wife to any one, he was sure in his mind that "my career as a writer was over "as" the woman who had made me begin was no longer there" (56). He says that love is an untamed force. "When we try to control it, it destroys us. When we try to imprison it, it enslaves us. When we try to understand it, it leaves us feeling lost and confused"(92). Being with someone else and making that person feel as if they were of no importance in our life is far worse than feeling alone and miserable in the streets of Geneva" (251). He learns that, "there is nothing worse than the feeling that no one cares whether we exist or not, that no one is interested in what we have to say about life, and that the world can continue turning without our awkward presence"(249).

While he was traveling, he saw a Chapel which helps him to realize that every human being is a Cathedral, growing and changing shapes, correcting weaknesses and sometimes fail to choose the best solution to do honour to the empty space where one worship the dearest and the most important person. That visit into the Cathedral helps him to understand that Esther, *the Zahir* is everything. She is the reason for his existence and helps him to rebuild himself to accept that "I love another human being more than I love myself" (60).

Christiana, his third wife, is an authoritative woman who is described by the narrator himself as "the woman who made me say "yes", when I wanted to say "no" who forced me to fight for what she, quite rightly, believed was my reason for living, who let me set off alone because her love for me was greater even than her love for herself, who made me go in search of my dream; "(27). Christiana wanted him to continue his writing when he "weighed down by responsibilities" (22). For him, "writing is a solitary activity in the world and in order to continue his dream as a writer he has to create sentences, paragraphs, chapters and go on writing till his death not allowing anybody to caught in the trap of success or failure" (69). "Everything that's written in my book is part of my soul, part of the lessons I've learned throughout my life, and which I try to apply to myself. I'm a reader of my own books. They show me things that I already knew, even if only unconsciously" (125).

Mystic experiments present in vision or voices is largely conditioned by one's temperament. Voices and Visions are the artistic expressions and creative result of thought, intuition and of direct perception. The visions and voices infuse something new in the way of strength, knowledge, directions and leave it physically, mentally or spiritually better than they found it.

Mikhail, a twenty five year old boy from Steppes who acts as a translator for Esther, first felt the presence of a lady when he was eight years old when he was turning from school. The vision predicts that before he was twenty two, a woman from far away will come and carry off him to see the world. The lady says that "I have a mission to fulfil to spread the true energy of love throughout the world" (195). As Mikhail was brought up in an Islamic religion, he knows more about *Zahir* and he has the blessing of God as "divine energy passing through the body "(101). He says that total power or sacrificing themselves for a cause gives meaning to some people's life.

Esther first met Mikhail when she has gone to central Asia to write an article about the American based berry being built in neighbouring country in preparation of War that would begin. She describes him as a good translator, a realistic, enthusiastic and sensitive person. Esther steps into Kazakhstan when mysticism and esoteric became fashionable after decades of religious repression and also when books about Gurus and teachers are published. She came there trust blindly in intuition. She also says that, "there are moments in life when we need to trust blindly in intuition, which is what she is doing now" (202). In Steppes, she with Mikhail is obliged to make a living weaving carpets and was giving French lessons to the foreigners.

She confesses to Mikhail a little about her life. Esther waited for her beloved husband like Penelope who waits for her beloved Ulysses, by weaving a shroud for her father in law. But Esther when realises that, "I had set off on a path of no return", she asks a nomad in Steppes to teach him to forget her personal history and went forward to accept the love which she says, "in the eyes of a painter called, Dos" (337).

Before he met Esther he had lived with the presence of the divine but Esther who shared the same wavelength with him, introduced him to other people. Michael is a Mongolian guy with all the strange idea about love. He used to conduct meeting every Thursday to restore the energy of love to the earth. He specialised in an exotic kind of performance Art from Kazakhstan which consist in encouraging people to talk about their own lives and to empty their mind. Oleg is the real name of Mikhail. Mikhail is the name he choose when he decided to reborn again to life. In the meeting which usually start with a prayer to dear Lady everyone wears the same symbols, somewhere on their clothing either in the form of a brooch or a metal badge of embroidery or even drawn on the fabric with a pen and used to include percussion instruments in the performance.

After his meeting with Mikhail in a book signing section in Champ Elysees, the unnamed protagonist tries to establish contact with the young epileptic, who swore that he could hear voices. Knowing from him about his wife, he travelled to Kazakhstan through the Silk Road, the old commercial route that connected Europe with the countries of the East. Paulo Coelho after reaching the Steppes realises that Steppes is full of emptiness and there is no distraction, "a sense of Paradise descends from the sky's".

The Kazakh nomads' simple way of life connecting with nature offers a stark contrast to the narrator's materialistic world. The Nomadic way of life is different from the usual life as they give more importance for preserving the culture and traditions of their society. His choosing of the new name "nobody" which symbolizes a fresh start is the result of this strict tradition. The unnamed narrator says that his travel to Kazakhstan to find his wife "made me travel through the whole of my past life. I saw where I went wrong, I saw where I stopped" (325).

The narrator is not a religious person, but he believes in the mystics' life. He is able to realise his dream of becoming a writer only after undertaking the pilgrimage on the road to Santiago and it's through another pilgrimage that he discover himself as he looks for his wife in Kazakhstan. Finally When he rediscovered his wife he too discovered the meaning of his life which had been through so many challenges and changes and was now about to change again. The narrator says, "I had discovered that I was much better and much more capable than I myself had thought;" (334). The bitter fact is that he had never made any attempt to really know his wife. The unclear ending of the novel emphasizes his on-going journey of self-discovery.

In Sufi mysticism, *The Zahir* represents the visible and the tangible world, but it also hold a deeper symbolic meaning of obsession, something that captivate the mind and Soul. The novel serves as a testament to the enduring power of mysticism to inspire, enlighten and transform the human experience. Through *The Zahir*, Coelho invites readers to embark on a mystical journey along the characters, ultimately illuminating the profound impact of mysticism in shaping the true self.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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