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ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO PAULO COELHO'S
THE ALCHEMIST

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ABSTRACT

The Brazilian author Paulo Coelho is one of the most read writers today. Most of Coelho's works are replete with nature portrayal and beautiful landscapes that a normal man may fail to perceive through his naked eyes. Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* is the best novel to present ecocritical elements in literature and their interconnectedness. The novel is nature oriented and beckons humanity to go back to nature to preserve and protect the environment.

Environment has been fundamental to our tradition and culture. It's only in the past decade or two that environmental literature has become a main stream. There is a growing demand to protect and preserve the environment. The rise of the concepts like *go green*, *green policy*, *environment market*, *carbon trading*, etc., have been entering human day today life.

Ecocriticism is a recent phenomenon in the area of theory and criticism which represents a growing awareness of environmental issues. It is based on an "*earth centered approach* to literary studies" and reveals that *human culture is connected to the physical world*, affecting it and affected by it. It is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or man's relationships with his physical environment as reflected in literature. Hence, Ecocriticism, the growing critical theory, is an investigation into the relation between humans and the natural world in literature.

Key words: Ecocriticism, carbon trading, green policy, preservation, interconnectedness, biotic-abiotic relation, alchemy.

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"A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself. Forests are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people." — Franklin D. Roosevelt

INTRODUCTION

Today man has exploited his home to the extent that there is a greater need to go back to the ancient life. With the emergence of science and technology, there is a gradual depletion of the environmental resources. It is often taken for

granted that natural resources are to be exploited for sound economy. The issues like rampant sand mining, ever increasing greenhouse gases like heavy emission of carbon dioxide, gradual depletion of the ozone layer, spread of epidemics, unheard diseases, e-waste dumping, devastating incidents, etc. have alerted human against environmental hazards and disasters or possible holocaust. Man who looks for economic growth only and not ecology conversion is the main cause behind the environmental hazards

face today. The threat is not only on the environment but on the very existence of humanity too. Hence, Maurice Maeterlinck, in his book *"The Life of the Bee"* writes "if the bee disappeared off the face of the earth, men would have only four years left on earth to live".

The recent reports on the environment and climate change have warned that the danger is lurking near us. The human population has doubled in the past 35 years, in the same period; the number of the invertebrate animals has decreased by 50 percent because of the loss of habitat or global environmental disruption. Thus, there is a strong need for an eco-friendly attitude and the environmental awareness. There are many ways to do so of which literature is one the best mediums.

This paper looks into the ecocritical issues faced in twenty first century and its remedies inscribed in literature, especially in the novel *'The Alchemist'* of Paulo Coelho. It is a novel of Nature which beacons humanity to protect, preserve and conserve the environment because earth is the only planet where lives thrive.

Understanding the Ecocritical Approach

Ecocriticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. It is a recent theory into the domain of criticism and its applications. It represents a growing awareness of the environmental issues. The word "Ecocriticism" was first coined by **William Rueckert** in his essay *"Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism."* By ecocriticism he meant "**application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature**" Ecocriticism demonstrates how nature is presented in literature. It is based on an "**earth centered approach to literary studies**" and reveals that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Cherry Glotfelty, an ecocritic said that ecocriticism as a critical stance has "one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between human and the nonhuman."

Ecocriticism started developing in the 1990s as a school of literary criticism in America exclusively dealing with American literature. Ecocriticism as a theory is concerned with the

relationships between literature and the environment or man's relationships with his physical environment as reflected in literature. It aims - to contribute to the preservation and survival of man and also environment. Thus, in a nutshell we can say that Ecocriticism is an investigation into:

- The relationship between humans and the natural world in literature.
- The way in which environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment, and attitudes towards nature are presented and analyzed,
- How individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects.

Paulo Coelho: Messenger of Nature

The Brazilian author Paulo Coelho was born in August 24, 1947 in the city of Rio de Janeiro. He is one of the most widely read authors. More than 100 million copies of his books have been sold and translated worldwide into numerous languages, and have been published in 150 countries. He was named a United Nations Messenger of Peace in 2007. Most of Coelho's works are replete with nature portrayal and beautiful landscapes that a normal man may fail to perceive through his naked eyes. *The Alchemist* is a fine example where the ecosystem is described to have the universal soul and the biotic – abiotic relations are well depicted. In Paulo's works we find four basic environmental perspectives or ecocritical elements. They are: -

1. Man always existed within some natural environment
2. Man is always in search of his true self or identity
3. Nature helps man to find his true self
4. Nature always foretells things to happen

The Alchemist: A Novel of Nature

The Alchemist is an adventure story about a shepherd boy who learns to live his dreams. The novel has already achieved the status of modern classic. This is the story of **Santiago**, an Andalusian shepherd boy who dreams of travelling the world in search of a treasure as extravagant as any ever found. From his home in Spain he journeys to the exotic markets of Tangiers and then into the Egyptian desert, where a fateful encounter with the alchemist awaits him. The Alchemist is a

transforming novel about self-realization in and through nature. Coelho portrays that nature has every answer for our dreams. He says, *"When you really want something to happen, the whole universe conspires in helping you to achieve it."* (ALC, 21) that is whole universe helps him who peruses for the dream to make it come true. The character finds his dream in Nature and peruses for it with the help of Nature.

Santiago is not just a boy characterized by the author but he is the persona of each one of us. He summons us to go back to Nature that has all the remedies of our problems. Nature itself is a box full of surprises and bliss. Paulo writes,

But, most important, he was able every day to live out his dream. If he were to tire of the Andalusian fields, he could sell his sheep and go to sea. By the time he had had enough of the sea, he would already have known other cities, other women, and other chances to be happy. I couldn't have found God in the seminary, he thought, as he looked at the sunrise. (ALC, 10)

It is believed and seen in history that nature is the manifestation of God and He communicates to people through signs and symbols. Coelho uses this aspect through the concept of omens that convey to the boy about things to happen.

"In order to find the treasure, you will have to follow the omens. God has prepared a path for everyone to follow. You just have to read the omens that he left for you." (ALC, 27-28)

Nature is full of mystery and surprises. One can dedicate his full life to understand the interconnectedness.. Nature has its own language and Coelho called as Universal language. In the desert, the Alchemist describes the relationship Santiago must develop with nature, and in so doing, understand the language of the world.

There must be a language that doesn't depend on words, the boy thought. I've already had that experience with my sheep, and now it's happening with people. He was learning a lot of new things. Some of them were things that

he had already experienced, and weren't really new, but that he had never perceived before. And he hadn't perceived them because he had become accustomed to them. He realized: If I can learn to understand this language without words, I can learn to understand the world. (ALC, 44)

Interconnectedness

Santiago who finds himself one with nature, when he asks for god he starts to speak with the wind, the sun and the desert and finally he communicates with the Soul of the World. We are all connected, we are not only made of the same stuff, but we can also communicate with Nature. The language of the world refers to the oneness of all things: that everything in the universe is tied together. And believers of this truth feel that the language of the universe links people to the world and to each other. Santiago speaks to his sheep, fields, camels, and desert and finally finds the universal soul of all these things. The oasis that offers shelter to Santiago is the oasis of hope to live, love and keep moving towards the dream. There are many such instances that reveal the deep interconnectedness of human beings with Nature.

The novel *The Alchemist* is replete with Natural imagery. The main protagonist is the Nature that helps Santiago to pursue and to realize his dream – i.e. to find the hidden treasure. The author in fact envisages that nature has all the remedies for the humanity. It's our moral duty to preserve the environment that helps us live happily.

Go back to Nature

The Alchemist is a novel that envisages humanity to go back to Nature and live in harmony with it. It is the Nature that teaches us and sustains us. Santiago who followed his dream did not learn from heavy books but from Nature itself. Nature reveals pages of knowledge gradually to those who aspire to learn. He feels with nature and feels nature in him. It does not require long practices of meditation or strictly disciplined monastic life to understand nature. Santiago teaches that we need to just live in nature and feel nature in oneself, i.e., universal language of nature. Hence, the novel calls us to go back to Nature which is the ultimate reality

of our existence. In history those who violated course of nature have never been successful in their endeavour.

Paulo Coelho, calls humanity to follow their dreams and realize them in Nature because ““when you want something to happen, the whole universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.” (ALC, 21) he calls us to protect and preserve Nature to ameliorate natural crisis faces in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Today, due to heavy industrialization, carbon emission, pollutions, etc., the environment has become a burning issue. The recent reports revealed that internet videos and associated cloud services, information and communication technologies, aviation industries etc., have a major role in the emission of carbon dioxide that are detrimental to human health. It seems that it's right the time to burn the candle at both ends to save humanity by protecting the environment. The constitution of India embodies the framework of protection and preservation of the nature without which life cannot be enjoyed. Indian constitution clearly imposes duty on every citizen to protect the environment. *Article 51-A (g)*, says, “It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment, including forest, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures.”

As most of the works of Coelho illustrate that if we want to preserve the nature, we need to love the world as our own. Environmental knowledge is not enough for inculcating a sense of respect and responsibility, love and empathy are more important when it comes to preserving the environment. *The Alchemist* is a fine example to comprehend the relation and connection between human existence and environment. In this situation humanity should think not only about development and comforts but also of survival and protection of the environment. It is rightly said “protect environment and environment will protect you”. A poet, Sylvia Stults warns us by her poem titled *Warned* to protect environment. She writes:-

Protect what has been given for free
Our waters, skies, wildlife and trees
For once they're gone, don't you say

Consider yourself warned of that fatal day.
(Warned, Sylvia Stults, 2015)

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