

Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* as a Postmodern Text

Aseel Abu Al-Rub

University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

Literature has witnessed the appearance of many movements and approaches throughout the history. After World War II, particularly in the 1960s, postmodernism has come to surface and as an up-to-date movement, many eminent critics and cultural historians have turned their concerns and attention to it. This study examines the concept of postmodernism and it explores its main characteristics that appear in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1986).

Keywords: postmodernism, Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, magical realism, intertextuality, symbolism, plurality

Postmodernism is considered to be controversial movement in many ways and that is why many debates have revolved around its definition. Critics consider different points of view; consequently, there are many definitions for the term "postmodernism". Some critics, like Lyotard, consider postmodernism as a development and continuation of modernism. Lyotard defines postmodernism "as Enlightenment or as the culmination of Enlightenment thought" (Geyh, 2003, p. 3). Others like Baudrillard and Jameson emphasize the decisive break between modernism and postmodernism (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997, p. 209). Another scholar is Fredric Jameson who defines postmodernism as "the cultural logic of late-capitalism" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 182). Charles Newman defines postmodernism as "commentary on the aesthetic history of whatever genre it adopts" (Hutcheon, 1987, p. 125). For the interest of this study, all these diverse views will be discussed thoroughly.

For Linda Hutcheon postmodernism is: "A contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concept it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography" (Hutcheon, 1987, p. 3).

From the definitions presented above, it seems clearly that postmodernism has affected every domain in life and the many controversial and sometimes contradictory definitions of postmodernism are such a normal result as each critic puts his or her focus on one side of postmodernism and depending on this focus they define postmodernism.

The scholarship on postmodernism reveals that it has been approached from many perspectives. The first perspective, whose main belief is the dominance of images and loss of reality, is represented by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). He criticizes modern technology and its prominent impact on our modern societies as it produces models without real reference in the real life. This brings about the concept of "simulacra" which means "the copy without an original" (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997, p. 205). Thus,

Baudrillard claims that the boundary between simulation and reality is obscure. This leads to what he calls "hyperreality" which "points to a blurring of distinction between the real and the unreal in which the prefix 'hyper' signifies more real than real whereby real is produced according to models" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 119). So, in postmodern time we do not have the real but only models of real which are considered as realer than the real itself. As a result, postmodern time is considered as depthless world where the meaning is only superficial and artificial. Nevertheless, Baudrillard suggests that there is a decisive break and broad line between modernism and postmodernism as he thinks that "[i]f modernity is the era of production controlled by the industrial bourgeoisie, the postmodern era of simulations by contrast is an era of information and signs governed by models, codes, and cybernetics" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 118).

So, even if the postmodern era is the time of simulacra and has the models not the real, it is distinguished from the modern time which is controlled by industrialism and capitalism.

Postmodernism has been approached from another viewpoint represented by the French philosopher and literary critic Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998). He defines postmodernism as part of modernism. For him, "the postmodern is associated with the pagan, with the absence of rules, criteria, and principles, and with the need of experimentation, and producing new discourses and values" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 164). While he sharpens his attack against the totalizing, universalizing, and totalitarian theories, he attempts to develop new discourses with new theories and values to suit the postmodern era. He argues that such theories "inevitably oppress the weak and suppress minority discourses" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 169). According to his concept of justice, he thinks that one should not be judged by universal perspectives. So, he emphasizes heterogeneity, plurality, and differences in the discourses as a subsequent result of his belief that the discourses should allow the mute minorities to raise up their voices. So, his emphasis on plurality, multiplicity, difference, and otherness comes as a revolt against the totalizing, universalizing, and totalitarian theories which attempt to suppress and exclude the marginal and oppositional voices. In this way the postmodern discourses "will explore the 'unsayable' and 'invisible'" (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997, p. 208).

In this respect, this paper discusses *The Alchemist* by the Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho (b. 1947) as a postmodern work. As the fact that there are many critics who discuss postmodernism, there are contentious notions about not only its definition and principles but also its characteristics. Given this fact, this paper discusses thoroughly the postmodernist characteristics of *The Alchemist* from Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Linda Hutcheon's points of view about postmodernism.

The novel, briefly, is about Santiago, a young shepherd who lives in Spain. He has a recurrent dream about a child telling him to seek a treasure in the Egyptian pyramids. After consulting a gypsy woman who interprets the dream for him, he decides to embark his own journey in search for his treasure in Egypt.

During his journey, many surprising and unexpected things happen with Santiago. In addition, he meets many people like the crystal merchant with whom Santiago works for about a year. Moreover, when he joins a caravan heading for Egypt, he meets an Englishman who is studying to become an alchemist and he learns from this Englishman about the Philosophers Stone that can turn lead to gold, and a liquid called the Elixir of Life that can cure all illnesses. In addition, Santiago meets a girl called Fatima and falls in love with her in Al-Fayoum oasis. Then, he meets an old alchemist who invites Santiago on a trip into the desert. During this time, he teaches Santiago about the importance of listening to his heart and following his dream till he achieves it. Finally Santiago arrives at the Pyramids and begins digging for the treasure, but two men find him, beat him, and ask him about the reason of digging. When Santiago talks about his dream, they decide to take his money

and let him live. Before leaving, one of the men tells Santiago about his own dream, which is about a treasure buried in an abandoned church in Spain under a sycamore tree. The church is the same one in which Santiago had his original dream, and he finally understands where his treasure is. He returns to Spain to find a chest of jewels and gold buried under the tree, and plans to return to meet Fatima and be with her.

In order for the study to achieve its purpose in exploring the postmodern characteristics in *The Alchemist*, it will refer to some theories by the two French philosophers and literary critics Baudrillard and Lyotard. In addition, it will adopt Hutcheon's points of view about postmodernism and its characteristics as mentioned in her noteworthy book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). As the fact that there are numerous postmodern characteristics, the paper focuses on some of these characteristics which clearly appear throughout *The Alchemist* such as the use of magical realism, hyperreality, language of magic, intertextuality, pluralism, and cultural hybridity.

Magical realism is considered as a main characteristic and integral part of postmodernism. Magical realism, which means reality mixed with magic, is used heavily throughout the novel and appears at the very beginning of the novel. When Santiago has a recurrent dream, he decides to see a gypsy woman who is well-known for her ability in interpreting dreams. She tells him that he has to go to Egypt to find his treasure:

And this is my interpretation: you must go to the Pyramids in Egypt. I have never heard of them, but, if it was a child who showed them to you, they exist. There you will find a treasure that will make you a rich man. (Coelho, 1993, p. 15)

These dreams and visions are not taken as mere perplexing dreams, but more likely as omens or hints that the characters throughout the course of the novel infer these dreams and visions and follow the omens they indicate. In point of fact, the whole novel is based on Santiago's dream of traveling to Egypt to find his treasure. All the events and people he meets come as a result of his journey to achieve his dream.

Another example of magical realism is that when Santiago has the vision of the hawks while being in Al-Fayoum. He immediately considers it as an omen and interprets it as an assault on the oasis and tells the tribal chieftains so they successfully defend themselves against the assault:

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. The vision vanished immediately, but it had shaken him. (Coelho, 1993, p. 105)

This leads us to another characteristic of postmodernism explored meticulously by Baudrillard which is hyperreality. He thinks that "Hyperreality [...] points to a blurring of distinctions between the real and unreal" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 119).

Thus, these dreams are not real but people interpret them and take them as actual omens or guidelines to instruct them in their lives. They even think that dreams are the "Language of the World" because these dreams and visions lead to the truth and reality in many cases throughout the course of the novel. From the beginning of the novel, Santiago decides to leave his country to embark on an audacious journey to reach a non-heard of place for him, risking his life to follow a dream. Additional, this can be seen evidently in the end of the novel as the truth about Santiago's treasure lies in the dream of one of the men who attach Santiago in the church. Therefore, the characters excel the belief that dreams are part of normal reality to consider them as part of the spiritual reality.

Sometimes, however, Coelho takes the readers from the real world and magical realism and puts them in a world full of pure magic. Many facts which are related to the alchemist are considered as mere magic. It is pure

magic, for example, for a man to live two hundred years old, to know the answers of all questions in this world, and to transform lead into gold. The philosophers Stone that can turn lead to gold, and the liquid which called the Elixir of Life that can cure all ills are also plain magic. Another strange and supernatural incident in the novel is that when Santiago is with the accompany of the alchemist, some tribal soldiers capture them. In order to save their lives, the alchemist gives the soldiers all of Santiago's money and tells them that Santiago is a powerful alchemist who will turn into wind within three days. On the third day, Santiago (with the help of the alchemist) has a dialogue with the desert and communicates with the wind and the sun and makes a huge windstorm:

"I don't understand what you're talking about," the desert said.

"But you can at least understand that somewhere in your sands there is a woman waiting for me. And that's why I have to turn myself into the wind."

The desert didn't answer him for a few moments. Then it told 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, 1993, pp. 152-153)

Coelho uses magic dominantly to reinforce the theme of the novel that

[e]ach of us is destined for treasure, that each of us has a magical dream buried deep down within us, and that it is up to us to search the reality around us until we finally discover where the magic is. (Hant, 2004, p. 311)

Intertextuality, which means "existing texts are quoted or combined with a new set of words into new texts", is another remarkable feature of postmodernism (Venter, 2009, p. 158). It helps to create a historical background to the text. Hutcheon emphasizes the importance of intertextuality by indicating that: "[t]he textual incorporation of these intertextual pasts as a constitutive structural element of postmodernist fiction functions as a formal marking of historicity—both literary and 'worldly'" (Hutcheon, 1987, p. 124). In *The Alchemist*, there is, for example, a reference to *The Thousand and One Nights*:

The boy couldn't believe what he was seeing: the oasis, rather than being just a well surrounded by a few palm trees—as he had seen once in a geography book—was much larger than many towns back in Spain. There were three hundred wells, fifty thousand date trees, and innumerable coloured tents spread among them. (Coelho, 1993, p. 90)

"It looks like *The Thousand and One Nights*", said the Englishman, impatient to meet with the alchemist (Coelho, 1993, pp. 91-92).

This book is very important as it associated with the Arab culture and it is definitely significant because Santiago embarks his journey from Spain to Egypt which is located in the Arab world. So, the mention of *The Thousand and One Nights* is certainly provocative and suitable for the context. There is another reference to the *Old Testament* when the alchemist mentions the story of Joseph and his ability to interpret the dream of the pharaoh of Egypt:

The elder continued, "[w]hen the pharaoh dreamed of cows that were thin and cows that were fat, this man I'm speaking of rescued Egypt from famine. His name was Joseph. He, too, was a stranger in a strange land, like you, and he was probably about your age." (Coelho, 1993, p. 112)

This reference to the story of Joseph in the *Old Testament* is of great importance as it gives the notion of dreams a profounder meaning and links it to reality so the reader will not consider them as mere fantasies.

Another postmodern feature in *The Alchemist* is plurality which can be understood from Bakhtin's definition of the novel as "diversity of social speech types sometimes even the diversity of languages and

diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 262). In his paper, "Is Postmodernism Dead?", Rajendra Kumar Dash discusses the many languages Coelho employs in the *The Alchemist*, "he [Coelho] mentions the 'language of the world' (i.e., ordinary human languages), the language of God (e.g., dreams), the 'language of the soul' (i.e., symbolism), and the universal language (i.e., love)" (Dash, 2013). In the same scope, Lyotard emphasizes that plurality comes as a result of attacking totalizing and universalist theories because he argues that such theories "inevitably oppress the weak and suppress minority discourses" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 169).

In *The Alchemist*, there are many characters from different ages, social and religious backgrounds and each one of them speaks his mind freely and talks about his or her knowledge, dreams, and principles in life without any hesitation. Starting from Santiago, the young shepherd, who embarks his journey of life to follow his dream to find his treasure in Egypt. During this journey, he meets many people. Some of them are enthusiastic and optimistic and help him to go on and reach his goal such as the gypsy woman who interprets Santiago's dream and Melchizedek—the king of Salem who advises Santiago to follow the interpretation of the gypsy woman, encouraging him to start his journey. Then, when he reaches Tangies, a thief takes his money and he works for a crystal merchant. This merchant is a Muslim whose dream is to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, but he does not because he is afraid that if makes the trip, he will have nothing else to live for. Later, when he joins the caravan which heads to Egypt, he meets an Englishman. He is educated and determined to learn the secrets of alchemy but because he is a skeptic, he misses the chance to learn from the old alchemist. When Santiago reaches Al-Fayoum oasis, he meets and falls in love with a girl called Fatima. She is understanding and encourages Santiago to continue his journey and to come back to her as she will wait for him. Then he meets the alchemist who knows the Soul of the World and who teaches Santiago many secrets to help him achieve his dream. When Santiago arrives at the Pyramids and starts digging, two thieves attack him and one of them makes fun of him when Santiago tells them about his dream. He tells Santiago about the worthlessness of dreams by telling him about his own dream which about a treasure buried under a sycamore tree in an abandoned church in Spain.

All these characters whether are men or women, old or young, true believers in their dream or not, collaborate and help to enrich the novel and reinforce its themes because giving many diverse voices and opinions helps to make this novel a microcosm and representative of our macrocosmic world regardless to the name of characters and places.

Symbolism in this novel is another important postmodern feature. The alchemist is the main symbol in this novel which also gives the novel its title. Alchemists are scientists with super natural powers who have the ability to transform normal metal into gold using the Philosopher's Stone. The process of transforming normal metal into gold symbolizes the experience Santiago goes through to achieve his dream and find his treasure. In both cases there are some inadequate elements which have to be eliminated. In the case of the metals, these elements are some kind of impurities, but in the case of Santiago, these impurities are the worldly desires, weak points, delusion, illusion, and the fear from the future.

Finally, cultural hybridity is another important characteristic of postmodernism which means something that consists of or comes from a mixture of two or more things. Coelho employs this concept proficiently by referring to many different places and people from diverse cultures. In *The Alchemist*, there are many incidents which indicate cultural hybridity. First, Santiago is a Spanish shepherd but his journey takes him to the Arab world and during his journey he visits and knows about many brand-new places like Tangier, Al-Fayoum oasis,

Mecca, and Egypt. In addition he meets many people from different cultures like the Muslim crystal merchant, the educated Englishman, and Fatima whom he falls in love with.

The title, the themes, the characters, the plot, the symbols, the many postmodern characteristics together besides other characteristics from other movements collaborate to make *The Alchemist* earn such distinguished fame and reputation and to make Coelho win many awards and to be considered as “Not only one of the most widely read but also most influential writers in the world today” (Ortolano, 2003, p. 57).

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