

# Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello* - A Pursuit for Enlightenment and Escapism

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**Abstract**—Literature introduces us to new worlds of experience. “It is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest on all of us” (*English Literature* 123). Latin American writers normally focus on physical journey, on the unbearable sufferings of the protagonists, and of course their material achievements. But Paulo Coelho projects a new vista in this physical journey which is the back bone of his novels. Journey in his novels transform the protagonists to realize the self. His novels prove that mysticism is the link language between man and God. *The Witch of Portobello*, being written as a series of accounts, takes us to an inner journey almost into the hidden power of our life as he fuses philosophy, religious miracle, love, fear of loss, and a kind of moral parable. It has (a unique narrative technique adopted by Coelho) of individuals who directly interact with the protagonist Athena.

**Keywords:** Literature, human life, physical journey, torments, mysticism, hidden power.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Incantations, rituals, spells and charms were integral to witchcraft in Southeastern Europe. Folk healing was the task of the village witch, who possessed special skills. In Bulgaria, villages typically maintained one white witch – a practitioner of healing magic – and one black witch – a practitioner of harmful magic. In Slovenia, female witches derived their power from a lunar Goddess; male witches sought to protect the village from evil (*South Slavic Witchcraft* 2007 <[http://www. answers. com/south%20 American 20 literature](http://www.answers.com/south%20American%20literature)>). Amidst these people who possess magical powers, Coelho attempts to present a woman who endeavours to seek God through music and dance. Signs, visitations, witchcraft, the Great Mother, mysticism, meditation and magic are the ingredients of the novel *The Witch of Portobello*. Among the ingredients, meditation and signs enable Athena to sense the presence of the Goddess Mother which mystifies her.

## 2. MYSTICISM

The term mystical theology denotes a direct experience with divine. Typically mystics, theistic or otherwise, see their mystical experiences as part of a larger undertaking aimed at human transformation and not as the terminus of their efforts. Thus, in general, mysticism would best be thought of as a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions and experiences aimed at human transformation. The protagonist of *The Witch of Portobello* - Athena's life incorporates distinctive practices, discourses, traditions and experiences solely to attain the divine spark. But ill-fated she is to be called as a witch by one Rev. Ian Buck. Her initial experience of trance is discovered by her parents in the church which she most frequently visits.

### 2.1. Strange Encounter

At first her mother ignores her visions of invisible friends – angels and saints as it is quite natural for children to have visions which they forget as they grow. But the following incident agitates her mother when Athena has said that “she had seen a woman dressed in white like the Virgin Mary” (23). Suddenly one night she reports her that hell is closer which scares her a lot. At times she confesses her spiritual energy to Lukas.

She also shares experience of getting into trance as soon as the music is played at church; she not only has a special gift for music but also for dance. Many a time, Lukas has seen her playing guitar and singing hymns in praise of the holy Virgin as if the atmosphere has been touched by the hand of an angel. He realizes a sense of paradise, of possession by the sacred. Talking about the possession by the sacred, Athena quotes.

[...] The fact is that, to a greater or lesser extent, all creative human beings have such experiences, which are known as “possession by the sacred” [...] for a fraction of a second, we feel that our whole life is justified, our sins forgiven and that love is still the strongest force, one that can transform us forever. (38)

### 3. UNRHYTHMIC DANCE TRANSCENDS

Her trance like state mystifies Lukas. In such an occasion, he is only conscious of the present neither the past nor the future. This is what is referred to as Hunches by Paulo Coelho in *The Alchemist*. He enters into a state of worship, ecstasy and gratitude for being in the world. He senses the grandeur of God, through which simple things are revealed to him. Besides, Athena remarks

When I come here to praise the Virgin with my music, I'm not bothered about what other people might think. I'm simply sharing my feeling with her. And that's how its always been, ever since I was old enough to think for myself. I'm a vessel in which the divine energy can make itself manifest. And that energy is asking me now to have a child, so that I can give it what my birth mother never gave me: protection and security. (*The Witch of Portobello* 41)

Her divine quest begins in the second phase of her life – after she divorces her husband Lukas due to marital disharmony.

The very incident that has created this sort of impact is when she has been forbidden entry into the church since she is a divorcee. From her initial beginnings as a devout member of the Catholic Church, to her humiliating dismissal, Athena searches for a way to fit into the world on a spiritual level. She finds herself connecting to her spiritual self through music and dance, and like any good prophet she shares her discovery with those around her. Through her newly embraced spirituality, she prospers in her life and is able to travel extensively and learn new ways to channel her mystic side. She rents a house in an apartment where the owner Pavel of that apartment holds a dancing ritual at night. They strongly believe that while doing so, they are in touch with something stronger and more powerful. Seeing her obsession with dance, the owner Pavel teaches her to dance, in accordance with the sound made by natural things that move to unearthly rhythms while dancing. Athena perceives herself to be a free spirit that takes her to sublime heights, contemplates the present, divines the future which is finally transformed into pure energy “and that gives me enormous pleasure, a joy that always goes far beyond everything I've experienced or will experience in my life time” (61). In a way of elevating her mind, the owner talks about the vertex in dance – the culminating point. Coelho pays a verbal tribute to dance highlighting its nobility. In this novel, he glorifies dance that bridges the human soul and the divine spark.

Dance only to the sound of percussion; repeat the process every day; know that, at a certain moment your eyes will, quite naturally, close and you will begin to see a light that comes from within, a light that answers your questions and develops your hidden powers. (64)

#### 3.1. Channelling

The Director General calls the primary emotions, channelled by Athena, esoteric which he has personally experienced during one of the holidays. Though he has attempted to do many things to challenge the void, he could not give full concentration.

I had a long, hard struggle with myself not to get up from my chair. Gradually through, the anxiety gave way to contemplation and I started listening to my soul – or intuition or primary emotions whatever you choose to believe in. Whatever you call it, that part of me had been longing to speak to me but I had been too busy [...] it wasn't a dance but the complete absence of noise and movement, the silence, that brought me into contact with myself. And believe it or not, I learned a great deal about the problems bothering me. (86)

At a highly incommoded position, he tries to introspect. This has enabled him to analyse his problems on his own accord and to take better decisions with clearer understanding. Athena is a restless and exuberant woman by nature yet calligraphy teaches her patience. It enables her to sit quietly for hours together focusing on Arab poetry. Natil, the calligrapher has processed her and has prepared her spirit every minute. She becomes hypnotized when Natil says that everything on earth, smaller or bigger, makes sense. As far as calligraphy is concerned, he says, fingers take prominent role. He examines the mysterious gifts that Athena possesses but never wishes to disclose, as her gift not only enriches her to have an encounter with God but also purifies her.

### 4. AWAKENING THE DIVINE SPARK

Edda – her teacher, actually a doctor, has a vital role in processing Athena towards the divine energy. She pinpoints her setbacks and educates her to ward off her fears and pessimistic thoughts. By doing so, Edda smoothes her path towards divine spark. During their first meeting, Athena runs into a little girl. On seeing her, she forgets everything around for a while except the little girl. Later Edda expresses that her unconscious mind is pleased by nostalgia.

Something touched your unconscious mind. Perhaps you saw yourself as you would have been if you hadn't been adopted – begging in the street. At that moment, your brain stopped reacting. Your spirit left you and travelled down to hell to meet the demons from your past. Because of that, you did not notice the woman across the street - you were in a trance, a disorganized chaotic trance that was driving you to do something which was good in theory but in practices, pointless! (119)

#### 4.1. Naval Episode

Athena eventually takes on a student Andrea, on the advice of her own spiritual teacher Edda to whom she teaches her secrets. By forming a connection with her student, she is able to pass down her learning and ensure that they continue to be spread the world over. Athena voluntarily visits the theatre of

Andrea where she is impressed by Andrea's friends with more questions about the game of seduction, fertility rites etc. Athena asks them to transform into something unknown to them. She directs them to associate certain images with what they have transformed themselves into. The moment she utters the word sacred, everyone makes some gestures to imitate it. Entirely different it has been as everyone has had their own individuality. But their signs for earth and centre has been identical.

"But I felt something strange" said one of the oldest actors. "When she said 'centre' it was as if all my vital energy were suddenly focused in my navel. I've never experienced that before" (198). This navel episode reaches Antoine through Heron. Though a foreigner, Coelho gives a clear perception of Hindu myth in relation with the navel. It is a belief that in the navel of Vishnu, the God of creation and destruction, resides the God who rules each cycle. As for yogis, it is one of the chakras or sacred points of the human body. On the whole, Coelho presents a strong and enormous illustration to emphasise the navel as the centre of all.

Primitive tribes often used to build monuments in the place they believed to be the navel of the world. In South America, people who go into trances say that the true form of the human being is a luminous egg, which connects with other people through filaments that emerge from the navel. The mandala, a design said to stimulate meditation, is a symbolic representation of this. (208)

## 5. HAGIA SOFIA RITUAL

The Hagia Sofia ritual has had a far reaching effect that flabbergasted not only Andrea's theatre throng but also others who have come to know about it. Once the throng of Andréa is taken to participate in Athena's music and dance ritual by Heron. Of course they are hesitant in the beginning but later as they start obeying her words, something miraculous takes place. They witness Athena entering into a trance and embracing the soul of Hagia Sofia at the peak of their dance. She begins predicting people's problems both physical and mental. On seeing Viorel who stands frightened at the transformation of her mother, Hagia Sofia says

You stopped laughing and dancing when you saw me embracing your mother and asking to speak through her mouth. But you know I wouldn't be doing this if she hadn't given me her permission. I've always appeared before in the form of light and I still am that light but today I decided to speak. (230)

### 5.1. Enlightenment by Signs

The news reaches Edda who is delighted for she knows that it is actually the soul of Mother that filled the body of Athena - "by touching the deepest part of the river that flows through her soul she had come into contact with the Mother" (232). Without being taught by anyone, she has let the spark of the

Great Mother enter into her since she has been guided by her signs - a light in her dance, a letter in calligraphy, a fire in the mirror. Even Hagia Sofia might have been one of the instructions given by the Mother herself. Edda recalls a similar experience that she has realized in her life.

Everything around me was different and I felt like saying things that I would never normally dare to say. I didn't lose consciousness, I knew I was stilled but paradoxically I wasn't the person I was used to being with. (234)

As for as Athena is concerned, the contradictory movement of her body and soul enable her to get disconnected from her body thus paving way for the Mother to enter into her soul. That spark from the Mother enables Athena to perceive things from a different angle. This enables her to see people's emotions too.

## 6. AURA

A kind of blanket lies between the physical and the spiritual world, a blanket that changes in colour, intensity and light; this is what mystics call aura (235). This aura monitors the happenings. These are also transparent forms mixed up with human auras called 'ghosts'. The unrhythmic dance had made everyone intimidated because they have to do things as they had been done than doing it in the another way.

### 6.1. Dance of the Fire

To tackle the problem caused by Rev. Ian Buck who accuses her of arousing the evil spirits using some magical spell and exploiting her son for the ritual, Edda takes her to the forest. At a chosen place, she feels the presence of the Mother - a mysterious inner joy or euphoria. There they perform a ritual by setting fire to the logs collected by Athena. She compares the burning logs to life. In order to liberate the energy of our strength, our weakness must be let to reveal itself. They contemplate on the fire amidst the external noises, thus fulfilling the cycle of birth and death of the Mother. They concentrate on the dance of the fire - a symbol in front of them. As Edda throws some specially chosen herbs Athena's orientation with the fire becomes explicit. She is able to hear a song from the fire which astonishes her. She has been commanded to stay inside a circle drawn by Edda. She dances vigorously so as to invoke the male fire, the fire that purifies everything transforming them into energy.

### 6.2. Spiritual Sessions

Relaxing from trance, Edda advises Athena to remember those feelings as a vicious circle since she has a mission to fulfil. This experience emboldens her to face the rebels. Word of Athena's weekly meetings, in which she channels her inner goddess, Hagia Sophia, spreads and she becomes both something to be seen and something to be feared. She is faced with ultimatum of losing her son or continuing her spiritual sessions. When everyone is afraid of the commotion, during their regular ritual, Athena remains unshaken. Amidst the

curses of the crowd instigated by Ian Buck, she steadily performs the rituals, enters into trance and calls herself the combination of two souls - Philemon - a spirit guide and Hagia Sofia. In that state, she declares her love to Heron calling it a divine spark. She further remarks that love is the soul, blood and body of the Great Mother. It is she who has kindled the passion in both the hearts “the energy of love can never be lost - it is more powerful than anything and shows itself in many ways” (310).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Thus in her quest, Athena opens her heart to intoxicating powers and becomes a controversial spiritual leader. Coelho also deals with the theme of returning to the goddess, religion, the interpretation of love, and the feminine part of the divine within the theme of searching for one’s true self and opening to the energies of the world.

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