

## Jalalu'd-Din Rumi's *The Masnavi* and Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* "A Study of Mystical Analogy"

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### ABSTRACT

The study examines the thematic and stylistic similarities between Persian poet Jalalu'd-Din Rumi and Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho in their understanding of the spiritual experience of reaching Illumination and Knowledge, both in the Sufi and Western Catholic mystical traditions, respectively. The significance of this study emanates from the fact that despite the authors' being temporally and culturally distant, their mystical visions intersect exceptionally, with decisive affinities manifested in selected books of Rumi's poem *The Masnavi* (transcribed between 1258 and 1273) and Coelho's novel *The Alchemist* (1988). The study compares the ways the works celebrate the mystic doctrines of intuition rather than rationality, renunciation of the worldly, and the Oneness of God and his manifestations that guarantee the fulfillment of the main characters' quest of reaching Illumination and Knowledge. The study also highlights the metaphors of the journey, discipleship, and alchemy, which intertwine with the symbols of the desert and the treasure in both works and serve the aforementioned themes, to reflect the shared mystic vision of Rumi and Coelho.

**Keywords:** Mysticism, Sufism, Western Catholic mysticism, Intuition, Renunciation, Oneness, Journey, Discipleship, Alchemy, Desert, Treasure.

### Introduction

Truth has always been the ultimate goal of mankind. This spiritual quest to reach a mature understanding of existence and one's place in the universe interconnects with mysticism and has together with mysticism, received considerable attention in different disciplines like theology, philosophy, and literature.

Spirituality in essence is a contemplative attitude that attempts to comprehend the authentic meaning and reality of human existence through one's awakening and commitment to and union with God. Teasdale (2010:10) defines spirituality as "an individual's solitary search for and discovery of the absolute or the divine. It involves direct mystical experience of God or realization of vast awareness." Spirituality in this sense relates to mysticism which is the realization of spiritual knowledge through intuitive and emotional faculties rather than through intellectual and sensual ones. In this light, Underhill (2002:22) states that mystics "[m]ore reasonable than the rationalists, find in that very hunger for reality, which is

the mother of all metaphysics, an implicit proof that such reality exists; that there is something else, some final satisfaction, beyond the ceaseless stream of sensation which besieges consciousness..." Another major mystical doctrine and level of being that helps reach Knowledge is the purity of the soul. This requires self-examination, renunciation of worldliness, and contemplation which together with one's reliance on intuition lead to the realization of Oneness which is the third mystic doctrine that helps reach self-realization.

As a spiritual approach, mysticism is not restricted to one religious faith. Eastern religions like Hinduism and Taoism proffer a clear presentation of spirituality apparent in the Hindu Upanishads as well as in the Chinese Taoist teachings of Laozi. Islam, and here, the Sufi tradition, is enriched with spiritual and mystic meanings expressed in works like the writings of Shams e-Tabriz and the poetry of Rabia' Al-Adawiyya, Mansur al-Hallaj, and Junayd of Baghdad. As for the Western Christian interest in mysticism, medieval works like the writings of Plotinus and the mystical visions of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe are cases in point. Of all mystic traditions, this paper focuses on the affinities between the Sufi understanding of mysticism as apparent in Jalalu'd-Din Rumi's *The Masnavi* (transcribed

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between 1258 and 1273) and that of the Western Christian Catholic faith of Paulo Coelho as he expresses it in *The Alchemist* (1988).

Sufism is commonly characterized as the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam and is believed to be its core. Among the most quoted understandings of Sufism is that of early Sufi master and poet Al-Junayd of Baghdad, who defines it as:

The purification of the heart from associating with created beings, separation from natural characteristics, suppression of human qualities, avoiding the temptations of the carnal soul, taking up the qualities of the spirit, attachment to the sciences of the reality, using what is more proper to the eternal, counseling all the community, being truly faithful to God and following the Prophet (saw) according to the law (Bilqies, 2014, p. 57)

In essence, Sufism, according to Al-Banna (2012), “is the spiritual and ethical tradition of Islam. It provides guidelines on personal piety, self-development and the elevation of moral, spiritual and ethical resolve...” (para. 11). Sufism seeks the purification of the *nafs* or inner-self to transcend and reach the realization that the self is the reflection of the Divine and that “knowledge, knower, and known are One” as Nicholson illustrates (2009: 27). Nicholson further explains that Sufism is a journey with many stages to cross and master, being those of “Repentance, abstinence, renunciation, poverty, patience, trust in God, [and finally] satisfaction” (2009: 27).

Not far from Sufism, Western Catholic mysticism is also understood to be a spiritual journey of Illumination. Butler and Butler (2003:5) mention that in the Western tradition, mysticism is known as “‘the experimental perception of God’s Presence and Being,’ and specially ‘union with God’— a union that is not merely psychological, in conforming the will to God’s Will but it may be said ontological of the soul with God.” Plotinus, the Father of Western mysticism and the philosopher who influenced Catholic theology, contends that the mystic seer attains the Ultimate Truth of Reality in a moment of “concentrated awareness focused inwardly” (Abhayananda, 2000, p. 16). Abhayananda explains that Plotinus believes the path upward to comprise the stages of purgative life, illuminative life, and unitive life. These stages result in the Gnostic’s realization that “all this vast universe and all that is included in it “emanates” from

that One in a way that can be characterized as “Thought”” (2000:15).

Apparently, Rumi and Coelho belong to two distant historical periods and cultures, and differ in style with little concerns in common as Rumi is a thirteenth century Persian Muslim Sufi poet whose style in *The Masnavi* is complicated and digressive while Coelho is a contemporary Brazilian Catholic novelist whose *The Alchemist* enjoys a simple style. Despite this, the present paper argues that the mystical experiences that the two authors portray in the texts under scrutiny show their decisive similarity. Both *The Masnavi* and *The Alchemist* celebrate the mystic doctrines of intuition rather than rationality, shunning all which is worldly for the sake of what is infinite, and understanding the principle of “all is one” which expresses the Oneness of God and his manifestations. Once connected and absorbed, these themes guarantee the fulfillment of the main characters’ quest of Knowledge. Both Rumi and Coelho depend in their presentation of these mystic themes on the same metaphors of the journey, discipleship, and alchemy, all of which interrelate with the symbols of the desert and the treasure.

Before tackling the similarities between *The Masnavi* and *The Alchemist*, it is essential to draw attention to the importance of using figurative language in mystic writings. All mystical or spiritual works are allegorical in nature. With at least two levels of interpretation, mystical works offer two meanings, the literal used to disguise the figurative and esoteric one. Underhill (2002:80) stresses this point by stating:

All kinds of symbolic language come naturally to the articulate mystic, who is often a literary artist as well: so naturally, that he sometimes forgets to explain that his utterance is but symbolic - a desperate attempt to translate the truth of that world into the beauty of this... Symbol - the clothing which the spiritual borrows from the material plane - is a form of artistic expression.

### **Rumi’s *The Masnavi***

Voluminous and highly dense, Rumi’s *The Masnavi* is a lengthy, mystical poem of some twenty-thousand lines divided into six books. This colossal work consists of a huge number of anecdotes, fables, tales, and digressions that vary in length, style, and source. In spite of the fact that many of the tales are fictitious while others are

derived from Islamic tradition and history, they all serve the mystic end of Enlightenment. For the sake of the present study, selections from the first, third, and fourth books have been chosen, being rich with metaphoric and symbolic images found also in Coelho's *The Alchemist*.

Rumi addresses the didactic stories and the mystical lessons of *The Masnavi* to his disciple Hasan Husam al-Din Chelebi, who became a Sufi seeker or *mureed* at an early age. Together with many digressions, these tales carry the Sufi meaning of the journey which Renard (2009:131) describes as "A major metaphor for the spiritual quest, often described as leading the seeker through various regions or realms of the cosmos." In the Sufi tradition, this journey towards Truth depends on the presence of a spiritual guide and a traveler or *salik* as in the situation of Shams-i-Tabriz who tutored Rumi in mysticism. In his *What the Seeker Needs*<sup>(1)</sup> (1992:5), Sufi master Ibn Arabi asserts the importance of the teacher in guiding the traveler in his mystic journey stating "Look for a perfect teacher who will lead you on the straight path."

Commenting on the mentor-disciple Sufi tradition of apprenticeship, Harmless (2007:165) mentions that:

... in its origins, Sufism centered on revered spiritual masters (*shaykhs* in Arabic, *Pir* in Persian) who guide circles of devoted disciples... Sufi teachings were handed down, usually orally, generation to generation, and it became traditional for an order to trace its chain of mystical teaching from Muhammad down to the order's founder and from the founder down to the presiding *shaykh*.

In more than one part of the poem, Rumi shows how the mentor guides the traveler throughout his spiritual experience which is both tough and risky stressing that without guidance one could easily go astray. In this sense, the poet gives the example of Khizr and Moses, who manifest the mentor-disciple relation best in the first book of the poem:

Having chosen thy Director, be submissive to him,  
Even as Moses submitted to the commands of  
Khizr;  
Have patience with Khizr's actions, O sincere one!  
Lest he say, 'There is a partition between us.' (p.69)

In Rumi's *The Masnavi*, the initial lesson that the

seeker of Knowledge is taught by his teacher is to listen to his heart and to believe in intuition rather than rationality. This doctrine is clear in the sixth story of Book One entitled "Omar and the Ambassador." The anecdote concentrates on the encounter of an ambassador sent by the Emperor of Rum with the Khalifa Omar. On approaching the Khalifa, this man is surprised that the leader of the Muslim nation rests under a palm tree instead of in a palace. This urges the ambassador to ask Omar about the world of souls. Omar responds to the inquiries, stressing the importance of listening to one's inner voice and reading God's omens, being the language through which God speaks to the soul:

Stuff not the ear of your mind with cotton  
Take the cotton of evil suggestions from the  
mind's ear,  
That the heavenly voice from above may enter it,  
That you may understand the riddle of His,  
That you may be cognisant of that open secret,  
Then the mind's ear becomes the sensorium of  
inspiration  
For what is this Divine voice but the inward  
voice?  
The spirit's eye and ear possess this sense,  
The eye and ear of reason and sense lack it. (p. 39-  
40)

Describing the essential mystic doctrine of intuition, Whinfield (2001:43) states in his notes on *The Masnavi* that it is "a leading principle of all mysticism, independently of sense and reason... an inward sense, or intuition which conveys to him a knowledge of God by direct apprehension<sup>(2)</sup>." The reason behind mystics' belief in the superiority of the spirit or the "inward sense" over the senses or the "outward senses" is based on the conviction that human senses are limited and that reason cannot grasp what is beyond the physical, that is, the metaphysical. In the fifth story of Book Five entitled "The Old Man who made no Lamentation at the Death of his Sons," Rumi narrates the story of an old man who is rebuked by his wife for not showing any signs of sadness over his deceased sons. Responding to this reproach, the father affirms that he is able to see his children with his inward eye of the spirit in spite of the fact that they are physically dead:

... But I see them clearly, though wide awake.

I conceal myself a while from this world,  
 I shake down the leaves of outward sense from the tree.  
 Know, O wife, outward sense is captive to reason,  
 And reason, again, is captive to spirit.  
 Spirit unlooses the chained hands of reason;  
 Yea, it opens all things that are closed. (p. 197)

In his journey towards Knowledge, the *mureed* is taught to combine his belief in his intuition with self-purification. This process of purgation in which the traveler is apprenticed is known as spiritual alchemy. The concept of alchemy is a pivotal metaphor in the Sufi tradition, and explained as "a symbolic science of material forms and a symbolic expression of the spiritual and psychological transformations of the soul," as Dalal (1995:32) states. In itself, reaching self-purification entails the renunciation of worldliness, patience, and contemplation.

Rumi tutors his novice, Hasan Husam al-Din, about the importance of seeking self-purification in more than one anecdote that he recounts. For one, in the second story of Book Four entitled "The Building of the "Most Remote Temple" at Jerusalem," the poet recites the famous story of Prophet Solomon and Bilqis, Queen of Saba, and the way he advises her to cleanse her inward temple of the heart from worldly pleasures and materialistic interests as a way to reach God. Comparing material gain to weed and the journey to "the right way," the addresser says:

O beloved, this weed is deviation from the "right way,"  
 You crawl crookedly, like infants unable to walk.  
 Fear not to acknowledge your ignorance and guilt,  
 That the Heavenly Master may not withhold instruction.  
 When you say, "I am ignorant; O teach me,"  
 Such open confession is better than false pride. (p. 276-7)

Close to this, the third story of Book Four entitled "The Youth who wrote a Letter of Complaint about his Rations to the King" explains the story of a young man who being dissatisfied with his low wage writes a letter of complaint to his king. Seeing that the complaint is over materialistic needs like food and drink, the king decides to ignore the letter. The youth writes five other letters to which the king does not respond, for he sees that the one

who replies to a fool is a fool himself. Commenting on this anecdote, Rumi stresses that the youth should seek spiritual gain through spiritual alchemy which spares him future misery. This teaching reiterates the following lines quoted from the first book:

If you desire to rise above mere names and letters,  
 Make yourself free from self at one stroke!  
 Like a sword be without trace of soft iron;  
 Like a steel mirror, scour off all rust with contrition;  
 Make yourself pure from all attributes of self,  
 That you may see your own pure bright essence!  
 (p. 78)

Rumi follows the footsteps of Prophet Solomon and the king who guide Bilqis and the young man, respectively, to give away life vanities. The poet invites his disciple and those ensnared by worldliness to return to God, stressing, however, that renunciation demands courage and inner strength. Moreover, the lines express that the alchemical process of self-purity entails mortification or *mujahada*. Rumi expresses this concept in the third book of *The Masnavi* in which he focuses his attention on the story of Prophet Moses and the Pharaoh. In the course of the story, Rumi contrasts the states of believers and non-believers like Pharaoh, favoring the former party for their patience and endurance of pain and sorrow to those who are endowed with riches, are pretentious, and are never truly thankful:

... Because pain and sorrow and loads of cares  
 Are the lot of God's friends in the world.  
 Pain is better than the dominion of the world,  
 So that thou mayest call on God in secret.  
 The cries of those free from pain are dull and cold,  
 The cries of the sorrowful come from the burning hearts. (p. 170)

In the same book, Rumi asserts that spiritual alchemy and transmutation require one's acknowledgement of the spiritual illnesses of the *nafs*, ignorance, pride, and, above all, lust in one's attempt to reach Illumination which is accompanied by the reward of one's spiritual union with his Creator. Here, he narrates another tale about a snake-catcher who finds a large serpent frozen by the cold and takes it to Baghdad to brag about his talent in catching snakes, not knowing that it is still alive. Recovering life

by the warmth of the sun, the snake kills its possessor and those spectators who come to view it. Comparing fleshly lust to the snake, Rumi expresses:

Lust is that snake; How say you it is dead?  
It is only frozen by the pangs of hunger.  
If it obtains the state of Pharaoh,  
So as to command the (frozen) rivers to flow,  
Straightway it is led to pride like Pharaoh's...  
Beware, keep that snake in the frost of  
humiliation,  
... Conquer it and save yourself from being  
conquered,  
Pity it not, it is not one who bears affection.  
... Slay it in sacred war and combat,  
Like a valiant man will God requite you with  
union. (p. 179-80)

The conditions that the traveler undergoes throughout his spiritual purification are associated in *The Masnavi* with the recurring symbol of the desert which holds diverse meanings like painful experiences of endurance and contemplation in Sufi mysticism. Among the stories in which this symbol can be found is the tenth anecdote of Book One, entitled "The Man who was Tattooed." This tale revolves around a man from Qazwin who wishes to have a lion-shaped tattoo. However, out of frailty and cowardice, he fails to endure the needle pricks and is left with the tattoo half done. Unraveling the figurative meaning of this anecdote, Rumi explains that the man's physical torment is analogous to the suffering that the seeker of Knowledge experiences in his spiritual quest. As he finds a similarity between these two physically and spiritually painful experiences and that of crossing the desert, the poet clarifies that treading this road requires strength and patience which the voyager can learn only from his guide; that is, from his spiritual mentor. Noteworthy here is that the symbol of the desert intersects with the metaphor of mentor-disciple as the lines quoted below illustrate:

Take not thy own way through this desert!  
Whoso travels this road alone  
Only does so by aid of the might of holy men.  
The hand of the Director is not weaker than theirs,  
His hand is none other than the grasp of Allah! (p. 69)  
Again, the symbol of the desert is associated with the

theme of self-purification in one of the digressions found in the third story of Book One entitled "The Jewish King, his Vazir, and the Christians." In this digressive poem, Rumi uses the desert to symbolize the state of contemplation, known as "sleep" or *mushahada* in Sufism, which is an essential step of alchemy. Arasteh (2008:19) mentions that contemplation in Islamic mysticism enables the seeker to "transcend time and place... It is a state of mind resembling sleep in which one does things perfectly." Following the Sufi tradition, Rumi associates the contemplative conditions that the mystic experiences with the desert where the viewer contemplates life and reaches a deeper understanding of it. Being isolated from the distractions of the materialistic world,

His soul wanders in the desert that has no  
similitude;  
Like his body, his spirit is enjoying perfect rest;  
Freed from desire of eating and drinking;  
Like a bird escaped from cage and snare. (p. 18)

In spite of the fact that the lines quoted above bear different meanings of the image of the desert, the reader can sense their interconnectedness. The *mureed's* hard challenge of renouncing the world of attachment which Rumi parallels to the tough experience of crossing desolate places goes hand in hand with his contemplation which the poet relates, too, to the symbol of the desert. Apparently then, the Sufi poet uses the symbol of the desert to serve the central mystic theme of Illumination, for it is through shunning the finite for the sake of the infinite, continuous awareness of the self, and contemplation that the initiate pursues his journey towards Truth.

With continuous mortification and contemplation, the mystic recognizes the meaning of Oneness through which he comes to realize the essence of his existence and that of the world around him. As the centerpiece of Sufi dogma, Oneness of all existence or *Wahdat al-Wujud*, as Sufis prefer to call it, is based on the conviction of the unity of everything as everything springs from one Source and is written by the hand of the One, God. This understanding of Oneness is best expressed in *The Masnavi* in the following lines from the ninth story of Book One entitled "The Arab Man and his Wife":

That One Person is Himself the world as He is the  
sun,

And every star in heaven is a part of the sun.  
That One Person is Himself the world, and the rest  
Are all His dependents and parasites, O man!  
He is the perfect world, yet He is single;  
He holds in hand the writing of the whole of  
existence. (p. 65)

The quotation demonstrates the main goal of Oneness which is "to experience the depths of one's being in which one's existence is validated and brought to completion" as Lazenby (2000:73) clarifies. The pivotal doctrine of Oneness entails the seeker's recognition of the unity of the universe, his identification of equality of all existent objects, and his realization that "In outward form thou art the microcosm/ But in reality the macrocosm<sup>(3)</sup>" (p. 262) as Rumi puts it beautifully in Book Four. Having grasped the meaning of Oneness, the searcher reaches the ultimate Knowledge that being one with the world is sharing an identity with God.

At the end of the hard journey undergone in the figurative desert of life, the mystic is rewarded with a treasure a symbol common among Sufi mystics. In this light, Schimmel (1993:239) argues:

The heart broken in constant service of God, smashed under the blows of afflictions, is comparable to a ruin which contains the most precious treasure - that treasure 'God' who wanted to be known. By recognizing his own worthlessness and absolute poverty, man finds the Treasure closer to him than his jugular vein.

In Sufi mysticism, the seeker's journey endows him with the two spiritual treasures of reaching God and self-realization. In *The Masnavi*, Rumi stresses the Sufi tradition of God being the hidden treasure that one finds when he understands Oneness by expressing that God "was a hidden treasure and [he] desired to be known, and [he] created the world in order to be known" (p. 299) in the sixth story of Book Four entitled "Moses and the Pharaoh." This priceless treasure is accompanied by that of realizing one's "Essential Self," that is, one's true self, which is one's eternal fortune as Rumi expresses:

Then, being thyself thy fortune, thou wilt never  
lose it  
How, O fortunate one, canst thou ever lose thyself,  
When thy real self is thy treasure and thy

kingdom? (p. 271)

### Coelho's *The Alchemist*

In a way very close to Rumi's *The Masnavi*, Coelho's bestselling novel *The Alchemist* celebrates Knowledge of God and one's self as a priceless treasure achieved at the end of one's mystical quest. This work communicates spiritual thoughts in a remarkably simple text which is "almost mythical in structure, with a linear plot and single story recounted in simple language. The tightly written narrative is not embellished by elaborate characterization, explanations, or historical detail," as Sollars (2013:30) maintains.

Coelho's *The Alchemist* tells the story of Santiago, an Andalusian adolescent who is thirsty for knowledge. Right from the beginning of the novel, the narrator clarifies that "ever since he had been a child, [Santiago] had wanted to know the world" (p. 8). Believing that knowing the world is more important for him than knowing God, he refuses to become a priest and decides to be a shepherd. Ironically enough, Santiago does not realize that his understanding of the world is part of his knowledge of God, which he gradually gains in his journey towards the Pyramids. Throughout the novel, Santiago's quest is compared to a journey which carries the same meaning in the Islamic Sufi tradition. This semantic commonality between the Western Catholic journey and the Islamic one is best emphasized by Netton (2011:51) who explains that this mystic quest is "a journey in which the Islamic and Christian mystics seek knowledge about, and ultimately union with, the Divine, whatever the mystic term 'union' might actually mean."

Santiago's voyage begins with a recurring dream which he finds himself unable to interpret. He describes his dream to a fortuneteller by saying:

I dreamed that I was in a field with my sheep, when a child appeared and began to play with the animals. The child went on playing with my sheep for quite a while... And suddenly, the child took me by both hands and transported me to the Egyptian pyramids... Then, at the Egyptian pyramids... the child said to me, 'If you come here, you will find a hidden treasure.' (p. 13-4)

At the beginning of *The Alchemist*, Coelho depicts the character of the fortuneteller as the first symbolic manifestation of Santiago's mentor who

guides him throughout his journey. The gypsy woman teaches Santiago about the importance of believing in his dreams since “dreams are the language of God” (p. 13). Choosing to open his novel with Santiago’s encounter with the fortuneteller, Coelho makes it clear that the protagonist’s quest for the treasure requires his discipleship in a way that resembles the discipleship of Hasan Husam al-Din Chelebi in Rumi’s *The Masnavi*.

In Catholicism, the concept of discipleship is emphasized by Jesus Christ, the first teacher in Christianity. Gribble (2010:117) points out that “Christianity is based on the concept of discipleship, the ideal of following Jesus.” Interestingly enough, Coelho himself has been involved in a master-disciple relationship with a man named Petrus who tutored him in the ancient Catholic RAM Order (Rigour, Adoration, Mercy) as he himself explains in his first published book *The Pilgrimage* (1987). Speaking about this order, Coelho mentions to Arias (2001:145) that “It is an order founded over five centuries ago, within the Catholic Church. Symbolic language is passed down through an oral tradition. But it’s not at all secret. RAM is more of a practice of the sacred than a theory of it.”

Obviously, the concepts of discipleship and oral teaching are points in common between Coelho’s and Rumi’s lives<sup>(4)</sup>. Moreover, the traces of these notions can be noticed in both of *The Alchemist* and *The Masnavi*.

The oral teaching that the gypsy conveys to Santiago is that his dream is a sign or an omen that should not be ignored. By teaching him this, she shows the protagonist the importance of intuition and listening to one’s heart for it is the compass that directs him on his way towards the treasure. This understanding of omens echoes Coelho’s conception which he states in an interview with Sheahen (2014). In that interview, he expresses that omens are “this strange, but very individual language that guides you towards your destiny. They are not logical. They talk to your heart directly... This silent voice of God that leads me to the places where I should be.”

The same teaching about the omens recurs in Santiago’s encounter with Melchizedek<sup>(5)</sup>, the old king of Salem, and later on with the central figure of the alchemist in the desert. The king teaches Santiago that omens make up part of the “universal language” of the world (p. 73) and that if Santiago is to “find the treasure,

[he] 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” (p. 30). Treating the protagonist as his disciple, Melchizedek sharpens Santiago’s intuitive power by handing him two stones; Urim and Thummim which would help him understand God’s signs, saying “When you are unable to read the omens, they will help you to do so” (p. 31). Through these two stones, Santiago learns that nothing is random and meaningless, for all is “*Maktub*” (p. 60). Likewise, the alchemist who symbolizes the young traveler’s main mystic mentor affirms the power of the heart over logic. Repeating the words of the fortuneteller and Melchizedek, he advises Santiago to “[r]emember that wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure” (p. 122).

Throughout his journey in *The Alchemist*, Santiago’s belief in his intuition grows gradually and is translated into action. At one point in the novel, he finds himself desperate for money and having been robbed earlier. Feeling that his dream to reach the Pyramids is now impossible to materialize, the young adventurer decides to work at a crystal shop as to afford his returning expenses. However, on the day of his departure, Santiago glances Melchizedek’s two stones which he has put aside for almost a year and reads that as an omen to pursue his quest:

But as he held Urim and Thummim in his hand, they had transmitted to him the strength and the will of the old king. By coincidence-or maybe it was an omen, the boy thought... I can always go back to being a shepherd, the boy thought. I learned how to care for sheep, and I haven’t forgotten how that’s done. But maybe I’ll never have another chance to get to the Pyramids in Egypt. (p. 66-7)

Again, Santiago reads the two stones as a sign upon his encounter with an Englishman who crosses the desert to learn the science of alchemy from the notorious alchemist. As he gets acquainted with the Englishman, Santiago remarks that the man possesses two Urim and Thummim stones that resemble his. Reading the similarity between him and the Englishman as an omen, Santiago realizes that he should accompany the stranger in his search for the alchemist.

Santiago’s belief in his intuition crystallizes as he interprets the vision of the fighting hawks as an omen of

an approaching assault on the oasis which could lead to the death of hundreds. Being able to prevent the plight, Santiago is praised by the tribal chieftain who compares him to Joseph, who “rescued Egypt from famine” through interpreting the Pharaoh’s dream correctly (p. 112). This comment made by the elder reflects that Santiago is on the right track to understand the pure Language of the World and to reach Knowledge.

Besides the importance of intuition, Santiago learns that a clear vision of the world requires self-purification. As in Rumi’s *The Masnavi*, this level of being is achieved through Santiago’s abandonment of material gain, endurance of hardships, and contemplation which Coelho relates to the metaphor of alchemy and the symbol of the desert. At the beginning of Santiago’s journey to the desert, the gypsy woman and Melchizedek train him to renounce earthly possessions. Both demand that he give each one-tenth of his treasure and another one-tenth of his sheep, teaching him that “[i]n any case, it’s good that you’ve learned that everything in life has its price. This is what the Warriors of Light try to teach” (p. 26). Moreover, Santiago’s decision to travel to Africa obliges him to sell his sheep and to leave the merchant’s daughter whom he admires behind, not to forget that all his money is later stolen by some stranger in Tangier. Above all, it is from the character of the alchemist that the adolescent learns to give away all that is materialistic. At a critical point in the novel, the alchemist and Santiago are caught by some tribesmen and are about to be killed. The alchemist offers the monetary reward that his *mureed* is granted after saving the oasis from the assault as a ransom. Responding to Santiago’s protest, he explains that “[y]our money saved us for three days. It’s not often that money saves a person’s life” (p. 148).

In *The Alchemist*, the spiritual principle of giving away the worldly for the ethereal interconnects with mortification. As has been stated above, Santiago’s renunciation of his possessions causes him suffering and requires patience to be self-purified. This purification of the soul is first introduced in the novel through the Englishman who explains it in relation to the metaphor of alchemy. Not far from its significance in Sufism, in Western mysticism “the whole aim of alchemy is to ‘purify’ and ‘transmute’ external and inner nature” as Marshall (1996:161) states. In the same respect, Marshall adds that:

Such an attitude assumes that nature is somehow

inadequate and incomplete in its present form, and requires man to use his ‘art’ to improve it... The inner ‘soul’ as much as outer ‘nature’ is a ‘substance’ which has to be purified, not by the miraculous intervention of God, but by man’s own efforts.

Very related to this explanation is what the Englishman clarifies in Coelho’s novel about how “[t]he alchemists spent years in their laboratories, observing the fire that purified the metals...” (p. 85). Still, while highlighting the scientific aspect of alchemy, the speaker pinpoints its mystical symbolism as he says that “They spent so much time close to the fire that gradually they gave up the vanities of the world. They discovered that the purification of the metals had led to a purification of themselves” (p. 84-5). Not far from the Englishman, the alchemist schools Santiago in endurance. As he senses the pain that Santiago feels after leaving Fatima, the desert girl he loves, the alchemist reminds his apprentice that “no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity” (p. 137).

In the heart of the desert, where most of the events of *The Alchemist* take place, the alchemist schools Santiago in mystic contemplation as a way to reach self-purification and, thus, Knowledge. Referring to contemplation as “action,” he contends that “There is only one way to learn. It’s through action... God created the world so that, through its visible objects, men could understand his spiritual teachings and the marvels of his wisdom. That’s what I mean by action” (p. 132-3). Commenting on Santiago’s experience in the desert, Muraleedharan (2011:54) states that “In the beginning of his journey, Santiago is ignorant of the nature of the desert. But as the journey progresses, he familiarizes himself with the desert and accumulates more information about it through his close observation.” Interestingly enough, Coelho’s choice of the desert to be the place where the protagonist learns the practice of contemplation is analogous to that of Rumi as apparent in the digressive poem found in his anecdote “The Jewish King, his Vazir, and the Christians” explained earlier. Enjoying the same mystical nature as that in Sufism, the desert in Western Catholic mysticism is considered “the most propitious place for divine revelation,” according to Cirlot (2013:79). Cirlot explains this more by stating that “This is because the desert, in so far as it is in a way a



negative landscape, is the realm of abstraction located outside the sphere of existence and susceptible only to things transcendent” (2013:79).

In the desert, where there is no distraction, Santiago comprehends the sublime mystical teaching of Oneness. In that place where the alchemist teaches him about contemplation and about listening to everything that surrounds him, he realizes the meaning of the words “all things are one,” (p. 134) which he frequently hears throughout the journey but does not grasp due to his spiritually immaturity. Santiago learns that he does not “even have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation<sup>(6)</sup>” (p. 134). Towards the end of Santiago’s journey, the alchemist defies the tribesmen who detain him and his disciple that Santiago can turn himself into the wind. At the climactic moment of the novel, the protagonist speaks to the wind and the sun, and pleads them to help him win the challenge. Here, both creatures fail Santiago and advise him to turn to God: “speak to the hand that wrote all” (p. 159). Listening to this advice, the mystic prays humbly to the only power that “could perform miracles, or transform the sea into a desert... or a man into the wind,” (p. 160) a moment of epiphany at which he realizes that he himself is the microcosm and that in him is the reflection of God, manifested in his universe: “I learned the alchemist’s secrets in my travels. I have inside me the winds, the deserts, the oceans, the stars, and everything created in the universe” (p. 154). With this recognition being won, Santiago unites with the universe and miraculously turns himself into the wind, an action which symbolizes his unity with God.

At the end of his journey, Santiago realizes that the treasure that has awaited him in the Pyramids has always resided within him. This recognition reflects Coelho’s Western Catholic mystic apprehension of the treasure, which Matthew’s Jesus explains to be “... the Spirit of

God (the Self) he has discovered within him. Selling all that he has rids him from the elements of the false “I” in order that the true “I” may manifest itself” (Brown, 2009, p. 67). In spite of finding the gold he has dreamt of, Santiago discovers that his real treasure is his Knowledge of God and his understanding of himself. Symbolically speaking, the “small, abandoned church... [and] the half destroyed roof” (p. 175) under which Santiago finds the treasure mirror his soul. In this sense, his soul “is comparable to a ruin which contains the most precious treasure - that treasure ‘God’ who wanted to be known” as Schimmel expresses (1993:144). In the end, Santiago learns, like the *mureed* in Rumi’s *The Masnavi*, “about penetrating to the Soul of the World, and discovering the treasure that has been reserved in [him]” (Coelho, 1998, p. 144).

### Conclusion

This study has shown that Jalalu’d-Din Rumi’s *The Masnavi* and Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* have thematic and stylistic similarities that are clearly manifested through comparison. The two texts portray the spiritual experience that one goes through to reach Ultimate Knowledge as a journey with many obstacles to overcome. Both *The Masnavi* and *The Alchemist* trace the gradual shaping and crystallization of the mystic’s understanding of the universe and himself as he learns to listen to his heart and to believe in his intuition, to undergo spiritual alchemy or self-purification, and to understand the philosophy of Oneness. Rumi and Coelho rely in their presentation on the same metaphors of the journey, discipleship, and alchemy, together with the symbols of the desert and the treasure. Both authors show that in spite of their cultural, spatial, and temporal differences, they share the same formula of spirituality which proves *The Masnavi* and *The Alchemist* to have a common mystical ground.

### NOTES

- (1) An English translation of Ibn Arabi’s book *Kunh Mā lā Buddā lil-Murīd Minh*.
- (2) This mystic doctrine is reiterated in the following lines which appear in the third book of *The Masnavi*: “The eye of outward sense is as the palm of a hand/The whole of the object is not grasped in the palm” (p. 181).

- (3) Man as microcosm is a universally recurring doctrine in Eastern as well as Western mystical literary works. The microcosm-macrocosm relationship can be traced in Medieval Indian poet Kabīr’s poem “Is ghat antar bāg bagīce” translated by Rabindranath Tagore as “Within This Earthen Vessel are Bowers and Groves” and in Renaissance English poet John Donne’s poem “I Am a Little World” which appears in his collection *Holy*

Sonnets, to name a few examples.

- (4) In an interview with Moubayed (2009) which appears in Syrian Forward Magazine, Coelho speaks of his relation with Sufism: "Indeed, Sufism has inspired me a lot throughout my life and I refer to this tradition in some of my books such as *The Alchemist* and more recently *The Zahir*. Rumi is of course the first figure that springs to mind. His teachings and visions are incredibly subtle and

clear".

- (5) Melchizedek is known in Catholicism as "the first priest of the Most High God" (Pearson, 2002, 187).  
 (6) This sentence echoes the famous quatrain of William Blake's mystic poem "Auguries of Innocence" which reads: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/ And Eternity in an hour" (2008, p. 490).

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## قصيدة جلال الدين الرومي (المثنوي) ورواية باولو كويلو (الخيميائي) "دراسة في التشابهات المتصوفة"

ريم عوني رشيق \*

### ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث أولاً إلى تقديم لمحة موجزة عن مجامع العلوم في الحقبة ما-قبل الإسلامية. ولتوضيح كيفية صعود التقاليد الإسلامية في مجال مؤسسة العلوم وتأسيس ورعاية المجامع سيدرس نموذج بيت الحكمة في بغداد الذي ازدهر في القرن التاسع الميلادي عن كُتب وذلك في ضوء المصادر العربية الأساسية وكذلك الأدب العالمي المعاصر المتعلق بالموضوع. ومن ثم سيتجاوز البحث الذي تم عرضه عن بيت الحكمة ويناقش النظرية القائلة إن بيت الحكمة كان بمثابة مجمع علمي سبق في تأسيسه ويقرون أكاديمية لينتشي الشهيرة والتي يعتبرها البعض أول أكاديمية علوم في العالم تأسست في روما عام 1603.

**الكلمات الدالة:** تاريخ العلوم، العلوم الإسلامية، الحضارة الإسلامية، بيت الحكمة، أكاديميات العلوم.

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