

Symbols in *The Alchemist*, *Hippie* and *The Winner Stands Alone*

Dr. Rashmi Rana¹, Yogesh Singh Mohan²

¹Associate Professor (Dept. of English), Maharaj Singh College, Saharanpur

²Research Scholar (English), Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut

Article Received: 21/12/2022,

Article Accepted: 23/01/2023,

Published Online: 26/01/2023,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.01.90

Abstract

The Alchemist, *Hippie*, and *The Winner Stands Alone* are the novels replete with symbols that point to various fields of knowledge. The current paper is an attempt to bring out these symbols and their contexts. Upon research, it was found out that some of the symbols are direct exposition of the ideas they convey while some of them are complex in nature and carry wider significances. Both ways the study seems to justify the hypothesis that the use of symbols has added to the literary quality of the works involved. *The Alchemist* has symbols like the pyramids, the hair and eyes of the girl in Andalusia, the ruined building of a church in desolation, and falcons. These symbols and their significance are assessed in the current paper. *The Hippie* also carries various symbols like the bridge in Istanbul, Hagia Sofia building and Piazza di Spagna. The text also incorporates symbols like Piccadilly Circus and Dam Square. Finally, the paper analyses an instance from *The Winner Stands Alone* as a symbolic representation.

Keywords: symbols, complex, pyramids, Dam Square, Istanbul.

Pyramids for centuries have come to represent the victory of human civilization over the odds of nature. They are a symbol of human greatness. As the human civilization was in ascendancy, the all so impossible looking monster buildings were taken up as a herculean challenge by the Egyptians. People in modern world still wonder at the plausibility of such miracles designed and executed by ancient people without any apparent set of sophisticated machinery. How did they manage it all and what paraphernalia were used to accomplice such an incredible feat is all a puzzle by and large.

At another level of significance, they represent mystery and forgotten past. In the novel, they seem to represent this very aspect (Coelho, *The Alchemist* 12-155). Thus, pyramids become a complex set of symbols in the work. These ancient monuments standing in the center of nowhere have raised immense public curiosity ever since foreigners came to learn of them. Their very structure creates a sense of mystery in the minds of the onlookers.

Moreover, the civilization to which they belong is long dead and almost forgotten. This has further led to an enhancement of the enigma. In any case, from explorers to looters, from scientists to tourists, people have felt baffled and enamored by them at the same time. The ancient world of *Pharos* gets illuminated in front of eyes the very moment a person comes face to face with these pyramids.

Falcon in the novel symbolizes dominance, freedom; and are like the undisputed and uncrowned rulers of the airspace (Coelho, *The Alchemist* 138). They also represent light and vision in wider prospects. Basically, Falcons have been assigned human traits in different cultures as per the predilections of the people. As far as the novel is concerned, as such they play no active part in the narrative and yet are there to set the tone of the scenes involving them.

The novel also uses other symbols like horses, cobra in their conventional significance. The novel is in fact replete with symbols.

The Alchemist talks of the ruins of a local church where a big sycamore tree has grown at the place “where the sacristy had once stood” (Coelho, *The Alchemist* 3). In a more literal sense, or what is called the denotative level, there are numerous such descriptions of ruined places outside the girdle of modern civilization, a peaceful outskirts of some village or town where vagabonds or outcasts find refuge to rest and securely keep their possessions safe for the night. The scenic beauty of such derelict buildings at night is the subject of many poems.

Further, Coelho intends to present the takeover of a building by nature herself. Nature is all encompassing and greater than any human effort as is well shown by this description. Any building if left untended would be easily overtaken by nature and in a couple of years be turned into a thick forest bubbling with variety of life forms.

Also, the scene represents the role of time, as with the passage of time, everything decays, even religions. So many religions with their gods have made their appearance, governed through their assumed divine decree and were replaced in the past thousands of years of history. The decrepit sacristy suggests that time is far superior to the institutions of religions that man creates. It becomes a complex symbol of the theme of man verses time.

On a connotative level, the sycamore tree has great cultural significance in different civilizations. The sycamore tree has often been evoked in relation to ancient Greek philosophers and their schools and it is a common saying that Socrates used to teach his students under enormous sycamore trees (Vdovenko).

The “black hair, and eyes” of the girl from *Andalusia* were a vague reminder of the Moorish conquerors of medieval times (Coelho, *The Alchemist* 5). On a denotative level, it sounds funny or rather romantic to relate the countenance of people to a specific region, and even thinking of them as having some mysterious relationship with antiquity. An average reader knows that young people are quite capable of such romance. After all it could well be taken as a complement by the impressionable girl with no clue of the history or geography of her region. But there are deep and very complex layers of connotative meanings involved in this symbol. The girl’s face is a reflection of the moor rulers who came from north Africa,

they were not the followers of the local religion, their culture was not Spanish, they were the forced conquerors. The moors had a long history in Spain as the paraphrase of the article *Who were Moors?* conveys:

The word *moor* is quite common in literature and art of Europe. North African Berber tribes were called moors. Later the term came to be used for all Muslims residing in Europe. The moors ruled for over hundreds of years in the Iberian Peninsula. Their rule led to development in commerce and growth of education along with the flourishing of arts and culture.(Blakemore)

Several centuries are a lot of time. The Moorish influence must have penetrated everywhere, from language to rituals, from art to architecture, from landscape to countenance! They were after all instrumental in establishing one of the greatest Muslim power centers of learning and culture (History).

The local culture always gets deeply influenced and hybridized by the impact of conquerors. And then some things started to change in Europe (i.e., Renaissance) which eventually resulted in resurgence of scientific temperament, spurt in business and a new religious-cultural awakening. The impact of changing times as depicted in *History of Culture and Design- The Moorish Influence in Andalusia* is paraphrased as:

Finally, as always happens, they departed and the natives returned to power and so did their religion. The erstwhile rulers and their history were relegated to oblivion. With time, the language got purged of the Moorish words, the old rituals were forgotten, their buildings, their architecture were left to be decayed with time; in all, Spain forgot all about the moors. (Babapulle)

Has it got something to do with racism, and if yes, has Coelho introduced this girl with a motive? Maybe! The connotations are very wide ranging though. The moors may be erased from the history books, their imprints may well be erased from the topography and traditions, but how will their reflections be removed from the faces of the natives? It is about the hybridity of genes which is but an obvious result of the mixing of the two populations. The hyper-nationalists may devise theories about the venomous masculinity of the conquerors, pacifiers may simply put a utopian picture of all being good under the foreigners and all mixing being the result of respectful nuptials; the reality lays somewhere in between. This is a whole Kaleidoscope of cultural, religious, spiritual, historical, linguistic stories and mixing of two different civilizations connoted by the reference to countenance of the girl and her Moorish eyes.

Piccadilly Circus and Dam Square are symbols of two centres of the world in the text (Coelho, *Hippie* 48). What would such symbolisation signify? The centre is supposed to nourish the peripheries. The centre rules and the peripheries are ruled. These centres are simply the reflection of the binaries of old days. The work becomes old in referring to them as such symbols.

Also, the mindset of the people hardly changes. The world order too hasn't changed much. Even in a multipolar world, Piccadilly Circus and Dam Square have to be the centres, culturally and materially. This is just a routine fact that has come to light by chance. The implications too are very simple- change needs time and the opportune time does not seem to have arrived yet. Till then, the geography of the lesser lands shall have to remain in dim evening shadow.

The text mentions Piazza di Spagna as a symbol of home away from home as the famous square becomes the resting place for the narrator during his stay in Rome (Coelho, *Hippie* 52). The idea of finding a place so comfortable and relaxing to the mind is wonderful. To find such a place in a foreign land adds to the confidence of a visitor. The person develops an association as people before him must have done. The space becomes a psycho-geographical unit and symbol of a mini-heaven. This is also a prerequisite of a learned reader, the way he can integrate the various designs into one strand. The square is a representative of other public spaces round the world, some famous and some like Tiananmen square, infamous.

At one point in the narrative the female friend of the narrator states, "It's rude to speak in a language I don't understand" (Coelho, *Hippie* 78). The assertion is a not just symbol of irritation but also an assertion of the individual self. The issue of language at large is always sensitive. There have been instances of mass movements in name of language assertion. The issue is all the more sensitive where there are attempts to force one language at the cost of others. It happens generally in name of national unity or in guile of study of science and religion. In any case the attempts of giving ascendancy to one language over other is always a risky deed. The idea here, too, is simple, all the parties must pay respect to other's language as the language is more than the spoken words. It is the carrier of the culture, in which it was born, or conversely, the culture it gave birth to and also, the mass of land that has for centuries nurtured scores of generations of the civilization to which the speaker belongs.

The much-contested building of Hagia Sophia is alluded to in *Hippie* as "the Blue Mosque" (Coelho, *Hippie* 183). It has become a very complicated symbol in context of the country and its populace. As a matter of fact, no narrative can be free from the ideology of the speaker. Even history can be and is interpreted as different, by different factions involved. The same gets reflected in the following interpretation of the ongoing conflict over the site:

History reminds us that Hagia Sophia was not only a Church but also a center of crusaders. It fell to the Ottomans when they won the war. They did not destroy it; the way victors used to do during those times. They did not convert it into a palace. They transformed it into a place of worship of God. They believed it was a place to worship the same God as that of Christians and Jews. (Abdullah)

The history of Hagia Sophia at one level also symbolizes the wonderful synchronization that the Turkish society has gone through over a period of time. But it is also a reminder of the fact that in present times the society is turning less tolerant towards

minority sentiments and is governed by the ideology of cultural nationalism of the majority establishment:

Hagia Sophia, Turkish Ayasofya, Latin Sancta Sophia, also called Church of the Holy Wisdom or Church of the Divine Wisdom, an important Byzantine structure in Istanbul and one of the world's great monuments. It was built as a Christian church in the 6th century CE (532-537) under the direction of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I. In subsequent centuries it became a mosque, a museum, and a mosque again. The building reflects the religious changes that have played out in the region over the centuries, with the minarets and inscriptions of Islam as well as the lavish mosaics of Christianity. (Britannica)

The text further refers to a bridge in the city, "A bridge! Connecting two such different, distant continents!" (Coelho, *Hippie* 183). Turkey is an amazing place, a nation that falls both in Asia as well as Europe. This is queer geography! And then, the Turkish society in itself is a conglomeration of different civilizational influences. A part of this beautiful nation reflects the European ethos and strongly relates to the European values. At the same time the country has a long association with Islam and in fact at a time in history the Turks have remained the torch bearer of the faith. Who can forget the impact and role of the Turkish mercenaries and rulers in establishing Islam in India!

Of course, in figurative language a bridge is considered to be a symbol of unity between divergent elements. The bridge here also stood for the unification of two different worldviews of the east and the west. The very idea of this geo-political-cum-cultural construct is based on the structural view of binaries. Therefore, the need of a bridge was thought essential and inevitable.

There is an interesting story of a frog in *The Winner Stands Alone* which goes like: "Yes, various biological studies have shown that if a frog is placed in a container along with water from its own pond, it will remain there, utterly still, while water is slowly heated up. The frog doesn't react to the gradual increase in temperature, to the changes in its environment, and when the water reaches the boiling point, the frog dies, fat and happy.

On the other hand, if a frog is thrown into a container full of already boiling water, it will jump straight out again, scalded, but alive!" (Coelho, *The Winner Stands Alone* 15-16)

The narrative is symbolic of an often-observed behaviour among people. Changing circumstances, if they are not sudden, usually evoke no response. People learn to evolve their habits according to slow changes in the environment. It is only in an instance as described in the tale, that an individual realizes the gravity of the situation and reacts instantly with requisite force.

It also symbolizes the fact that sudden changes are always difficult to tackle. The big-wigs in today's corporate world sitting in their AC chambers make plans for their employees taking into consideration such facts of basic human nature. They are well aware

that hardships as and when are to be introduced should be done inch by inch. As the story deals with the upper- class society, the narrative is quite pertinent in describing this particular aspect of their lives.

References:

- Abdullah, Aslam. "Hagia Sofia: Church, Mosque or Museum?" *Islami City*, 14 Jul. 2020, www.islamicity.org/53958/hagia-sofia-church-mosque-or-museum/?gclid=CjwKCAiAzp6eBhByEiwA_gGq5C1-veU9rHskBLmtqYu9DYIG0Msx3nO_R8ARBLJRWeRLgPm_dl54WRoCXhAQAvD_BwE.
- Babapulle, Alia. "History of Culture and Design- The Moorish Influence in Andalucia." *The Culture Clique*, 1 Feb. 2016, www.thecultureclique.com/the-moorish-influence-in-andalucia/#:~:text=The%20Moorish%20influence%20was%20way%20back%20when%20they,Alhambra%20in%20Granada%20and%20the%20Mezquita%20of%20Cordoba.
- Blakemore, Erin. "Who were the Moors?" *National Geographic*, 12 Dec. 2019, www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/who-were-moors.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Hagia Sophia". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 Jan. 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/Hagia-Sophia.
- Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. Translated by Alan R. Clarke, HarperCollins Publishers, 2016.
- . *Hippie*. Translated by Eric M.B. Becker, Penguin Random House India, 2018.
- . *The Winner Stands Alone*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa, HarperCollins e-books, Pdf Drive, 2009, www.pdfdrive.com/the-winner-stands-alone-e42105982.html.
- "History of Moorish Spain." *Spanish Fiestas*, www.spanish-fiestas.com/history/moorish-spain/. Accessed 12 Jan. 2023.
- Vdovenko, N. "Sycamore-A Tree of Philosophers and Travelers." *National Technical University of Ukraine*, 2012, kpi.ua/en/platan.