

# A Journey of a Mystic: Choice and Transformation

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## Abstract

“Our life is a constant journey, from birth to death. The landscape changes, the people change, and our needs change, but the train keeps moving. Life is the train, not the station. And what you’re doing now isn’t traveling, it’s just changing countries, which is completely different.”

Aleph: Paulo Coelho

In his novels, Paulo Coelho emphasizes choice and how it leads his characters towards transformation. Humans are on trial, choosing what to eat, to speak, how to be, and how to create their stand in this universe. Individuals are judged on what they do and how they present themselves. As a result, one is continuously under society’s scrutiny. Paulo Coelho addresses this state of mind in most of his novels: to find one’s true self, identify one’s potential, and make one’s life count on this earth is difficult. The spiritual quest in our journey probes and questions our deeds as we take this journey. The idea that ‘Journey manifests purpose’ suggests that the experiences and events in our lives shape our understanding of our purpose or meaning. Many of us do not listen to our calling; only a few, like Coelho, transform these experiences into pearls of wisdom. He emphasizes the importance of the journey and our experiences rather than just focusing on the end goal or destination. The journey helps us in our personal growth, self-discovery, and, ultimately, a sense of fulfillment. The quest, purpose, and journey influence our search for identity. This paper aims to connect with the disconnected world through Paulo Coelho’s novel Aleph. The novel helps readers rejuvenate and conquer their fears and indicates the path to finding an Aleph within you.

**Keywords:** Journey; Purpose; Self-discovery; Spirituality.

## **Introduction**

Paulo Coelho, one of the most-read novelists of the present era, talks about spirituality in his autobiographical works *The Pilgrimage* (1998), *The Alchemist* (1988), and *Aleph* (2011). These novels present in-depth knowledge about the spiritual quest through the novel's leading characters. Coelho encompasses his spiritual experiences as life lessons through these novels. In *Aleph*, the protagonist reaches self-actualization as he revisits his past and seeks forgiveness for the sins of his last birth. The story also shows that our past plays a role in our lives through the present moments. The journey powerfully helps us to rediscover ourselves as readers. T.S Eliot, in the poem "Journey of the Magi," discusses rebirth and renewal through spirituality and the value of birth and death through hope. In the same way in *Aleph*, Paulo Coelho explores the possibility of hope, rebirth, and a spiritual path in this challenging era of temptations and pleasure.

## **Spiritual Quest**

Spirituality forms an integral part of human existence. Your spiritual personality decides your relationship with yourself and others. Spirituality stands beyond the framework of religion. Spirituality not only aids self-awareness but also helps us connect with community and nature; it also nurtures our relationship with the Almighty. The protagonist of Paulo Coelho's novel, *Aleph*, embarks on a spiritual quest to find meaning in his life and reconcile his past experiences. The journey takes him from a mundane life to a successful author with an extraordinary know-how of spirituality and self-discovery. Throughout the journey, he grapples with his beliefs, memories, and experiences and learns to embrace his spiritual path.

Signs are an extremely personal language that we cultivate throughout our lives. We do this by trial and error until we understand God's guidance in our lives.

As the author starts his explorations, he tries to reconnect with his experiences and the people around him. He also introspects and recollects his experiences. As stated, he is trying to identify significant signs in life. Coelho strongly believes that the powerful almighty God who has planned our lives leads us through signs and symbols to our destination. It's we who pick our path. The choices we make determine our goal. However, the experience through choices is what shapes our personality. The spiritual quest begins as we search for answers and meaning. The constant

search for life's fulfillment pushes him to the edge, so to rejuvenate himself and reconnect with himself and the world, he embarks on this journey that takes him to far-flung places and introduces him to new spiritual practices and beliefs.

We will not be able to see our inner light until we truly disown ourselves. This discernment illuminates the inner light.

Throughout his journey, he encounters various spiritual leaders and gurus who challenge his beliefs and help him deepen his understanding of spirituality. He also experiences moments of self-reflection, where he is forced to confront his fears and insecurities. The writer, in his journey, is in the process of growth and self-discovery as he learns to embrace his spiritual path and come to a greater understanding of himself and the world around him.

'Anyone who knows God cannot describe him. Anyone who can describe God does not know Him'. God is an experience and not a concrete structure; if we try to put God in a frame, we may fail to comprehend the true nature of God. If we try to paint a picture, we may end up creating a superficial, limited picture of God. Man cannot fully capture the true essence of God and his mysterious existence.

'I'm surprised by my own words. I've been asked this a dozen times, and my automatic-pilot response is always: 'When God spoke to Moses, he said: "I am," so God is, therefore, neither the subject nor the predicate, he's the verb, the action.' (Aleph 121). Humanity has always connected with religion, one of the oldest institutions of natural human values. In the postmodern era, we also witness contemporary institutions like paganism, neopaganism, nihilism, agnosticism, and cultural hybridity. People from non-religious backgrounds use the humanistic approach. People seek faith and spirituality, especially during times of crisis. We all have experienced during the recent pandemic how the entire universe became one in faith to tackle the virus through interreligious prayers and how people from different religious communities stood by to support one another.

As Coelho states, God is present in action and sees everyone as equal. However, we do not recognize and feel his presence. Paulo Coelho, through his fiction, tries to stimulate the readers for a revival of self and the soul - not to seek external peace but inner peace in the novel. He constantly recollects his past- an image of a priest indicating that he was a

priest in his previous birth and had done something unforgivable. As we read the novel, we understand that he loved a woman but could not save and stand by her in a predicament. This act of his previous birth created a vacuum in his life; this emptiness forced him to take up this journey.

In *Aleph*, Coelho explores the idea that spirituality is a journey, not a destination. His journey is not just physical but also spiritual and emotional, as he tussles with his beliefs and experiences to find a greater understanding of himself and the world around him. The novel suggests that spiritual growth is never-ending, as each experience and encounter contributes to our knowledge and personal development. Johnson J (1999) states that the kind of relationship that we draw with God is reflected in the relationship that we share with individuals. Therefore, the author decides to take up this journey to reconnect with people. This relationship with others, in a way, would also help him connect with his creator. Our relationship with God is always symphony with our fellow travelers' ties. God is omnipresent. We may not feel his presence, but He is always present in our lives. The visionary fiction of Paulo Coelho represents the contemporary spiritual quest, the quest to find an omnipotent God, and the quest to look for symbols in our quest for faith. The novel does not insist on believing in God; instead, it gives us a sense of God's presence even though we do not believe or see. While the protagonist reconnects with nature and the people around him, he encourages the readers to start their spiritual journey, break the monotony of life, take stock of their lives, introspect, and nurture their souls through spiritual practices.

We are free to follow a path that has neither a beginning nor an end. We are truly free to create our path. The path that Coelho talks about here is the one that helps him to understand his purpose and leads him to the right destination. In the novel *Aleph*, he does not aspire for worldly appreciation, but by chasing the goal of self-actualization, he wants to strengthen his relationship with God. However, this could happen only by one way of acknowledging every individual he meets in his life's journey and reaching out to the omnipotent God. His dilemma of taking the path God has planned for him manifests as he meets Hilal and struggles to escape from his past, which she is about to unfold. His encounter with Hilal discloses his profession and his cowardice when he could save his love from shame. The novel encourages us to seek spiritual and righteous paths and look for the real meaning of life and relationships on earth and beyond. All the knowledge that we gain without experiencing it will be in words. It will not be real. Therefore, taking risks and choosing a path to struggle adds value to our lives.

## Purpose and Fulfilment

Purpose and fulfilment are core themes in the novel *Aleph*. The protagonist, who feels unfulfilled and disconnected from his life and purpose, embarks on a journey. Throughout the novel, we see him constantly searching for something. He is trying to find himself because he has lost his true identity. Maybe success and popularity have made him different. Self-discovery and spiritual growth in search of meaning and fulfilment are the objectives of his journey, and he does not want to stop. A causeless life is an affectless life. We need to thrive to discover the purpose of our life.

The zeal with which he starts the journey keeps the zest until he finishes it. Despite his challenges, especially when connecting with his past through Hilal, he becomes more self-aware. His journey begins with a sense of emptiness and a search for answers. He feels his life lacks purpose and direction, and memories of a past love haunt him. The universe goes through many mutations and carries a past with it. We call each of those mutations 'a life', but just as the cells in your body change, and yet you remain the same, time does not pass. It merely changes. You think you're the same person you were in Ekaterinburg, but you're not. "I'm not even the same person I was when I began talking. Nor is the train in the same place it was when Hilal played her violin. Everything has changed; it's just that we can't see it". (126) As the journey progresses, he begins to discover his purpose and find fulfilment. He learns to accept his past experiences and come to terms with his memories.

He also realizes that his journey of self-discovery and growth has given him a deeper understanding of spirituality and a greater connection to the world around him. The novel illustrates that accomplishment comes from embracing our journey and finding meaning in our experiences rather than searching for it outside of ourselves. When we think that we have reached the finishing line, life bestows us with a different challenge, and many of us who do not want to give up embrace the challenge with the right attitude. Furthermore, there could be instances where we are searching for an answer, but the quest leads us to learn an unforgettable lesson. It could be in our careers, relationships, or daily responsibilities; we encounter endless opportunities to nurture and mend our ways. Through his physical and metaphorical journey, Coelho tries to address the question of the purpose of his existence. Coelho uses travel as a tool to rediscover himself, transform his journey, and reach a meaningful destination. Burrow, AL., Hill, P.L., Stanley, M. & Summer, R.(2014) illustrate

that travel can offer people new exposure. It could also recreate their past through the process of encountering other individuals. There is room for self-discovery.

“The purpose in life is defined as a self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviours, and provides a sense of meaning and is recognized as an indicator of psychological wellbeing, physical health, and even longevity” (p. 242). According to the authors, the one who searches for purpose is organized, carries a positive attitude, and makes sure his behaviour inspires his goals by providing a sense of meaning in every action. He also believed that the present moment is precious. The past teaches us lessons, but the present helps us to fulfill the lessons from the past.

He is moved by the anecdote of Chinese bamboo, which he explains to his secretary, Monica. “Don’t think about what you’ll tell people afterward. The time is here and now. Make the most of it.” The meaning of life is derived from the commencement of well-being, quality of life, and purpose. Further, he explains how The Chinese bamboo tree is known for its slow growth; it can take several years before it begins to sprout above the ground. However, it can shoot to incredible heights once it starts growing in just a few weeks. This characteristic of the bamboo tree serves as a reminder that actual growth and transformation often occur in stages and require time, effort, and patience. The Chinese bamboo tree serves as a metaphor for growth and change. The bamboo tree is a recurring image in the book, representing that true growth and transformation require patience and perseverance. The bamboo tree symbolizes the protagonist’s journey of self-discovery and growth. Discovering your life’s purpose is the step towards living a conscious life.

It is vital as it helps us to make sense of our actions and helps us to develop a balanced and meaningful life that embodies kindness and mindful practices. Throughout his journey, he experiences moments of frustration and doubt, but he perseveres in his quest for self-discovery and growth. The bamboo tree symbolizes the idea that self-discovery and growth are ongoing and that each experience and encounter contributes to our personal development and understanding of the world around us. Coelho formulates his beatitudes when he says that we should not only transform our lives but also help others around us to transform. By setting an example, he asks his readers to give selflessly, accommodate the needy, and show the right path to those who have lost their way. We should be vigilant like hunters who are aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

Having a goal in our life or knowing our purpose on this earth also denotes healthy aging. When the author decided to travel, it was for evaluation and introspection. It was not for pleasure or to admire nature but to uncover his worth and potential. Realizing the purpose of his life made him stronger in faith and dedicated to his profession, and it helped him invest in inner peace.

## **The Journey**

The journey becomes the central aspect of the narrative as it decodes the path of self-discovery and Spiritual growth. It indicates the progression from one stage to the other, from the state of disconnect to the state of connecting and rewinding. This evolution encompasses his relationship with the world, professional and personal life, spirituality and religious beliefs, and self-transcendence. The journey in *Aleph* serves as a metaphor for the idea that life is a journey of self-discovery and growth and represents the idea that each person's path in life is unique and that the journey is an ongoing process of learning and growth. A journey is an essential part of our existence. It is not the distance we travel that matters but what we gain through this journey that counts. A journey helps most of us understand ourselves better. It also aids in knowing the people around us. The myth and realities are unfolded. Paulo Coelho encourages the readers to focus on life's journey rather than the destination. Here, the journey is physical, spiritual, and emotional as he grapples with his beliefs and experiences to better understand himself and the world around him. We call "life" a train with many carriages. Sometimes we're in one, sometimes in another, and sometimes we cross between them when we dream or allow ourselves to be swept away by the extraordinary.' (I 27)

Your journey is the process of reaching your destination. Throughout your journey, the experience you gain is what shapes your personality. In *The Quest Motif in Literature*, Howard N (2010) discusses the heroes who had taken up a vicious journey to fulfill a mission, either to save themselves or others. The journey becomes a primary plot, a motive in many literary works. In many novels, the protagonist's journey transforms their lives from innocence to awareness: Brida in search of magic, Maria in 11 Minutes in pursuit of wealth and fame. When his secretary questions his sudden travel plans while he has so many commitments to fulfill, he narrates a story. "A man stumbles and falls into a deep hole. He asks a passing priest to help him out. The priest blesses him and walks on. Hours later, a doctor comes by. The man asks for help, but the doctor merely studies his injuries from afar, writes him a prescription, and tells him to buy the



medicine from the nearest pharmacy. Finally, a stranger appears. Again, the man asks for help, and the stranger jumps into the hole. "Now, what are we going to do?" says the man. "Now, both of us are trapped down here." To which the stranger replies: "No, we're not. I am from around here, and I know how to get out." "Meaning?" asks Monica. "That I need strangers like that," I explain. "My roots are ready, but I will only manage to grow with the help of others. Not just you or I or my wife, but people I have never met. I am sure of that." The whole objective of the journey was to find that lost spark in his successful life, which was beyond perfection in the eyes of society. However, he was aware of the emptiness he felt even amidst the crowd of admirers. The journey can be divided into two categories: literal moving from one place to another and character progression, here, the personality transforms as the journey progresses (Bodart, Barrineau & Flamino, 2011). At the end of his journey, the protagonist can rekindle the spark of the divinity in him and his co-traveler, Hilal, as he explains to Hilal about Aleph. By sharing his knowledge, he demonstrates his selfless attitude and helps to form a better community. According to the author, finding Aleph in you makes you more energetic and instills self-confidence, but it requires patience, effort, and perseverance. The author's journey is not without challenges and difficulties, but he perseveres in his quest for self-discovery and growth. The journey serves as a reminder that true growth and transformation often occur in stages and require time, effort, and patience.

Furthermore, the journey in Aleph symbolizes that each experience and encounter contributes to our personal development and understanding of the world. Every co-traveler in this life's journey has a role to play. We don't meet people by accident; instead, everyone we encounter has something to contribute. As we read the novel, it comes alive and provides new experiences, from spiritual encounters to personal reflections, and each experience contributes to his growth and transformation. The journey serves as a reminder that each encounter and experience in life has the potential to shape and transform us in profound ways. Our relationships might end in a jiffy; some might stay for a few years and some for a lifetime. When we exchange our paths, each one contributes by sharing their experiences we learn and unlearn as we focus on our destination. In our journey, we try to fulfill our dreams and aspirations and contribute to every soul that crosses our path. In the novel, as the protagonist tries to achieve self-actualization, he also shares lessons from his life, lessons of love and marriage, lessons of togetherness and commitment, and lessons of purpose and self-discovery. Our journeys may not be simple. We might put on a brave face to the world and fight a silent battle within ourselves.



What matters is the focus and zeal of looking forward. Each one has a different story and a different journey.

The journey in *Aleph* serves as a powerful metaphor for growth and transformation, and it represents the idea that life is an ongoing journey of self-discovery and searches for that inner thread that is not, making our lives yet it is more potent than our outward appearance of growth and accomplishment. The journey here symbolizes the idea that actual growth and transformation require patience, effort, and perseverance and that each experience and encounter contributes to our personal development and understanding of the world around us.

## **Conclusion**

The night is darkest before sunrise. We need to learn to convert our setbacks into opportunities – to appreciate the priceless moments in our lives. *Aleph* is a powerful tale of spiritual quests and self-discovery, and it offers a timeless message of hope and inspiration to readers seeking to find their spiritual path. You must choose to take a chance if you want anything in life to change. Through his journey, Coelho illustrates the transformative power of spiritual growth and the importance of embracing our journey, no matter where it may take us. Trusting the path always makes a difference in one's life. Through *Aleph*, Coelho urges the readers to connect with others rather than bury themselves in self-made material cocoons. He magnifies the importance of the choice of spiritual quest that leads to inner peace.

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