

AN EXISTENTIALISM STUDY ON PAULO COELHO'S THE ALCHEMIST

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Abstract

*This research aims to discover how Santiago, the main character in *The Alchemist*, defends his existence and the relation between Santiago's freedom of choice and Existentialism. Accordingly, this research applies Existentialism theory that is proposed by Jean Paul Sartre. This research is a qualitative research. The data of this research were primarily taken from Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. The form of data is all narrations and dialogues in the novel. To analyze the data, the researcher used content analysis. This is a technique of gathering and analyzing the content of the text. The data was analyzed by using Sartre's Existentialism theory which comprised freedom of choice, responsibility, anguish, and estrangement. To ensure the data trustworthiness, the researcher also conducted proof-reading method to check the data relevance and consulted his findings with supervisors. The findings of the study bespeak that Santiago, the main character in *The Alchemist* has to acquire freedom of choice, overcome anguish, show responsibility, and estrange himself from others to defend his existence. As an existentialist individual, Santiago tries to find his existence by his freedom of choice.*

Keywords: *existentialism, freedom of choice, existence.*

INTRODUCTION

Humans have to make decisions to cope with the dilemmas based on their choices. It is true that human beings are often influenced by the others in order to deal with dilemma. The complicated dilemma is usually caused by the fact that the process of decision making sometimes becomes very personal, which means that one's choice is occasionally different compared to other people's choices in the society.

Every human lives in a world of their own, with his or her own beliefs, values, joys, problems and priorities. Humans are confined, by nature, to see the world from a subjective point of view. People expect judges to put aside their subjectivity and make decisions based on objectivity. The subjectivity

illustrates the big spaces of freedom in decision making because the individual himself who has full authority.

Responsibility is the most important thing that people have to take after they make their free choice. Sartre (1946) in "Existentialism is Humanism" said that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. We have choice, we have subjectivity, and we choose what we will make ourselves to be; we are entirely responsible for our existence". Thus, existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him.

The importance of existentialism has been raised by Paulo Coelho in his work, *The Alchemist*. Paulo Coelho, born in Rio de

Janeiro in 1947, is one of the bestselling and most influential contemporary authors in the world. Paulo Coelho is the world's most successful contemporary Brazilian author whose novel, *The Alchemist*, becomes an obligatory text at many schools in United States such as, University of Richmond, Shoreline Community College, Boston College, Portland Public School, and Westminster College.

Through *The Alchemist*, Coelho tries to present the issue of freedom, choice, decision, and action which is portrayed by the major character in the story, Santiago. Paulo Coelho's masterpiece tells the magical story of Santiago, an Andalusian shepherd boy who yearns to travel in search of a worldly treasure as extravagant as any ever found.

In this research, the researcher tries to elaborate the problems and choices that are faced by the main character. Santiago faces some hard decisions along his journey that trigger him to make a choice based on his free will without any influence by other people. He is not afraid of making decisions because the most important thing for him is to give meaning to his life. Therefore, what the main character experiences related to dilemma and choices is worth to be discussed and analyzed using the theory of existentialism by Jean Paul Sartre.

Jean Paul Sartre (in Muzairi, 2002:4-5) defines Existentialism as one the anthropology philosophy that expresses on human existence's freedom and responsible. It

is strongly difference to another philosophy studies, which Existentialism focus its studies on human existence. So that, Existentialism discourse forces everyone to aware the reality, that this world and human existence does not finish and imperfect. It means, human being always to face the existential problems like anxiety, fear and trembling anxiety, freedom, death, etc. All of them are the empirical facts for human being itself.

Fuad Hasan in his book states that Existentialism is a study that bases its research on a concrete human being. Human being in philosophical study is viewed as a free individuality. The existentialists believe that an individual has a difference from other God's creature, as it is only human being that exists (Hasan, 1973:5).

Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* states that existentialism is related much to freedom. He defines freedom as the very being of the being-for-itself which is condemned to be free. Being-for-itself must forever choose itself that is make itself. "Condemned", because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does. "To be free" does not mean to obtain what one has wished but rather by oneself to determine oneself to wish (in the broad sense of choosing). In other words, success is insignificant to freedom (Sartre, 1943: 630). Man is left alone in the world without excuse to determine himself. That is what Sartre

meant when he said that man is condemned to be free.

Sartre (1956, 567) points out that people are free to make their own choices but they are condemned to always bear the responsibility of the consequences of these choices. Sartre says that humans never asked for this life or this freedom but they are still held accountable for their choices and these choices end up shaping what we become in life.

The consciousness of one's own freedom is anguish. Anguish is a type of self-consciousness and is experienced by man when he realizes that any conduct is possible. It is his choice and his responsibility as to which conduct is made actual. He literally has the freedom to choose any action, and he must accept the consequences for those actions. Anguish is different from fear in that "fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself." It means that man can fear or be afraid of death, but anguish occurs when he is afraid of being afraid. He becomes filled with anguish before himself in this situation.

Freedom for Sartre means freedom of choice and not freedom to obtain what one wants. The latter, he explains, is a popular and not a philosophical use of the concept 'freedom'. Choosing a course of action with a certain outcome in mind does not necessarily mean that this outcome will be attained. As Sartre writes, "success is not important to freedom". This means that even though

people are free, they may not manage to engage in meaningful activity and in meaningful relationships with others.

RESEARCH METHOD

The researcher assumed that the suitable research design applied in this study is descriptive qualitative research. This study is aimed at getting some statement and phenomena from the reading. The research can also be categorized as a library research, since the data applied in this research are mainly explored from library based on the reading that is limited on the topic of the research.

This research uses narrative expression of the novel as the data of the research. The data of this research primarily were taken from Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* published in New York, 1998. The data sources of this research were collected from any kinds of sentences, expressions, and paragraphs related to the research upon the existentialism study on the novel. All the data sources that have been mentioned above must relate to the aspects of the research: 1) how the main character defends his existence, 2) how freedom of choice of the main character's way of life relates to Existentialism.

The data collection was conducted by the researcher through several steps. Initially the researcher read *The Alchemist* as the source of the data. The researcher carefully and thoroughly read the work several times to obtain a deep understanding the content of the novel. Then, the researcher conducted the

data collection by taking some quotations related to the topic of the research. These quotations were used and arranged by the researcher as documentation. Categorizing the data was the final step.

DISCUSSION

1. Santiago's Ways in Defending His Existence

a. Acquiring Freedom of Choice

Santiago is a shepherd who lives by frequently moving from place to place. Before he became a shepherd, Santiago was just a boy who lived in Andalusia whose parents were farmers lived in a modest family. For his parents are from simple farm family, having a son who becomes a priest can make them very proud and respected in the society. Instead of being priest, in his young age, Santiago chooses to be a shepherd and tells his will to his parents.

His parents had wanted him to become a priest, and thereby a source of pride for a simple farm family. One afternoon, on a visit to his family, he had summoned up the courage to tell his father that he didn't want to become a priest. That he wanted to travel. (10)

Santiago acquires his freedom of choice by deciding to be a shepherd. He does not follow what his parents ask.

When Santiago chooses a certain end, he understands the world in light of this end: objects are perceived as obstacles or advantages with regard to this end. Santiago always has the possibility to choose a different end from the end he pursued thus far, which will change the way in which he

perceives the world. In this way, he is always free to choose, even when he is estranged.

Santiago uses his freedom of choice to reflect his own life. He contemplates to what happens towards his choices and draws a decision from it, just as when he has some doubts about his decision to travel and to find the treasure. He still cannot understand that making a decision is only beginning. Then he finds that when a person makes a decision, he really drives into a strong current which brings him to many places that he never imagines before.

b. Overcoming Anguish

Anguish is the emotion felt by man when he faces the world, understands his full freedom and responsibility, and realizes that there is no ground on which to base his actions. Man is faced with infinite possibilities coupled with a lack of external justification or direction: this is the feeling Sartre channels when he alleges that man is "condemned to be free." (1963: 567).

Anguish exists after man has made a decision. This feeling of deep anxiety exists after Santiago chooses to leave Spain and go to Africa. He sometimes feels afraid of making mistakes by choosing something wrong. This happens when someone robs his money after Santiago decides to look for the treasure.

... He recalled that when the sun had risen that morning, he was on another continent, still a shepherd with sixty sheep, and looking forward to meeting with a girl.... But now, as the sun began to set, he was in a different country, a

strange in a strange land, where he couldn't even speak the language. He was no longer a shepherd, and he had nothing, not even the money to return and start everything over.

After this incident has happened, he wants to go home in Spain because the trouble makes him depressed and anguished. This triggers him to ask God as the narrator said that "...he wept because God was unfair, and because this was the way God repaid those who believed in their dream (41)." This conveys the feelings of solitude and helplessness growing to angst within every human being throughout self-awareness, which the existentialists state to be bound to happen. Sartre describes this experience by referring to human beings' feeling of loneliness as an absence of guidelines for their deeds:

Man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on – neither within nor without. First, he finds there are no excuses. For if it is true that existence precedes essence, we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. (1963: 29)

In that way, Sartre describes a modern human being's situation as an existential limbo where outer and inner freedom of choice is inseparable from an entire loneliness and anguish. A primordial impossibility for a human being to reach any kind of harmony between himself or herself, others and the

outer world turns the existence into the absurd.

When Santiago decides to continue the journey to the Pyramids, he also experiences anguish because everything is still a mystery.

He still had some doubts about the decision he had made. But he was able to understand one thing: making a decision was only the beginning of things. When someone makes a decision, he is really diving into a strong current that will carry him to places he had never dreamed of when he first made the decision.

When I decided to seek out my treasure, I never imagine that I'd wind up working in a crystal shop, he thought. And joining this caravan may have been my decision, but where it goes is going to be a mystery to me. (70)

The narration above does not direct to ask the choice he makes before, it rather gives emphasis the mystery of the future risk that he may experience. This thought signifies that Santiago experiences the anguish. The narrator's voice above implicitly signifies Santiago's feeling. The decision to look for the hidden treasure leads him to lose all his money. At this time, Santiago experiences anguish after he makes choice because he thinks that he makes a mistake by deciding to look for the treasure.

c. Showing Responsibility

Santiago has to accept all the responsibility as the consequence of his choice to become a shepherd. Living far away from his family is the new condition that he must adapt. He has no friend except his sheep. This new situation does not make him sad and

lonely. However, Santiago must be prepared of everything that may change as the consequence.

Santiago's freedom is a responsible freedom. It means that when Santiago decides to do something, he must accept all of the consequences. As he chooses to look for the hidden treasure in Africa, Santiago must sell his sixty sheep which he takes care for two years in order to get the money to go to Africa. Santiago does not lament his condition although Santiago's decision results in leaving his good life as a shepherd and also his dream to meet the merchant's daughter. This is the proof of Santiago's responsibility towards his choice

d. Estranging Himself from Others

According to Sartre, the others look at a man in a way that they intend to be looked, as this alienates him from them. It means that what the others look at him is not what he actually is and this causes him to be alienated from the others. In the case of Santiago whose decision is opposed to his parents' will, it indicates Santiago is estranged from others.

Santiago's choices are different from the others opinion. In the first dilemma, Santiago chooses to become a shepherd because he himself wants to be a traveler, wandering along the world. Becoming a shepherd allows him to travel. This reason of deciding to be a shepherd shows that his basic consideration is his own subjectivity. His subjectivity also influences him not to pay attention to the others opinion and the pride he may get if he

follows the crowd. Furthermore, Santiago's decision, to be a shepherd, is opposed to the others' opinion which is to become a priest.

Santiago is estranged from the traditional community in general because he chooses to be a shepherd. As the old man said,

"Well, he thought about that," the old man said. "But bakers are more important people than shepherds. Bakers have homes, while shepherd sleep out in the open. Parents would rather see their children marry bakers than shepherds." The boy felt a pang in his heart, thinking about the merchant's daughter. There was surely a baker in her town. (24)

When Santiago becomes aware that he is being looked at by the old man, his existence becomes objectified and his subjectivity becomes part of the world of another. His realization that another person can access this dimension of his being makes him feel estranged. This is what Sartre calls as 'being-for-others'. The sense of man being essential to the construction is lost.

2. Relation Between Santiago's Freedom of Choice and Existentialism

Santiago defends his existence with some consequences of the choice he has made. He must be responsible of everything he does. As Sartre says in *Being and Nothingness*:

"...I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man" (1963: 61)

Santiago must choose a choice between possibilities, which means that he hopes that the other person takes the same decision in a similar situation, but there is no certainty that the other person will make the same decision with him, but certainly is the decision that has taken it to be his own responsibility. Santiago is an existence that precedes its essence. It means that he must be responsible for his life and all actions or choices that have been taken.

Freedom is very essential for human being. It includes freedom of choice that every human is free to choose what he or she will become in his or her own life. Santiago's freedom of choice leads him to be more responsible with the consequences as an existentialist individual. Sartre (1963: 3) states that an existentialist individual is not just a stone or fungus, but something a higher being responsible for the whole course of his action. Human is an existence that exists first then creating essence to his or her life.

CONCLUSION

To defend his existence, Santiago has to acquire freedom of choice, overcome anguish, be responsible, and estrange himself from others. In achieving his dream, he must follow his own choice. The decision is coming from his own thought. As the consequence of his decision, he must accept all the responsibility even though he also feels anguish, nothingness, despair and trembling anxiety in his life.

Santiago's freedom of choice leads him to find his existence. As an existentialist individual, he is free to choose what he will become in his life. Santiago's life long struggle to achieve his dream is the testimony of the existential belief that man is an existence who has commitment to follow the dream with freedom. His treasure is not the goal of the life but it is his life that becomes a centripetal force, to merge with the universal soul in order to become one with it. Santiago's treasure is symbolic of the treasure lands that lie unexplored within every human being.

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