

## ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN PAULO COELHO'S NOVELS -A SELECT STUDY

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### Abstract

Symbolism, one of the literary devices, always takes different forms in the hands of literary artists. It is defined as the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Enjoying the freedom given by the symbols, writers such as Paulo Coelho magically transform the characters into symbolic entities. It is quite interesting for any reader to go through the magical gallery of Paulo's writings as the symbols deftly erase even the slightest ambiguity. Thus, Paulo Coelho is seen by many as an alchemist of words. Coelho's novels are highly symbolic and he usually uses a linear and sequential plot structure to emphasize the eternal struggle between deeply driven human ambitions and the tragic tendency. Coelho's works, originally written in Portuguese, have been translated into more than 150 languages. This research paper focuses on Paulo Coelho's use of animal symbolism in the novels *The Alchemist*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Devil and Miss Prym*, *Brida* and *The Witch of Portobello*. The common animal symbols in Coelho's novels are sheep, horse, snake, camel and wolf. Paulo Coelho has very tactfully and contextually used the symbols in his novels. Each animal symbol mirrors the weak or the dynamic characteristic feature of human beings. Coelho's novels are elegant with the use of his animal symbolism.

**Keywords:** sheep, snake, horse, camel, and wolf

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian lyricist, short story writer and novelist. He has achieved national and international acclaim for his works that focus on the discovery of the self as a means of spiritual fulfilment. Coelho's novels are highly symbolic and he usually uses a linear and sequential plot structure to emphasize the eternal struggle between deeply driven human ambitions and the tragic

tendency. Coelho's works, originally written in Portuguese, have been translated into more than 150 languages. Paulo Coelho's use of animal symbolism in the novels such as *The Alchemist*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Devil and Miss Prym*, *Brida* and *The Witch of Portobello* is discussed in detailed in this research paper.

Symbolism, one of the literary devices, always takes different forms in the hands of literary artists. It is defined as the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Enjoying the freedom given by the symbols writers such as Paulo Coelho magically transform the characters into symbolic entities. It is quite interesting for any reader to go through the magical gallery of Paulo's writings as the symbols deftly erase even the slightest ambiguity. Thus Paulo Coelho is seen by many as an alchemist of words. Among all his symbols, animal symbols play a significant role in his novels as from the ancient times, animals were closely connected with human activities. In the art and narratives of all cultures, animals not only signified themselves, their habits were also explored; they were the parts of man's environment on more symbolic levels. In the narratives and myths, especially origin myths, animals were involved in the creation of the human world. Animal symbolism mirrors the cyclic movements of the sky and the seasons. Similar symbolic patterns for certain animals prevail over a wide geographical range, in the Old World as well as in the Neotropics.

Animal symbolism plays a vital role in the history, tradition, culture and the philosophy of the literature of any age. Animal symbols are mostly found in proverbs, music, folk tales and stories. Animal images in culture and tradition show the qualities of kinship and leadership and sometimes relate to the rituals of the indigenous tradition. The ancient people selected various animal species as the remarkable features of their traditional state symbols. The origin of some of these icons was lost in antiquity; however, they helped in differentiating the various ethnic groups, communities and their characteristics.

In olden days, stories in the form of animal symbolic narratives were inscribed on the walls of the homes and the temples. Those stories were imbued with strong religious and allegorical importance. Ancient Egyptian, Roman and Greek cultures developed complex mythological systems by using the animals such as lions, horses, reptiles and birds. Stories in the Old and New Testaments

of the Bible contributed lasting images to literature. Similarly, Indian, South American and African cultures use animals to explain the stories and mysteries of the life of human beings and the universe.

Animals took part in the moral allegories of the seventeenth century, which was called the Age of Enlightenment. Jonathan Swift experimented in the literature by using animals for the political corruption and human foibles. The eighteenth-century poets such as Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Keats praised the beauty of nature in their imaginations through animals and birds. In the Victorian era, the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) demonstrated that the human beings had not been created distinctly for the animals.

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, Paulo Coelho leaves a lasting impression on the minds of the readers with his philosophical, mystical and spiritual thoughts. His novels focus on symbolism in general and animal symbolism in particular. Believing in the ideas of Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, Coelho also follows the same path which was expressed in her *Hunting the Wren* (1997) that animals take on human qualities and humans take on animal qualities. Coelho uses these symbols in order to convey the mystical message that is as applicable to real life as it is to the fictional characters. The common animal symbols in Coelho's novels are sheep, horse, snake, camel, wolf, and so on. Coelho shows animals with both the positive and negative attributions like the ancient writers.

### **Sheep**

Sheep is the common symbol of both religion and mythology. Ancient writers gave significance to lamb and sheep. But Coelho uses in his writings the sheep in a less extraordinary way. Santiago in *The Alchemist* loves the sheep, but he does not want to resemble the sheep. The existence of the sheep is banal and these sheep are concerned only with food and water and do not have their own consciousness and goals and Personal Legends to follow. Santiago understands that he does no way resemble the qualities of the sheep as he is aware of his Personal Legend and tries to listen to the inner voices.

Santiago imagines that the sheep are blindly trusting him and will not revolt against him though he slaughters them one by one. The symbolism of the sheep is the lack of understanding, lack of imagination and lack of transformation. The sheep symbolize, in *The Alchemist*, the characters such as the baker and the crystal merchant. They are contented with what they have and cannot pursue their

Personal Legends. They will not appreciate the new trends and creations and they tend to miss many-an-opportunity at their doorstep and have limited perspectives.

### **Horse**

The horses were presented in different cultures as the universal symbol of freedom. Horses were the symbols of travel, desire and movement. The horse is ever present in mythology. In Celtic mythology, horses represent a harbinger of good luck and good fortune. Without the horse, there could not have been the adventurous journey from the ancient days in mythology. Ancient writers wrote that the horses were friends to human beings and helping in wars, journeys and adventures.

Horses symbolize movement and prominence in the novel *Don Quixote* and they (horses) often denote a character's wealth or class. The pilgrims outside Barcelona, for example, tread to the city. The noblemen ride in carriages, whereas Don Quixote and the robbers ride on the horseback. Don Quixote thinks that the appearance of horses on the horizon symbolizes the arrival of a new adventure.

In *The Alchemist*, the black-clad alchemist appears to Santiago on a white horse which a symbol of mystery, power, independence, adventure, loyalty, devotion and a strong sense of self. All these qualities are visible in one person who is the alchemist. In the Bible, the horse is known as a symbol of intelligence. This is properly justified through the words of Santiago. "There's life here," the boy said to the alchemist. "I don't know the language of the desert, but my horse knows the language of life" (123).

As soon as a Black-clad horseman is seen by Santiago an image arrives in his mind, that is, the Christian saint and slayer of Moors, Santiago Matamoros. The Moors were the Islamic conquerors of the Iberian Peninsula, which consists of Andalusia, Santiago's hometown. But in contrast to the typical image of Santiago Matamoros, in which St. James rides a horse, a Moor beneath its hooves, here Santiago, the Christian pilgrim and a shepherd boy, occupies the Moor's place. In another twist, the terrifying man riding the white horse is none other than the alchemist on whose name the novel is named.

### **Snake**

The symbol of the serpent/snake was extremely significant in the ancient religions and cultural life of the people. Two highly symbolic roles were attributed to snakes by societies and scriptures.

One way, the snakes are connected to the heavens as the snake represents the deity, power of healing and creative powers. On the other hand, the snake is associated with the underworld and represented the evil, harm and destructive power.

In *The Alchemist*, the alchemist finds a cobra in the desert as a symbol of life. Conventionally, snakes also are emblematic of male potency. The alchemist possesses the strength to confront things that emerge from the desert — the cobra, the three armed warriors, and so on. He demonstrates his strength and influence through these animals. Santiago observes how the alchemist handles a snake in the hole. The alchemist keeps his entire arm up to his shoulder. Santiago assumes what is happening in the hole through the alchemist's eyes-squinted. It seems that his arm is battling with the snake. Santiago is amazed at the movements of the alchemist. Finally, the alchemist frantically struggles and grasps the snake by the tail. The alchemist places the snake in the circle drawn by him.

The serpent is known to the people as a strong evil power. It is shown in *The Devil and Miss Prym*, that it is the mirror image of Satan in the Bible. In the author's note, Paulo Coelho writes about the first man and woman on the earth and how evil comes on to the earth. He explains,

And one fine day the serpent appears, swearing that this knowledge is more important than paradise itself and that they should possess that knowledge. The woman refuses, saying that God has threatened her with death, but the serpent assures her that nothing of the kind will happen, but quite the contrary, for on the day when they learn what Good and Evil are, they will become God's equals (DMP, viii).

In *The Witch of Portobello*, Edda, the mentor of Athena discusses the alchemical symbol, i.e. a snake forming a circle and swallowing its own tail. It means that the people like Edda and Athena are constantly trying to destroy and rebuild themselves. Everything in their life has followed the same pattern such as from lost to found, from divorce to love, working in a bank to selling the land in the desert as real estate, so on and so forth. J. E Cirlot in his book, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, quotes the definition of the snake by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) that the snake is endowed with magnetic force because it sheds its skin, it symbolizes resurrection because of its sinuous movement and it signifies strength. In *The Witch of Portobello* Edda teaches Athena how to stabilize herself and how painful it is to get experienced. She also says,

Living as a human being and as a divinity. Moving from tension into relaxation. From relaxation into a trance. From trance into a more intense contact with other people. From that contact back into tension and so on, like the serpent swallowing its own tail (TWP, 214).

In *Brida*, Brida is in trance on the day of the Equinox as she is going to be initiated by Wicca who is her teacher and mentor. Wicca invokes Virgin Mary to give initiation to Brida. Wicca knows how difficult it is. So at first, she longs for her teacher's protection and then Virgin Mary's. Here Brida is compared to the Virgin Mary, who crushed Satan and his forces in the form of a serpent under her feet. Similarly, Brida oppressed all the evil spirits at the time of her initiation as a witch to achieve her goal. Coelho describes in *Brida*, the climax scene at the time of initiation of Brida and invocation of Wicca in the following lines:

In that power dwelled the Wisdom of Time. There was the Serpent, wise and masterful. Only the Virgin, by crushing the serpent's head beneath her heel, could subjugate it. And so Wicca prayed to the Virgin Mary as well, asking her for the purity of soul, steadiness of hand, and the protection of her cloak, so that she could bring down that Power on the women before her, without it seducing or overwhelming any of them (BD, 240).

### **Camel**

The camel is the symbol of wealth and prosperity in one hand and strength, endurance and protection on the other. It also symbolises the real world of long distance travelling. There is a known fact that camels bear the wrath of burning desert temperatures as they transport people and cargo across the vast lands. Camels are the best source of inspiration to the human beings when humans have difficult times ahead in their life journey. They inspire with their energy and spiritual strength.

In *The Alchemist*, the camel plays a crucial role in the journey made by Santiago. He learns so many things through the camels and the camel driver. At first, Santiago understands things through reading books. When he starts understanding the camels, he throws away the books and believes in the language of the desert and camel. Santiago sets his behaviour by observing the camels in the desert.

### **Wolf**

The wolf's senses are highly developed. Wolves are extremely intelligent with excellent hearing, strong sensation and sense of smell. When compared to the nature of other animals, they are cunning. A wolf's howl is primal and penetrating. The howl is used to locate its own clan members or to let wolves from outside of the pack or to know their territory boundaries. The wolf is a symbol of the night, which represents a lonely path. Night time seems lonesome and scary to all the human

beings. But it is also the time when through dreams, one may discover valuable things about oneself. To truly come to understand oneself, one must be alone, undeterred by the beliefs, judgments and views of others. Wolves teach to learn about one's inner self and to discover one's inner power and strength. However, to achieve this, one must take risks and face one's deepest fears.

In *The Devil and Miss Prym*, a rogue wolf plays a prominent role. The power of the wolf brings forth intelligence, instinct, an awareness of the importance of social connections and appetite for freedom. Paulo Coelho has introduced the concept of the symbolism of the wolf to know about the tendency of the key characters in the novel, Chantal Prym and the stranger. Coelho introduces this symbol with a negative attribution. The wolf symbolizes Chantal Prym's feelings towards life as she is afraid of everything and lack of trust in herself and also others. She has the appetite for freedom and her liberty of life in her future. She wants to leave Viscos if she has an opportunity to go to the nearest town like the other young people in the village.

Chantal is selected by a stranger for the evil deeds as she is such a weak personality identified by him. On the other hand, the stranger symbolizes the cunning nature of a wolf. He wants to conduct the experiments on the lives of people in Viscos. His wild nature is exposed in his selection of Chantal Prym and the village.

In Western Europe, wolves were not shown positively in the myths. Especially, in both German and Norse mythology, the wolf was a symbol of destruction, devastation and death. J. E. Cirlot in his *A Dictionary of Symbols* mentions that in Nordic mythology, Fenris, a monstrous wolf, destroyed iron chains and shackles, was eventually shut up in the bowels of the earth and at last it devoured the Sun. The wolf appears as a symbol of the principle of evil in the form of the stranger in Viscos.

Berta, an old woman in the village, usually discusses the howling of the rogue wolf. She believes in whatever she expects and hears. Due to the sudden death of her husband she lives alone and always thinks about the good of the village. She expects that something bad will happen to the villagers whenever she listens to the howling of the wolf. At the time of discussion another character involves with Berta and Chantal, is the Mayor's wife. These three women in the novel represent the weak and meek mentalities. They are trying to know about their inner selves but they utterly fail.

Every nation's culture is unique through the use of symbols such as logos, birds and animals. Similarly to offer such inimitability, in most of his novels, Paulo Coelho uses one or more animals as symbols around which the stories revolve. These central symbols, sheep, snake, horse, camel, wolf, and so on are the manifestations of the characters concerned. These animal symbols are like vehicles to the reader through which to better comprehend the experiences of his characters. With his symbols, Coelho's themes are glorified with colour and clarity. Paulo Coelho has very thoughtfully incorporated the symbols in his novels. Each animal symbol mirrors the weak or the dynamic characteristic feature of human beings.

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