

## The Influence of Classical Arabic Narrative on Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

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### Abstract

*This study attempts to show the influence of Arabic literature on Paulo Coelho through his *Alchemist* novel. It analyzes the relationship between *Alchemist* and *He Saw in His Dreams That His Richness Would Be in Egypt* story written by Al-Tanukhi. The researcher traced the similarities and differences of the two works to conclude that Coelho had been influenced by Al-Tanukhi's story as he found strong relationship between the two works. It became apparent that Coelho is influenced by Al-Tanukhi as the later lived long time ago before the first. Of these similarities that the researcher traced the motive, place, time, dream, and the plot of the two stories. Despite the difficulty of tracing the similarities between the two works as a result of time, place and genre differences, the researcher has achieved his goal and traced all the possible similarities.*

### Introduction

This study discusses the similarities and points of intersection of two literary works of different times and cultures. The first returns back to the Fourth Hijri Century, however the other is contemporary. Despite the fact that they apparently look different, the deep analysis for both of them reflects different results. The researcher knows well that both works intersect in relation to narrative style though they belong to different literary genres; one of them is a tale, however the other is a novel. Each one of them is signified with various literary characteristics. The research is based on discourse analysis to sort the similarities and points of intersection of both works. The research handles the two works as they are both based on narrative and investigated the similarities that are related to motive, dream, time, place and purpose. It comes up with the result that the journey in both works was to achieve a dream; however, the dream was not the ultimate goal they sought. Both works focus on the pursuit of the dream rather than achieving it. The researcher depends on the basic resources of the study which are *Al-Faraj Ba'adullShideh* – part two – for Al-Tanukhi where the tale, the subject of the study, is published and *The Alchemist* for Paulo Coelho, translated into Arabic by Jawad Saidawi.

This study investigates the influence of Arabic literature on other cultures' literature namely the influence of Al-Tanukhi's literary works on Western Literature. Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, which gained great popularity around the World, is taken as an example. Comparing two literary works of different languages is a really challenging task as the comparison will not be held on basis of language or genre, or even the narrative techniques. It will be based on the similarities, influence, intersection, and how literature of different cultures approach the cognitive and expressive forms. The comparison will also approach the literary texts of different times and spaces.<sup>i</sup> This study aims to investigate the exchanging influence among literary works of different cultures. It cannot be alleged that a modern literary work whatever original or deep-rooted it is, is free of the influence of other nations' literature.<sup>ii</sup> Through this study the researcher sheds light on the influence of literary works on each other in general and investigates deeply to what extent the two literary works subject of the study are influenced by other nation's literature without prejudice.

The study inspects two literary works that belong to different languages; Arabic and Portuguese, two different cultures; Arabian and Latin American, and two different times; the 4<sup>th</sup>Hijri (1000 CE) and the 15<sup>th</sup>Hijri (2000 CE). Investigating the two works within the place, time and culture restrictions will be exhausting, add to this the different nature of both works in terms of form and genre. Though, the research will focus on the similarities in relation to narrative style and theme of both of them. This study will handle Al-Tanukhi's tale *He Had a Dream to Be Rich in Egypt* that had been narrated in his book *Al-Faraj Ba'adull Shideh* that was revised by Aboud Al-Shalijy and *The Alchemist* by Coelho. The author of *Al-Faraj Ba'adull Shideh* book was Abu Ali Al-Muhsin Ali Ibn Mohammad Ibn Daud Ibn Al-Fahm Al-Tanukhi. He was born in Baghdad in( 268 H), and died in( 384 H).<sup>iii</sup>

He had three books compiled in 14 volumes. The first is “Nishwar Al-Muhadarh Wa Akhbar Al-Muthakarh” (The Remnants of the Scenes), it falls in 8 volumes. The second is *Al-Faraj Ba’adull Shideh* (Content after Anguish), it falls in 5 volumes. However, the third is *Al-Mustjad Min Fialat Al-Ajwad* (The Good Deeds of the Generous), it falls in one volume. In his works, Al-Tanukhi aims to feature a group of tales and stories to entertain and educate readers. The Tale *He Had a Dream to Be Rich in Egypt*, subject of this study, is narrated in *Al-Faraj Ba’adull Shideh* book which is considered as one of the most famous and most organized works of Al-Tanukhi. He organized it into chapters and sorted tales accordingly. It comprises about 462 tales in addition to poetic verses<sup>iv</sup>. All the tales sorted in this book refer to the theme of content that follows anguish. This book is a rare anthology for tales and stories related to anguish that affect man as a result of some predicament he faces and how he gains content and wins in the end. The book’s theme, which is so related to his life, can be understood apparently through its title. The story, subject of this study, appears in the second part of his book, chapter six which he had named (Going Rich after Hard Times after Having a Dream That Was Entirely Believed in)<sup>v</sup>.

This story, which was narrated in almost two pages, tells us that a man became rich after experiencing poverty for a time. When he was asked about it he narrated his life story that can be concluded in that he had inherited a lot of money from his father and wasted it that he had kept nothing out of it. He was left with no money or food but of his mother’s weave work. He saw in his dreams that someone talked to him and told him that his richness is in Egypt. In the next morning, he hurried to Abu-Omar, the Judge, who was an old friend to his father, to help him with some money for his journey. He travelled to Egypt where he failed to achieve anything. He reached to a dead end when he decided to go out at night and beg people for help. He hesitated and spent most of the night thinking about doing it or not until a night guard spotted him. Thinking that he was a thief the guard beat him severely. After that he told the night guard his story of poverty and told him about his dream and how he arrived in Egypt. Calling him a fool, the night guard told him that he had also a dream of being rich in Baghdad as he saw in his dream a house where there was a treasure buried under a tree, and he wouldn’t do such a journey to catch with his dreams. As he described the house and the tree, the man realized that it was his house. He returned to Baghdad and dug the treasure out to become rich after experiencing extreme poverty.

However, Paulo Coelho, born in 1947, in Rio de Janeiro, is a popular writer and a theatre manager. He composed a group of folkloric songs. He was awarded several international literary wards. His works were translated into 69 languages and were published in more than 160 countries where over 100 million copies of these works were sold around the world. He occupies the position of cultural diversity ambassador in the UNESCO. He also works as a consultant for various cultures and spiritual rapprochement.<sup>vi</sup> *The Alchemist* is a shepherd who twice heard in his dreams someone telling him that there is a treasure in the pyramids of Egypt, and should he dig it out. Asking his father for help, he gave him some money to achieve his dream “his personal legend”. He travels from Spain to Morocco passing through the desert and experiencing a lot of adventurous events to get to the pyramids. He started digging under the pyramids in search for his promised treasure. He was caught by a group of rough men who beat him severely till he told him about his dream. Based on his story they called him a fool and one of them told him that he had seen in his dreams that his richness is in Spain as he saw that there was a treasure buried under a tree near an old cathedral. It happened that it was the place where he had set off from. He returns back to dig out the treasure and become rich after being poor. Reviewing the two works, we notice that these two works are interlinked as they have similar narrative techniques and themes. These similarities can be sorted as follows:

### ***First: The Motive / the Dream***

It is clear that dream is the motive for both characters to go into their adventures, Al-Tanukhi made his dynamic character, as well as Coelho did, see a vision through his dream telling him that his richness is in Egypt. Al-Tanukhie’s character heard a caller while being asleep, which can be considered as a type of dream, as well as the Alchemist saw that dream more than once. Both of them found that achieving their goals can be through a journey to Egypt, or as Coelho named it ‘the pyramids’, which are not but in Egypt, so both of them went to the same place.<sup>vii</sup> The critical financial and living conditions motivated both characters to travel looking for stability and settlement, or as Prop<sup>viii</sup> called it interdiction. “Most of the time the interdiction precedes the state of remoteness”. The journey comes to create a state of internal stability that the characters seek for, and to enhance their living and financial conditions which cannot be achieved but in traveling. The dream at Al-Tanukhie’s story came after the character passed through a very difficult situation and experienced financial problems and so is the case for the Al-chemist as he was experiencing bad living conditions. He was a shepherd who hardly earns his living.

Consequently, the financial motive that pushed the two characters to take an action is strongly present in the two literary works. The journey is emphasized in the title of Al-Tanukhie's story. It makes travelling the pushing factor for the rest of the events and the core of the needed change. The character's state changed as a result of travelling to achieve his dream. However, in the Alchemist, achieving his legendary personality was the real motivator for travelling. In these two works, we have two dreams; the first was to overcome the bad living conditions that Al-Tanukhie's character had passed through, and the second was to attain legendary personality of Coelho's character. The place where the dream will be achieved was known for both characters; Egypt. Al-Tanukhi did not give specific details about where exactly his character would go. However, Coelho's character was heading to the pyramids. So, both of them would go to Egypt. In the two works, there were other two dreams that their dreamers did not pay any effort to achieve, so they lost a lot. They were the people who met the dynamic characters in Egypt and mocked them and their persistence to achieve their dreams.

The other dreams were detailed and very clear, but their dreamers took them as any other false dreams and neglected them. They even described their dreams to the dynamic characters who in turn were able to locate the treasure accurately. The other dreams described the city, the neighborhood and the tree that the treasure is buried under it. This made the characters go immediately to the start point where they found the treasure as they knew the described places well. The real motivation behind the journey is to achieve a personal dream and he who takes action can do it by the end despite all of the difficulties he might go through. However, those who tend to show laziness and do nothing to achieve their dreams will remain prisoners of their own idleness and achieve nothing. That was a great opportunity for those characters to understand that realizing dreams can only be through hard work. The two characters' believed in their dream and their ability to achieve their goals even if they were apparently so remote. They believed that their dreams needed some hard work to achieve and to overcome the obstacles that stand between man and his dreams which eventually turned to be true.

### ***Second: The Place***

The journey was the basic motivator that the narration relied on for both Al-Tanukhi and Coelho. The narrators of the two stories highlighted the journey that was based on a dream to demonstrate how it helped in reshaping the characters. In both works, the solution was related to the place. It was a circular journey as it started and ended in the same place. Al-Tanukhie's protagonist set off in his rough and tough journey from Baghdad asking for help from someone to be able to go along in it. So similar it was for the Alchemist protagonist, who asked his father to help him before he set off in his journey from Spain to the pyramids and return back. The solution for both stories related to the place as they found their treasures under the tree where they set off into their journeys. They went into a faraway journey and returned to the same place where they started. The ultimate goal of the narration was to say that man can achieve his goals only by hard work. Although the solution was under their feet, they were not able to discover it until they went into a tough journey. Despite the fact that we are in front of two different types of narration, the two works agreed on having tree as a symbol of growth, bestowal, renewal and start of new life under which the two dreams were achieved. Dreams are not enough to change life conditions; they need hard work to get that change. With dreams only, man cannot achieve his legendary personality; he needs work, hope, and persistence to achieve his goals, ambitions and happiness. The places where both of them set off from were almost decaying and about to fall which showed how feeble the two characters were at the moment when they sought to achieve their dreams.

The narrator in Al-Tanukhi's story can be quoted saying, Arrived to my empty house where I left nothing to live with, I stayed for a while without any food except for some that was earned by my mother's woven cloth. I wished death to that life. So were the life conditions of the Alchemist protagonist "the sun was about to sit down when he arrived with his cattle to the yard of an old deserted church; its ceiling had fallen since a long time ago<sup>ix</sup>. This shows the similarity between the two places before the motivating dream for the journey and travelling. The two writers used this situation as a trigger that stimulates intelligence, maturity and ability to achieve their dreams. The place which was a source of weakness and decay turned to be the source of strength and survival. The dream was not achieved in the same place, the caller in Al-Tanukhi's story ordered the narrator to move to Egypt as there his dream would be realized. However, the dream for Paulo Coelho's protagonist called him to start a journey to the pyramids which only exist in Egypt. Both characters in the two stories traveled to the same place which is Egypt. It is well-known that the pyramids are linked to the ancient history of Egypt which involves lots of legends and tales of treasure hunt, which might be the real reason for choosing it as the place where the two writers pushed their characters to go to.

Another manifestation showed that the solution is linked to the place as Al-Tanukhi made his character walk through the streets that arouse the night guards suspicion ,to arrest me and find out that I am a stranger that made him investigate my situation when I told him that I am a feeble person, he didn't believe me and made me to the ground and started beating me...<sup>x</sup>, it was the same reason that made the men suspect the Alchemist's character when he was digging under the pyramids. Trying to get his treasure from there he was prevented by a group of men who also tried to rob him all what he had. trying to lift up some of the stones and wipe the sand away, he heard footsteps approaching. They got so close, but he wasn't able to see their eyes because they were coming in the moons direction... They forced him to continue digging, but when he found nothing they beat him severely till the sun rays started to appear. His clothes were torn and felt that death is so close.<sup>xi</sup> Protecting the place was the overt goal and lead to the narrative solution and concludes the story. The security guard and the men in the pyramids who dared to hope to take his possessions helped the two characters with the solution for all their problems, which was represented in getting back to the start point where their journey's started. Thus, place is the main spur in the narrative process and an important motivator in making the events go forward, shaping the characters, determining the ends, and giving narrative clues through the places the characters moved in.

### ***Third: Time***

The event sequence in the two works differs according to the different times of Al-Tanukhi and Coelho. However, by reviewing the narrative structure of the two works, we find that both of them aimed to have the main characters being caught in the night which has clear significance that is not disputed in these two works. It represents darkness, blackness, fear, weakness and invisibility. So, having the main character caught is tied to night time with all its darkness that the main character in Al-Tanukhi's story was not able to escape, and so is the situation for Coelho's character that was not able to recognize the men's faces as they were moving in the direction of the moon. The climaxes of the two stories took place in the midnight. Despite its symbolic significance we have already mentioned, night had in its folds the moment of hope and solution. At that time, the two characters realized that the real richness was in pursuing their dreams and discovered that getting back to the start point will achieve their goals. The two characters were treated as insane, as dreams happen to everybody and most of the people take them as false incidents. However, the two characters took their dreams seriously and pursued them even though they were treated as insane. The real difference occurs between those who pursue their dreams and those who keep prisoners of their dreams.

### ***Fourth: The Events***

Looking back at the sequence of events, we can notice the difference in the type of the two works as they were introduced in different narrative styles. However, they both went through clear plots that may not vary except for the narrative style related to each literary type. Despite the shortness of the story and its focus on the main events differs from the lengthy novel which allows the novelist to dig deeper in the psyche of the characters and express what goes in their heads. So, we will review the two works in relation to plot sequence and to what extent they are similar. The two works started with odd description for the places that the main characters were in and the very bad financial conditions they experienced. The dream came to be a motivator for the two characters' movement pursuing their dreams. The two main characters needed to an external aid to support them in achieving their dreams. In Al-Tanukhi's story, Judge Abu Omar was the helper, who provided the main character with a letter to the governor of Egypt to help him there, In the early morning, I went to Judge Abu Omar and begged him to help me for a favor that my father made and asked him to provide me with a letter to the governor of Egypt and he did.<sup>xii</sup> The external aid came in the form of the person who would payback a favor that he had received from the main character's father. For Coelho, the father was himself the helper as he gave his son some advice and some money to help him with his journey to achieve his goal. "The next day he gave his son three Spanish gold pieces..."<sup>xiii</sup> the helper here is the father as he gave his son all what he had to proceed in his journey. Through the journey, the two characters experienced hard times, so Al-Tanukhi's character ran out of money and he started considering begging as solution, I used all the money I had and got confused. I thought of begging and asking people for help.<sup>xiv</sup> However, Coelho's character had been victimized by a fraud who took his money and left him without any, "by the sunset, he finds himself a stranger, in a foreign country where he can't even understand the language the people talk with. He is no longer a shepherd, he has nothing, even the necessary money for his return journey... he opened his saddle bag to find anything to eat, there might be some piece of the sandwich that he ate on the ship, but he only found the letter..."<sup>xv</sup> Arriving at the place of the dream, Egypt or the pyramids, was so similar, and it was part of the plot sequence.

Night time was decisive in the two works, as it involved the meeting with the night guard in Al-Tanukhi's story and the men in Coelho's story and being beaten to admit that it was a dream that led both characters to travel to Egypt which all led to the resolution in the end. The same characters that tortured them, gave them the key to solve their problems. Every one of them gave the main character the moment of hope and break through that there is a treasure at their start points. The solution is related to the tree as the place of the treasure. It was buried under the sidra tree in Baghdad where the decaying house of the character is located. However, it was buried under the sycamore tree near the cathedral where the shepherd used to secure his sheep in. They were the two places where **the journeys had started. Bouncing to the start point for the two characters, looking under the tree and finding** their treasures were of the strong manifestations of similarity in the two works. Al-Tanukhi's character "cut down the" sidra" tree and dug beneath it to find a bag that had 30 thousand Dinars and took it."<sup>xvi</sup> However, Coelho got the character back to the sycamore tree where he started looking under it to find a chest full of Spanish gold pieces, gyms, gold masks decorated with red feathers and stone statues with diamonds and forgotten remnants of war."<sup>xvii</sup> The two works had so similar endings in the pursuit of dreams as every character sought to achieve his dream and they did. Although the two works belong to two different times and different literary genres, they have many similarities as they met in many occasions from the beginning of the narration till its end.

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