Exploring the Depths of Self-discovery: A Critical Analysis of Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello*

Syed Kaleem Ur Rahman[1], Inayat Ullah[2], Nawsherawan*[3], Sohaib Rahim[4]

Original Article

1. BS Student, Department of English, Government Degree College Batkhela, Malakand.
      Email: syedkaleemsk72@gmail.com

2. BS Student, Department of English, Government Degree College Batkhela, Malakand.
      Email: inayatkn61@gmail.com

3. BS Student, Department of English, Government Degree College Batkhela, Malakand.
      Email: nawsherawan14@gmail.com

4. BS Student, Department of English, Government Degree College Batkhela, Malakand.
      Email: rahimsohaib280@gmail.com

Abstract

This study critically examines Paulo Coelho's "The Witch of Portobello" through the lens of inherent potential, employing Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a theoretical framework to explore the protagonist Athena's journey of self-discovery. Utilizing a qualitative methodology based on a close reading of the novel, supported by a review of relevant literature, the analysis reveals how external pressures, particularly from a patriarchal society, suppress individual talents and potential. Despite these societal constraints, the research highlights that personal will, courage, and enthusiasm are pivotal in pursuing hidden potential. The findings suggest that recognizing and nurturing one's inherent potential can lead to significant personal growth and societal change. The study highlights the impact of societal misconceptions and the treatment of individuals on personal development journeys, recommending further investigation into societal influences on self-discovery. It advocates for educational and social interventions to support individuals in realizing their potential, emphasizing the role of self-discovery in literature as a reflection of both personal and collective human experiences, providing deep insights into the dynamics between society and individual identity formation.

Keywords: Ecstasy*, Self-discovery, Inherent potentials, Patriarchy.*

Introduction

The concept of the self, from a psychological perspective, is considered an agent, cognizant of its own identity and role as both subject and agent. When an individual articulates personal narratives surrounding achievements and identity, the notion of the self materializes within the cognitive processes of the brain. This self-awareness manifests not only in moments of self-promotion but also in the selective articulation of personal attributes, where the mind acts as an agent in choosing what aspects of oneself to disclose or conceal. Gender identity also plays a role in this self-representation, as individuals discuss themselves within the confines of their perceived gender roles, derived from cognitive interpretations.

Freudian theory posits the 'self' as akin to the ego, which the self does not recognize as part of its own entity. According to Freud, the usage of self-referential terms like 'myself' or 'himself' signals an egoistic dimension within the individual. For example, when a person claims, "I myself witnessed the event," it reveals not only the act of witnessing but also an egoistic element in the portrayal of the self.

This underscores the self as a construct deeply embedded in psychological processes, a synthesis of cognitive activities and egoistic expressions (Rycroft, 1968).

The term 'discovery' originates from 'discover,' denoting the act of revealing or uncovering something previously unknown or concealed. It entails the acquisition of new insights, knowledge, or awareness about a subject, fact, or truth. 'Discover' also implies recognizing the appeal or significance of an activity or subject for the first time. Additionally, 'discovery' can involve revealing someone's identity (Grof, 1988).

Self-discovery, thus, is the process of gaining insight and understanding about oneself, including one's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, strengths, weaknesses, and overall identity. It involves exploring and reflecting on one's own experiences, behaviours, and motivations to develop a deeper awareness of who one truly is and what drives them (Myers, 2010).

According to Grof (1988), the term 'Self-Discovery' denotes the realization of one's self through the acquisition of self-knowledge. It involves a process wherein individuals gradually recognize their potentialities and adapt to a changed world based on this newfound understanding. 'Self-discovery' occurs as a natural psychological progression when individuals become cognizant of their own identity. It encompasses personal reflection and action, enabling characters to reveal hidden aspects of themselves, including views, secrets, truths, failures, and facts. In fiction writing, 'self-discovery' serves as a crucial technique, involving a psychological journey where characters examine their lives, actions, accomplishments, and setbacks, drawing from self-awareness and past experiences. Ultimately, 'self-discovery' facilitates the attainment of self-knowledge, allowing individuals to gain insights into their personalities and overcome shortcomings to advance their careers.

The journey of self-discovery depicted in literature offers insights into the moral and economic structures prevalent across different epochs. It portrays the physical and psychological challenges faced by individuals in diverse societal settings throughout history. Inner exploration serves as a crucial means for personal growth, societal improvement, and the cultivation of resilience. Experiences in life contribute to the development of robust and resilient minds. The primary objective is to uncover the truths about one's life and its interconnectedness with the broader world, inspiring individuals to lead lives of integrity. Achievements in self-discovery include internal acceptance and transformation, wherein individuals undergo a profound inner rebirth. Transformation emerges as a central theme driving the process of self-exploration (Chen, 2016).

The Witch of Portobello is a story of the self-discovery of Athena. Being an adopted child, the protagonist is never made to feel so by the Khalil's. Athena the protagonist is an adopted child into a well-educated and well-mannered girl. The Khalil's, who had adapted have understood her independent nature and respect her choices She discovers herself because after she is rejected by her real mother and is kept in the orphanage. At a young age, she was also rejected by her husband, whom she loved too and by the father of the church. Whenever Athena intends to know about her real motherland, the patriarchal mindset of her contemporary society tries to kill her desires. The protagonist practices many art forms to explore her inherent potential; like dance in ecstasy and calligraphy to fill her "empty spaces". She even ventures to her biological roots to find answers, with the hopes of filling the "empty spaces" inside her. And then adopts the power of witch crafting in alterity to a divine side "hagia Sofia" and at last challenges the church administers, the place from where she had been rejected while the father refused to give her the communion of Christ (Alexander & Tyagi 2017).

Statement of the Problem

The central problem of this study is to explore how individuals uncover and express their inherent potential despite societal constraints, particularly within the context of Paulo Coelho's novel *The Witch of Portobello*. This exploration explores the thematic portrayal of self-discovery, as the protagonist Athena confronts and navigates through the impediments imposed by patriarchal societal structures. These external forces often stifle personal growth and self-expression, yet the novel suggests that individual resolve, courage, and introspection can catalyze the revelation and fulfilment of one's latent potential. The study seeks to critically analyze how Coelho articulates this journey of self-discovery and the dynamics of personal transformation amid social and cultural resistance, using a close reading methodology to extract insights from the text, supported by a theoretical framework grounded in psychological and literary theories of self-realization and identity formation.

Objective of the Study

To explore Athena's journey of self-discovery, examining her expedition fueled by willpower, courage, and unbridled enthusiasm

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it provides an examination of the concept of self from a psychological perspective, exploring the evolving nature of personal identity. By analyzing Athena's journey of self-discovery in Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello*, the research illuminates the relationship of factors that shape human identity, including spirituality, religion, and broader social influences. This analysis highlights the transformative potential of self-exploration, emphasizing the importance of embracing one's unique experiences and perspectives. The study not only enriches the reader's understanding of identity formation but also highlights the empowerment derived from self-awareness and authenticity in navigating life's challenges. Through this exploration, the research contributes to a deeper appreciation of literature's role in reflecting and shaping our understanding of the human condition.

Literature Review

One of the core aspects of self-discovery is discovering inner potential. Most of our lives have been trapped into doing only certain things, performing only within certain capacities and releasing only enough ability from within inside as the environment demands. This conformity to culture, however, had robbed the definition of potential. Although the potential is defined as what could be done, not defined as all that could be done that hasn't been done yet. This means once a thing has been done, it is no longer a potential; it is an ability. The continuous release of potential is one of the strongest sources of fulfilment for any life. Discovering inner potential, therefore, entails examining the little despised energies which are to see how can be channelled into doing great things. It also entails examining the energies which are misplaced (either underutilized or used for doing unproductive activities) and channelling them into highly productive and fulfilling activities (Dennis, 2004).

In her debut novel, "The Thousand Faces of Night," Githa Hariharan, a prominent Indian author, delves into the struggles faced by women in navigating societal expectations and norms. Through characters like Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, Hariharan intricately explores the complexities of Indian culture, drawing from mythology and religion to illustrate the deeply entrenched values and traditions of Hindu society. These women embark on personal journeys to discover their identities, only to be met with unexpected disappointments in their pursuit of idealized married life. Hariharan's narrative sheds light on the ongoing battle for women's rights and self-identity, offering insight into the often overlooked challenges faced by Indian women (Suganya, 2018).

A feminist analysis of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" delves into the protagonist Louise's internal conflict and quest for liberation. Through meticulous examination of Chopin's use of characterization, imagery, and symbolism, the study highlights Louise's brief sense of freedom upon learning of her husband's apparent demise, juxtaposed with the constraints of her loveless marriage and societal norms. The story's conclusion, where Louise tragically dies upon seeing her husband alive, underscores the theme of how societal structures can restrict women's autonomy. This feminist perspective aims to critique oppression and social imbalances portrayed in literary works, emphasizing their impact on individual freedom and happiness. The analysis also explores the internal struggle faced by Chopin's characters between social obligations and the desire for true freedom, revealing the consequences of oppressive social institutions on women's lives (Khan et al., 2023).

In "Brida," a novel by Paulo Coelho, the protagonist, Brida O'Fern, an Irish girl, seeks her destiny and explores the mysteries of the universe. Her journey of self-discovery leads her to encounter various spiritual mentors who assist her in uncovering her life's purpose. Through overcoming fears and embracing intuition, Brida forges her unique path towards destiny, learning to trust herself and the power of love. Coelho's narrative offers a message of hope, encouraging readers to pursue their dreams despite obstacles. Brida's quest parallels that of military personnel, emphasizing the importance of clarity in objectives and strategic planning. She assimilates wisdom from spiritual guides to equip herself with the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve her goals (Coelho, 2014).

"The Pilgrimage" by Paulo Coelho recounts the journey of Paulo to Santiago de Compostela, a renowned spiritual site in Spain. Throughout the pilgrimage, Paulo confronts internal struggles and external challenges, ultimately learning to trust his instincts and connect with his inner divinity. The novel underscores the significance of self-discovery, spiritual growth, and personal transformation in fulfilling one's destiny. Paulo's journey symbolizes the individual quest for life's purpose, exploring the roles of faith, intuition, and spiritual practices in guiding individuals towards their destinies. Coelho's narrative inspires readers to embark on their own journeys of self-discovery, confront fears with courage, and trust in the universal guidance towards fulfilling their destinies (Coelho, 2014).

The literature reviewed here offers profound insights into the multifaceted journey of self-discovery. It highlights the significance of uncovering inner potential as a fundamental aspect of personal growth and fulfilment. Dennis (2004) elucidates the concept of potential, emphasizing the continuous release of untapped energies as a source of fulfilment in life. Meanwhile, the works of Githa Hariharan, Kate Chopin, and Paulo Coelho exemplify diverse narratives that explore the complexities of self-discovery within societal contexts. Hariharan's portrayal of Indian women's struggles in "The Thousand Faces of Night" illuminates the ongoing battle for self-identity and autonomy. Likewise, Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" provides a poignant reflection on the constraints imposed by societal norms, particularly on women's freedom. Coelho's novels, "Brida" and "The Pilgrimage," offer inspirational narratives of individuals embarking on spiritual quests towards self-realization and destiny fulfilment. Collectively, these works underscore the importance of introspection, courage, and trust in one's journey of self-discovery, serving as guiding beacons for readers navigating their own paths towards fulfillment and purpose.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology, which typically follows an inverted paradigm format, progressing from general observations to specific insights. Qualitative research is a systematic, interpretive mode of inquiry that aims to understand the complexities, meanings, and contextual nuances of human behaviour, attitudes, and interactions. This approach utilizes open-ended data

collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations to gather rich, detailed information. Such methods enable researchers to delve deeply into the nuances and intricacies of the research topic (Willis, 2008). For this study, the primary data source was the original text of the selected novel, while secondary data was obtained from relevant articles and journals accessed through online databases. This study utilizes Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a theoretical framework to guide the exploration of the protagonist's journey. By employing a close reading technique, the research meticulously examines the text to uncover the challenges and sufferings faced by the protagonist, whose quest for self-discovery involves expressing her true potential amidst societal stigmas (Maslow, 2013). This methodological approach allows for a deeper understanding of the character's psychological motivations and the impact of social barriers on her path to self-actualization.

Data Analysis

Athena, our protagonist, embarks on a quest for inner peace and tranquillity, seeking solace beyond the superficial delights of the world. Unfazed by material allure, she grapples with existential questions, perpetually pondering: 'Who am I?' and 'What is my purpose?' In her relentless pursuit of answers, she finds solace and enrichment through immersion in various forms of art.

> "Whenever I dance, I see a light, and that light is now asking me to go further" (Coelho, 2006 p.74).

Athena's quest in Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello* (2006) illustrates a profound journey into the depths of her own potential as she seeks to transcend her current experiences and reach a destiny that beckons her from foreign shores. The symbol of light is recurrent in the text, representing her sought-after destiny and the enlightenment she yearns to achieve. This symbolism is vividly portrayed when Athena articulates her need for inner peace, stating, "I need this, and I need to calm my soul" (Coelho, 2006, p. 76). Her search for harmony reflects a broader human endeavour to find solace and strength in activities that fortify the spirit amidst life's trials.

However, Athena's spiritual journey is marred by societal and institutional rejections that mirror her internal struggles. Despite her devout participation in religious rituals—evident when she "closed her eyes and opened her mouth to receive the body of Christ" (Coelho, 2006, p. 44)—she faces exclusion based on rigid doctrinal decrees that marginalize the divorced, severing her from receiving communion. This exclusion starkly contrasts with her deep religious fervour and highlights the church's role in her journey of self-discovery. Rejected by the very institution she seeks solace in, Athena is forced to confront and redefine her identity outside the traditional frameworks of religious acceptance.

After Athena's death, the priest's reflections on her situation further underscore the complexities of her quest for self-discovery and acceptance. His account reveals the institutional and societal barriers that individuals often encounter in their pursuit of spiritual and personal fulfillment. Athena's story, thus, not only highlights her individual struggle but also serves as a critique of the societal and religious constraints that shape and sometimes hinder our journeys toward self-realization.

> "It was no longer the voice of a girl who sang her worship of the virgin marry, who talked about her plans, who was so moved when she … its heart full of loathing" (Coelho, 2006 p.45)

In the novel, the priest's narrative provides a stark depiction of Athena's spiritual and social alienation. After being denied communion, Athena is portrayed not merely as a disgraced individual but as a deeply humiliated and animalistic figure, reacting with the raw, instinctual ferocity of a wounded animal

seeking vengeance. This imagery intensifies the emotional impact of her rejection, illustrating her transformation from a participant in religious rites to an outcast labelled by her circumstances.

Following her rejection, Athena's profound encounter outside the church further amplifies her spiritual crisis. She imagines a poignant scene with Jesus, reflecting her confusion and desperation:

> "When she left the church Athena met Jesus weeping and confused, she would have thrown herself into his arms, asking him to explain why she was being excluded just because of a piece of paper …" (Coelho, 2006, p. 46-47).

This moment highlights her struggle to reconcile her deep faith with the institutional practices that exclude her, encapsulating her feelings of betrayal and abandonment by the very faith community she seeks to embrace. Athena's personal life mirrors this theme of rejection and search for identity. Her rejections by her biological mother, her husband due to his busy life, and finally, the church, compound her feelings of isolation. In response, she embarks on a journey to discover herself, seeking to fill the "empty spaces" within her soul. This journey leads her to learn a trance-inducing dance from her apartment owner, symbolizing her quest to reach a higher state of consciousness and connection, represented by a "hidden light" that everyone seeks but few can find.

Her narrative of love and loss further underscores her existential dilemma, as she reflects on her capacity for love despite the absence of reciprocity:

> "No one taught me how to love either, but I loved God, I loved my husband, I loved my son and my family. And yet still there is something missing" (Coelho, 2006, p. 55).

Athena's love, though profound and pure, fails to bridge the gaps left by those who drift away from her. This unrequited love propels her further into a journey of self-discovery, as she seeks a form of love and acceptance that remains elusive, yet central to her being.

In the novel, Athena's formative experiences of receiving insufficient love from her mother, husband, and society at large fundamentally shape her resolve to raise her son differently and lead her to lose faith in life's traditional structures. In her quest for self-discovery, Athena finds solace in dance, which she perceives as a medium to transcend the ordinary and access higher states of consciousness. She expresses this transformative power of dance, stating,

> "Although ecstasy is the ability to stand outside yourself, dance is a way of rising up into space, of discovering new dimensions" (Coelho, 2006, p.58).

For Athena, dance becomes a conduit for touching her inner self and tapping into a source of immense power and serenity. Her journey towards self-realization also leads her to the professional world. Athena's integration of dance into her daily work routine at a bank not only enriches her interactions with colleagues but also captivates the customers, significantly increasing the bank's clientele. Her unique approach catches the attention of her manager, who considers promoting her for her innovative contributions. However, Athena's response to her boss's praise, "I need to travel. I'd like to get out of London and discover new horizons" (Coelho, 2006, p.62), underscores her relentless pursuit of personal growth over career advancement. This decision marks a pivotal moment in her life, emphasizing her commitment to exploring beyond her current environment to answer the lingering questions of her past.

Her relocation to Dubai represents a continuation of her journey. In Dubai, her encounter with a client's uncle, a Bedouin calligrapher, opens up another avenue for self-discovery. Athena's eagerness to

learn the art of calligraphy is met with an immediate acceptance from the calligrapher, who introduces her to the philosophical depth of the practice:

> "The first lesson, and perhaps the most difficult, was: 'patience!' Writing wasn't just the expression of a thought but also a way of reflecting on the meaning of each word" (Coelho, 2006, p.76).

This calligraphy lesson becomes yet another facet of her journey, emphasizing the intricate relationship between patience, thought, and the profound exploration of self.

> "I taught her not only the calligraphy techniques. I also tried to pass on to her the philosophy of the calligraphers" (Coelho, 2006 p.78).

The Bedouin in the desert reveals about Athena's enthusiasm and passion while learning the calligraphy. The adaptation of art addicts the person towards its axis, but Athena's interests in every field are evidence of her inherent potential, especially the job at the bank, at first it becomes a source of her success and then she moves to Dubai. She starts her career as a real state dealer. She does not continue the initial art from which she starts her journey. After leaving her job in Dubai, she allocates herself to learning the art of calligraphy (Coelho, 2006).

The quest to discover one's true self is a formidable challenge, particularly within the constraints of a patriarchal society. In the novel, the protagonist, Athena, embodies this struggle as she confronts numerous obstacles on her path to self-discovery. Her journey is marked by profound suffering, poignantly expressed in her declaration,

> "When I die, bury me standing, because I've spent all my life on my knees" (Coelho, 2006, p.131).

This statement reflects the intense struggle faced by women in a society that often stifles their desires and potential.

Athena's narrative is not just a personal saga but also a broader critique of societal norms that restrict individual transformation. She endeavours to redefine her role in society and champion a new ideology that empowers those oppressed by prevailing social structures. Her pursuit involves embracing unconventional paths such as magic and witchcraft, which she uses as tools for self-empowerment and to challenge societal norms.

Moreover, Athena's journey is deeply intertwined with her efforts to educate and inspire other women about the dangers of losing their identities under male domination. Her mentor, Edda, advises, "Try to be different. That's all" (Coelho, 2006, p. 177), encapsulating the essence of Athena's mission to foster individuality among women. Athena's engagement with witchcraft is portrayed not merely as a quest for esoteric knowledge but as a symbolic revolt against the centuries-old suppression of women. Through this practice, she seeks to reclaim the lost identity of women and assert their rightful place in society.

As Athena evolves, she questions her existence and the values imposed upon her, prompting a transformative reflection that she hopes to instil in her followers. Her campaign to uncover the "female face of God" symbolizes a collective journey toward recognizing and embracing the divine feminine, challenging the traditional narratives that have long marginalized women's spiritual roles.

In essence, Athena's narrative in "The Witch of Portobello" is a powerful exploration of the struggle for self-discovery against the backdrop of societal expectations and gender roles. It is a story of personal liberation and a call to action for societal change, encouraging individuals, especially women, to seek their true selves beyond the confines of societal approval and traditional norms.

Conclusion

The novel *The Witch of Portobello* follows Athena, a young adopted woman, as she navigates a profound and turbulent journey of self-discovery. Abandoned by her biological mother, later by her husband, and ostracized by her church for being divorced, Athena's experiences with rejection catalyze her quest to unearth and harness her hidden potential. The rejection by her church marks a pivotal turn in her life, igniting her resolve to assert her identity within a society that has marginalized her. With each challenge, she seeks to fill the voids within herself, spurred on by the desire to reinvent her life and redefine her place in the world. This feeling of social exile motivates Athena to start afresh, exploring new avenues to realize her inner strengths and capabilities. As Athena grapples with her feelings of unrequited love, she finds solace and expression in dance, a medium that becomes her pathway to ecstasy and enlightenment. Through dance, she seeks answers to the fundamental questions of her existence, finding both a release from her emotional burdens and a realization of her spiritual and emotional depths. Her commitment to this art form does not go unnoticed, leading to significant changes in her professional life as well. Athena's innovative approach to integrating dance into her daily routine at a bank not only revitalizes her colleagues but also attracts a surge of clientele, boosting the bank's success. This leads to her promotion and subsequent transfer to Dubai, where she continues her journey of self-discovery.

In Dubai, she delves into the art of calligraphy, which she sees as another layer of her quest to decode her complex identity. The dance sessions become a conduit for Athena to perceive a mystical light, guiding her to delve deeper into her psyche and urging her to pursue her path beyond the familiar. Her return to Scotland is driven by a resolve to confront and change the oppressive conditions faced by women in patriarchal societies. In embracing witchcraft, Athena finds not only a personal empowerment but also a cultural and societal statement, challenging the norms and expectations that have long confined women. In Scotland, Athena intensifies her spiritual and societal endeavours, using her newfound skills in witchcraft and magic as tools of liberation and empowerment. She aims to demonstrate her worth and influence within her community, striving to alter the existing power dynamics and inspire other women to recognize and realize their potential.

Throughout her narrative, Athena also focuses on nurturing her son with the strength and unconditional love she felt was absent in her own upbringing. By providing him with the support and encouragement she lacked, she prepares him to face and transform the societal challenges ahead. Athena's journey from a marginalized individual to a spiritual leader who challenges and reshapes the ancient beliefs of her society encapsulates her transformation through self-discovery. It is a poignant testament to the power of inner strength and the relentless pursuit of self-awareness, set against the backdrop of societal change and personal empowerment."

References

Alexander, F. F., & Tyagi, S. G. (2017). A study of the protagonist's alterity is exhibited in Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello*. International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL).

Chen, L. M. (2016). The Journey from Self-Exploration to Self-Identity.

Coelho, P. (2007). *The Witch of Portobello* (1st ed.). Harper Collins.

Coelho, P. (2014). *Brida.* HarperCollins.

Coelho, P. (2014). *The Pilgrimage*. HarperCollins.

Dennis, D. (2004). Creative self-discovery: The road to inner knowledge and better choices (Master's thesis, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology).

Grof, S. (1988). *The adventure of self-discovery: Dimensions of consciousness and new perspectives in psychotherapy and inner exploration*. Suny Press.

Khan, I. U., Shah, S. M., & Khan, A. (2022). Awakening Into Selfhood: Feminine Oppression, Self-Discovery, And Illusive Freedom In "The Story of An Hour" By Kate Chopin. *Women (1997-2032), 14*.

Maslow, A. H. (2013). *Toward a psychology of being*. Simon and Schuster.

Myers, D. G. (2011). *Psychology in everyday life*. Macmillan.

Rycroft, C. (1968). *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. London: Nelson.

Suganya, M. (2018). Quest For Self Discovery In Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces Of Night. *BDhi*, 29.

Willis, J. W. (2008). *Qualitative research methods in education and educational technology*. IAP.