

## **A Biographical Study on The Life of Paulo Coelho in The Light of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory**

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Abstract:

Paulo Coelho, one of the most prominent contemporary writers in the world, is an extraordinary personality who has a strong drive to realize his true potential and achieve his true self. He delivers through his novels that there is an intrinsic potential inside everyone and everyone must develop to its fullest in order to lead a purposeful life. Abraham Maslow, the renowned twentieth century theorist and founder of the humanistic psychology too focuses on the optimistic facets of human experiences. His Hierarchy of Needs theory centers on individuals' personal meanings, understandings and subjective experiences attached with growing and learning. He postulated the idea that people are programmed to be self-actualized and they have the powerful need for reaching the balance between who they are and who they could be. The research paper explores Coelho's personal life using Maslow's Hierarchy of Need theory to understand the motivation behind his optimistic vision of his life and to analyse how Coelho moves upward from physiological to self-transcendence needs.

Key Words: Humanistic Psychology, motivation, Hierarchy of need theory, self-transcendence, etc.

The desire to evolve further is a natural tendency and it is intrinsic in human beings. Human drives and needs are myriad and very varied. Like giant waves of sea, one need of man gives rise to another and the process continues endlessly. Every human being moves through certain stages of growth, from birth to death. They also have the capacity to evolve

themselves, to recreate themselves in a new image. Abraham Maslow emphasizes that human beings traverse through and are shaped by certain fundamental experiences in their lives. Needs are one such experiences and he portrays needs as a fundamental motivator and as constitutive of the self. His Hierarchy of needs theory comprises six layers. Physiological needs are at the lowermost needs in the hierarchy and the hierarchy moves upward in a pyramidal shape to safety and security, belongingness and love, to esteem, to self-actualization and ultimately to self-transcendence. According to him, a person must first meet his basic physiological needs such as water, food, sleep, sex, etc., the need to feel secure, satisfy the need for connecting with people, the need for belonging and love and the need for self-esteem to finally get to the top to reach the need for self-actualization.

Maslow postulates the physiological needs as the deficiency needs because failure to satisfy such needs produce a deficit in an individual. Further he asserts that failure in satisfying the higher-order needs such as love, sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization does not lead to a crisis because they are considered to be less needed for survival. However, they do contribute considerably to psychological growth and wellbeing. According to him, the fulfilment of these higher-order needs leads to enhanced physical and mental health, happiness and longevity. He called the higher order needs as growth or being needs. Self-actualization is a need which pertains to personal growth that drives an individual to achieve his full potential. By undertaking a qualitative method called biographical analysis, Maslow examined 18 exemplary people whom he considered as self-actualized and formulated some common behaviours and traits of self-actualizers in his book *Motivation and Personality*.

Paulo Coelho, the world-famous Brazilian Writer, has a strong passion towards writing and reading from his childhood. He loved reading and writing but hated studying. He wanted to be a writer but he was discouraged by his parents. He was admitted in a strict Catholic Jesuit School where he developed a strong dislike to the obligatory nature of religious practices. He was a rebellious teenager. Due to his rebelliousness he was admitted in a mental asylum three times. For want of freedom, he indulged in drugs and rock n roll of hippie life. As a hippie, he traveled all over South America, North Africa, and Europe. He got involved in all kinds of drugs and hallucinogens, even the strongest and most dangerous. His lack interest in studies led him to venture into the world of the theatre. He became an actor and director and indulged in sexual experiences. He joined an Alternative Society an organization

that supported individual's rights and involved himself in the occult, witchcraft and black magic. With his friend Raul Seixas, he produced a number of songs and one of the biggest hits was called Sociedade Alternativa. The lyrics were considered as subversive and he was imprisoned by a paramilitary group. There he experienced a variety of torture and eventually escaped by telling them that he was mad and had thrice been admitted in a mental hospital.

At the age of 33, he married Christina Oiticia, a Brazilian artist after three unsuccessful marriages. Travelling became their common passion and with her he set out to travel around the world for six months. In Dachau concentration camp, Germany, he underwent a profound and life-changing spiritual experience that brought him back to the Catholic beliefs. Then they visited Amsterdam where Coelho met a man who later became his Master. He was called Jean or J, who was an active member of an ancient Catholic religious order called RAM. He advocated Coelho to walk the Santiago de Compostela which is situated in northwestern Spain. The epoch-making road journey inspired him to pen the book *The Pilgrimage*. This turned to be a milestone in his life. This novel later became a bestseller and transformed him from an ordinary man into an established writer. Then he quit his other jobs and became a devoted writer.

Reading Coelho's biography, one can get to know that Coelho had a normal and healthy childhood. He grew up in a security estate constructed by his father at Botafogo in Rio, until he became thirteen. One of Coelho's earliest memories was his father's firm grip on domestic finances with a view to building a large house with drawing rooms, a conservatory, verandahs and several bathrooms. His father declared that there would be no new clothes, no birthday parties, no presents, and no unnecessary trips in the car. Coelho recalls, "we had nothing, but we didn't lack for anything either" (Morais, 52). It is obvious from Coelho's statement that he did not encounter any hardships in fulfilling his basic needs such as physiological and safety needs in his childhood.

In Maslow's view, parental outbursts of rage or threats of punishment, speaking to a child harshly and physical punishments such as handling roughly, beating may result in panic and terror and make a child feel insecure and nervous. When Coelho's academic scores were very poor, his father was enraged and stopped giving pocket money and he punished him by finding him a job at a dredging company. Even though Coelho was badly paid and the money was not enough for his travel and cigarettes, he would rush home after morning classes, had

lunch and took bus to reach the company where he would spend the rest of the day with a slate in his hand, making a cross each time the machine picked up the rubbish from the sea bed and deposited it in a barrage. During adulthood, the deficiency of basic needs led him to psychological depression.

Coelho's desires to liberate himself from parental control could be explained by his psychological drive of needs such as need of freedom, being independent and need of self-identity. For want of freedom, he became a true hippie. In search of new experiences, he travelled all over North and South America. During this period, he involved himself in all kind of drugs. He wrote about hippie life in his diary as the humanity's final revolution. To fulfil his basic needs, he started taking coaching classes for the entrance exam to the theatre school. He earned enough money to live for the whole year. He did children's theatre as well. It was seasonal work, three months of work and then nine months free to travel. He wrote song lyrics for Raul Seixas and he became rich overnight. He recalls, "I went to the bank to see how much I had in my account and found a deposit of almost forty-thousand dollars. I didn't have enough money to go to the movies or eat out and next day I had forty-thousand dollars. It was madness!" (Arias, 47) He bought a flat at the age of twenty three and soon he became the owner of five apartments at the age of thirty.

Even though he was born in an upper middle class family, he struggled to fulfill his basic needs during his twenties. Similarly, he had a caring relationship with his parents and other family members such grandparents, uncles and aunts in his childhood. During his adulthood, his parents wanted to regulate Coelho's behaviour by giving strict punishments but that really did not help to maintain family bounds and caring and opened relationship with his son. He felt rejected by them. His love life too was also not successful. At eighteen, he faced his first failure in love. He fell in love with Marcia, a neighbour and a member of the literary club 'Rota 15'. The relationship did not last long as her parents disliked Coelho. The unfulfilled need of love led him to deep depression. During his twenties, Coelho fell in love with several women, had girlfriends but his marriage life was not successful. In 1971 Coelho married his first wife, Gisa. Their relationship came to an end when she could not accept his behaviour while they were in prison and tortured together. He married Cissa, in 1976. The marriage did not last long. After two unsuccessful marriage, he meets his life partner, Cristina. Her influence on Coelho was positive and supportive. She transformed Coelho's life

by her love. Eventually, his need for love and sense of belonging was fulfilled to a certain extent.

He faced many hardships in achieving his self-esteem needs. He felt inferior as he was not an attractive boy during his childhood. His poor academic scores and his bad behaviour enraged his father. He was punished and advised to follow some respectable professions such as an engineer or lawyer. But he did not listen to them. He listened to his own heart. He was considered as a black sheep of his family and was admitted in a mental asylum. The admittance in the asylum thwarted his self-esteem.

When he was well-known for his songs, making a lot of money, involving in magic and felt almost omnipotent, he was imprisoned for political reasons and tortured. The thwarting of self-esteem needs causes feelings of inferiority, of weakness and of helplessness. Coelho reminds how the imprisonment affected his self-esteem: "It was the worst experience of my life, because along with what happened inside, when I got out I was a leper. Everyone said, 'don't go near him, he's been in prison, there must have been a reason for it'" (Arias, 48) His relationship with Christina brought him back to Christianity. Another important person who influenced Coelho was known as Jean or J, his master of the order RAM. As advised by his master, he at the age of 36, ventured along the 700 inhospitable kilometres of the mystical route between St Jean-Pied-de-Port, in the south of France, and the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, in the northwest of Spain. The pilgrimage was a radical experience. The journey taught him simplicity, problem-solving ability and self-confidence etc.

At the end of journey, he thought that he had 300,000 US dollars in the bank and five apartments bringing him a regular income, he was in a stable relationship with Christina and he had just received the sword of a Master or Magus, but he was still unhappy because he was not yet an established writer. Finally, the time has come for him to give himself entirely to write a book about his pilgrimage. He saw a pigeon feather which is the sign he had asked for God. He published the book *The Pilgrimage* in 1987. It was the first successful book of Coelho. It was on the week's bestsellers list and the sales went on to exceed 12,000 copies. *The Alchemist* was published in the year 1988. The book was appreciated by readers from different backgrounds. It brought him popularity far and wide and established him as a writer of consummate skill. Maslow draws attention to the fact that the gratification of the self-

esteem need leads to mental state of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world.

According to Maslow, Self-actualization is one's desire to become everything one is capable of becoming to realize and use one's full potential, capacities and talents. Coelho was mainly driven by his desire to become a writer from his childhood, not just another writer, but a world famous writer. On his way, he came across several hardships, but with single-mindedness he overcame all hindrances and eventually achieved self-actualization. Being a self actualizer, he reiterates that God has assigned a particular role to all and it is one's duty to perform that role by following one's dreams. He calls it as Personal Legend and it is the prominent aspect that catalyses the process of self-actualization. The realization of one's personal legend enables one to follow one's dream and pursue one's path of self-discovery. Coelho reiterates throughout his novels that every individual in the world has a personal legend and through achieving it, the individual reaches the soul of the world.

Coelho displays the behaviours and the characteristics leading to self-actualization. Behaviours like risk taking attitude, experiencing life like child, listening to his own heart, being honest, taking responsibility and working hard to achieve his dream. He also has the qualities of self-actualized individuals such as perceiving reality better and tolerating uncertainty; accepting himself, others, and nature; spontaneity in thought and action; ability to look at life objectively; simplicity and being natural; problem solving ability; creativity, liking solitude and privacy; resisting to enculturation, but not purposely unconventional; concern for the welfare of humanity; experiencing mystical or peak experience; having faith in democratic attitudes and capability of deep appreciation of basic life experience, etc.

As proposed by Maslow, Coelho's physiological and safety are met. He moves upward to gratify his love and sense of belonging needs and self-esteem needs. When these needs are met to some extent, he makes every effort to fulfill his growth needs. Although his material needs met even beyond imagining, still feels emptiness in his life. His religious beliefs help him to satisfy the need for self-actualization which is considered as the highest human need. It helps him to develop morality and compassion, to transcend self-centeredness and separateness, and to develop a sense of the sacred.

The self of Coelho undergoes a qualitative change from his childhood to the seventies. To some extent, he has fulfilled all the six stages of the hierarchy of human needs. Being

metamotivated, he gives major importance to the growth needs which is reflected in his literary works. In his view, finding one's personal legend is the foremost step to take towards a life filled with joy, inner peace, love and fulfillment and the purpose of one's life is to evolve the self and to serve humanity in a specific way. As he has been living through the experiences such as self-actualization and self-transcendence.

Maslow, at his later age viewed the experience of self-transcendence as being one step above self-actualization as the self-transcendent individuals strive to perform service to the humanity. Coelho's creation of the Paulo Coelho Institute in Rio de Janeiro provides financial support to underprivileged children and the elderly people which displays his commitment to social development. As a transcendent individual, he feels connected to the world at large, and feels a greater commitment to make a difference in the society. As Maslow says, "Not only is it good to survive, but it is also good for the person to grow toward full humanness, toward actualization of his potentialities, toward greater happiness, serenity, peak experiences, toward transcendence." (Maslow,104)

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