



**A Comparative Analysis of *Alice in Corporateland* and *The Alchemist* :
Towards a Study of Corporate Fiction**



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Abstract :

*The novels *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho and *Alice in Corporateland* by Tulika Tripathi are situated thematically in the corporate culture in the sense that the protagonists in both the novels are aspiring to be successful in careers or terms of wealth. These novels present methods to help them succeed. The narrative does not simply tell the story of their quest but comprise of multiple explicit educational suggestions to motivate and guide them. The contents of the novels are akin to the contents in the popular self-help books found in the business books genre. However, compared to the text of the self-help books, whether in terms of learning principles of career success or of spirituality, they have made a difference in the narrative style. They have incorporated the technique of fictional narrative to put forth their*

principles. As 'Genres may be determined by literary technique, tone, content, or length (especially for fiction). They generally move from more abstract, encompassing classes, which are then further sub-divided into more concrete distinctions' (Wikipedia, Literary Genre), this paper is an attempt to compare the narrative styles of the two novels and analyze the common narrative structure that is peculiar to them to study whether they can be considered as representative of a subgenre within corporate fiction.

Keywords:

The Alchemist, Alice in Corporateland, Narrative Analysis, self -help books, corporate fiction, genre studies

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The Alchemist tells the story of a young shepherd boy, Santiago, who has a dream about finding treasure. His quest for that treasure leads him into a journey that helps him to learn the alchemy of life. He has this wish to travel the world and the treasure would provide him with the means for the same.

Santiago's story is an example similar to a 'rags to riches' story. He is a sincere shepherd who knows how to communicate with his sheep. However, when he is motivated to go to Egypt to find his treasure he sells his sheep and is robbed of his money. He works diligently in a crystal shop for almost a year. His innovative ideas such as putting up a display case for the crystals and serving tired travelers tea in crystal tea cups increases the ambience of the shop and helps to increase the sales of the shop to a very great extent. His income helps him to finally reach Egypt with a caravan where he meets people who give him a lot of knowledge about life and alchemy indirectly. The journey was just about the lessons that he was supposed to learn about being successful in his quest. The journey enabled him to become a spiritual person who learnt and experienced that there is a Soul of the World and that each person is a part of that Soul. The thefts, failures and coincidences that occur were all a part of his training so that he could master his emotions and understand the cooperation of the elements of the universe. It tested his will power and his persistent efforts were rewarded. The theme of the novel is learning the alchemy of life that brings about Soul-confidence rather than self-confidence, fearlessness and patience thus leading one towards destiny's reward.

Alice in Corporateland is the story of a young graduate who has just set out for her first job. She is guided in a dream sequence about the principles of success that she should bear in mind. With all the guidance that she receives about being successful it is very probable that she would achieve great success in her career. The guidance that she receives is more materialistic and rooted in corporate culture. However, she is also taught the nobler aspects or perspectives regarding these principles for corporate success. The theme of *Alice in Corporateland* is a guide to corporate success by being a noble human being. It teaches values rather than spirituality.

Considering the theories propounded by Greimas and Levi Strauss the story has two structures a surface narrative structure that is syntagmatic and a deep narrative structure that is 'paradigmatic'. The arrangement of the fictional and semiotic elements in the narrative have been identified according to their temporal and causal principles and the logical relations among the elements. By creating of a corpus of such narrative elements and their structure and comparing them an attempt has been made to identify a sub-genre of corporate fiction.

Narrative Analysis

The narrative structure of *The Alchemist* is like a *bildungsroman*. Although Santiago is not a rogue, he is a young boy who fights against mediocrity to believe in his dream. He pulls away from his parents' wishes to become a shepherd. He pushes away the thoughts of proposing to the merchant's daughter to be able to follow his dreams. He meets a wise old Gypsy woman and a strange old man who guide him and motivate towards his dreams. He is robbed of the money he

earns three times, to earn it back again in different ways. He meets businessmen such as the candy man, the baker and the crystal shop owner. These three are representative of three kinds of attitudes in business. The candy man represents someone who is very happy with his business and works because he enjoys it. The baker is someone who does his business like mundane duty. The Crystal shop owner is a businessman who had initially dreamt of great riches but later settled into his comfort zone and did not like change. However, he appreciated and cooperated with Santiago's ideas to increase the sales of his shop. However, he was afraid of the potential power of this change. Santiago meets the Englishman and the camel driver on the caravan. The Englishman represents the academic corporate who believes in rigorous studies to be able to understand alchemy. He is a person who tries to learn from books. The camel driver represents the labor service industry as he was disillusioned by his great loss in his life and now lived a resigned life of labor. The chieftains he meets on the oasis represent the political corporate segment that are engaged in the administration and wellbeing of their state. Each of them teach Santiago lessons of understanding life. However, his education is brought to completion by the Alchemist who helps him reach the point where Santiago understands that each individual can progress to the limits of becoming the Soul of the World and communicating in the Language of the World. Multiple characters teach Santiago but his greatest guide is the Alchemist. The instructions are not prescriptive as in the regular self-help books. Instead, Santiago learns through discussions with the other characters and is motivated by anecdotes providing stimulus by way of anecdotes and situations that test Santiago's mettle. For example, he is robbed of all his money and then gets a job at the Crystal shop. His innovative ideas lead to great income, almost double of what he initially had. The Englishman later told him that this was an example for him to understand that everything in this world has a soul and they collaborate together to fulfil your wish as we all belong to the Soul of the World.

The narration of the story in *Alice in Corporateland* is developed as a pastiche of the story of Alice in Wonderland. It is similar to the story of Santiago. Alice follows the path of the Alice in the fairytale, she follows a rabbit down an underground tunnel and comes to face a small door. She has to eat a cake to shrink in size so that she can go through the door. She comes across a parchment that has couplets as riddles that she has to solve so that she could return to her home. On the way she meets different fairy tale characters who guide and instruct her in principles and virtues that she needs to live by so that she could have a successful corporate life. The setting of the story is similar to that in Alice in Wonderland, such as the small door, the toadstool the towers and the lakes and a tea cup but the characters are replaced by popular traditional fairytale characters such as Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Rumpelstiltskin. Each character's story contains an anecdote from their lives that explain some principle for wholesome success. The events that occur when Alice meets each character generate a practical demonstration for Alice to practice the principles learnt. For instance, while Alice and Rabbit were flying holding on to Peter Pan, Rabbit slips and falls through the sky. Alice, in response, lets go of Peter Pan to fall along with Rabbit, takes hold of him, thinks happy thoughts that are the fuel that enables them to fly. This event occurred to test her leadership qualities and teaches her the importance of being responsible for her team mates or colleagues and helping them to rise up. This sense of responsibility stems from the values of not being selfish but by being considerate towards others. It comes in line with the corporate world as the reason she is able to fly is by thinking happy thoughts that are her dreams and ambitions that would save her from falling. Each chapter contains a riddle, a fairytale character, a noble value, a principle for corporate success and an event that test Alice's integrity. The narrative can also be seen as a young girl's *bildungsroman* as she learns

along a journey from different characters she meets and performs the tasks set out for her along the way.

Characterization

The protagonist Santiago, his first guide Melchizedek and his mentor The Alchemist are the main characters in the story. The dynamic character is only Santiago as he is the one who learns and progresses throughout the journey. Melchizedek is a supernatural persona. His name is the name of the Jewish priest who meets the prophet Abraham as mentioned in the Holy Bible. He is shown to have a gold breast plate with precious stones studded in it and he gives Santiago the two stones the Urim and the Thummim to help him make decisions initially. These are the two stones of divination that were allowed in the Judaic system. The character's role is similar to the priest Melchizedek who guided the prophet Abraham and asked him to give him a tenth of his assets. Prophet Abraham then amassed great wealth and on meeting Melchizedek again surrendered all the wealth to him. Melchizedek tells Santiago that he can take the form of anything he wants to be able to guide people who wish to live their Personal Destiny. The Alchemist is an extra-ordinary human. He is supposed to be more than 200 years old and lives alone in his tent in the desert. He has mastered the philosophy of alchemy and is able to change lead into gold. He teaches Santiago the alchemy of the soul, that everything has a soul and is a part of the Soul of the World and that everything evolves and thus the Soul of the World is continuously evolving. Santiago learns to master the Language of the Soul of the World because of which he is able to talk to the elements of sand, wind and sun and set up a huge sandstorm to save himself from a warring tribe. However, he learns that he has to face set-backs like getting robbed and beaten up as the Hand that writes it all is guiding him through the shortfalls towards the fulfilment of his dream. The other characters are not given any name. They are described by the businesses that they run such as 'the candy man', 'the baker', 'the Englishman' and the 'camel driver'. They are representative of different attitudes towards their businesses or their Personal Destiny. These attitudes are a contrast to what Santiago finally learns in culmination. Thus, only Santiago is a normal real life simulation of a young boy while others remain close to fictional elements.

The characters in *Alice in Corporateland* are fairy tale characters with a difference. The character Cinderella in the original story is a hardworking girl exploited by her cruel stepmother. She is able to go to a ball arranged by the prince of the land in order to search for a prospective wife with the help of her fairy godmother who uses her magic to transform Cinderella who is dressed in rags to an elegantly dressed lady with a chariot. In the story of *Alice in Corporateland* Cinderella modifies the story to fit into a corporate culture. The step mother represents the employers who load a lot of work on the newbies in their office. Conceding to grueling hardwork would not get the aspirant any closer to success. The fairy godmother represents mentors who are experts in the organization or the corporate sector who could guide the aspirant and provide her with the needed exposure and protection needed to progress. The magic mirror in the fairy tale of Snow white and the Seven Dwarfs is used by the evil step mother to answer questions about who is the most beautiful woman in the land. This concept is modified in the story of Alice in Corporate land where the mirror is asked for feedback. Alice is taught the importance of gaining objective feedback and that she should use feedback constructively to develop herself and gain good will. Each character provides an inter-textual frame of reference. The reader can compare the two stories of the character and glean the contrasting qualities in the two which provide the dos and don'ts for corporate success. The characters tell anecdotes that instruct Alice. They even set out tasks for her and present situations that Alice can learn from. The tea cup does not allow Alice to pass through

the gate and presents her with a question. Alice learns not to make hasty decisions and look for other options before answering.

Symbols

The symbols in *The Alchemist* are spiritual or religious. The abandoned church in Spain where Santiago sleeps with his sheep is representative of institutionalized religion in an abandoned state. However, the sycamore tree that grows through the sacristy is the symbol of life that is evergreen, and it grows through the roof. It is here that Santiago dreams of a treasure near the Pyramids of Egypt. The sycamore tree is itself a symbol in Christian lore where a short tax-collector named Zaccheaus climbed up the sycamore tree to be able to see Jesus. When Zaccheaus was noticed by Jesus he was given the privilege of the holy man's visit to his house and became his disciple. The symbol of the sycamore tree could be seen as working on the principle that Santiago initially left Spain to search for the wealth in gold but his aspirations led him on to a spiritual treasure. The Pyramids of Egypt are also representative of ancient wisdom. The journey of Santiago from the abandoned church to the Pyramids and then back to the abandoned church is symbolic of his non-spiritual life in quest for treasure, he finds the treasure of the ancient philosophy of alchemy. He does not find his treasure at the Pyramids but has to return to the abandoned church, as if he has to return to real down-to earth life and not remain in the spiritual realm as was the case of Melchizedek and the Alchemist. The Urim and Thummim are symbolic of aided decisions which are later replaced with spiritual maturity. The meditation progresses by the ability to read omens and then mastering the Language of the Soul and further becoming the Soul of the World.

The narrative of *Alice in Corporateland* is replete with symbols. The objects that appear in the original story of Alice in Wonderland take on very significant meanings. She comes across a very small door and has to eat a cake kept there to become very small in size to be able to go through the door. The small door and the shrinking in size is symbolic of being humble and beginning one's career with small goals instead of very grand unachievable ones. The eye drops that Rabbit uses are titled Patience that help him to focus. The magic mirror from the Snow White story symbolizes asking the correct questions for constructive feedback. The narrative of *Alice in Corporateland* uses multiple objects from fairytales to teach principles of corporate success.

Concepts Learned

Santiago learns that each one has a Personal Destiny. It is that which he desires the most because it is his mission in life. One should not forget it. He learnt that everything comes for a price, he has to promise to pay the gypsy woman one tenth of his treasures and Melchizedek, one tenth of his assets. He learns that when one desires something intently the whole universe conspires to help him achieve his desires. This happens because everything has a soul and is a part of the Soul of the World and when one learns the Language of the Soul of the World one becomes the Soul of the World. Santiago learns about Destiny and the one Hand that writes it all, but this can be changed by the intent one put into the present situation one faces. Thus, he learns how everything evolves to evolve the soul of the world and the true alchemy of life.

Alice in Corporateland provides tips that help to achieve greater ambitions. Alice is taught the ethics of the corporate culture. The concepts range from instructions that are as simple as the importance of a firm handshake and appropriate appearance that would impact how others perceive you to greater values such as compassion, consideration and sacrifice that would help in better team work and longer lasting meaningful progress. She is taught to be humble and start with

smaller tasks and projects that would open her up to greater opportunities, develop a network of mentors, be focused and patient with ambitions, remember the grander dreams so that she doesn't become mediocre, help others on their path to success and the like. Thus, the concepts taught in *Alice in Corporateland* inculcate important values of character and ethics but teach more about fulfilling one's ambitions.

Conclusion

The themes of the two stories are complementary to each other. Both the protagonists are young aspirants. Alice wants a successful career and Santiago is in search for his treasure in gold. The element of dream is used in both the narrative schemes, both the protagonists are led on with a dream. They are guided by multiple guides and mentors. The people they meet are not ordinary humans, they are either symbolic representation, fairytale caricatures or supernatural beings. The concepts learnt are ennobling values that are not limited to money worth of things. They lead to holistic understanding of success. Both the narrative have used symbols extensively. Both the aspiring characters, the receivers of guidance, Santiago and Alice, are made to get involved in practicing the principles that they have learnt within the narrative events creating reader interpellation and transport. There are a considerable number of similarities in the underlying structure of the narrative in both the novels *The Alchemist* and *Alice in Corporateland*.

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