



Research Article

Politics of Symbolising Female Characters in Paulo Coelho's *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*

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Abstract

Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho's works are generally known for inspiring readers and using literary symbols to narrate complex philosophical concepts. Out of the seventeen works of Coelho, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* describes the conflicts faced by two lovers who are brought together by fate after eleven years. Re-joined, they set out for an excursion together as the issues in their relationship emerge again. Though Coelho explicitly uses water as a literary symbol in the novel, this paper closely analyses how the female characters in the same novel are also symbolised, making them symbols of self-submission. It thereby probes the complexity of the connection between female characters and water as literary symbols within the same context.

Keywords: Fiction, novel, Paulo Coelho, symbols, female, water, self-submission.

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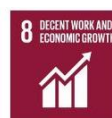
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Introduction

The usage of literary devices like simile, personification, alliteration, and metaphors, amongst others, engulfed literature throughout its history. Employing literary symbols was one such literary device that dominated literature in the 1980s. Nowadays, symbols are everywhere in literature, from titles of books or plays to words on pages. Writers use symbols to illustrate a point, create specific effects, and represent something outside the story. American philosopher Susanne Katherina Langer formally defined symbols as "signs which are not intermediaries for their objects but the vehicles for the conception of the same" (Langer, 1951, p. 61). Within the same definition, anything can be a sign as long as it can be interpreted as a sign for another American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce. In contrast, a sign is a combination of 'signifier' and 'signified' for Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Chandler, 2007, p. 34). Peirce also put forward the idea of symbols in different words, as he considers symbol as a mode (symbolic mode) in which "the signifier does not resemble the signified but is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional - so that the relationship must be agreed upon and learned" (Chandler, 2007, p. 36).

One of the authors whose works are known for their extensive use of symbolism is Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho de Souza, who uses symbols to describe journeys that are physical and mental at the same time. Such journeys are mostly seen in *The Pilgrimage*, *The Alchemist*, *Zahir*, *Aleph*, and *Hippie*, where the protagonists travel to different destinations, mostly searching for something valuable. However, symbolism forms a major part of most of his works, and the author resorts to multiple religions, cultures, traditions, mythologies, and folklore to derive inspiration to use the symbols and frame his philosophical thoughts. Coelho has used even human beings as literary symbols in his works, a prominent example being *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, where the female characters are symbolised along with other natural elements like water. In earlier times, the image of female characters incorporated contradictions – the symbolic with the human, sexual purity with motherhood, isolation, otherworldliness with a common identity among women, and passivity and activity (Eggers, 2021, p. 393). As a symbol is an object or an action that means something more than its 'literal meaning', the literary device consists of many layers of meaning that may not be discernible at first look or reading (Chandel, 2018, p. 31). The object or action used as a symbol usually represents many other and different concepts or qualities than those found or noted in merely the word's literal translation (2019, p. 31). Additionally, it encourages the readers' cognitive mind to think beyond what is said (John, 2019, p. 112).

The 1994 novella *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* is centered around two people brought together by fate eleven years after their juvenile love. Written in the diary notes of the protagonist Pilar, one can see her transforming into a strong and free person with time. However, her beloved companion becomes an attractive and charming otherworldly pioneer who finds religion a shelter from his internal contentions. Re-joined finally, they leave on a troublesome excursion as the long-standing issues in their relationship emerge again. As they head towards the river Piedra in the French Pyrenees, they investigate the eventual fate of their relationship and life's most significant inquiries. Coelho followed his usual style of symbolism in *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, and many female characters act symbolically in various instances throughout the fiction. Adding on, natural elements like water, rain, and rivers also act symbolically within the same novel, as this paper closely analyses how the female characters are represented as symbols throughout the

work. It thereby probes the complexity of the connection between representing female characters and water as literary symbols within the same context.

Review of Literature

As Coelho gave magical realism in the book a visionary dimension, encouraging the idea that every one of us is destined for a treasure, the existence of the idea of God goes hand in hand with the employment of magical realism and faith tactics in *The Alchemist*. The methods of magical realism provide the impression to the readers that they each have a hidden magical dream, and it is up to them to explore the world around them until they find the magic (Hart, 2010, p. 312). Similarly, he effectively shows the influence of faith, self-realisation, and intuition in all his novels. Like Santiago in *The Alchemist*, protagonist Veronika's faith and conviction in Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* lead her from the position of a pessimistic preceptor to an optimistic one (Vijay, 2015, p. 43).

Coelho found words in sacred or profane books, oriental legends, and occidental epics, concocting a mixture of gospels and medieval magic books (Arias, 2007, p. 187). Since Coelho's life background contributes to the making of his novels (Kharisma & Ryan, 2017, p. 46), his desire to travel, read books, and learn new things is expressed in them (Geetha & Thambi, 2018, p. 98). Some of the characters in Coelho's novels can be attributed to possessing the characteristics of Coelho's interpersonal relations. Such works reflect the society he belongs to and the struggles and obstacles Coelho faced (Geetha & Thambi, 2018, p. 101). When Coelho framed his works as symbolic narratives of his personal experiences, geographical places, unnamed characters, dreams, journeys, numbers, forests, mountains, deserts, animals, and water played highly symbolic roles in them (Raihan & Banerjee, 2021, p. 130). He enhances the profundity of his works with rich symbolism and uses symbols generously to convey ideas that add depth to his novels. Coelho's symbolism has various origins and forms, creating countless connections. Sometimes, his novels share the same or similar symbols (Raihan & Banerjee, 2021, p. 130).

Female Characters and their Symbolic Representations

The Protagonist and a River

The novel, narrated like a diary written by protagonist Pilar, first symbolises the river as something that takes in everything falling into it. Pilar herself sits near Piedra as she writes her diary. She says her hands are freezing, her legs are numb, and she wants to stop every minute (Coelho, 1996, p. 1). She also remembers her past and says:

There is a legend that everything that falls into the waters of this river – leaves, insects, the feathers of birds – is transformed into the rocks that make the riverbed. If only I could tear out my heart and hurl it into the current, then my pain and longing would be over, and I could finally forget (Coelho, 1996, p. 1).

Considering the above statement as a general one where the protagonist wants to dump or throw away all the problems she was facing till that time, the river acts as a natural element that can flow

from one point to another. Piedra attributed the capability of the river to flow as a symbolic opportunity for her to discard her feelings so that the river would take them away with it. However, one could also notice that the idea of a river has been attributed multiple symbolic connotations throughout the history of arts and literature.

The symbolism of river and running water is simultaneous of 'universal potentiality' and 'the fluidity of forms', fertility, death, and renewal (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 808).

The stream is that of life and death. It may be regarded as flowing down into the sea, as a current against which one swims; or as something to be crossed from one bank to another. Flowing into the sea is the gathering of the waters, the return to an undifferentiated state, the world of senses and the state of non-attachment (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 808).

By analogy, the alchemists compared "water" to the "fluid body" of a person and quicksilver in its initial conversion. Modern psychology interprets this "fluid body" as a representation of the unconscious: the person's non-formal, dynamic, motivated female side (Cirlot, 2001, p. 364). Swimming against the stream is returning to the divine source, the First Cause. Crossing the river is overcoming an obstacle separating two realms or conditions: the phenomenal world and the unconditioned state, the world of the senses and the state of non-attachment (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 808). The Zen patriarch Hui Neng taught that the far bank was "paramita," that is, the state which is beyond being and non-being, a state, furthermore, which is symbolised not simply by the far bank but by the smoothly flowing stream as well (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 809). In the symbolic sense of the term, to enter a river is for the soul to enter the body and 'river' takes on the meaning of 'body' (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 810).

The dry soul is drawn in by fire; the moist soul is enfolded in the body. The body leads a precarious existence; it seeps away like water, and each soul possesses an individual body, its temporary habitation, and its river (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 810).

Hence, applying such existing connotations about the symbolic characteristics of the river with Piedra's statement, her desire to discard her sufferings, feelings, and emotions by 'throwing' them into the river can be considered symbolic of submitting her sufferings to the universe or the 'flow' of the universe, so that they will be transformed into something better, or into lessons from which one can learn many things.

Moon, Water and Fountain

As the story progresses through the memories of Pilar, she meets her childhood love. The meeting occurs immediately after a lecture delivered by her love, and Pilar gets left out to wait for people to finish talking to him. Awaiting, she is led to a fountain by Brida, another participant in the same lecture. She shows Pilar the moon's beauty and reminds her that the moon symbolises a human female, as a human female's body repeats the moon's rhythm. She later takes Pilar to a fountain, saying water manifests God's female side. Pilar also gets hypnotised by the music played by Brida on her flute and the sound of the water and realises that the moon is indeed a reflection of her femineity.

In his *Dictionary of Symbols*, J E Cirlot (2001) points out that from the earliest times, humans possessed knowledge of the connection between the lunar cycle and the physiological cycle of

human females, as well as the tie between the moon and the tides (p.214). He continues by saying that as patriarchy replaced matriarchy, the moon and sun began associating with different genders (p. 215). The distribution of the waters and the rains indicate the moon's moderating role. As a result, it first appeared as the intermediary between Earth and Heaven. The moon's activity not only measures and dictates terrestrial phases but also unites them by affecting water and rain, fecundity in humans and animals, and vegetation fertility (Cirlot, 2001, p. 215). Like J E Cirlot, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (2008) defines the moon as a symbol of dependence, periodical change, and renewal. One of the two primary characteristics of the moon is that it has no light and reflects the light from the sun. Second, the moon changes its shape through its regular phases. On the latter count, it symbolises change and growth (p. 669).

Coelho connected the existing idea of interrelation between the moon and the physiological cycle of the human female body with the thought processes of Pilar, who felt the same connection while looking at the moon. Pilar realised that the moon was indeed a reflection of femineity when she listened to the sound of the water flowing from the fountain. Considering the existing symbolic connotation of a fountain in various religions, cultures, traditions, mythologies, and folklore, which is synonymous with that of spring, fountains and springs are held to be holy because they are the source of fresh or pure water (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 910). They are channels of the primary manifestation of basic cosmic matter on the level of human reality, without which fecundation and growth of all living things could not be assured (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 911). Like rain, the freshwater they diffuse is divine blood and heavenly seed. Springs are also symbols of motherhood, and for this reason, they were often protected by taboos. The Maya-Quiche of Central America are still forbidden to fish in springs or lop the trees that overshadow them. Spring water is lustral water, 'part and parcel of purity' (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 911). The spring was variously termed the "Fountain of Life, the "Fountain of Immorality," or of "Youth," or the "Fountain of Knowledge" (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 911).

When Brida told Pilar that the moon symbolises women just because a human female's body repeats the moon's rhythm, she connected a human female's menstrual periods to the visibility cycle of the moon from Earth. Moreover, the moon is a celestial body intermediary between the sun and the earth. It reflects what belongs to the sun on the surface of the earth. Throughout the novel, Pilar symbolises the moon not only because her body follows the moon's rhythm but also because it stands as an intermediary between her boyfriend and God, considering the existing symbolic connotations of the moon. Similarly, even though the fountain which Brida showed Pilar is relevant in the novel only in terms of the sound of the water it produced, the symbolic connotation of the fountain, in turn, connects the idea of motherhood and divine interventions with a human female body. It also acts as the starting point from which Coelho attributed water to human females. For citations inside the paragraph having only one sentence or phrase or clause, follow the same style. Page no can be added. For instance: The presidential struggle for a society free of racial discrimination was still in its infancy, but it allowed Truman to lay the foundations for a "second Reconstruction" (Goldzwig, 2005, p. 104).

Virgin Mary

Pilar goes out with her boyfriend to Saint-Savin as per his request. While discussing the concept of love sitting outside their hotel room, her friend talks to Pilar about the Virgin Mary, the mother

of Jesus. He says that 'The Virgin' was just another 'normal' woman, as the *Bible* states Jesus had two brothers. However, she is called a virgin not in sexual terms but in terms of the idea that she initiated a new generation of grace. There began a new era because Mary showed courage in accepting her destiny. She made room for God to descend to earth and was transformed into the "Great Mother." Thus, for Pilar's boyfriend, Mary symbolises the earth, fertilised by heaven. Since Mary was fertilised by heaven, which in turn is symbolic of God, she became the feminine face of God, making herself a Goddess (Coelho, 1996, p. 66). Pilar's friend also adds that the symbol of Mary is water, and The Goddess uses water to manifest herself (Coelho, 1996, p. 67). Thus, water symbolises Mary, the earth, and the female side of God. Though Pilar's friend is unsure about the reason, he says it may be because Mary is the source of life, humans are generated in water, and they live in it for nine months (Coelho, 1996, p. 68). Water thus also represents the power of women, a force that no man can possess, no matter how enlightened or perfect he may be (Coelho, 1996, p. 68).

Further in the novel, Pilar and her friend see a grotto of Mary. Although the grotto looked like Mary was holding baby Jesus, Pilar was surprised to notice that it was quite the opposite (Coelho, 1996, p. 88). The grotto depicted baby Jesus holding Mary upwards toward the sky. The grotto implies that although Mary shows the feminine side of God, it is the male side guiding her from above. Further, Pilar recalls how Mary stands as a symbol of acceptance of God's will. Through the character Pilar, Coelho recalled how Mary could have said "no" when Archangel Gabriel informed her about the birth of Jesus. Mary said "yes" when she had to give birth to her child amidst animals and when she found his son arguing with priests at the temple. She said "yes" to God even when her son was lost for three days, and when he said his mother and brothers are the ones who follow what he says. Mary said "yes" when she stood near the cross where her son gave up his life (Coelho, 1996, p. 97). Pilar recalls that in all those instances, Mary, the feminine side of God, was saying "yes" to the masculine side of God, manifested as Jesus Christ.

When Coelho writes that Mary symbolises the earth, she allows herself to get fertilised by heaven. Since the earth usually gets fertilised by rain, Coelho uses rain as a symbol that stands as a tool of heaven to fertilise the earth. Coelho also details the submissive behaviour of Mary, who said "yes" to all the hardships she had to face in her life. When Pilar prays to Mary under heavy rain, she is never disturbed by the water. She submits herself to the natural force, and her submission helps her connect with Mary.

Bernadette and Her Vision

Coelho detailed a real-life incident in the novel, associating the same with the symbol of water. Talking about the incident, a little girl named Bernadette had a vision in which a woman in a white dress appeared before her and asked her to drink filthy water (Coelho, 1996, p. 70). As per certain tales, Bernadette Soubirous, also known as St Bernadette of Lourdes, was the person who claimed she had visions in which a lady appeared before her. The lady was later considered Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. However, the lady introduced herself as "The Immaculate Conception" to Bernadette, and there is no scientific proof or evidence of Bernadette's visions. The foul water was coming from a hole Bernadette dug upon the order of the lady who had appeared before her. "The water was so dirty that although Bernadette cupped it in her hands, she threw it away three times, afraid to bring it to her mouth. Finally, she did, despite her repugnance" (Coelho, 1996, p.

71). However, the same filthy water later cured many diseases, including a man's blindness and a child's high fever (Coelho, 1996, p. 71).

Since Bernadette was asked to drink filthy water during the Immaculate Conception, the filthy water and Bernadette's willingness to drink it symbolised Bernadette's submission of herself to the Immaculate Conception, which paved the way for miracles that happened at the same spot afterwards. Despite the novel having rain and water as symbols, Mary, Pilar, and Bernadette become symbolic of self-submissions, helping themselves witness miracles.

Rain and Waterfall

The symbol of water can be seen again in the novel through different forms, such as rain, waterfall, and river. Mixing reality, fiction, and myth, Coelho has incorporated how people pray at a church in Lourdes, France. Pilar joined her friend in a group prayer with people from different nations at Lourdes. The prayer occurred amidst heavy rain, but none of the devotees, including Pilar, was bothered by the same. The rain fell harder on them, but none cared. They looked like a human tent, and their position concentrated their energies and heat (Coelho, 1996, p. 118).

After their prayers, Pilar and her friend arrived at a waterfall. They descended through a hole at the side of the falls. They later reached a lake when her boyfriend revealed that he had asked the Virgin Mary to take away his unique gifts, breaking Pilar's heart. Pilar enjoyed being a part of her friend's gift, accompanying him throughout his missions of curing people and preaching about God. Unable to believe what her friend asked the Virgin Mary, she wanders off in shock to get saved by a stranger and ends up in the protection of a convent. She settles there and starts going to river Piedra with a pen and paper, pouring her heart out and writing the novel *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*. Pilar later gets reunited with her friend who came searching for her, setting out a new beginning with her boyfriend yielding to her request to continue his spiritual journey while standing near the banks of river Piedra. Pilar's boyfriend was confused between choosing a love life with Pilar or following the divine path through the priesthood. Ultimately, he decides to live with Pilar, continuing his pursuit of the divine gift of healing he was bestowed with. Pilar then becomes a reflection of love, which equals God's divine energy.

Rain is regarded universally as the symbol of the celestial influences that the Earth receives (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 782). It is self-evidently a fecundating agent of the soil, which gains its fertility from rain, and countless agrarian rites were devised in dance form, in offerings to the Sun, in Cambodian "sand-mountains" or by using the smithy to summon a storm to send down rain (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 782). Rain symbolism is considered close to dew symbolism, and it could be observed that in China, they are sometimes opposed to one another since the rain is yin and the dew yang (Tseu and Vial, 1962). Nevertheless, both originate on the Moon. The fact that they work together is a sign of world harmony (Tseu and Vial, 1962). The Peruvian Inca believed rain was cast down from Heaven by the thunder god, Illapa, who drew the water from the Milky Way, the great celestial river (Lehmann-Nitsche, 1928). In India, a fertile woman is called "the rain," the spring of all prosperity (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 783).

Similarly, in essential pairings, the waterfall contrasts with the rock, mountain, water, and "yin and yang." The water's downward movement alternates with the mountain's upward movement, and the waterfall's dynamism with the rock's static properties (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 1089). The

downward movement of the waterfall carries the same meaning as the downward direction of the heavenly activity, deriving from the still center, the immutable, and displaying its infinite potentiality (Burckhardt, 2004). Waterfalls are also unharnessed elemental motion, the force fields one needs to master and control for one's spiritual benefit, something akin to the concerns of Tantrism (Govinda, 1996, p. 321). In other cultural areas, streams and rivers carry a similar meaning (Chevalier et al., 2008, p. 1089).

Thus, the symbolism of water, as expressed through various forms like rain, waterfalls, and rivers, intricately weaves through Coelho's narrative. Pilar's experience at Lourdes during a group prayer in heavy rain is a vivid illustration. The devotees, resembling a human tent amidst the downpour, demonstrate a profound connection with the celestial influences of rain, reflecting a universal symbol of Earth's fertility. Pilar's subsequent journey, entwined with a waterfall and a lake, unfolds a poignant story of spiritual conflict and resolution. Her boyfriend's plea to the Virgin Mary, followed by a choice between love and the divine path, culminates in a decision to continue his spiritual journey alongside Pilar, transforming her into a reflection of love as a conduit for God's divine energy. Pilar thereby represents both rain and waterfall indirectly, becoming symbolic of rain and waterfall, as she became not only the source of celestial influences and blessings her boyfriend received but also a mark of a heavenly activity that made her boyfriend stick to his spiritual journey.

River Piedra Again

The novel begins and ends with the mention of the river Piedra. In the beginning, Coelho writes that a river intakes everything that falls into it but keeps moving. Pilar understands that her boyfriend decided to leave the path of spirituality out of his love for her. The decision shocks her, as she realises her love was not only for her boyfriend but also for his search for the divine. Pilar loved her boyfriend not only because he helped her fill her heart with love but also because he restored her lost faith in God and the divine. Pilar felt something would miss her but did not know whether that would be love, faith or both. She realised the same standing before a waterfall, witnessing a waterfall. Towards the end, she sits on the banks of the Piedra River, collecting and jotting down the memories of all the beautiful moments she had experienced in the past few days. Pilar thereby appears like the river, which carries everything with it. All the good moments of love and faith she enjoyed became like rotten leaves falling into a river. She symbolically became a river, carrying rotten leaves, but determined to move forward.

Water in Biblical Context

Looking at all the existing symbolic connotations of different water bodies in multiple religions, religious texts, mythologies, and traditions, one could notice that there are further connotations for the same set of symbols that connect every one of them. For example, in the case of *The Bible*, Jehovah (God) was compared with Spring rains by Hosea (6:3), with the dew which makes the flower grow (14:6) and fresh water running from the mountains and thirst-quenching streams. The righteous man is like a tree planted beside running water (Numbers 24:6), and the soul searches for its God as 'the heart pants after the water brooks' (Psalm 42: 1). However, the symbolism of water acquires prominence when there is another mysterious water. It derives from wisdom, which presided when the waters were created and took shape (Job 28: 25-6; Proverbs 3:20; 8:22, 24, 28-29; Ecclesiasticus 1: 2-4). That water dwells in the heart of the wise man and is like a well or spring

(Proverbs 20:5; Ecclesiasticus 21:13). Its words are like a flowing brook (Proverbs 18:4). The inner parts of the fool are like a broken vessel and he will hold no knowledge as long as he lives (Ecclesiasticus 21:14). Water, which was above all a symbol of life in the Old Testament, has become a symbol of the Spirit in the new. Jesus Christ had revealed himself to the Woman of Samaria as Lord of the living waters, the well from which "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink" (John 7:37). Wisdom and spirit often coincide, as it is widely believed that true wisdom lies in the spirit of a person.

Since Coelho's *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* is based on the context of the Bible and biblical beliefs, the symbolic prominence and connotations water possesses in the exact religious text align with how Coelho has used those elements as literary symbols in his work. It adds up to the symbolic meanings discussed above, paving the way for further understanding of the use of water symbols and their connections with the female characters in the novel.

Conclusion

While Coelho tried to use water and its various forms as symbols in his novel, the author connected the female characters to different water bodies. Though the story revolves around Pilar, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary's devotee, Bernadette, the usage of water as a symbol of submission stands in line with how those characters are addressed. It is also the case with the mention of Earth as a symbol by the author, who says that the Earth submitted itself to get fertilised by Heaven. Connecting the female characters mentioned above to rain, rivers, waterfalls, filthy water, and earth, Coelho indirectly attributes the idea of self-submission to all of them. Such connotations limit the understanding of the roles of those characters in the novel, as they are being attributed only to the idea of self-submission, offering a nuanced exploration of female characters within a spiritual and emotional context.

In Coelho's novel, a deliberate exploration of water and its manifestations as symbols is evident, particularly in the profound connection between female characters and various water bodies. While the central narrative revolves around figures such as Pilar, Mary (the mother of Jesus), and Bernadette (Mary's devotee), the symbolic utilisation of water aligns seamlessly with the thematic thread of submission that permeates these characters' portrayal. The author's portrayal of Earth as a symbol further emphasises the theme, elucidating how Earth willingly surrenders itself to be fertilised by Heaven. By intricately linking the female characters - Pilar, Mary, and Bernadette - to elements like rain, rivers, waterfalls, impure water, and Earth, Coelho subtly attributes the concept of self-submission to each of them. While such connotations may seemingly confine the understanding of these characters to the singular idea of self-submission, they concurrently offer a nuanced exploration of the roles these women play within the novel's spiritual and emotional landscape, adding complexity to their characterisation.

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