

# THE ALCHEMIST

THE TITLE OF AUTHOR PAULO COELHO'S MOST FAMOUS BOOK SUMS UP HIS ATTITUDE TO LIFE, GOD, THE GITA AND BOLLYWOOD

[ AN HT BRUNCH EXCLUSIVE! ]

By Priya Bala

In the introduction to *Hippie*, his latest work, Paulo Coelho writes that everything that follows truly happened to him. The protagonist is called Paulo and he embarks on a journey from Amsterdam to Nepal on the ramshackle Magic Bus that traversed the route in the era of hippies, flower power and free love. He does not make it to the subcontinent, deciding to stay back in Istanbul and explore the mystic traditions of the place. Paulo Coelho may not have been to India yet, but he finds constant inspiration in Indian literature and legends.

**“THE MOMENT I READ THE BHAGVAD GITA, I FELL IN LOVE WITH IT. IT’S MY BOOK FOR ALL TIMES... IT TEACHES YOU TO ACCEPT YOUR DESTINY”**

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The following lines from the *Gitanjali* preface *Hippie*:

*“I thought that my voyage had come to its end at the last limit of my power, – that the path before me was closed, that provisions were exhausted,*

*and the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.*

*But I find that thy will knows no end in me. And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders.”*

Rabindranath Tagore, Coelho says, has been a major influence, not only on him but on many of his peers. “Poetry is another way of seeing the world,” he says. “These







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## THE AUTHOR WITH THE SECRET TOUCH

**Paulo Coelho,** 71, was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Before making writing his full-time profession, he directed plays and worked as an actor, a lyricist as well as a journalist. However, a year after his pilgrimage to saint James of Compostela (1986), Paulo published *The Alchemist* that went on to become a bestseller, though initially the sales were so slow that his first publisher contemplated dropping the novel! Coelho is very active on Twitter and Facebook and puts up regular blog posts. Few people may know that his political activism has landed him in prison three times!





**YOUNG AND CAREFREE**  
A photograph of Paulo Coelho from one of his many travels in the 1970s

days people don't pay enough attention to poetry. By quoting Tagore at the beginning of the book, I wanted to bring back attention to his work."

Coelho had at first wanted to title this book 'And where the old tracks are lost', from the above poem. "But then I thought it may not translate accurately in all languages and settled for *Hippie*," says the author whose books have been translated into 80 languages.

### SONG AND DANCE

Besides Tagore, whom he counts among the major influences on his writing and life, alongside Kabir, Rumi and Hafez, Coelho also places high value on the Bhagvad Gita and its teachings. "The moment I read it, I fell in love with

**"I MADE A MISTAKE AND SOLD THE RIGHTS TO THE ALCHEMIST. IF IT'S MADE INTO A FILM, I'LL HAVE NO INVOLVEMENT"**

the book. It continues to be my book for all times. When I first discovered it, I wrote the song '*Gita*'. It was sung by Raul Seixas and you can listen to it on YouTube," he says.

The lessons of the Gita have profound significance for Coelho. "Standing at the edge of the

**"I THINK OF MY NAME IS KHAN AS A MASTERPIECE. I WAS SO OVERWHELMED, I HAD TO CALL SHAH RUKH KHAN... THE FILM DESERVED AN OSCAR!"**

mystery, Arjuna asks Krishna 'Who are you?' Krishna will not be straightforward and chooses to tease Arjuna. He says 'I am the blindness of those who can see, I am the eyes of those who cannot see'. The Gita teaches you to understand the mystery, accept your destiny and when there is a battle to face, to go forth and fulfil your task."

Another aspect of India the rest of the world should appreciate is Bollywood films, says Coelho, who watches them regularly. "I am surprised they don't find more space outside India. I've seen *My Name is Khan* (2010) and consider it a masterpiece. It was brilliant. I was so overwhelmed by Shah Rukh Khan's role and the way he plays it – pure magic – I got in touch with him. The film deserved an Oscar. Another film I enjoyed was *The Lunchbox* (2013), which also pays tribute to the *dabbawalas* of Mumbai. Outside India, Bollywood movies are as inadequately understood and appreciated as the Gita is," he says.

### LEARNING AND TEACHING

The ardent Bollywood fan doesn't, however, see any of his books becoming movies. "A book is a book and a movie is a movie. Every time there has been an attempt to make one into the other, it has been a complete disaster. When you write, you create characters, landscapes, how people speak and how they are. A film cannot do justice to that. I have forbidden the selling of the rights of my books to movies. This is after I made a mistake and sold the rights to *The Alchemist* several years ago. If it is ever made into a film, I will have no involvement with it. I will buy a ticket and see the movie, and I'm certain I won't like it. And I will express my opinion freely. Those aspiring to make the movie haven't managed to convince me. I don't even open the envelopes in which the screenplays arrive. *The Alchemist* is not a movie, neither is *Hippie*."

This is understandable, coming from an author who counts his book sales in millions. Paulo Coelho is not just read, he's quoted, trusted, followed. But he maintains he is no spiritual guide. "A guru teaches, I don't. I believe life is a mystery and everything comes from an unknown place. We can merely be good instruments in this large scheme of things. I'm simply someone trying to be in contact with the universe. What resonates with my readers, I think, is that they believe I have a lot of experience. My books become journey companions to them."

He is no medicine man with a bag of remedies, he explains. "I think the problem is that people are trying to explain what's good and bad. Frankly, I'm getting a bit tired of these explanations. Every time I have an answer, the question has changed. So instead of wasting my time on explanations, I've decided to simply enjoy the magic of every single day. Whether in a forest, in the city or in your house, you can feel this connection that may only last a few fleeting moments and in that time you become aware that God exists. You realise you are nothing but an instrument of God and you must respect this reality," he says, speaking like a passage from one of his books.

### QUEST FOR GOD

His faith in a higher power is unshakeable, but he is increasingly disillusioned with organised religion. "I have begun to question my religion," Coelho says. "Religion, in general, is complex. Look around. All the conflicts we see in the world are provoked by fanatics who try not to doubt anything. I'm a man with doubts about life. I try to think about contradictions. Religious people don't have doubts. They have to prove to themselves that they have faith. You don't have to prove your faith. You don't have to see the world through the eyes of a priest and you don't have to be brainwashed. As a

Photo courtesy, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE



**“THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF WRITERS: MARCEL PROUST LOOKED INWARD. HEMINGWAY WROTE ABOUT THE WORLD AS HE EXPERIENCED IT. I AM THE LATTER TYPE!”**



Photo: GETTY IMAGES

Catholic I realised that there have been too many mistakes made over the centuries and there's a clash within the church. So I told myself I'd forget about the church and go back to spirituality."

His spiritual quest forms one of the key moments in *Hippie* and he looks back at the time with joy and wonderment. Today, it would seem unthinkable that anyone would attempt to travel from Amsterdam to Nepal in a bus without reclining seats. "In those days, it was possible to travel through Iraq and Afghanistan, all for under 100 dollars. What good times they were, oh my god!" he says, wistfully.

### WAITING FOR A SIGN

It is his personal experiences, his journeys that become his

books. Coelho who writes at great speed – *The Alchemist* was written in two weeks and *Hippie* in a month – says that writing is about putting out what is within you. "*The Alchemist* was a metaphor for my own experiences. In *Hippie* I was trying to remember – incidents like the torture at the hands of the military in Brazil. Right after I wrote the *Gita* song, I was arrested. When I came out, I saw the song was No. 1 on the charts and everybody was singing it. I emerged from prison, unable to truly enjoy that success, torn between being a person who was totally hurt and being terribly scared."

That conflict finds expression in *Hippie*. "You cannot write something out of nothing," says Coelho. "There are two types of writers. There was Marcel Proust

who rarely left his room and his works, such as *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, were inward looking. Then there is Hemingway, who wrote about the world as he experienced it. I am the latter type of writer."

As a writer, Coelho is unique, on account of his belief in angels, for instance. "Yes, they exist," he says with conviction. "Not with wings, not like we picture them, but as a very real phenomenon. And there are omens also. It took me a long time to understand this and to believe that I could be guided by these signs and omens. My best decisions have been based on omens and signs. If life was whispering in my ear and I didn't obey the whisper it always ended up being the wrong decision."

He is waiting for such a sign

to come to India. "I have many friends in India and they keep asking me to visit. My wife has been there and she loved it, especially the train journeys. I cannot just visit India, I have to stay there. For India I have to wait for the right time. When the time comes I will get the sign. India is not a country, it's a universe. I have to be inside this universe and experience all that it has to offer."

And another Paulo Coelho book will, no doubt, emerge from that.

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The author is a Bengaluru-based senior writer who specialises in food, travel and lifestyle writing. She has edited several major mainstream publications in the past