

**A Sketch Of Our Global Condition: Mapping Assorted Postmodern Cultural Voices In
Paulo Coelho's *The Winner Stands Alone***

Saumya Rajan

Paulo Coelho – an all time bestseller Portuguese language author always believed to pursue real dreams. He himself proclaimed that he never wanted to go to any other field except writing. He is following his dream and wants everybody to execute the same.

The Winner Stands Alone emerges as a tale of our contemporary culture's uncertain manipulated dreams and equally manipulated destruction –a rough blueprint of our non-entity which takes over twenty-four hours to unfold. Coelho's novel *The Winner Stands Alone* (2008) hereby questions the postmodern world, “. . . what if everybody gets to be justified in believing whatever they want, and they use that justification to destroy my dreams.”¹

Jean Francois Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) is one of the most influential accounts of our postmodern condition. As society is fragmented, fragmented forms with provisional satisfactions and solutions have made their way. He discusses how the face of knowledge has changed, what knowledge has become today, and how it is reproduced and communicated by societies. He argues that we dwell in a knowledge-motored market, which is full with hi-tech discoveries and effortlessly handy sources. Hence, things are easy to manipulate to supply profit -- a key surviving factor. Postmodern knowledge, Lyotard argues, enhances our perception regarding differences. It seeks to find out the position of knowledge in the most developed societies. Owing to this, we become consumers and knowledge becomes commodity. Defining our postmodern condition Lyotard says that:

. . . the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.²

The novel unravels the journey of Igor Malev, a schizophrenic, psychotic Russian millionaire who can go beyond limits to chase his dream. With Igor's mission, Superclass' living and the Cannes Film Festival, interwoven is our contemporary culture's global position, which this novel's more than three hundred pages reveal and this paper maps.

At the very outset, Beretta P×4 pistol lays bare a foundation of violence in which the entire novel finds itself drowned. Igor murders Olivia a street vendor, Javits Wild a movie distributor, an unknown man, Maureen a new movie maker, and then at last Ewa along with her husband Hamid Hussein. It is this cruel and obsessive love of Igor which lets him destroy whole worlds just to get his dream -- his ex-wife Ewa.

Along with this story vital stories of showy branded clothes, dark glasses, cell phones, and culturally structured success and dreams are woven which Coelho detests. Here, people as cyborgs affirm this present culture of bewilderment and fluid identities. Yes! Coelho welcomes us to the world of glitterati and pity. In this journey of destruction, Coelho exhibits various snaps of Superclass that surround the Cannes. He declares how in Cannes millionaires are called "perfumes" (Coelho 9) where as millionairesses are called "perfume" (10). He says:

The male 'perfumes' deceive themselves: they think that the long legs and youthful faces [. . .] can now be manipulated at will. The female 'perfume' put all their trust in the power of their diamonds. (10)

This Superclass is all plastic and Silicone endorsing luxury, power, beauty and distorted familial bonds. He also puts light on how the Cannes Film Festival is a festival of fashion, brands and skin, but not of quality films. He, through Gabriela comments, "No one understands the importance of being an actress; beauty is the only thing that counts" (28). Coelho names popular brands such as Elie Saab, Versace, DKNY and Galliano to highlight how commercialism has gripped this culture where short message services lead the world into "a state of utter madness" (43). Due to this grip the being is found caught in its indispensable circle.

Commenting on the lunacy about cell phones, Coelho utters how:

It was slow and awkward and could cause serious damage to the thumb but what did it matter? Things that take five minutes to be written down and only ten seconds to be spoken, but that's the world is. (43)

Through this, Coelho satirizes this culture's obsession with communication and information in which ironically "most information is apparently to be distrusted."³ In this era of information and hyper technology, we never realize reality but "hyperreality" to use Jean Baudrillard's term. His highly known four successive phases of sign, lays bare this present state of emptiness. Baudrillard suggests an example of Disneyland, as a pointer of crucial third phase. He then makes us go to the fourth phase which this very Disneyland possesses. In fact, Baudrillard suggests that America is no longer real but a hyperreal world in which reality is no longer in its purest form but in its manipulated or simulated form. Our contemporary situation is both 'apocalyptic' and 'comic' at the same time. Due to capital and materialistic ends, everything has come under the category of exchange, destroying every trace of objective reality. He describes this system as 'catastrophic spiral' because this exchange system of any product which is now, not based on its 'use-value' abolishes all the distinctions between surface and depth. Coelho projects that our real self is engulfed in the matrix of hypermedia, simulations, and passive cultural workings which therefore becomes hyper real and manipulated. We witness many characters in the novel that change their name as for example Christina who becomes Jasmine Tiger, Gabriela, who becomes Lisa Winner and Igor, who in the end becomes Gunther. It is true that:

Mediated identities, notions of fragmentary, fluid and destabilized selves, and the annihilation of space through time once shocked. Now they are but a login away.⁴

The adjustment of the real with the unreal and the manipulated, indicates our culturally structured selves, which in this culture no longer conforms to natural constructs. Nearly all the

characters are fragmented from within but they are not seen lamenting their plight as if they know how to fine-tune with this culture.

As analysed, everything goes with this culture that mixes ideas from different arenas, and which shows how this culture relies heavily on money, power and knowledge purchase, and use-value. The issues of identity, history, faith, morals, reality and many others now are not naturally, but culturally constructed. Cultural Studies are always politically occupied. These exhibit the intricate mechanism of the power structures of society. Postmodernism being a cultural theory pin points the inequalities within these power structures and strives to reconcile and repair relationships between majority and minority discourses. Currently, because language and identity are believed to be culturally constructed, it is hence believed that both can be reconstructed. Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a provocative philosopher-historian understood the operation of powerful discursive practices of society. As these discourses have our unconscious acceptance, they exist enduringly in influential shapes. The exploitation which these discourses carry out have been sternly criticized by various theories such as Feminism, Post- colonialism, Queer and many more in this postmodernist culture. Discourse, according to Foucault, is not just a way of speaking or writing but involves whole vital mind-sets and rules that govern and encompass the unconscious of the citizens of a particular society. These pre-existing practices feed our mind in such a way that it never appears like slavish obedience. The self is inclusive of the disturbing languages of power and cannot be spaced out from the social condition which is equally fragmented and distorted.

Coelho feels that the only language people comprehend is fashion because it appears to be an effortless way of believing that:

I belong to your world. I'm wearing the same uniform as your army, so
don't shoot [. . . .] We dress in the same way. I belong to your tribe. Let's
gang up on the weaklings as a way of surviving. (10)

He compares how fashion and I.T. industry billionaires exhibit different codes of living, and to survive, adaptation to that code is obligatory. Being one of the many repressive structures of society this also works passively making us feel liberated but in reality, it is all forced.

We witness Hamid Hussein, a successful haute couturier from the Middle East who fought all odds to gain his position in the West. He challenges the West's preconceived notions about the Middle East people and its religion. For this, he believed in his traditional Bedouin designs to attain recognition for himself and his country. Hamid says, "I'm convinced that fashion could be one way of breaking down the prejudices the rest of the world has about us" (92). Through Christina, Coelho exposes a black female Rwandan refugee's pitiable position in Antwerp – the one who afterwards became a Super model in the West and to the contrary previously had to flee from Antwerp in order to escape regional and ethnic violence. Furthermore, in the past Christina's parents had to leave Rwanda from the eternal conflicts of Hutus and Tutsis. Coelho, here, via these characters tried to map the position of the 'Other' and refugees, who are always detested and undervalued.

Hamid and Christina however being dispossessed, emerge victorious in this postmodern world where privileges of race, gender and ethnicity are seen subverted. Therefore, it is true that:

. . . postmodern moment constitutes a massive challenge to the privileges of gender, ethnicity [. . .] allows for the objective production of facts about the physical world irrespective of the issues that structure the social world -- gender, ethnicity, nationality, power, prestige.⁵

To a large extent, it is true but Coelho projects a sour angle of this culture that always supports privileged ones in some or the other way, and in which we spot:

. . . injustices committed by the powerful on the powerless. [. . .] They choose the people they want to choose and don't have to explain themselves to anyone. (31)

Women characters such as Ewa, Olivia, Maureen, Jasmine and many more are given substantial space to communicate their emotions, and make their fight to obtain a room of their own palpable, in this heterogeneous and commercialized culture. They in this postmodernist

culture whether supported or exploited feel their power. What we witness in this postmodernist culture is a:

. . . massive cultural shift. One aspect of it is the unprecedented flow of power in to the hand of women. Women is being undoubtedly used on satisfying male ego and desires, but this very process is concentrating power in the feminine subjectivity, and is turning out to be, quite unexpectedly, a means of feminist assertion, whether in support or in opposition.⁶

About sexual orientation, we know how our thought process has drastically changed now and how involving in any sort of relationship is normal and not a big deal. We observe Christina comfortably involved in a lesbian relationship, stamping erosion of all boundaries in an acceptable way. This culture has platform and projection for every race and difference, where Russian, Rwandan, American and many others co exist. So, it is true that “Mongrelization is part of the new visual landscape of cities . . . [and] difference in this century is no longer very different.”⁷ It is the same culture where people like Igor kill various innocents for their own self-love, and Superclass exploit Underclass to any extent. That is why “blurring of ethics is common thread throughout the novel”⁸. He names countries such as Antwerp and Amsterdam where men painstakingly cut stones to find a piece of diamond only to be at last swapped for arms. These diamonds become blood diamonds as they become aids of violence in Liberia, the Congo, Angola and the like of these.

Coelho, through this novel provides an “ontological”⁹ survey of our existence for which Jasmine’s omission of Igor’s words deserve notice. She articulates that

We were, he said, surrounded by people who were full
of uncertainties, glories and conquests ,but they weren’t enjoying
themselves [. . . .] They’ve forgotten there’s still a whole world to
conquer [. . . .] because they’ve got used to life as it is. (372)

This is our neutral existence, where “certainties have replaced passions” (372), and where politics of scarcity and scarcity of ethics reside.

Coelho also projects how, globalization, commercialization and hyper media have engulfed and manipulated real dreams of people who remain oblivious of their real wants and crave for nonsensical latest accessories, latest cell phones ,fashion, brands and anti-ageing means. Here, we also see a relocation of production from the developed areas to the developing areas, where the work labour was cheaper. This is post-fordism which is the most vital point of postmodernist cultural theory. Moreover, now people do not purchase reasonable products but the ones, those uplift their status and make them branded persons. Our perception regarding both areas private and public becomes 'schizophrenic' in construction, with frequent alterations and incoherence. Talking about brands that suck money just because of their 'brand names', actually stand erect because of the resources they exploit, of many Third World countries. This dimension draws attention to the trajectory of Third World countries that are stripped off everything they have and considered as the only source of terrorism as well. The novel reveals how the Middle East is always believed to be the source of tension which has consistently kept "the world in limbo" (149).

For this culture's artists, Coelho believes that these only "end up becoming icons of popular culture" (330). It is this postmodern culture where politicians end up in resignation and contradiction, Superclass suffer from celebrity syndrome and play power game of fashion, blood, drugs, human trafficking and dirty money with its money laundering, and where simultaneously exist dispossessed populace and minorities, who albeit find some back-up, still strive hard to grip their dreams and their own selves. This is the dual code, this culture exhibits in its appeal to both and space for both.

The novel which initially took up the issue of individual evil force emerges out to be a mirror of this apocalyptic world and its postmodern cultural position. It is in this culture, information is considered as a "commodity indispensable to productive power"¹⁰ which has displaced news and where 'I' is perceived as dismembered, culturally structured and unfathomable.

Brian Mc Hale in his *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), he raises postmodernist fiction's ontological issues. Modernist fiction was about the questions regarding

knowledge and truth, whereas Postmodernist fiction is about the questions regarding one's existence and this world. Postmodernist writing is about what types of world there are, how different worlds are created at every moment and so on. This very contemporary cultural theory lies somewhere in the midst of the real world and its fictional counterpart that disturbs all firm boundaries one tries to fix between the two. For the most part, postmodernist writing concerns itself with uninterrupted ontological mobility and vagueness. The novel's open ending asks: Is humanity winner in this sense? Is this, the world where we, as non existents, claim our existence? Yes! This is our culture in all its extreme positions, now combating Genocide, financial collapse, terrorism in all its variants, environmental catastrophe and Third World countries' appalling and awful plight. At this juncture, Coelho acts as a postmodern thinker who explores this culture's "new depthlessness"¹¹, and captures an image of "where we are now."¹² Thus, if one is winner in this sense, then, of course, this winner deserves to stand alone!

Notes

- ¹ “Following Your Dreams”, *Wordpress.com*, 3 June 2009, 10 August 2009 <<http://www.welovetea.wordpress.com>>.
- ² Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1992), p. 3.
- ³ Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 3.
- ⁴ Steve Matthew man and Douglas Hoey, “What happened to Postmodernism”, *Sociology* 40(2006):536, *SAGE*, 26 March, 2009 <<http://www.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/40/3/529>>.
- ⁵ See Steve Matthewman.
- ⁶ Anil Rajimwale, "Post-modernism, Culture and Theory", *Mainstream* Vol. 39.25 (2001), p. 15.
- ⁷ Mica Nava, “Cosmopolitan Modernity: Everyday Imaginaries and The Register Of Difference”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19, 1-2 (April, 2002): 94.
- ⁸ See “Book Review: *The Winner Stands Alone* By Paulo Coelho”, 24 June 2009, 10 August 2009 <<http://www.bookopolis.com/2009/06/book-review-winner-stands-alone-by.html>>.
- ⁹ Brian Mc Hale, “Change of Dominant From Modernist to Postmodernist Writing”, *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel A Reader*, ed. Bran Nicol (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2002) p. 284.
- ¹⁰ Lyotard, p. 5.
- ¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) p. 6.

- ¹² This expression is expressed by Coelho himself in the Preface, *The Winner Stands Alone*, in order to highlight its grave theme and our contemporary position.

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About the Author:

Dr Saumya Rajan,Assistant Professor ,JSS Noida.

E-mail-rajansaumya@gmail.com