

***A la Brasileña:* Pilgrimage in Paulo Coelho's Writings**

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with selected novels by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho, and highlights some of the distinctively Brazilian approaches to religion and faith. Foregrounding the motif of pilgrimage within the accessible religious register of *The Pilgrimage* (1987), *The Valkyries* (1992) and *The Zahir* (2005), I analyze the ways in which Coelho's protagonists pursue individual rights and achieve renunciation. Viewed from the angle of postmodern narrative, pilgrimage is an alternative space which reflects and celebrates the eclectic quality of Brazilian religious values. Because it is inherently individualistic, Coelho's notion of pilgrimage breaks bonds with official religious discourses. Finally, the Brazilian pilgrim's renunciation as means of moral replenishment and spiritual salvation in a problematic society is assessed from Lyotard's perspective.

Key Words: Brazilian literature, Lyotard, Paulo Coelho, pilgrimage, postmodernism, religion, renunciation

INTRODUCTION

In proposing an analysis of pilgrimage in selected works by contemporary Brazilian writer, Paulo Coelho, this paper also investigates the postmodernist characteristics involved. After all, Coelho's unwavering focus on contemporary Brazilian religious panorama, by means of simple language, can be said to connect to a popular brand of Catholicism originally imported from Portugal and which is typically highlighted by a belief in the supernatural, a partial autonomy vis-à-vis ecclesiastical structures and an overall eclectic quality which appeals to the mass (Dawson 2007). Because

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Coelho's books emerge at a time when confusion in the world accompanies nascent neoliberal policies, the characteristic 'self-help' style emerging therein eventually offers a response to increasing global insecurity (Maestri 1999). The postmodernist parameters in his novels, which clearly break the boundaries between the official and the popular, display a porous narrative engagement where the heroic is juxtaposed with the ordinary and where the spiritual complements everyday concerns.

While acknowledging the 'self-help' element in Coelho's writing, this paper approaches *The Pilgrimage* (1987), *The Valkyries* (1992) and *The Zahir* (2005) on the basis that his obsessive concern with pilgrimage represents an altogether different kind of marginal position and a different set of narrative strategies in a postmodernist context. Firmly grounded in postmodern culture, Coelho's novels draw upon multiple discourses, narratives of discontinuity and transgression of generic boundaries and exploit various postmodern narrative strategies to create specific effects. His representation of pilgrimage therefore enhances postmodernist explorations of spirituality, religion and the renewal of faith in the mundane sphere.

Part of the rationale behind the paper is also to bring into positive critical limelight this Brazilian author, whose mass popularity amongst international readers has somehow not prevented him from being frequently side-lined or else derogatively viewed by academia. In coining the term 'Carmen Miranda syndrome' to examine Brazilian expressions of popular culture, for example, Piers Armstrong (1999) only gives selective consideration to the works of well-known Brazilian writers such as Machado de Assis, Mário de Andrade, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, João Guimarães Rosa and Jorge Amado, but chooses to ignore Coelho. More than a decade later, Patrícia Trindade Nakagome identifies the source of Coelho's unchanged problematic status in the following terms:

In relation to Paulo Coelho's work, critics and common readers have very different perceptions. To the first group, his books are not literature because their form and content are considered poor [...] To the second group, the simplicity of Coelho's books is an important element to support stories of faith and hope, which help them to face their own challenges (2014, 6).

Coelho's works have therefore received little critical attention and have not necessarily been considered within the framework of postmodernism. The sparse existing scholarship on Coelho largely advocates global thematic investigations which complement Maestri's argument that he attracts readers who look for the same brand of escapism all the time, that is stories

concocted in supposedly traditional lore in which happiness can be readily attained (1999). In a similar register, Robert Ziegler (2002), for example, investigates strategies of survival in *Veronika Decides to Die* while S. M. Hart (2004) approaches magic as dominant theme in *The Alchemist*. If Wisam Mansour (2006) showcases the universal appeal of Coelho's works by examining the traditional implications of love between man and woman in *The Zahir*, Kavitha Ganesan's study of *Eleven Minutes* suggests the realization of the sexual self as primordial for Coelho (2006). More recently, Sonia Soni (2014) discusses *The Alchemist* in terms of societal conflict.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of examining the postmodern effects of Coelho's recurring pilgrimage motif, this paper opts for Jean François Lyotard's perspective. In this context, Lyotard maintains that in the contemporary epoch, 'the grand narrative has lost its credibility' (1984, 37) and that 'most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative' (ibid, 41). Being artistic, imaginative and devoid of inaccessible, overtly heroic feats, the pilgrimages in the novels under study cannot be easily inserted into a 'master' narrative. Consistent with Lyotard's view that the conditions of knowledge which have fundamentally changed scientific knowledge is now a 'form of discourse' (ibid, 3) in the postmodern era, Coelho's religious-based narratives engage with the notion that metanarratives are no longer considered completely legitimate and thus, are not universally held to be completely credible.

One of the consequences of such thought is the assumption that if what modern knowledge says about reality is no longer held to be automatically true, then in this sense "reality" itself is held in some doubt. Like Lyotard, Coelho also espouses a brand of postmodernism which advocates this incredulity and its effects throughout society. In exhibiting incredulity towards official religion, for example, several of Coelho's protagonists instead identify and celebrate free pilgrimages as the be-all and end-all of religious possibilities. Religion therefore morphs into its porous, accessible and unmistakably postmodern counterpart, that is, spirituality devoid of official markers. Lyotard's argument, 'Let us wage a war on totality' (ibid, 82) implies how the power of metanarratives creates the illusion that the world is itself whole, a totality – a myth that supposedly suppresses differences.

In his view, therefore, the day of 'grand' narratives or all-embracing

totalizing systems of belief has passed and from now on, meaning must be derived from 'little' narratives or 'local' justifications (ibid). From this angle, Coelho's rendition of 'little' narratives is located in a cusp where traditional storytelling fuses with postmodernist strategies and which manifests into spiritual and mystic journeys for ordinary people. Dissolving the barriers between oriental narrative traditions and Christian beliefs, his novels emphasize the fluid and accessible quality of faith and myth/'little' narratives as compared to the rigidity of official religion/'grand' narratives in the contemporary framework.

Because Coelho rarely uses complex allegories, metaphors or idioms, his works display a consistent awareness of 'local' narratives and structure traditionally associated with enchanting old tales, soothsayers, idealistic lovers, mysterious maps and parchments, exotic strangers and a network of ancient beliefs which he converts into contemporary yet accessible quests for truth and self-enlightenment. According to Nakagome, 'simple language and powerful images' (2013, 5) help identify the universal appeal of Coelho's 'little' narratives, while Shahd Alshamari (2013) attributes Coelho's iconic status due to the rise of interest in popular literature.

Liotard's privileging of 'local' over 'master' narratives also points to significant functions of form where the criticism of grand narratives is part of a project in the validation of oppositional tales, while the 'little' narratives are told by 'others' (1971). Associating narrative with an eclectic mix of myth, fairy tale, teleology and metaphysics amongst others, Coelho's 'self-help' style ultimately rejects canonization by party or state. His narrators belong to the typically marginalized breed defined by Lyotard, for example the aimless, divorced individuals in *The Pilgrimage*, *The Valkyries* and *The Zahir*. Enhanced by a subaltern narrator, Coelho's 'local' narratives go against the grain of metanarratives which are more institutionalized, canonical and legitimizing.

In addition, Lyotard argues that, since narratives are the communal method by which knowledge is stored and exchanged, they 'thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are part of that culture, they are legitimated by the fact that they do what they do' (ibid, 23). Thus, Coelho's postmodernist preoccupation with metanarrative is part of an exploration of the role and function of marginalized narrators. Narrating stories which make the very production of those stories the key issue, Coelho's protagonists target self-reflexive narratives which call attention to their own terms of production. In other words, Coelho's narrators link their individual concerns to an intricate narrative and communication construct, the emergence of which

corresponds to the assumption of narrative power within the story concerned and by the storytellers themselves. The unrooted identity of such narrators, therefore, mediates communication and narrative production far more obviously than traditional storytellers can aspire to do.

Pablo Semán, for whom 'self-help' literature is not necessarily an indication of mediocre writing and goes beyond mere issues of identification, instead highlights the redeeming features of the genre, that is 'familiarity between the reader's personal dilemma and the hero of the novel' (2007, 137). Coelho's 'little' narratives therefore emerge as means of empowerment and support. For Vanina B. Canavire, 'self-help' writing 'mobilises feelings, emotions and memories more than an intellectual operation' and ensures 'the continuum between an "efferent reading" and an "aesthetic reading"' (2014, 35). In other words, categorizing Coelho within 'self-help' genre not only helps to explore the growing importance of popular or mass market narrative styles but also works as a key to understanding the unanchored ordinary man who pursues individual rights in the 'little' narrative.

THE 'LITTLE' NARRATIVE AND THE BRAZILIAN RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Coelho's supposed 'literary poverty' (Andrade 2004, 54), backed by the argument that he is 'not interested in accuracy or consistency' (Paulo 2007, 103) is highlighted in negatively oriented works such as *Por que Não Ler Paulo Coelho* (Why not to read Paulo Coelho) and *Os 10 Pecados de Paulo Coelho* (Paulo Coelho's Ten Sins) respectively (translations mine). If his works appeal primarily to the mass, they equally indicate the relevance of 'local' narratives in a country which does not possess a stable literary culture and where 'the primary and high school educational system [...] has opted for Communication instead of Literature' (Moriconi 2003, 85). Contrary to the demeaning perspectives offered by Andrade and Paulo, this paper highlights the celebrative and innovative quality of Coelho's dynamics of religious faith which pertain to a holistic perspective, an individualistic ethos and an unusual pragmatism towards knowledge and techniques that engender spiritual well-being for the common man.

Lyotard's view of justice under the postmodern condition is worth considering. Opposed to the idea of associating the issue of consensus with the practice of justice, Lyotard believes that under the postmodern it is possible to have a politics in which the desire for justice and the

unknown is honored (1984, 66-67). Certainly, within the framework of the postmodern condition, Lyotard discusses a state or condition in which judgment is made in spite of a benchmark of whatsoever kind. Paganism is the name that Lyotard gives to this process of judging 'without criteria' (Lyotard and Thebaud 1985, 16). To the degree that it is characterized by spontaneity and positive transcendence, Coelho's paganism '*A la brasileña*' (Arias 1999[2001], 158), has an advantage over official frames of understanding. Because it is anti-foundational, paganism in his works also creates a narrative space in which all categories of thoughts are entertained without limits being set against them. To this effect, Lyotard contends that just as in aesthetic appreciation the individual is confronted by the singularity of the sense data presented to him or her, under the postmodern condition judgments on social issues are made without preexisting rules or doctrines.

'*A la brasileña*' is therefore the term which Coelho uses to connect his passionate commitment to 'local' perspectives with religion and spirituality. 'Being Brazilian greatly influences my artistic creative process, because people here are very intuitive, not ashamed of experimenting with the spiritual or the magical, they are much more paradoxical than Cartesian', maintains Coelho (Arias 1999[2001], 157). Motivated by a compelling Brazilian religious ethos peopled by physical as well as spiritual forces and marked by porous religious diversity, Coelho's novels also reflect problematic aspects of a country that Roberto DaMatta (1991[1979]) refers to as 'peripheral' and 'liminoid'.

According to DaMatta, the dilemma of Brazil lies in its struggle to combine two mythologies. The first, taking its inspiration from the modern tradition, considers the individual as an autonomous moral entity endowed with inalienable rights such as freedom and equality. The second is based on a world-view that denies individualism, distrusts progress and rejects formal political equality. In many cases the result is a mythology that believes in miracles, spirits and messiahs. This situation is equally endorsed by Coelho for whom 'it's necessary to break down that separation between the sacred and the profane' (Arias 1999[2001], 156) and whose novels examine a 'local' narrative where 'Brazilians aren't allergic to the spirit and accept all experiences impregnated with spirituality or mystery' (ibid, 157).

Coelho's almost obsessive striving towards religious values, which evolves into a concern with pilgrimage, is noteworthy. Traditionally, a pilgrimage is a religious act which creates a value-laden bond. It connects secular places with the world 'above', the wayfarer with the travelling community

of the faithful and the pilgrim with his second self, who will be healed or cleansed by making the pilgrimage. Variouslly defined as transcendental (Sanjinés 2014), emotional (Carreño 2014) or retrospective (Olds 2012), pilgrimages typically intensify the personal faith of believers and strengthen their bonds of fidelity to their community. The distinctive Brazilian quality of Coelho's pilgrimage, however, demarcates itself by collaborating closely with the individual's search for a harmonious democratic world, free of conflict. In his novels, the ensuing result of this quest often manifests as renunciation.

Recognizing that secular identities are impermanent, Coelho reassesses pilgrimage as an individual rather than a collective act. In his novels, the common Brazilian put-down, 'Do you know to whom you are speaking?' (DaMatta 1991[1979]), is dissolved and instead morphs into an important spiritual ethic for the Brazilian mindset, now 'characterized by a pronounced move towards individualism' and which 'systematically detach[es] [...] from relational social life' (Mills 2000, 17). An interesting alternative to the otherwise iconic Pedro Malasartes of Brazilian folklore, Coelho's renouncing world-weary protagonist highlights bonds or bridges between orders of reality and implies that there is indeed a distinction between pilgrimages and mere religious ceremonies. Nevertheless, Coelho's fiction, as part of an increasingly postmodernist trend, is also enhanced by a passion for mysticism, esoteric beliefs and a structural awareness of the fairy tale and folkloric storytelling. *The Pilgrimage* (1987), *The Valkyries* (1992) and *The Zahir* (2005), therefore, indicate a tension between traditional forms of pilgrimage and the more subversive 'laws' of postmodernism.

As a recurring religious motif, pilgrimage in Coelho's novels can be seen as perfectly consistent with attacks on the negative impact of modernity and indeed with a broader postmodernist outlook characterized by a 'disenchantment with modernity'. If, according to Coelho, 'the beyond is accessible to those who dare' (Baghat and Rifaat 1998, 34), the result is his characteristic 'one-size-fits-all' (Moriconi 2003, 86) popular narrative format. Devoid of theological jargon, his religious message is largely accessible and simple, connected to individual happiness (Ortolano 2003, 57) and the ability to live out one's 'personal legend' (Baghat and Rifaat 1998, 34). The created illusion of Coelho's narrative simplicity also translates into a fable-like language, promoting romanticized notions of pilgrimage and easily converting to contemporary quests for truth and self-enlightenment. Coelho's argument that, 'men will always need an ideal, for it is part of human nature' (Ortolano 2003, 59) attests to this urge for universal religious meaning.

Considering the framework of pilgrimage, the selected novels share similar concerns and motifs. The recurring merging of autobiographical and fictional persona underlies a disillusioned protagonist, named Paulo, whose urge for a more spiritual understanding of life is frequently translated as physical pilgrimage and renunciation. Coelho's early novel, *The Pilgrimage*, is an account of a spiritual journey and the trials and tribulations that follow. The protagonist, who renounces the comforts of his home in Brazil and engages on a physically and psychologically challenging journey, chooses a legendary road travelled upon by pilgrims of San Tiago since the Middle Ages. Together with his mysterious mentor Petrus, the protagonist journeys across Spain in search of a miraculous sword.

The Valkyries proposes a fictional engagement similar to *The Pilgrimage*. In an attempt to renounce his dark past in Brazil, the protagonist chooses a spiritual journey and learns to recognize his guardian angel. Set in the Mojave Desert, *The Valkyries* records an unusual encounter with the warrior-like, lesbian women who travel the desert on motorcycles and who spread the word of angels.

The Zahir records the trajectory of a famous author who undergoes an international journey in quest of his wife. In fact, the wife disappears completely without leaving a clue. At first, the protagonist tries to forget his wife by having affairs in quick succession. An obsession for the wife then takes over, following which he feels compelled to find her and talk to her. His quest, which takes him from Brazil to Spain, France, Croatia and eventually Central Asia, leads him to Mikhail a Kazakh youth and to his pregnant wife who does not need him anymore. In the course of this journey, though, the protagonist's understanding of love is broadened through renunciation.

In a conversation with Coelho, Juan Arias draws attention to the anomaly that, 'almost all [his] books draw inspiration from Spain and none, so far, from Brazil' (1999[2001], 153). Coelho, who defends this in terms of 'another of [his] paradoxes' (ibid, 153), identifies strongly with the motherland all the same and clearly maintains, 'I also feel profoundly Brazilian and that's why I need my Brazil to write' (ibid, 154). Coelho's depiction of pilgrimage, which frequently involves imaginary or exotic landscapes, is therefore the result of Brazilian *mestiçaje*, 'that mix of a thousand things that's taught [...] Brazilians to be tolerant with the spiritual world, with all the magic that manifests through the basic symbols of music, dance and poetry' (ibid, 154). Furthermore, the pilgrimage motif shows an urge towards renunciation, but only on the condition that it is an act of free will and not subjected to any religious authority. Consequently,

Coelho's 'little' narratives remodel religious freedom as a choice which meets the different requirements of contemporary Brazilian society.

Despite the non-Brazilian setting, Coelho's strong association of pilgrimage with natural magic and powers lends a distinctive Brazilian cachet to his novels. He typically situates his protagonist in the larger setting of a wilder, remote environment, away from urban spaces. This liminal space, which becomes positively charged or magically altered by the presence of spiritual forces and powerful holy figurines, transforms into a strategic retreat for the pilgrim. Thus, a whole range of Biblical resources such as angels, mysterious radiances of light, complements the meaning of pilgrimage in Coelho's novels. However, the urge for traditional religious journey also suffers frequent collapses into impasse. Such a contention is quite typical of the postmodern temperament. By recuperating large-scale Biblical and odyssey-like formats, moreover, the pilgrim's initial personal disillusion, shallowness and emptiness are foregrounded and hint at a lack of orientation. As represented in the selected novels, renunciation belongs to an order of reality which cannot be reduced to the world of concepts or be forced into a scientific mould.

PAULO COELHO'S PILGRIM

In casting the postmodern as style and a politics, Lyotard points out how 'local' stories always contain as their referent or subject the 'local' individual. Paulo, the recurring pilgrim in Coelho's *The Pilgrimage*, *The Valkyries* and *The Zahir*, also happens to be a Brazilian national who refuses to weave pilgrimage into a single plot. Empowered by the discourse of the 'local' narrative, the subaltern narrator accomplishes a certain objective by inviting readers to go back over familiar Biblical narratives numerous times, viewing the text through a different lens on each pilgrimage. In other words, the obsessive cycle of Biblical pilgrimages in Coelho's novels underlines John Barth's argument that there is a 'usedupness of certain forms or exhaustion of possibilities' (1967, 29). The repetition of 'exhausted' narrative plots seeks out each ordinary 'hero', whose effort to solve a personal problem by undertaking a pilgrimage is evident. Although the proximity towards Biblical narratives is an accepted, celebrated fact in Coelho's narrative sphere, the core of the Brazilian pilgrim's ritual process is nevertheless conferred in 'movement, process and dislocation' (DaMatta 1991[1979], 76), away from home.

The very narrative étiquette of Coelho's marginalized storytellers must

now adapt to alternative modes. If ethical value signifies value of marginalized voices, the 'little' narrative can be a significant model for a society that will continue to work out its cultural, sexual, gender and national dilemmas in story form. Paulo's world-weary pose requires a selective use of elements of action and passion which emphasize his Brazilian ideology. By means of the way he renounces his past identity and life, undertakes various pilgrimages and structures bygone biblical narratives –astutely employing time and space, entrances and exits– his Brazilian dilemma gradually unfolds. 'Neither here nor there' (ibid), the presence and physical commitment of the Brazilian protagonist to the act of pilgrimage indicate his personal need to renounce.

In these representative religious narratives, a gamut of moods enhances the pilgrim's characteristic restlessness and physical retreat from home. In *The Pilgrimage*, for example, the protagonist who 'asked for a soft drink, and tried to watch television, but [...] was unable to concentrate' (13) indicates the initial stage of renunciation. Paulo, who is described as 'nervous', 'uncertain' (11) and 'strange' (16) in *The Valkyries* also displays an unusual exuberance which complements his 'gleaming' (3) eyes. In *The Zahir*, Paulo takes on the avatar of a thrice-divorced man whose renunciation is clearly based on his 'ability to choose' (18) and a persistent quest for 'adventure and the unknown' (19).

Coelho's typically disillusioned protagonists emerge not as presenters, but rather as contemporary custodians of bygone Biblical narratives. This alternative narrative possibility operates in two ways. Firstly, it is shown how Coelho's contemporary pilgrim can renounce formal religious values by altering received traditions. Secondly, it is shown how an established religious story can nevertheless illustrate counter-values to those of its originating tradition. Hence, it is argued that Coelho's religious-oriented novels depict the conflict between the power of the pilgrim and the ethical issues which arise from the use of religious narrative. The pilgrim's decision to renounce is therefore marked by a subversive authority which attempts to unblock meanings surrounding universal human values. As argued by Barry Smart (1993, 89), the resurrection of the 'sacred' as a sphere of experience pertinent to modern forms of life, as a counter to the nihilism of the modern world [...] certainly constitutes a part of what has been described as the postmodern condition.

In the three novels, Paulo's refusal to accept stasis in his personal life clearly complements the geographically ambitious quality of his peregrinations. His willing transformation from a blasé adult to a modern-day pilgrim indicates a different way of viewing religious values, supported

by the belief in *The Zahir* that 'there are two kinds of world: the one we dream about and the real one' (119). Paulo's presence as a pilgrim legitimizes the 'little' narrative and calls for the preservation of an alternative spiritual dimension represented by dreams, imagination and fantasy. While the novels surely hanker after a spiritual depth, they also display many of the postmodernist formal features of narrative plundering, undermining a stable narrative persona, deliberate fostering of narrative uncertainty and a refusal to conclude, which militate against harmony, oneness or peace. Paulo's allegiance to physically demanding pilgrimages therefore concurs with the novels' postmodern transformative effects.

What is interesting about Paulo the pilgrim is his unusual enactment of religious critique, which forms part of the spiritually transgressive and transformative urge that always lies at the heart of Coelho's novels. At one point in *The Valkyries*, he juxtaposes the holy and the mundane to indicate an eclectic spiritual framework, 'Paulo put his cigarettes and a Bible in a small bag. When they arrived at the lake, he was going to suggest that they read a passage from it, chosen at random' (41). This pilgrim is also a confirmation of Coelho's recurring literary choice which is based on a postmodernist, metafictional style, reflecting religious critique through literary subversion. The conscious use of fable-like language mingled with contemporary travelogue, the blurring of ontological boundaries, the incorporation of Biblical references into the narrative mark Coelho's novels as a form of what Linda Hutcheon calls 'historiographical metafiction' (1988, 92-93), one which incorporates history into the fictional process, and acknowledges its existence in order to question our perception of it. In *The Zahir*, for example, the rejection of scientific knowledge in favour of natural omens and oracles such as the sun enhances the value of the 'little' narrative while influencing the pilgrim's decision to renounce. As a confirmation of his renunciation, Paulo therefore welcomes the sun and confesses, 'I know that this is a sign, a good sign' (75). Such moments in Coelho's 'little' narratives certainly indicate a more formal level of subversion of the reading process.

Lyotardian perspectives are further enhanced, given that the disturbances in the pilgrim's personal life are already designed to bar the reader's access to a stable reality and to foster spiritual uncertainty instead. While this is of course part of the common purpose of postmodernism, it nevertheless exposes the pilgrim's unwavering ideology. Paulo's peregrination as a common man is but a means to intervene spiritually and to provide information and description about his disseminated personal life. In the three novels, the pilgrims exploit multiple and intensive forms

of physical pilgrimage with varying degrees of similarity and contrast. Often portrayed in a state of self-contention, Paulo undertakes lengthy pilgrimages out of personal urge. The religiously charged diction such as 'the voice' (197), 'gates of Paradise' (141), 'awesome power' (204), in *The Zahir*, *The Valkyries* and *The Pilgrimage* respectively, exerts an unwavering spiritual commitment to renunciation.

Broken and disillusioned in his personal life, Paulo is a pilgrim whose spiritual motivations are extended into the role of disciple as well. In the three texts, Paulo finds spiritual guidance through exotic and mysterious mentors such as Petrus (*The Pilgrimage*), Valhalla (*The Valkyries*) and Mikhail (*The Zahir*) rather than an all-controlling God or 'master' narrative. To a certain extent this is a predictable result of Paulo's 'human' limitations, as well as his subjective involvement in the materialistic world which he describes.

Just as prevalent and insistent as Lyotard's language of fragmentation, Coelho's treatment of the uncertain pilgrim shows a Brazilian sensibility which recognizes the ambiguous function of religion in contemporary society and points to broken minds like Paulo's as latent sources for rethinking spirituality. Paulo, as both pilgrim and disciple, points to the textual process of the novels, where the technical subversion occurs. The presence of an active renouncing pilgrim in the novels holds out the hope of a productive engagement with a spiritual reality, which connects with Paulo's personal dilemmas.

RENUNCIATION AND PILGRIMAGE: AN ACT OF FREE WILL

Associating narrative with eclecticism, assemblages of discordant parts and loose ends, Lyotard argues that story and history impose continuity and closure on the gaps and silences of reality (1971). Paulo is certainly not the archetypal Biblical hero, but an ordinary broken man in quest of meaning, a 'subaltern' figure whose pilgrimage is artistic and imaginative and which certainly does not fit into the mould of the 'master' narrative. According to Coelho's novels, it is the nature of the protagonist's free spiritual experience that connects his peregrination to renunciation. It is not so much the philosophical implication, but how renunciation recognizes its emancipatory potential through the 'little' narrative and is transformed into a meaningful individual experience. The pilgrim's progress towards his spiritual destination in fact elaborates upon a

postmodern narrative approach.

In underlining the creative power of Coelho's 'little' narratives, this section assesses the kind of experiences which dominate the pilgrim's so-called 'progress' in the spiritual world. Paulo's experience as a pilgrim does not imply the recitation of Biblical dogmas to be memorized or affirmed. Instead, the three different religious experiences examined in *The Pilgrimage*, *The Valkyries* and *The Zahir* project an almost Gandhian tendency, where renunciation is the highest form of religious faith. Although the Bible is physically present in his bag, what entrances Paulo is not an intricate series of religious dogmas but a cumulative, instinctive unfolding of the secrets of the universe and the fact that he is free to make his choices. The universe is so skillfully constructed by the spiritual mentors that Paulo feels his own world transformed.

Renunciation, in terms of Paulo's willing departure from a realm of social interconnectedness, recreates his identity as a rationalized and unconnected individual, divested of material particularities. In all the novels, he is intent upon the process of internalized temporal becoming and the attainment of enlightenment through the individual materialization of renunciation. While Lyotard recognizes that 'a self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before' (1984, 15), Coelho's representation of the self in a fabric of relations also identifies with struggle and conflict. The utterance that Paulo makes is a statement in favour of or against what is available within the framework of social interaction and every decision involves a psychological duel. Lyotard states the matter thus, "the first principle underlying our method as a whole [...] [is] to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics" (ibid, 10). By and large, Lyotard is opposed to any kind of theoretical system that would reduce the self to a passive agency determined by some form of structure.

In this connection, even if religious narratives are vehicles of truth, Coelho's persistence in adopting physically challenging pilgrimages indicates a foraging for renunciation. The creative energy within the wild desolate locales of Paulo's spiritual walk stimulates the pilgrim to imagine himself as if he were one with the environment. Recurring instances of almost supernatural phenomena underline the mythic quality of the pilgrimage. In *The Valkyries*, for example, the presence of the 'blazing light of the sun' which 'multiplied a dozen times' (106) is a source of both mystery and spiritual realization for Paulo. The pilgrim's attraction towards the mythic godly quality of the 'red' sky in *The Pilgrimage* is likened to a

‘dream or a magic vision’ (137). In *The Zahir*, too, Paulo confesses to a similar spiritual connection with nature, ‘[...] when I felt that warm wind and saw the lights, I knew that these were symptoms of my connection with the Power’ (147).

Although Paulo’s identity and the plot differ in the three novels, the resembling surface details and geographical locations, which comprise the most fundamental elements of plot and spiritual theme, pertain to his free decision to renounce. The pilgrimages in the three novels therefore suggest harmonized criteria according to which religious narratives are better understood as aesthetic wholes. After all, the urge for spiritual journey projects the temporal worlds of disillusioned people whose fates hinge on choices. By concentrating on pilgrimage, these novels give a sense of coherence, a semblance of order at least to what would otherwise appear to be a random, meaningless sequence of religious quests. The wandering pilgrim, who is in quest of meaning, ultimately renounces his past identity.

In the context of achieving renunciation, Lyotard’s notion of ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ (1984, xxiv) outlines the overall subversive nature of the pilgrim’s progress towards renunciation. *The Pilgrimage*, for example, reworks traditional adventure stories into a journey of the soul as well as of the body. Taking to traditional road-maps in an attempt to understand faith is one means to understand spirituality today. Notions of ‘guide’, ‘pilgrim’ and ‘practical test’ (81) are invested in the novel, indicating how the pilgrim’s progress is physically premised on a series of roads. *The Pilgrimage* establishes the fact that personal rebellion with God provokes the breakdown of the *grand récit* (Lyotard 1984, xxiii). God, per se, cannot exist as point of origin – whether in terms of spirituality or literary creativity. Paulo’s world, which reflects an unusually strong scepticism, is one where divine presence is constantly denied or challenged. For this reason, Paulo is constantly coaxed by the guide Petrus to believe in alternatives, “Talking with your messenger doesn’t mean asking questions about the world of the spirits”, Petrus said the next day. “The messenger performs only one function for you: he helps you with regard to the material world. And he will give you this help only if you know exactly what it is that you want” (73).

The various bodily and spiritual disciplines offered in *The Pilgrimage* (1987) promise the breakdown of psychic blocks and convention-induced constraints, letting free the suppressed instincts or cleansing out hidden injuries. The protagonist is forced to develop the skills of self-abandonment, for example the famous episode where he exorcises the dog, which guide

all his efforts towards renunciation.

In *The Pilgrimage*, the breakdown of oppositions by which the Brazilian subject is accustomed to think eventually leads to renunciation. Paulo's subjection to spiritual exercises by Petrus for example ensures a total breakdown of the barriers between matter and spirit, subject and object, veil and truth, body and soul, text and meaning, interior and exterior, representation and presence, appearance and essence:

But now, having spoken in strange tongues and having exorcised devils, that puddle of water established a contact –however fragile– with the Milky Way above me. It reflected the stars, created designs I could not understand, and gave me the feeling not that I was wasting time but that I was creating a new code for communicating with the world. It was the soul's secret code – the language that we know but so seldom hear (87).

RENOUNCING OFFICIAL DISCOURSES

Liotard argues that the fault of 'grand' narratives is that they prize unity and sameness over plurality and difference. In line with this statement, Coelho's *The Valkyries* and *The Zahir* promote a renewed sense of 'pilgrim', postmodern odysseys, and an eventual renunciation of official discourses of religion. The novels reject dependence on and routine subordination to God. In rejecting the stiff structures of official religion like that of churches which usually keep the walls of social divisions impenetrable, Paulo the pilgrim clearly refuses to allow 'authority' to flourish.

The pilgrim's retreat into unexpected landscapes reflects a belief in alternative values. Paulo's pilgrimage in *The Valkyries* and *The Zahir* is complemented by a reassessment of traditional religious values in favour of contemporary ones. In *The Valkyries*, for example, renouncing traditional religious outlets is the effect of a rather extreme choice. The pilgrimage takes place in a no-man's land, the Mojave Desert, where neither reptiles nor scorpions can ever hope to survive. Familiar pilgrimage routes in *The Valkyries*, for instance, are significantly transformed into more subversive mappings of 'rocky valley with sparse vegetation, thorn bushes, cacti, and yucca' (40). In this context, renunciation indicates not only psychological isolation of the mind, but also a foregoing of official religious spaces.

Supportive of postmodern palimpsestic plots, Paulo's pilgrimage resists narrative mastery. 'My story, like all stories, refers to other stories', argues Liotard (1977, 45). By extension, Paulo confronts official religious institutions by retreating into 'badlands' and deserts. In other words, Paulo's

pilgrimage produces a diversity of experience, knowledge and esoteric language, but no longer requires the power of official faith to join them into a meaningful whole. The pilgrim's various experiences teach him to respond to the loss of structure through continuous pacts, quests and spiritual realizations, "From now on he would battle side by side with his guardian angel. *You must have made a tremendous effort, he said to his angel. And, in the end, I spoiled everything, and you couldn't understand it.* His angel was listening. The angel knew about the pact, too" (136, Emphasis in original). Such instances are particularly well suited to unravel Coelho's renewed sense of the narrative, reflecting the decline of religious values one has forgotten or has become too used to cherishing. *The Valkyries* is therefore suggestive of anonymous multiple divinities, such as 'someone' or 'the voice' (232), which certainly reject the formal process of naming.

The lesbian-feminist group of the Valkyries, with Valhalla as leader, indicates an inclination towards, even an acceptance of alternative anchors for pilgrimage. They are pariah women, after all, roaming the desert as messiahs of God, messengers of love and peace, postmodern motor-cycle equipped angels of the desert. Paulo's spiritual attraction to these women reflects the insufficiency of God's authority or even the redundancy of God as a vital life-force and spiritual anchor. At this stage, Coelho refutes the classical notion of God and religion as a collection of beliefs about good, evil, heaven and hell. In this novel, God is transformed into a collective yet accessible stronghold of women 'accustomed to fighting for love' (190) and 'who would recognize no limits' (191). Coelho's representation of pilgrimage, then is recorded through popular and accessible travelogues in which the trials and tribulations of the spiritual hero are recorded and where any notion of divine 'authority' is discarded.

Alternative forms of pilgrimage, as espoused in *The Valkyries* and *The Zahir*, are recognized as narrative acts which create freer and more expressive identities. *The Zahir* is a further example of postmodern odyssey, dealing with the pilgrim's personal disillusion and quest for alternative values. In this novel, the collapse of Paulo's personal life when his wife Esther deserts him and which gradually transforms him into 'the kind of boring person no one wants to be around' (54) becomes an occasion for pilgrimage and renunciation.

The pilgrim in *The Zahir* (2005) reiterates the structure of *The Valkyries* (1992) by promoting the possibility of experiencing unknown sensations. Paulo, who is already aware that '[he] has grown too used to comfort and lost [his] ability to improvise in crisis situations' (58), confronts his sedentary existence and renounces it. In opting for meta-experiential

journeys and more spiritually-oriented expectations, he aims at the enhancement of psychic and bodily skills. His act of shunning social connections is therefore a rejection of consensus which, according to Lyotard, is suspect because it is a tool of authority. In a jargon which reflects defiance, the protagonist maintains, 'I stamp on the small apparatus that connects me to the Internet, destroying it completely. I put my mobile in a box and send it to my publisher, saying that he should only give it back to me when I come round personally to pick it up' (60).

The Zahir gives us a renewed insight into what it means to renounce one's identity while undertaking a pilgrimage. Since Paulo refuses to conform and undertakes a pilgrimage instead, the very act of renunciation becomes one of spiritual inventiveness. From Lyotard's perspective, it is dissent which makes possible the free play of multiple narratives. Paulo, in his new detached stance, becomes much more tolerant of other narratives, including those which he does not necessarily endorse. The postmodernist element which complements the act of pilgrimage in *The Zahir* permits the recognition of multiple discourses while also increasing the incommensurable quality of such narratives. Paulo certainly reinstates his new psychological state of mind following renunciation of his old life, 'I am now a man at peace with his spirit [...] I am capable of a love of which I myself knew nothing, and this leaves me in a state of grace' (60-61).

When Paulo in *The Zahir* decides to forgo his old identity, an important issue which deserves consideration is the problem of the relationship between self and society. The demise of grand narratives seems to suggest that society is disintegrating into 'a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion' (Lyotard 1984, 15). However, according to Lyotard, this is not what is happening in the postmodern world. While the role of the self has changed, there is nothing that suggests that its demise is imminent.

In combining Paulo's renunciation with pilgrimage, this novel recognizes that the subaltern's self is not an entity existing unto itself; rather its existence is bound up with the intricate social interaction within which it exists. The protagonist, who combines dual responsibilities as pilgrim and subaltern, therefore recognizes the various possibilities of life, of which renunciation happens to be his prime choice. The departure of his wife, though unsettling at the beginning, gently leads Paulo into a reconciliatory understanding of life. He thus philosophises, "It's happened before, it will happen again, I'm sure. When someone leaves, it's because someone else is about to arrive - I'll find love again" (16).

Fascinated by the notion of a life without committing to an underlying 'authority', the Brazilian pilgrim's responsibility is to market his personal freedom. The novel consequently bases itself on the search for truth of one's own life and leads this pilgrim into a new understanding of the nature of love, the power of destiny and what it really means to follow the dictates of the heart.

Paulo's refusal to participate further in a network of failed social relations does not involve a smooth process. On the contrary, his self is caught in the midst of intense struggle and conflict which causes him to renounce and to accept from then onwards 'a state of either holiness or madness' (61). Paulo's various utterances are clear statements about choices which he is empowered to make and which are available within the framework of social interaction. The central preoccupation in the novel – 'I must first find myself' (179) – shows how the fragmentation and deinstitutionalisation which unfold in contemporary social life are mediated through the ethical and religious choices of the Brazilian pilgrim. The binaries of the orderly and the simple versus the disorderly and the complex are sharply woven into Paulo's intricate international odyssey which displays the multiple ironies that exemplify the nature of Coelho's engagement with Brazil as a whole. Paulo is after all not the only one who renounces his identity and undertakes a pilgrimage – his wife Esther does so much before him, followed by the disparate narratives of Jan the disillusioned Dutch millionaire and Paulo's own mentor, Mikhail the Kazakh.

When Paulo indicates, 'I've been wandering like a pilgrim through the streets of one city, and yesterday I arrived in a different one' (309), the act of pilgrimage is sealed in a unique form and as a unique spiritual event and clearly emphasizes the personal motivations behind his renunciation. Paulo's worldly detachment, his creation of a new identity and reception of knowledge from his mentor are like processes of a perpetual spiritual discovery. In other words, 'the postmodern needs to be understood through the paradox of the future anterior tense' (Lyotard 1992, 32). Coelho's storytelling tactic in *The Zahir* is a deliberate confrontation of the contemporary reader with narrative phantoms. For this reason, pilgrimage in *The Zahir* as well as in other texts, signals religious *déjà-vu* motifs.

Dissociating from formal discourses, Paulo's physical pilgrimage extends into a free pilgrimage of the mind. The argument that 'religion as being mainly concerned with general, long-range, goals and magic as concerned with immediate and concrete goals' (Stark 2001, 102-103) materialises in the esoteric tendencies of Coelho's postmodern narratives and enhances

the multiple possibilities surrounding renunciation. In *The Zahir*, for example, the pilgrim's spatio-geographical choice between 'North or South' (259) welcomes 'West' as a fitting alternative, since renunciation means acceptance yet detachment.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper conveys aspects of the eclectic religious character of contemporary Brazil as perceived in selected novels by Coelho. Through the recurring motif of pilgrimage and Lyotard's notion of the 'little' narrative, the paper highlights the broader implications of renunciation with multiple possibilities cohabiting side by side – the fit body of the protagonist served by an equally well-trained and detached mind, is a body capable of repeated, even continuous, intensity of sensations, and constantly open to any chance experience which the world may provide.

While most religious pilgrimages lead to a holy city, building or shrine, this reading of pilgrimage in Coelho's novels adds to the dimension of time and space that gives renewed depth to representations of religion in contemporary Brazil. It is true that the shrine, whether it contains the relics of a saint or the visible marks of a past contact with the divine, a temple, a tablet of the law, signs of a miracle or reminders of a covenant, recalls some foundation event. After all, the goal of the pilgrimage, whether it is a place from which the faith emanates, a centre on which it converges or a commemorative representation, allows of many different interpretations.

Coelho's renewed definitions of pilgrimage through the recurring trope of renunciation display a universal perspective towards religion. One and the same site may be revered by universal rather than divisive religious codes, in succession or simultaneously. The goal, however, is nothing without experiencing the journey to reach it. The Brazilian pilgrim's quest also establishes a bond: it brings together and unites travellers at the same high point in their existences, spreading ideas and models of faith and forging alliances between freed people.

Renunciation also indicates a focus on the sublime, which is intense at the end of *The Pilgrimage*, *The Valkyries* and *The Zahir*, where blessings and forgiveness abound. Most phases during the pilgrimage prepare for these final reconciliatory messages which are universal and accessible, unbound by the rigorous discourse of formal religion. From a Lyotardian perspective, the imminent pain in experiencing the sublime results from

the fact that the pilgrim's imagination leads to the joy of discovering greater, more noble possibilities within personal discordance (1988, 166). In the novels concerned, Paulo's renunciation and physical pilgrimage are translated as a cycle of both pain and joy and a sign of progress towards a more honest mode of human relations.

Coelho's depiction of Bible-like pilgrimages by non-Biblical figures creates not only the effect of renunciation being accessible, but also underlines the popular idea that contemporary individuals do need the 'alchemist' who is apparently able to transform uncertainty into self-assurance and confidence. Coelho's religious views, in these novels, reflect the awareness of living in the era of identity problems, with disturbed men and women looking for balms and cures. The prominent role of the pilgrim therefore legitimizes individual rights and personal narratives. Though the destination of the pilgrimage is not necessarily certain, Coelho's Brazilian pilgrim is entitled to make choices, renunciation being a prominent one.

Finally, it is tolerance that underlines Coelho's perspective of pilgrimage. Lyotard also arrives at the view of tolerance, since according to him, one of the basic attributes of postmodern knowledge is that it cultivates our sense of appreciating differences, and 'reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable' (1984, xxv). Coelho's representation of pilgrimage a la *brasileña* thus helps us to understand that differences are not to be overcome; rather they are facts of the postindustrial way of life.

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