



ECHOES BY
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An Encounter With the Alchemist

I
 It was 2000. I was in Cambridge. I was going through a bad depression. Fortunately, I had some good friends. Ricardo, a Rastafarian from Jamaica, and Rafael from Caracas in Venezuela suggested I read a book. The question was: which book? Our friend, Caroline from Montpellier in southern France suggested *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho with her reassuring smile that never failed to impress us.

I went to Waterstones bookshop in Sidney St. I bought *The Alchemist* and went to the tea parlour. I ordered a pot of Earl Grey tea. I started reading. I filled up my teapot two more times. Caroline's reassuring smile won again.

My encounter with Santiago, Fatima and the Alchemist changed my life like it did for many others. A simple story pulled me out of depression. Fate had a trick up its sleeve, though.

II
 It was a Saturday. I woke up early. I was listening to Radio Cambridgeshire. Paulo Coelho would be in London the same day to sign autographs for his latest book *The Devil and Miss Prym*. By then, I had digested Paulo's *The Alchemist*, *Valkyries*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Fifth Mountain*, and *Veronika Decides To Die*.

The venue was Foyles, Charing Cross Road. This was a calling. There wasn't a second to lose. I was soon in a taxi from our student flat in Huntingdon Road to the railway station.

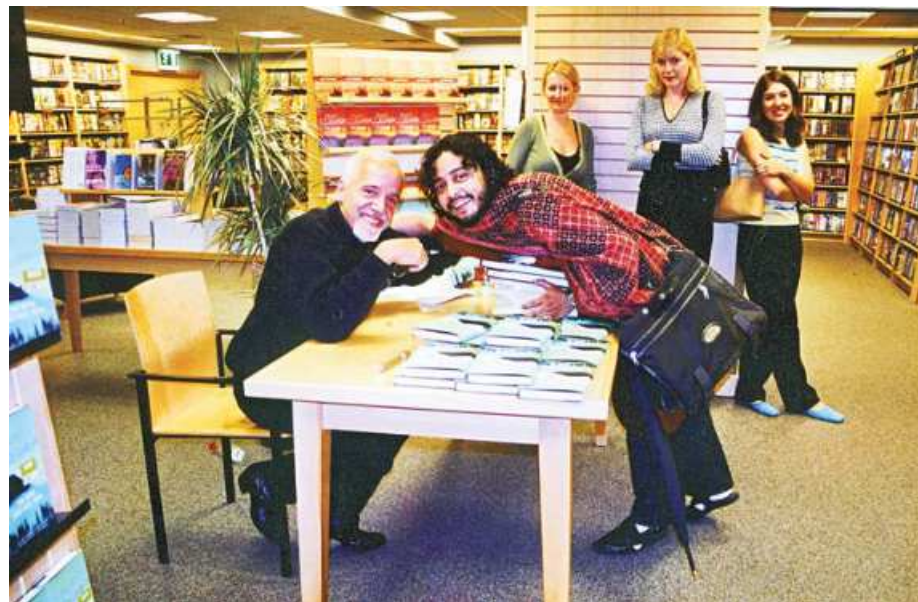


PHOTO: NURIA GAUDENS

III
 A chance to meet Paulo Coelho was one battle won. The larger battle would be to impress him within less than two minutes while he gives autographs to all his books I had.

I dressed up as best as I could. To make myself stand out, I wrapped myself in a red Sindhi Ajrak *chaadar*. I wore a ruby-red Rajshahi silk *kurta*, a pair of Peshawari sandals with white socks, and carried an umbrella. I had a beard and

long hair in those days.

While waiting in line, I made friends with Nuria from Australia and Alexandra from Greece. Being younger than what I am now, I was a bit overconfident; a bit of a show-off. I declared, I'll make Paulo talk with me. Nuria and Alexandra promised me a treat if I could do so. When my turn came, I handed my SLR to Nuria and requested her to take snaps.

IV
 I noticed a wrapped cigar in front of Paulo.

It gave me an idea to start a conversation. "That isn't a Habana cigar," I said. Paulo was signing, paying no attention. "How can you be so sure, my friend?" Paulo responded. I said "As I came out of Charing Cross road station, I met a fairy. She told me you'll meet the Alchemist. He doesn't smoke Habana cigars." Paulo looked up. He had a smile on his face. "I'm not the Alchemist. You are the Alchemist, my friend. I'm Santiago from Andalusia."

I was lost for words. We both looked at each other. We both smiled. Paulo asked me about myself. We talked. Nuria took one snap. Surprisingly, Paulo asked her to take some more snaps. He asked the attendants to come into the frame. I just couldn't believe my luck. Nuria and Alexandra kept their word that day.

V
 No, I didn't overcome my battles with depression after reading *The Alchemist*. That took time. "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" was *the* quote that gave me hope at that time. For this, I am grateful to Paulo. However, it took years to appreciate; sometimes fate doesn't give us what we want.

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ART EXPLORATION 101

SYED MASRUR TEHZIB

Art can seem like an increasingly distant issue to today's youth, the result of growing up in a culture built on social media, bite-sized information, and online interaction. These things, while not inherently negative, have considerable influence on the youth's perception of art, especially classical forms of it. It is important to understand that art can mean a variety of things; this article specifically talks about visual art.

Firstly, understanding and appreciating art requires time. Few people have the time to visit museums and art galleries and look at exhibits in order to fully experience the works in front of them.

Secondly, the culture surrounding art has become far more marginalised than it was in the past, especially in Bangladesh. It is all too common for millennials to have grown up in a household that considers art to be unimportant, or simply a hobby. This old-fashioned view holds the youth back from exploring their creativity without the inherent barriers placed upon them.

So how do we cross this divide? Here are some suggestions.

WATCH YOUTUBE

The youth significantly lacks time to explore mediums such as art. So, why not incorporate art into your free time? While a plethora of such channels exists, my personal favourite is Nerdwriter1. His content includes



various video essays on topics ranging from science, philosophy, and art. The videos are exceptionally high quality and their production is sure to keep any viewer engaged for hours. Through his videos, it is possible to find interest in art of all forms, and start understanding what you enjoy about the medium. Additionally, if you fancy something more educational or advanced, I would suggest Smarthistory. They are far more in-depth, and you may find yourself transfixed by their content.

EXPLORE

The next step in your artistic journey is more open to interpretation. Once you've established what about art speaks to YOU, you can go out of your way to find related articles, videos, or pieces on the internet. If you enjoy

a particular style, Pinterest is your best friend. There is an abundance of all types of art on the app, and one is free to explore these interests as one pleases. If you find difficulty in investing yourself in art, try looking at fan art from your favourite movie, show, or game. That is bound to be a promising start.

TRY EXPRESSING YOURSELF

After all is said and done, there is no better alternative to picking up a brush – or pen – and letting your imagination run wild. Your first caricatures may not be masterpieces, but they don't have to be. Through the very process of trying to formulate your thoughts into art pieces, you will have understood the truth that lies at the heart of all great art, the painter – you.

Hopefully, in the end, you will find yourself engrossed in this utterly beautiful medium. Art can help us better understand the world around us while being a wonderful source of self-actualisation. And once you've found yourself appreciating art, look into Bengali art too. Works by the likes of Zainul Abedin, SM Sultan, Quamrul Hassan, and Murtaja Baseer will help you appreciate Bengali culture through this newly acquired lens.

Perhaps, through art, you can discover a part of you that you never knew existed.

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