

**Exploring the Concept of “Spirituality” in Coelho’s *Brida*:  
The Search for Inner Awareness and Personal Integration**

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**Introduction: Nature/Culture: A Form of Patriarchal Subjugation or Empowerment?**

The subjection of women based on patriarchal traditions alongside a dualistic system has been responsible for the denial of equal status to women. For example, associating female with nature is one of the strategies used to “imprison” and “lock” women in this vulnerable position. Under this system, women are “chained” to the domestic sphere. When this “tradition” is passed on from one generation to another, society seems to perceive this as the universal truth.

By establishing the sense of dualism between male and female, a parallel between the culture/nature polarities is drawn, where men are associated with culture and women with nature. The association or the clear demarcation between men and women is supported by the concept of “logic of domination” (Warren, 2000: 47). The “logic of domination” is a logical structure of argumentation that justifies the domination and subordination of women as the weaker beings. Equating women to such a claim will tend to place women in the locus of passivity, namely being weak, submissive, and emotional and so on as compared to the male counterparts. Similarly, Jasmin Sydee and Sharon Beder claim that:

There is a systematic domination over both women and nature, underpinned by a conceptual set of dualisms. These dualisms would be familiar as man/woman, mind/body, reason/emotion, human/nature, active/passive, and so forth. The importance lies, however, not just in the presumption that reality does in fact occur in binary opposite sets, but that the former in each pair is believed to be justifiably superior to the latter. (Sydee and Beder, 2001: 3)

Hence, the stereotypical depictions of women as closer to nature reinforce gender stereotypes and the commitment to the elimination of male gender privilege and power over women. Hence, most feminists disagree with the claim and tend to debunk the fact that women are closer to nature, which equate them [women] as the weaker being. Ynestra King claims that:

Feminism has had to wrestle with the problem of the projection of human ideas onto the natural, where these human ideas of what is natural have then been projected back onto human society as natural law and used to reinforce male ideas about female nature. Because ideas reinforcing the relationship between women and nature have been used to limit and oppress women in western society, feminists have looked to social constructionism. (King, 1992: 118)

King also asserts that nature/culture dualism acts as a product of patriarchy and is perceived as the “natural law” which is formed in order to “reinforce the woman/nature relationship as biological determinism.” Similarly, Val Plumwood states that society tends to assume that western culture is human nature. Plumwood further explains that:

...the gendered character of nature/culture dualism, and of the whole web of other dualisms interconnected with it, is not a feature of human thought or culture per se, and does not relate the universal man to the universal woman; it is specifically a feature of western thought. (Plumwood, 1993:11)

Plumwood also asserts that:

In terms of the assumptions of culture/nature dualism, women’s ‘uncontrollable’ bodies make them part of the sphere of nature”. Such an assumption of women’s closeness to nature is taken as the realm of necessity over that of freedom, is of course extremely problematic for feminists. (ibid: 37)

Based on the aforementioned assumptions and proclaimed “universal truth” about the connection of nature with women and culture to men, most feminists tried very hard to disassociate women from this stereotypical demarcation. The entanglement of women as a part of nature has placed women in the state of stillness, motionless that seem to silent them in every possible way.

In contrast to the abovementioned statements and claims, here Brida’s actions (of blending into nature in search of her own spirituality) will be seen to be a form of

empowerment. Furthermore, the article will also look at how she is able to achieve a spiritual identification with nature.

The identification of women with nature here is seen as a form of empowerment instead of a form of subjugation that weakens the women's position in the patriarchal society. The female protagonist in Paulo Coelho's novel is *Brida*, a young Irish girl, who is involved in a quest for knowledge and has decided to become a wicca (witch). She has long been interested in various aspects of magic, but now she is searching for something more. Her search leads her to people of great wisdom who begin to teach her about the spiritual world.

### **Being a Witch: A Stereotypical Depiction**

At present, witchcraft is less likely than at any time in its history to be seen as an exceptional matter, concerned with hysteria, cultic depravity, gynocide (the mass murder of women) or other extremes of human behavior (Gibson, 2000: 1).

Based on this definition given by Marion Gibson, society has imposed certain stereotypical depictions on the term "witch." Negative connotations have been assigned to women--in particular, witches. Witches are, therefore, associated with devils, sorcery, cult, genocide, and so on in history and in media representations. Edward Bever defines the term "witch":

Witches were generally thought to use magic to influence the weather, interfere with smaller-scale domestic processes like churning butter and brewing beer, harm farm animals or prevent them from producing eggs or milk, cause impotence in men or frigidity in women, and injure people through illness or accidents. The means by which they were thought to work their *maleficium* included secret spells and incantations; actions and gestures; potions, salves, and powders; magically potent objects; a look, breath, touch, or blow; public verbal curses; and the sheer power of their ill will. (Bever, 2008: 2)<sup>1</sup>

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a witch is "a woman who is believed to have magic powers, especially to do evil things and wear a black pointed hat and flies on a broom." The often negatively skewed definition of the term "witch," however, is no longer applicable in

covering for the different branch of witches in the modern society. On the contrary, the “witches” in *Brida* are depicted as spiritual feminist.

According to Kathryn Rountree, Wicca (also known as a witch) is one of the branches in feminist witchcraft which invokes both Goddess and God (Rountree, 2004:35). From the 1950s onwards, Wicca spread widely and rapidly. Rountree further elaborates that “Wicca are often more open about their practices, less hierarchical in their organization, and more creative and spontaneous in their rituals than traditional Wiccan covens” (ibid: 35). Furthermore, Rountree indicates “the central tenets were its equal emphasis on both genders, within both the human and divine realms; its celebration of the natural world, the earth’s cycle, personal freedom and pleasure; and its system of initiation and training and inclusive participation of all coven members” (ibid: 37). Normally, these Wicca practitioners are in search of their aspects of spirituality along the journey of self-discovery. They need to evoke all their senses in order to activate and enhance their inner spirituality. Rountree’s definition of the term “witch” will be applied in the present study.

The term ‘witch’ has been redefined by those in the modern movement to mean a woman – a sixteenth-century village wise woman or a modern spiritual feminist – who challenges patriarchal control and claims independent knowledge and power. (ibid: 42)

Some feminists perceive the notion of “women’s spirituality” as a part covering both Christian feminists and feminist witches. The term “spiritual or spirituality” is used to contrast church life with worldly or materialistic ways of being (Rizzuto, qtd. in Nelson, 2009: 8). Hence, the meanings of the terms “spiritual” and “spiritualism” are often fuzzy, particularly in feminist studies because they indicate different meanings in different contexts. “Spiritualism is a broad term encompassing multiple domains of meaning that may differ among various cultural, national and religious groups.” (Roehikepartain, Benson, King and Wagener, 2006: 4-6; Tahakashi & Ide, 2003: 15-38). In short, “spiritualism” refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live and “spirituality” implies some

kind of vision to the human spirit and the need to assist it to achieve its full potential.

Drawing the idea from Spilka and McIntosh, Peter C. Hill et al. define the term “spirituality” as “the individual experiences and is identified with such things as personal transcendence, supraconscious sensitivity and meaningfulness” (Hill et al, 2000: 60). Robert A. Emmons and Cheryl A. Crumpler define “spirituality” as “the experiential and personal side of our relationship to the transcendent or sacred”.<sup>2</sup> This present study adopts ecofeminist spiritualities theory in order to dissect Coelho’s *Brida*.

### **Ecofeminist Spiritualities**

Ecofeminists claim that spiritual ecofeminism reinforces harmful gender stereotype about women as closer to nature than men, less rational and more emotional than men. Likewise, Murray Bookchin was particularly disturbed at connections with feminist spirituality, perceiving it the worst form of apolitical mysticism (Sturgeon 1997: 37). Associating women with nature seems to place them in the locus of passivity (i.e. weak, submissive, emotional etc). Hence, Karen Warren claimed that “ecofeminists disagree about the nature and place of spirituality in ecofeminist politics and practice” (Warren, 2000: 193).

In contrast to the belief, Warren affirmed that ecofeminist spiritualities was said to embody a kind of power, including personal power, which is a form of empowerment (ibid: 199). In other words, the communion between women and nature is said to intensify the personal power (i.e. power to transcend beyond the sensual self). Therefore, this present study will look at the concepts of inner awareness and personal integration. Charlene Spretnak claims that “the ecofeminist sense of spiritual emerges through experiences of ecocommunion with nature” (qtd. ibid: 32).<sup>3</sup>

Our spiritual nature is not a separate nature or characteristic that we have but an inseparable part of all we are and do (Wagener & Malony, 2006: 137-149). Spirituality thus takes us beyond ordinary daily experience and has a transforming effect on our lives and relationships. It is not just about being and experience. It also involves a search for higher values, inner freedom and things that give life meaning (Vergote 83). Women's spirituality in this sense is being viewed as a primary good, having its own inherent nature and integrity, and being fundamentally grounded in nature itself (Sydee and Beder, 2001: 4).<sup>4</sup>

Nicola Slee states that "Feminist spirituality, arises from the consciousness of women's oppression and is a quest to overcome women's marginalisation in religion as in every other sphere of life" (Slee, 2004: 176). However, feminist spirituality is a very broad ranging movement, and takes expression in all the major world religions, including Christianity, as well as movements such as Paganism and Wicca. This is evident in *Brida* where the woman protagonist is in search on inner-spirituality and the meaning of life.

Today, Hill et al. (2000) and Emmons & Crumpler (1999) indicate that the definition of the term "spirituality" is often used to denote experiential and personal side of our relationship to the transcendent or sacred. The term "spirituality" has evolved and is said to encompass four themes: (a) a source of values and ultimate meaning or purpose beyond the self, including a sense of mystery and self transcendence, (b) a way of understanding; (c) inner awareness and (d) personal integration (Roof, 1999: 35). The present study focuses on the last two aspects--"inner awareness" and "personal integration"--although many scholars have emphasized the fourth theme whereby spirituality has an integrative and harmonizing function that involves our inner unity and our relationship and connectedness with others and to be a broader sense of reality that powers our ability to be transcendent (Nelson, 2009: 8).

### **Exploring the Concept of “Spirituality” In Paulo Coelho’s *Brida***

Magic is a bridge; a bridge that allows you to walk from the visible world over into the invisible world, and to learn the lessons of both those worlds (Coelho, 2008: 16).

*Brida* depicts the notion of “self-discovery” of a woman named Brida. Brida chooses to be a witch, as she needs to evoke her senses, to discover her “Gift” as well as to evoke her inner awareness towards her surrounding [nature]. The “bridge” as mentioned in the excerpt above denotes the “knowledge” that Brida needs to acquire simultaneously with the “awakening” of her inner self. In order to “cross the bridge” she needs to master the Tradition of the Sun and the Tradition of the Moon. According to the Magus, “the Tradition of the Sun, teaches the secrets through space and the world surrounds us, and the Tradition of the Moon teaches through time and the things that are imprisoned in time’s memory” (ibid: 6-17). Brida is required to master both the traditions before she could be fully regarded as a “wicca” [witch].

Along the process of becoming a witch, Brida is constantly exposed to her surroundings (i.e. to study the meaning of “life” through immersion; i.e. via nature) through her teachers (the Magus and Wicca). In the teachings, she is constantly exposed to the issues such as dualism in patriarchy, the sense of guilt and dilemma faced by women, the misconception of being a witch and so on. During one of the witch gatherings, they were exposed to the aforementioned issues. The following excerpt illustrates the concept of dualism as one of the problems faced by women in patriarchal society:

May the Virgin Mary free us from those marks and put an end for ever to our sense of guilt. We feel guilty when we go out to work because we are leaving our children in order to earn money to feed them. We feel guilty when we stay at home because it seems we’re not making the most of our freedom. We feel guilty about everything, because we have always been kept far from decision-making and from power. (ibid: 129)

As mentioned earlier, her senses towards her surrounding have been awakened. The subjugation of women in patriarchal society has always been a “blind spot” for women. They

try to avoid questioning the “patriarchal system” that seem to oppress them in many ways. In other words, women are constantly facing dilemma in a patriarchal society. They are often bound in the domestic sphere and their roles are mainly taking care of their children, cooking instead of working. Warren indicated that the dualistic system established by patriarchy “encourages oppositional values” (46) and these values are used to subjugate women as the weaker beings. Therefore, the logic of dominations places women in the locus of passivity and thus established itself as the universal truth. As indicated in the excerpt above, “we [women] feel guilty” because they are now going against the norm. These paradoxical feelings are as the results of the societal subjugation by the “power” [patriarchy] that limit women’s abilities to go against them.

In addition, Wicca’s teachings also touch on the issue of being a witch. Women who practice witchcraft will tend to be doubly-subjugated; firstly for being a woman and secondly, for practicing dark magic. This is shown in the excerpt below:

May the Virgin Mary remind us always that we were burned and persecuted because we preached the Religion of Love. When others were trying to stop time with the power of sin, we gathered together to hold forbidden festivals in which we celebrated what was still beautiful in the world. Because of this, we were condemned and burned in the public squares. (129)

According to Rountree, the accused ‘witches’ did not indulge in “the bizarre and diabolical activities” (Rountree, 2004: 42) the inquisitors accused them of but they performed rituals such as “illicit healing, sorcery, incorporating magical charms in their healing”. Therefore, from the perspective of many feminist scholars, they do empathize with the contemporary witchcraft movement and claim that the “witches were not the pitiable victims of senescence” (Levack, 1987: 15). They were just simply the victims of prejudice imposed by the society for going against the norm. Besides that, the concept of spirituality has been added into the definition of certain branch of witches who deemed themselves to be spiritual feminists.



These spiritual feminists tend to believe that personal integration and inner awareness are the platforms to transcend.

### **Personal Integration and Inner Awareness**

One simply finds oneself empowered to act on behalf of other beings –or on behalf of the larger whole-the empowerment itself seems to come through that or those for whose sake one acts. (Macy, 1989: 210)

According to Sydee and Beder, “Certain paths of ecofeminist thought are almost wholly spiritual, as theorists and activists explore the holistic value of reality and raise it to a sacred realm” (Sydee and Beder, 2001: 1). Sydee and Beder also claim that “the reconnection of women to nature as a source of strength, power, and virtue. Surprisingly, for witches, ‘life means communion with the Universe’ (ibid: 4). In other words, witches need to assimilate themselves into nature in order to feel transcendental. Sydee and Beder argue that:

Re-connecting humans with nature, and modelling communities and self-actualisation on the patterns and webs of nature has vast political and structural implications, and, in itself, is inherently spiritual. These ecofeminists wish to break the hierarchies that have been created around difference to re-immense humans in nature. (ibid: 1)

Brida’s spiritual journey encompasses two stages; namely personal integration and inner awareness. In the *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* Nicola Slee claims that women’s spirituality has been a mostly hidden tradition (Slee, 2004: 172). In other words, in order to transcend, a woman has to evoke her “unknown self” and has to find her own path to achieve what ecofeminists call “spiritual identification.” This is shown in the excerpt below:

She spent her life dancing and lighting candles, plunging knives into water and learning about rituals...And she accepted all that because it was part of the Tradition, a Tradition she didn’t understand, but which was perhaps in touch with her unknown self. (Coelho, 2008: 135)

Based on this excerpt, Brida’s spiritual journey also serves as the quest for meaning; more specifically the meaning of life. Apart from that, she also has to discover her “Gift” through the two traditions.

Personal integration is a process whereby there is integration between Brida's inner self and the Others (nature, other beings) in order to transcend. Like any other branch of ecofeminism, ecofeminist spirituality emphasizes the interconnectedness of life. Based on the Magus and Wicca's teachings, to be able to integrate with nature is one of the challenges that Brida has to face. For example, she needs to show her respect to the non-beings as well such as asking permission to enter into the forest: "Brida asked permission. The wood, which had, up until then been just an ordinary wood, seemed suddenly to come to life" (ibid: 60) Brida's integration, her act of "blending" into the nature makes her feel empowered. She embraces nature as it gives her the strength to transcend beyond her sensual self. As mentioned previously, ecofeminism celebrates the "interconnection of life." Brida's inner awareness is thus sharpened when she is asked to make contact with her surroundings. This is shown in this excerpt:

Stay on the bridge between the visible and the invisible...Everything in the Universe has life, and you must always try to stay in contact with the life. It understands your language. And the world will begin to take on a different meaning for you. (ibid: 61)

It is visible throughout the novel that Brida is taught how to appreciate life, how to make meaning out of her surroundings and how to evoke her "gifts" through her assimilation with nature. Therefore, although some ecofeminists claim that the association of women and nature is degrading, nature in this novel makes Brida feel empowered. Besides that, her teacher also taught her to dance to the rhythm of the world:

When she danced to sound of the world, her soul would feel more comfortable in her body, her soul would feel more comfortable in her body and there would be a lessening of tension. (ibid: 126)

The unification of her body and mind make it possible for Brida to connect to nature. The two traditions have taught her to "open" her mind and "listen" to her surroundings. Brida states that "she was entirely connected to the world" (ibid: 163) as she has discovered her path finally, which is to become a witch. Her inner senses are "awakened" when she

practices the ritual and she feels the sense of “freedom” once she is connected to nature. The following excerpts illustrate her feelings towards her inner awareness: “Every atom of her body was touching the air, and the air was generous, it brought with it, from afar, secrets and perfumes to clothe her from head to toe” (ibid: 234). “I’m free, I’m proud of my body because it’s the manifestation of GOD in the visible world . . . she was alive, the blood was coursing through her brain” (ibid: 237).

Personal integration and inner awareness have played a crucial role in guiding Brida along her way to becoming a witch. In addition, her journey involves “integrative and harmonizing functions,” as mentioned previously, that stimulate her urges to reach for both her “spiritual self” and the meaning of her life. Hence, the concept of spirituality has deep roots in this novel as it serves as a form of empowerment for the female protagonist.

### **Spirituality as a Form of Empowerment**

In Witchcraft, we define a new space and a new time whenever we cast a circle to begin a ritual. The circle exists on the boundaries of ordinary space and time; it is ‘between the worlds’ of the seen and unseen, of flashlight and starlight consciousness, a space in which alternate realities meet, in which the past and future are open to us. Time is no longer measured out; it becomes elastic, fluid, a swirling pool in which we dive and swim. The restrictions and distinctions of our socially defined roles no longer apply; only the rule of nature holds sway. . . . Within the circle, the powers within us . . . are revealed. (Starhawk, 1989: 71–72)

Here the concept of “spirituality” encompasses “the experiential and personal side of our relationship to the transcendent or sacred” (as defined by Hill et al., 2000 and Emmons and Crumpler, 1999). The ritual Brida and the other women perform in the forest (also known as the Witches’ Sabbath) represents the channel to explore their “unknown self”. These women, including Brida are in the “Initiation Stage” which, according to Jone Salomonsen, serves as “an option for spiritual rebirth and becoming once again” (Salomonsen, 2009: 368).

I'm free. I'm proud of my body because it's the manifestation of God in the visible world...The world seemed far away, and she no longer cared about superficial things. She was alive, the blood was coursing through her veins, and she was entirely given over, body and soul, to her search. (Coelho, 2008: 237)

The ritual during the witches' Sabbath enables Brida to transcend and feel empowered. In addition, this is the moment where she achieves spiritual identification with nature. The feeling of being empowered is "activated" once she has completed the ritual in the forest. Spretnak claims that:

There are many moments in a woman's life when she gains experiential knowledge, in a powerful body/mind union, of the holistic truths of spirituality...females are predisposed from a very early age to perceive the connectedness in life; for example, females are more empathetic, and they remain more aware of the subtle, contextual "data" in interpersonal contacts throughout adulthood. (Spretnak, 1991: 35)

Therefore, after the ritual, she could feel the sense of "*Power*" in her body and soul. The "union of body/mind" enables her to feel empowered. Hence, women, being more empathetic beings in the ecosystem, are said to be more sensitive (or closer to nature) towards their surroundings as compared to men. Consequently, the association of women to nature is crucial as it enables them to discover their spiritual self. This is reflected in these excerpts: "In that power dwelled the Wisdom of Time. There was a Serpent, wise and masterful. Only the Virgin, by crushing the serpent's head beneath her heel, could subjugate it" (Coelho, 2008: 240); and "And so Wicca prayed to the Virgin Mary as well, asking her for purity of soul, steadiness of hand, and the protection of her cloak, so that she could bring down that Power on the women before her, without it seducing or overwhelming any of them" (ibid: 241).

The phrase "crushing the serpent's head" here represents Brida's empowerment in resisting the norm. The "Power" which Brida has experienced during the witches' Sabbath has given her the strength to "cross the bridge to the unknown world." In other words, she has reached the transcendental stage.

## **Conclusion**

Everyone has a Gift, but they choose not to see it. You accepted yours, and your encounter with your Gift is your encounter with the world. (Coelho, 2008: 252)

Brida's assimilation into nature is a form of spiritual identification which enables her to "unearth" her "unknown self." She has learned how to integrate herself into the nature as well as to evoke her inner awareness through the two Traditions. These two approaches--namely personal integration and inner awareness--have transformed her inner self, making it transcendent. Hence, these approaches served as the integrative and harmonizing functions that eventually transcend Brida's inner spirituality into another level. Brida's actions of blending into the nature have activated her "Gift" and invoked the "Power" within her. Brida's assimilation into the nature has been viewed as a form of empowerment rather than a form of patriarchal subjugation. Besides that, the distorted images of "witches", being viewed negatively for centuries are now debunked. The witches are depicted as "spiritual feminists" who believe that the ultimate goals are to uncover the purpose beyond the self and to aim for self-transcendence.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Bever, “the Latin word *maleficium* originally meant ‘wrongdoing’ or ‘mischief,’ but in Roman times it came to be specifically associated with harmful magic.”

<sup>2</sup> Emmons and Crumpler also claim that the “importance of inquiring into people's implicit beliefs about the nature of God is vital in the study of psychology and religion, because we believe this issue may lie at the heart of the debate surrounding definitions of religion and spirituality.”

<sup>3</sup> Spretnak also claims that communion with nature would empower oneself and enable the discovery of what Joanna Macy calls the “ecological self” (qtd. in Warren, 2000: 32).

<sup>4</sup> Taken from the Archive of University of Wollongong. For details concerning the original copy, see Sydee and Beder (2001).