

# Non-conformity of Characterization in select works of Paulo Coelho

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## ABSTRACT

Humans were born to be conformists. Conforming to the law of the land is what has brought peace and order to chaos. In fact, conformity is in our genes. The desire to fit in is so overwhelming and instinctive that when people find their behaviour to be conflicting with their group, their brain mechanisms motivate them to alter their behaviour to match their peers. In psychological terms, this is known as the 'reward prediction error' signal. In other words, our dopamine neurons send signals that cover three possible errors in predicting a reward: that the reward was better than expected (a positive error); that the reward was exactly as expected (no error); or that the reward was less than expected (a negative error). It is in case of a negative error that the dopamine neurons tend to shut down. (1)(2)(3)

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In case of conformity, there is either a positive error in the form of acknowledgement from peers or there is no error, both of which result in dopamine neurons firing up the pleasure centres of the brain.

So, when our brains are wired to conform, why do most people relate to non-conformists? And, what benefits come out of rejecting societal norms? This paper will study how Paulo Coelho has integrated non-conformist behaviours in his protagonists and what makes readers relate to them. It will also delve into how creativity is essentially a bi-product of non-conformity and that every human is a non-conformist within.

### Discussion

Non-conformity is a necessary evil. People usually tend to oppose change but it's important for long-term progress and development. Many out-of-the-box, outstanding and remarkable inventions that have transformed our very lives were created by people who were of the strong belief that change is inevitable. Without non-conformists, human development and progress would be significantly slow.

In his PsyBlog post "Why Group Norms Kill Creativity", Psychologist Dr Jeremy Dean writes: "The purpose of norms is to provide a stable and predictable social world, to regulate our behaviour with each other. In many respects, norms have a beneficial effect, bolstering society's foundations and keeping it from falling into chaos." But, he notes, "stability and predictability are enemies of the creative process. (4)

To put things in perspective, an excerpt from a speech made by Peter Thiel (co-founder of PayPal and first investor in Facebook) goes: "In Silicon Valley many of the more successful entrepreneurs exhibit a mild form of aspergers--they are missing the imitation socialization gene." It turns out that's

what makes them less fearful of disappointing their peers and great at innovation that creates companies. (5)

As a creator, the nonconformist embraces the change, and carves out something different from what is already useful. And, the creative person-the nonconformist - often has a profound disagreement with the way things are done. Nonconformists are mostly self-reliant. They stay true to their beliefs, attitudes and desires. They are courageous in the face of adversity.

While these may seem like traits that only a handful of people possess or even aspire to inculcate, it turns out, non-conformity is as much a part of human fabric as is conformity. Even when a child wants to grab its parents' attention, it does something out of the ordinary. When an athlete refuses to sing his national anthem as an act of defiance against his government, he warrants nationwide attention to a cause.

Similarly, different cultures and societies may deem certain acts inappropriate at the least and unlawful at the worst. Take driving in Saudi Arabia for example, women weren't allowed for generations to go behind the wheel, but it took just one non-conformist to start a whole movement that has now led to the abolishment of the religious law that forbade women to drive.

Paulo Coelho, one of the most famous authors of our times, has gained mass popularity as his books carry a universality that resonates with people living all across the world. His best known book, *The Alchemist*, remains till date the most translated book in the world by a living author, having sold over 35 million copies.

Paulo Coelho's work is often considered to be somewhat spiritual in nature; it is seen as a guide to self-realization for many people. The protagonists in his books many-a-time struggle with the idea of

conforming to a certain notion or paths decided for them by society but are able to achieve happiness, fame or success when they follow their hearts.

As mentioned earlier, *The Alchemist* is widely revered across ages and nationalities for its truthfulness in the journey to self-realization. It follows an Andalusian shepherd boy, Santiago, in his search for his 'Personal Legend', i.e., what a person has wanted to accomplish since childhood. He denounces all the charms and distractions of the world, even bears being parted from the girl he loves, in search of his dream to achieve the alchemy of the soul. (6)

He faces countless hurdles throughout the book, but keeps alive the faith in him to achieve his dream. His non-conformity is reflected in the fact that despite managing a reasonable abode as a shepherd, he readily sells his sheep to go to the Egyptian pyramids. It is this conviction and want for a purpose larger than himself that speaks to the common reader. Everybody finds themselves giving up on a dream, or choosing the easier option, instead of braving the barriers that stand in their way.

Another literary masterpiece is *Eleven Minutes*. Maria, the protagonist, dreams of a life of love, happiness and glamour. However, the traditional Brazilian town she grew up in, considered such emotions rebellious, even blasphemous for a girl, forcing her to flee. When her theatrical picturization of life eludes her, she ends up turning to prostitution. What may be considered a non-conformist choice, becomes her life and blood, and she manages to become very good at her job. Even when love does knock on her door like she'd always wanted, practicality prevails and she finds herself choosing her job over spending a life with a person who is worlds apart. (7)

In essence, it is the story of a girl who chooses to remain a prostitute, instead of settling for a conventional life with the person she loves. This is the epitome of non-conformity as she gained both success as well as encountered love, making the very choices which the society looked down upon.

A somewhat unconventional example of non-conformist behaviour can be found in Coelho's *Veronica Decides to Die*. After a failed suicide attempt, Veronica finds herself interned in an asylum as she is told that her overdosing has made her death imminent. However, she is overwhelmed by the inner peace and happiness of the inmates of the asylum for being able to lead their lives on their own conditions without being judged or ridiculed. She realizes how comforting it is to be liberated from the enforced norms and constant oppressions. (8)

It is in a setting that most would find alienating that she finds a reason to live. She falls in love with a person with schizophrenia and even learns what true happiness felt like, all because she was not forced to adhere to the rules of society.

It might be an important question to ask where Coelho draws such vivid experiences of self-realization and spirituality from. And, the answer lies in his own life journey. Having been institutionalized by his parents for dreaming to become a writer, Paulo Coelho almost gave up his passion. Later, through his many life phases, he partook in the hippie culture, became obsessed with occult sciences and dark magic, finally to wake up to his creative potential of being a storyteller. In his autobiographical work, *Hippie*, he takes cues from his unconventional life and illustrates how he broke away from the stereotypes and societal pressures to pursue his true calling. Through his narration Paulo guides the readers to follow their dreams for actual self-realization. (9)

Be it his own life or his books, Paulo Coelho provokes a side that perhaps lies dormant in most of his readers. Although subtle, his protagonists convey a strong message directed towards helping his readers through their own set of struggles and follies. Some may refer to his work as motivational, however, it embodies the traits, desires and dreams that every human lives with or abandons in his lifetime. Non-conformity is not that out of the ordinary, but for most, they don't realise where they should be non-conformists to create necessary chaos in a world full of the illusion of peace, and that is where Coelho's books come in handy.

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