

Self-awareness as Gyroscope in Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello*

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Abstract

Self-awareness is a crucial aspect of emotional intelligence, enabling individuals to recognize, regulate, and modulate their emotions effectively. This paper explores the concept of self-awareness and its significance in the lives of women, particularly through the lens of Paulo Coelho's novel *The Witch of Portobello*. The paper delves into the various levels of self-awareness from confusion and differentiation to identification, permanence, and meta-awareness, as proposed by Philippe Rochat and demonstrates how Athena, the female protagonist, exemplifies these levels throughout her journey of self-discovery. As she progresses through the various levels of self-awareness, she learns to accept her emotions, confront her past, and discover her true identity. Her evolving self-awareness serves as a gyroscope, keeping her centred and guiding her towards self-actualization. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of self-awareness as a gyroscope that guides individuals towards attaining a deeper understanding of themselves and navigating life's challenges.

Keywords: *Self-awareness, Phillippe Rochat, levels of self-awareness, Paulo Coelho*

"To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom"

- Socrates

Self-awareness is one of the many prominent terms invoked by influential intellectuals in the fields of management, spirituality, psychology and sociology. The paramount necessity of cultivating self-awareness in today's world has been underscored by a multitude of scholarly investigations. *The Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary* connotes self-awareness as "knowledge and understanding of your own character" (1387). Psychologists have used terms like "metacognition" to refer to one's awareness of their thought process", "metamood" to indicate a person's awareness of their emotion and "observing ego" is the term generally used by psychoanalysts, while Freud suggests using "evenly hovering attention" as the appropriate term to be used by psychoanalysts. But, Goleman in the book *Emotional Intelligence* chose the term "self-awareness, in the sense of an ongoing attention to one's internal states" (46) as the first core component of emotional intelligence. According to him it "refers to a self-reflexive, introspective attention to one's own experience, sometimes called mindfulness" (315). Here the mind not only observes and investigates the experience but also the emotion involved. It is also "a nonreactive, nonjudgmental attention to inner states" (47).

The concept of self-awareness has been part of both the Western and Eastern philosophies. Extensive theories on self-awareness have been propounded. Matthew D. MacKenzie has classified the theories on self-awareness from these two traditions into two broad categories as "reflectionist or other-illumination (paraprakasa) theories and reflexivist or self-illumination (svaprakasa) theories" (40). According to reflectionist theorists like D. M. Armstrong, David Rosenthal and the *anuvyavasaya* theory of the Naiyayikas, "self-awareness is the product of a second-order awareness taking a distinct, first-order awareness as its intentional object" (Mackenzie 40). While, reflexive theorists like Jean-Paul Sartre and theories of Yogacara Buddhism state, "an awareness of an object reveals itself at the same time as it reveals



its object” (41), that is, self-awareness is self-revealing. The word *svasamvedana* or *svasamvitti* is used to denote self-awareness in Buddhist reflexivism.

The most famous theory on self-awareness has been given by Shelley Duval and Robert Wicklund in 1972, where they have focused on objective awareness. Their argument was “environmental cues or personality factors can lead people to become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and behavior” (Sanderson 66). They also mentioned that there was an inherent self-system which individuals used for self-evaluation of their actions. If the individuals found discrepancies then it led to conflicts that resulted in them choosing out of two options “match . . . [their] behaviour to. . . internal attitudes or reduce self-awareness” (Sanderson 66). This proposes the argument that self-awareness depends on individual responses to situations.

Self-awareness is a topic that has drawn the attention of other fields like management. Extensive research has been conducted on the significant role of emotional intelligence. In a study conducted by V. Jayashree to identify and study the factors that lead to self-awareness and to evaluate the self-awareness among 500 management staff of the Automobile Industry in Chennai, it was found that self-awareness plays an important role in the attitude and performance of the staff irrespective of age.

There are other relevant features of self-awareness dealt with by Neale et al., in the book *Emotional Intelligence Coaching: Improving Performance for Leaders, Coaches and the Individual*, where they state, “Self-awareness is about being aware of your own feelings and learning how to manage them, rather than allowing them to manage you” (60). The book argues that self-awareness, “is the degree to which you are in touch with your body, your feelings and your intuitions” (106). Consequently, an inextricable interplay exists between an individual's psychological and physical dimensions in fostering self-awareness.

Self-awareness constitutes the foundational pillar of emotional literacy. Under Emotional Intelligence, it was Daniel Goleman who first used the term self-awareness. Daniel Goleman identifies the “keystone of emotional intelligence [to be]: awareness of one’s own feelings as they occur” (46) and also “the fundamental emotional competence on which others, such as emotional self-control, build” (47). Self-awareness is predominant in emotional intelligence as it “is about recognizing when we are experiencing a feeling or emotion inside” (Neale 107). It entails more than merely recognizing emotions; it demands the ability to regulate and modulate emotional responses without being unduly influenced by them, and “it is a neutral mode that maintains self-reflectiveness even amidst turbulent emotions” (Goleman 47). In essence, self-awareness stands as the cornerstone of emotional intelligence, paving the way for effective emotional management and fostering meaningful interactions.

Self-awareness is essential for everyone in life, especially women who need to hone it. In today’s world women play multiple roles at home and in society, therefore they encounter varied problems and pressures in their day-to-day lives. At times on certain days, they may find themselves on an emotional roller coaster, experiencing anger, fear, happiness, anxiety, surprise, etc., one after the other. On such occasions a composed approach is essential and a good level of self-awareness helps them to stay in charge of the situation and the emotion, instead of being controlled by their emotions. It also helps them handle their responsibilities with discretion.

Goleman in the article “How Emotionally Intelligent Are You?” claims that knowing one’s internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions are together part of self-awareness. Self-awareness is constructed as an indispensable part of humans. The above-stated characteristics of self-awareness are even depicted in the fictional characters in novels. Women characters have dominated the narrative space in novels, and Paulo Coelho’s novels are no exception. This paper proposes to build on the premise that women characters

in Coelho's novel exemplify how self-awareness is vital for women in their lives and it serves as a gyroscope. Relevant theory on self-awareness is applied to establish the credibility of the premise.

Research suggests that self-awareness develops throughout the lifespan of a person, supporting a person in all spheres of their life. In a neo-Piagetian theory on cognitive development given by Demetriou, he states that self-awareness develops throughout the life span of a person and assists in the inferential capability of individuals. Phillippe Rochat has given six levels of self-awareness. His theory suggests "6 possibilities (of self-awareness), ranging from self-obliviousness (absence of self-awareness, referred here as "Level 0) to self-consciousness" (Rochat 719), as they develop for an individual chronologically from birth to approximately 4-5 years. The various levels of self-awareness are: Level 0: Confusion, Level 1: Differentiation, Level 2: Situation, Level 3: Identification, Level 4: Permanence and Level 5 Self-conscious or 'meta' self-awareness. Rochat further clarifies "adult self-awareness is viewed as the dynamic flux between basic levels of consciousness that develops chronologically early in life" (717). This developmental trajectory of self-awareness highlights its dynamic nature, emphasizing its continuous refinement and significance across the human lifespan.

Paulo Coelho's novel *The Witch of Portobello* centres on the female character Athena, the subject of this paper's study. She exhibits the different levels of self-awareness postulated by Rochat. According to Rochat, in level 0 the individual is oblivious of self and is unable to distinguish things. Athena in *The Witch of Portobello*, is not aware of her real feelings in her childhood and as she enters adulthood. When she gets to know from a family friend that she was adopted, she cries over the fact for two days and then becomes normal. However, the confusion of who she really is lingers on inside her. John comments that the truth "created a huge impact on the small girl's psyche even leading to her isolation from her parents" (11). Later when she gets married, marriage also makes her feel more confused. Athena grapples through the stage of Confusion.

The first sign of awareness, according to Rochat, begins in the level 1 Differentiation, where "a differentiated self is expressed" (720). Athena as a married woman, in her confessional mode, states to Father Giancarlo Fontana "I pretend a happiness I don't feel; I hide my sadness so as not to worry those who love and care about me. Recently, I've even considered suicide" (41). She begins to decipher her real emotional state as she progresses through adulthood. Athena's signs of self-awareness become evident at this stage.

Next, Rochat states that level 2 is Situation. It is the exploration phase, here the "first signs of a contemplative stance" (721) is visible as confusion starts to dwindle and "a situated self is expressed" (721). In Athena's case dance helps her unearth the real state of her mind after the bitter experiences in marriage and after divorce. Seeking the vertex through dance rejuvenates her. Athena "flits from one endeavour to another to try to fill this unnamable void" (Kirkus Review), which is a sign of her trying to do away with her confusion.

Rochat specifies Identification to be level 3 of self-awareness that "manifests recognition" (721) and "an identified self is expressed" (722). Even in *The Witch of Portobello*, Athena identifies "I came in search of a meaning for my life, because, at present, its only meaning is my son, Viorel, and I'm afraid I might end up destroying him, either by being over-protective or by projecting onto him the dreams I've never managed to realise" (66). The need for true love and the disappointments in her life were sucking her soul which Athena recognized. Hence, she tries to find other distractions in dance and calligraphy.

In Permanence, the level 4 of self-awareness, Rochat enumerates, identification is not limited to the self being “an entity that is represented as invariant over time and appearance changes . . . The individual manifests a sense of self that perdures . . . A permanent self is expressed: an entity that is represented as invariant over time and appearance changes.” (Rochat 722). In *The Witch of Portobello*, Athena confesses:

I prefer to accept my loneliness. If I try to run away from it now, I’ll never find a partner again. If I accept it, rather than fight against it, things might change. I’ve noticed that loneliness gets stronger when we try to face it down but gets weaker when we simply ignore it. (66)
This level of self-awareness and acceptance of her loneliness is therapeutic for Athena.

Rochat terms the last level (level 5), as “self-conscious self . . . simulated and projected in the mind of others” (722) and recognised by oneself, in comparison to others, which establishes ‘meta’ awareness. In *The Witch of Portobello*, Athena’s migration to Dubai helps her understand more about herself. When she learns calligraphy from Nabil Alaihi in the desert, she realises her inability to master the technique of equal spaces between words. Even Alaihi says “Although you have mastered the words, you haven’t yet mastered the blank spaces. When you’re concentrating, your hand is perfect, but when it jumps from one word to the next. it gets lost” (99). It is then that Athena realises the reason behind her restlessness. She confesses:

... ‘When I write, when I dance, I’m guided by the Hand that created everything. When I look at Viorel sleeping, I know that he knows he’s the fruit of my love for his father, . . . but I don’t know the hand that first rocked me in the cradle. The hand that wrote me in the book of the world.’ (100)
Thus, Athena’s self-awareness leads her on the journey to discovering her roots.

Goleman says, there are three varied styles that individuals adopt when they deal with their emotions. They are (a) self-aware style, (b) engulfed style and (c) accepting. In accepting style, individuals “tend to be accepting of their mood” (48) and don’t make efforts to change them. Here there are two branches of approach, firstly where the individual is in a good mood, lacking motivation to change and secondly, those who are susceptible to having bad moods accept them with “a laissez-faire attitude” (48). Athena in *The Witch of Portobello*, displays signs of accepting her moods as they occur. She even confesses to having repressed her actual emotions and exhibited the emotions she was comfortable with. Self-awareness for Athena is like a “gyroscope”, says Weisinger, “it helps keep you centred and immediately alerts you when you are tilting off course” (5). As Athena progresses through the different stages of self-awareness, it serves as a gyroscope to navigate towards discovering identity.

In conclusion, self-awareness is a multifaceted concept that has been extensively explored in various fields, including psychology, management, and spirituality. Paulo Coelho's novel, *The Witch of Portobello*, provides a poignant illustration of how self-awareness shapes an individual’s life journey. Athena, the protagonist, embarks on a quest for self-discovery, gradually developing a deeper understanding of her thoughts, emotions, and motivations. Athena's evolving self-awareness is evident in her ability to confront her past, acknowledge her emotions, and make conscious decisions about her future. She learns to embrace her strengths and weaknesses, and she begins to see herself as a powerful and capable individual. This newfound self-awareness serves as a guiding light, enabling her to make meaningful connections with others and pursue her passions with renewed vigour. Athena's journey serves as an inspiration to readers, encouraging them to embark on their quests for self-discovery and to embrace the transformative power of self-awareness.

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