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WOMAN AS A ‘TRANSFORMER’ IN PAULO COELHO’S *THE ZAHIR*

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Abstract

Paulo Coelho is an eminent Brazilian writer of the present times. His novels reflect his deep understanding of mythology and mysticism and are a blend of tradition and modernity. Woman plays a significant role in the metamorphosis of the protagonist in Coelho’s novels. This paper intends to study the role of woman in his novel *The Zahir*, in the light of Campbell’s theory of Initiation in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell’s theory of Initiation accords a central position to woman. She performs various roles and becomes instrumental in bringing about the transformation of the hero. The more the hero initiates into his adventure, the more fascinating does he find the woman, changing herself in accordance with the needs of the hero as dictated by destiny. Initially, woman in *The Zahir* seems to hold a subordinate position. She is even regarded as a mere commodity by the hero. But as the narrative develops, the role of the woman, true to Campbell’s remark undergoes a series of transfigurations, the deeper the hero initiates into his inner quest the subtler the woman becomes. From a mere commodity the woman transfigures into a guide, from a guide into a divine energy, capable of bringing about the inner transformation of the hero.

Keywords

Initiation, zahir, self-discovery, search, journey, transfiguration, occult,
enigmatic, inner-quest, realization, fetters, mystic, Tengri-tradition,
divine- energy, destiny

Paulo Coelho is an eminent Brazilian writer of the present times. His works are widely acclaimed and are international best sellers. They are translated into many languages of the world and have proved to be an elixir for the problems of the modern times. His *The Alchemist* has been translated into 61 languages. It has made the Guinness world record for becoming the most translated book by any living author. Few weeks after the publication of *The Zahir*, 8 million copies of the book, translated into forty-two languages, arrived in bookshops in eighty-three countries.

Coelho is a writer of extra-ordinary genius with a deep understanding of the mythology and mysticism as evident in Campbell's theory. Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist and psychoanalyst, in his magnum opus *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), discusses the theory of journey of the archetypal hero found in world mythologies. Coelho's novels are a blend of tradition and modernity and bear a great imprint of Campbell's philosophy where woman plays a significant role in the metamorphosis of the protagonist. As Kasturi Sinha observes in Coelho's female characters "His lucid narration brings to life many female characters culled from the mundane realities of existence." Even Coelho's perception of women is aptly reflected in the words of Vijay More:

Projection of women in Coelho's novels is neither as a chaste Christian maiden nor as pagan's corrupt evil seductress. He simply represents contemporary woman in realistic manner. In his novels, he has presented memorable, mystique and extraordinary female characters; they are, in fact, true paradigms of modern liberal feminism. He has significant contribution to the perception of women, particularly in challenging traditional perceptions about the purity of women. (More)

This paper intends to study the female characters in Coelho's novel *The Zahir*, in the light of Campbell's theory of Initiation. Campbell's theory of Initiation accords a central position to woman. She performs various roles and becomes instrumental in bringing about the transformation of the hero. The more the hero initiates into his adventure, the more fascinating does he find the woman, changing herself in accordance with the needs of the hero as dictated by destiny. Campbell observes:

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters. (Campbell 97)

Published in 2005, Coelho's *The Zahir* shakes up and leads one to think about the organized life and highlights the different possibilities of life. *The Zahir*, subtitled as a novel of obsession revolves around an accomplished, unnamed author of international bestseller. Through *The Zahir*, Coelho presents the philosophical and spiritual chronicle of a man's quest for self-discovery. The novel centers on the narrator's search for his missing wife, Esther. While examining the reasons of her disappearance and his married life, he realizes that, in order to find Esther he must 'find himself'. The idea of finding his wife becomes his 'zahir' which in Arabic means a visible, present, incapable of going unnoticed. The narrator's search for his wife and for the truth of his own life, takes him from South America, Spain,

France, Croatia and eventually the bleakly beautiful landscape of Central Asia. Through the narrator's journey Coelho explores the various meanings of love and life.

In this context, *The Zahir* seems to accord a central position to Esther. The whole plot revolves around Esther. The more the hero initiates deeper into Esther's quest the more he finds her stature magnifying, though she continues to remain enigmatic. The woman in Esther puzzles the hero as she transforms into the 'zahir' yet she continues to lure him, The newly acquired form of the 'zahir' is the version of the form of the goddess in Campbellian terms who undergoes for the hero a series of transfigurations. The hero experiences the spell of the 'zahir', lying in the empty space of his inner cathedral: "She fills everything. She is the only reason I am alive. I looked around. I prepare myself for the talk I am to give, and I understand why I braved the snow, the traffic jams and the ice on the roads: in order to be reminded that every day I need to rebuild myself and to accept – for the first time in my entire existence – that I love another human being more than I love myself" (Coelho 62, 2005). Despite her enigmatic make-up the 'zahir' continues to guide the hero throughout his initiation: "One day, because of a woman, I made a long pilgrimage in order to find my dream. Many years later, the same woman had made me set off again, this time to find the man who had got lost along the way" (Coelho 341, 2005). Still she continues to elevate and adore the hero by preserving a copy of the hero's book and reading the lines from the book to the women who come to her to take lessons in French. Even as Esther, the 'zahir' bids the hero burst his fetters:

I look across at the woman who has just made some coffee and is now reading the newspaper, whose eyes look tired and desperate, who is her usual silent self, who does not always show her affection in gestures, the woman who made me say 'yes' when I wanted say 'no', who forced me to fight for what she, quite rightly, believed was my reason for living, who let me set off alone because her love for me was greater even than her love for herself, who made me go in search of my dream; and, suddenly, seeing that small, quiet woman, whose eyes said more than any words, who was often terrified inside, but always courageous in her actions, who could love someone without humbling herself and who never ever apologised for fighting for her man, suddenly, my fingers press down on the keys. (Coelho 28, 2005).

Though, Esther, with reference to the Campbellian model of a woman appears a prototype of Campbell's model, her relations with a person not even named and described in the novel, leading to her pregnancy is a rejection of the hero's role as a husband in the worldly sense of the term, yet her return to the hero and the hero's self-realization together make the hero burst his fetters.

Interestingly, the use of Campbellian thought on woman with respect to the Initiation of hero in *The Zahir* accords a significant status to Marie, though, Marie is a minor character. The character of Marie in Campbellian perspective magnifies the way she surrenders her love and happiness for the love and happiness of the hero, prompting him to initiate into Esther's quest with the help of Mikhail, Esther's boyfriend. She advises the hero to turn his hatred for Mikhail into love and employ him as a guide to seek Esther because Mikhail is the only person to know Esther's whereabouts. She advises the hero to be practical. She loves the hero, though she is also in love with her neighbour. Thus, using Campbell's words with regard the role of a woman, Marie always promises more than the hero is capable of comprehending. At the same time, Marie lures, guides and bids the hero burst his fetters. The hero himself feels: "I would even go so far as to say that there was between us a kind of love, but different from the love I felt for Esther or that Marie felt for her neighbour" (Coelho 58, 2005). Thus, Marie,

herself in love with her neighbour, yet adoring and advising the hero to employ the services of Mikhail, Esther's boyfriend, in quest of Esther, presents different versions of love, ignites the hero's love for Esther leading the hero to his destiny. Thus, Marie is both a medium and means to the hero-Esther union, making both the hero and Mikhail conscious and responsible for their respective love, articulated in the words of Mikhail: "Maybe, but for you to be able to love her fully, you need to find her and tell her that to her face. It might not be possible, she might not want to see you, but you would, at least, have tried. I would be free from the "ideal woman" and you would be free from the absolute presence of what you call the Zahir" (Coelho 86, 2005). Marie's role as a woman in Campbellian terms comes true with the realization of both the hero and Mikhail, thus, turning the hero's hatred for Mikhail into admiration and gratitude, apparently a mutual but two-dimensional adventure.

However, the role of the white little girl in white dress with a halo, visible and communicating only with Mikhail during Mikhail's boyhood till the felling of the tree and later invisible to Mikhail also but continuing to communicate with Mikhail (described as 'the voice' by Mikhail) throughout the novel, seems to accord the white little girl a pivotal position, despite her mystic identity and occult ways. Though, like other characters she is not directly involved in the linear development of the narrative, yet she makes her presence felt in every web and woof of the narrative, influences and guides almost all the major characters through Mikhail, besides lending multiple narrative techniques to the novel. She guides the hero, communicates to him through Mikhail whether he should continue his initiation in the quest of Esther or wait till the omens are favourable. She also communicates to the director of the museum through Mikhail that he is likely to receive an important post. The prediction that comes true is significant the way it unites Mikhail with Esther, testifying another prediction made earlier, mentioning that before Mikhail is twenty-two a woman from far away would come and take him off to see the world.

The role of woman in Campbellian context also enables one to look at the paradigm shift in an interesting way. Mikhail, used as a medium by the little white girl interprets the occult in terms of the mundane, while Mikhail employed as an interpreter by Esther to help her communicate with the nomads and shamans of the Tengri tradition, seems to connect the occult with the primitive and in turn both with civilization, wherein the occult and the primitive seem to predominate, lending the fictional discourse a Campbellian perspective. It also enables one to appreciate the important metaphors in the novel – the metaphor of "the Railway Track", "Ariadne's thread" even the title of the book "A Time to Rend and A Time to Sew", also metaphorical and suggestive of the hero – Esther relationship. Such a study seems to equate Marie, a minor character with Esther, the protagonist, though Esther is strongly made to participate by way of constant and strong references, and the little white girl for her distinct role as a mystic force determines the respective roles of the protagonists, enables the hero to accomplish his destiny in a mystic way, substantiating the use of Campbell's theory of Initiation in respect of 'woman'.

Thus, woman plays a significant role in the initiation of the hero in *The Zahir*. Initially, woman in *The Zahir*, seems to hold a subordinate position. She is even regarded as a mere commodity by the hero. But as the narrative develops, the role of the woman, true to Campbell's remark undergoes a series of transfigurations, the deeper the hero initiates into his inner quest the subtler the woman becomes. From a mere commodity the woman transfigures into a guide, from a guide into a divine energy, capable of bringing about the inner transformation of the hero.

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