

The Postmodern Penelope: Coelho's *The Zahir* and the Metamorphosis in Gender Relations

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Coelho's narrator tells us "if a book isn't self-explanatory, then the book is not worth reading" (248). Though such a statement may not appeal to a Formalist critic in the sense that literature should alienate, defamiliarize and make difficult the literary experience, Coelho proves in *The Zahir* the assumption of his narrator. The book is so simple and its narrative flows so smoothly like a running stream of water in the early months of spring. Coelho's narrative magically transfixes its readers and absorbs them into the mystical and mythical world of its narrator.

A brief summary of the novel will do it great injustice as the novel's forte lies in the smoothness, richness, spirituality and simplicity of its narrativity. In *The Zahir*¹, Coelho tells us the story of its male narrator who, like Coelho himself, is a celebrated artist, lyric writer and novelist. The narrator-artist, whose name significantly remains incognito, finds himself obsessed with the mysterious and sudden disappearance of Esther, his third wife. Esther, a journalist and a war correspondent, in spite of her love and support to the narrator artist disappears and leaves the artist confounded and confused. For him she becomes the "Zahir"² that haunts his days and nights. Though he forges various love affairs during the enigmatic absence of Esther, he cannot

¹ Coelho, Paulo. *The Zahir*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005

² The title comes from a tale by Jorge Luis Borges, published in his book *The Aleph*. Coelho in the introductory pages of the novel states that "according to the writer Jorge Luis Borges, the idea of the Zahir comes from Islamic tradition and is thought to have arisen at some point in the eighteenth century. Zahir, in Arabic, means visible, present, incapable of going unnoticed. It is someone or something which, once we have come into contact with them or it, gradually occupies our every thought, until we can think of nothing else. This can be considered either a state of holiness or of madness." P. viii.

suppress Esther's virtual existence in the data banks of his brain and heart cells. Eventually, the writer begins to collect clues about the whereabouts of Esther. He enlists the aid of Mikhail, an epileptic visionary young man whom Esther helped bring to France from Kazakhstan after he worked as her interpreter in his region. The writer learns that his wife lives in a village in the steppes of Kazakhstan weaving carpets and teaching French to the locals. In order to solve the enigma of her sudden disappearance and to free himself of the *Zahir* that has colonized his being, he embarks on an odyssey to find his wife.

By examining the text critically, which one should not do lest one spoils the phenomenological pleasure of living the experiences of the narrator as they materialize in the reader's being, one cannot help but establish a link between the narrator-artist and Ulysses on the one hand and Penelope and Esther, on the other hand. The "Ithaca" song at the very beginning of the book, among many other signs in the text, provides the formal link to this connection. The novelty of this connection, however, lies in the way Coelho treats his metaphoric Ulysses and Penelope. Whereas in the Homeric epic Ulysses is a hero to the end: he dares the seas and the wilderness of the physical and the spiritual and arrives at Ithaca in disguise to torment and destroy Penelope's suitors and restore his patriarchal command with brutal force, Coelho's narrator is a hero to the end, too, but without Ulysses' trappings of masculinity. He does not show any signs of radical masculinity upon his encounter with his wife and/or her lovers. He is a postmodern European subject with mystical tendencies that mediate and soften any possibility towards aggression.

What are at stake in the analogy between the two heroes, however, are the constituents of a hero. In the Homeric sense, brutal force and machismo are the backbone of heroism. A hero has to have a destructive force with which he can crash his opponents. The postmodern Coelhoean hero abandons his machismo in the caves of oblivion and arms himself with sensitivity, sensibility, a passionate heart and an advanced mindset that rejects one's history and denounces it. The narrator's attempt at erasing his past and history implies a sense of strong shame of his ancestors' barbaric rituals of heroism. Thus, at the end of the narrative Coelho's hero embraces his wife and returns home with her, though she tells him that she is currently pregnant by someone else.

Coelho's hero is a Lacanian figure whose final action denounces and denigrates the social conventions that dictate and govern the relationship between genders. Fidelity in a marital context has always been associated with love and devotion to one's spouse, with primary emphasis on the devotion of the wife to the husband. Social conventions penalized the woman in a heavier way than the man in case of perfidy. Shahrayar's measures, in the *One Thousand Night and Night* are the epitome of the severity of social conventions and their internecine impact on women when they go astray or take a Baudrillardian approach to their bodies³. The indignant monarch of the legendary tales does not only kill his first wife who has been liberal with her body, but he starts an orgy of killing a woman every night after deflowering her until Shahrazad enters his life and help him restore faith in women again after a symbolic one thousand and one night sessions of therapeutic narrativity.

Coelho's hero, the artist who significantly denies his shameful past and history and calls himself "Nobody" to get closer to his beloved is reminiscent of John Barth's Shahrayar. In *Chimera: Duniazadiad*, the postmodern Barth rewrites the Shahrayar-Shahrazad encounter from a postmodern Western perspective: Shahrayar at the end of the narrative, aware of Shahrazad's betrayal, tells her that the love he bears for her overrules all social conventions. As a result the almighty king does not retaliate against his beloved wife though he knows very well that she uses her body liberally beyond the constraints of current social and moral values. His genuine love for her transcends all the masculine and patriarchal trappings.

Like Barth's Shahrayar, Coelho's man undergoes a radical change that mediates centuries of prescribed conventional masculinity and ends by not only condoning female perfidy, but also legitimizing it by his reunion with his wife in spite of her being pregnant by some other man.

"I'm pregnant"

For a second, it was as if the world had fallen in on me.

'By Dos?'

'No, it was someone who stayed a while and then left again.'

³ In *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990) pp 37-41 Baudrillard advocates that the postmodern subject has a libido that should be expended, a subconscious that should speak, a body that should give and maintain pleasure, and a sex that must be put to good use.

I laughed even though my heart was breaking.” (338)

Coelho’s narrator-artist has to take a long journey through which he sheds all his biases and obsolete conventionality including his history to deserve a shred of the blood stained shirt Esther got from a dying soldier in the battlefield. Like Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” who redeems his soul by blessing the water snakes, the slimiest of god’s creatures in the dead and stagnant water where his skeleton of a ship was marooned, the narrator redeems himself and gains the shred of blood stained shirt, Esther’s metaphor of infinite love, when he blesses Esther’s pregnancy and takes part in it by accepting his role in his wife’s liberal disposal of her amorous favors:

‘The baby? You do not think a baby’s going to stop me working, do you? Besides, why should you worry? You didn’t do anything to contribute.’

‘didn’t contribute? It’s thanks to me that you came here in the first place. Or doesn’t that count?’ (339)

Likewise, Esther, Coelho’s female protagonist, has to suffer distancing herself from the comfort of an office and a villa in Paris or other European urban space and had to live in the wilderness of a remote corner in central Asia to be able to tune herself with herself and confirm beyond doubt that she is the sole mistress of what she owns: her body. She recounts what befalls her to her husband:

‘I was still very bruised...he taught me to love myself rather than to love him. He showed me that my heart was at the service of myself and of God, and not at the service of others....He explains to me that suffering occurs when we want other people to love us in the way we imagine we want to be loved, and not in the way love should manifest itself-free and untrammelled, guiding us with its force and driving us on.’ (337)

Her adventures beyond the European urban boundaries are a strong metaphoric indicator on her conquest of the backwardness of Western masculinity and its biases. Her arrival, residence and work as a carpet weaver and teacher in the center of the center of the Orient become a metaphor

of diving into the arid conventionality of man's psyche to reweave its basic fabric and to teach it progressiveness.

In her process to reinvent herself, Coelho's woman denigrates the Penelopean mindset and asserts her full control over her body and proves faithful to it. During her encounter with her husband in the remote steppe in Kazakhstan at the end of the narrative, Esther tells her husband that she "waited" for him "as Penelope waited for Ulysses, as Romeo waited for Juliet, as Beatrice waited for Dante." (336) But as he was not there she refuses to maintain or prolong the waiting position. In stead she learns how to forget her history and how to love again:

"I went to the nomad I had met before and asked him to teach me to forget my personal history, to open me up to the love that is present everywhere... One day I glanced to one side and saw that same love reflected in someone else's eyes, in the eyes of a painter called Dos." (337)

Ironically, none of the classic characters mentioned by Esther has her progressive approach to love. The summoning of the names of these conventional lovers is far from being innocent. It serves to accentuate the disparity between her attitude to love and her measures in dealing with her body and theirs. Significantly, all through the narrative, the reader is never made, even for once, to feel that Esther's liberal attitude to her body constitutes an act of adultery. Consequently at the end of the novel the reader, like the husband artist, accepts Esther's pregnancy as an article of faith, a progressive act and not as something immoral. By doing so, the narrative succeeds in making the reader absorb and embody the narrator's mindset or consciousness and live the narrator's experiences through a phenomenological merging in the narrator's world.

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