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Abandoning Archetypes: A Radical Solution to Sexism and the Process of Individuation
in Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir*

A Jungian approach to reading Paulo Coelho's novel *The Zahir* reveals the story to be a striking illustration of Carl Jung's process of individuation as a means to a meaningful existence. Centered on efforts to heal the fractured relationship between the narrator and his wife, it is particularly effective in demonstrating the role of the anima (man's inner female nature) and the animus (woman's inner male nature) in the process of individuation. As such, *The Zahir* also reinforces the sexism inherent in Jungian thought on the masculine and the feminine, calling up patriarchal tropes of the emotional woman and her subservience to the rational man. However, despite its sexist overtones, the novel points to a radical solution to sexism: altogether abandoning the archetypes from myth and religion that have relegated the feminine to a place of inferiority.

Before delving into an analysis of the anima and the animus, their presence in *The Zahir*, and the sexism they service, a review of Jung's overall perspective on the human condition and the process of individuation is necessary. In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung begins by sharply contrasting humanity's "primitive" and "civilized" states. He associates the former with nature, intuition, and the instinctual unconscious. He links the later to logic, education, and the rational conscious. In his view, "the unconscious and the conscious must be integrally connected...for the sake of mental stability and ... psychological health" (*Man* 37). However, humans have, in

the process of becoming “civilized,” “divided our consciousness from the deeper instinctive strata of the human psyche,” (36) and disrupted the “psychic equilibrium” (34). The result is a “lost and miserable” existence—“an artificial life far removed from healthy instincts, nature and truth.” The modern individual is left without a “real and meaningful life” (78).

Jung’s solution to healing this disastrous divide lies in individual self-realization—in searching for and finding “the unified self” to achieve “the harmonious wholeness of conscious and unconscious” (“Carl” 504-505). Throughout this search, the individual must look to symbolic images that spring from their unconscious in dreams and fantasies. The images are invariably based on archetypes: “the primal form or original pattern of which all other things of the same kind are representatives or copies” (Harris 47). Archetypes are often noted as characters from religious stories and mythology, such as the Virgin Mary, “an ideal model of maternal tenderness,” “Zeus, the powerful father,” and his wife “Hera, who upholds the institution of matrimony that perpetuates her own subordination” (Ibid). For Jung, these symbols “are the essential message carriers from the instinctive to the rational parts of the human mind (*Man* 37). They carry meaning for the individual from whose unconscious they come, and interpreting and understanding them hold the key to “restor[ing] our psychological balance” (34). They bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious; they help right the relationship between intellect and instinct.

A requisite step towards Jung’s psychological balance, self-realization, and discovery of the unified self is the process of individuation. This is a “process of psychic growth” (*Man* 161) in which “the conscious com[es] to terms with one’s own inner center (psychic nucleus) or Self” (169). The goal is “the realization of the uniqueness in the individual” (163) and thus the ability to “fulfill one’s destiny [which] is the greatest human achievement (165). A myriad of

meaningful archetypes and symbols can arise to assist throughout the process. In fact, Jung notes that “it is difficult to summarize the infinite variations of the process of individuation” (167). However, he keys in on a few archetypes that are common to the process, placing particular emphasis on the anima and the animus.

As two of Jung’s “principal archetypes,” the anima and animus are critical players in the process of individuation for men and women, respectively. For a man, the anima is “the woman within”—“a female personification of his unconscious” that raises feminine aspects of his psyche (*Man* 186). “Whenever she appears,” Jung says, “she embodies all the ... characteristics of a feminine being (“Principal Archetypes” 521). Conversely, for a woman, the animus is “the man within” or “the male personification of the unconscious” (*Man* 198). Functioning as message-carriers from the unconscious, anima/animus symbols emerge on the individual’s search for the unified self.

In an introduction to Jung’s theories in *The Critical Tradition*, David H. Richter calls this search a “journey” in which the Self must “encounter the various elements that make it up, thereby forming the relationships that constitute its individuality” (“Carl” 505). In the case of the anima/animus, the individual must encounter and then “open ... up to the unconscious contrasexual elements and integrate their attitudes into [the] conscious self...both males and females need to recognize and integrate both emotional and rational (female and male) parts in order to be human” (Stupak 269)—in order to be whole.

The notion of the process of individuation as a journey, particularly as a journey culminating in unification with the inner anima/animus, is underscored by a Jungian analysis of the *Odyssey*. As *Classical Mythology* notes, individuals who attain a “healthy psyche” are those in which “anima and animus achieve a harmonious relationship with each other, as they do in the

reunion of Odysseus and his wife, Penelope” (Harris 49). Again, by “rejoining the animus with the anima, the hero’s psyche can be made whole” (276).

The quest for self-realization in which one meets and integrates their anima/animus into consciousness is powerfully illustrated in *The Zahir*, wherein the male narrator is on a quest to find his disappeared wife and, in the process, also finds his unified self. It is clear that the narrator is on an epic journey from the outset, as the author invokes the *Odyssey* by opening the novel with a poem titled “Ithaca,” Odysseus’s ultimate destination on his long and perilous quest. Like the mythical hero’s drive to return to his wife Penelope—the “full expression” of his inner anima (Harris 434)—so, too, is *The Zahir*’s narrator driven to reconnect with his own anima, his wife Esther.

However, along the way, he must encounter “the woman within” in her progressive four stages of development which, according to Jung, are symbolized by several archetypal women. First, the biblical Eve “represents purely instinctual and biological relations” (*Man* 195). She is concerned only with satisfying her bestial biological drives. Second, “Faust’s Helen ... personifies a romantic and aesthetic level that is, however, still characterized by sexual elements” (Ibid). While she functions on a deeper level than the base Eve, she still seeks to satisfy her natural urges. Next is the Virgin Mary, “a figure who raises love ... to the heights of spiritual devotion” (Ibid). All sexuality is erased, and the anima becomes a revered, sacred being. Lastly, there is Sapientia, the ultimate female sage who represents “wisdom transcending even the most holy and the most pure.” Here the anima finally achieves her “proper positive role ... as a mediator between the ego and the Self [and] guide to the [man’s] inner world” (Ibid).

Even before Esther disappears and his journey begins, the narrator seems stuck in the “Eve” stage of his anima, as represented by the various lovers he takes from time to time as he

pleases. They are exemplified by Esther's friend, with whom he has a one-time intimate encounter. She is a woman "looking for excitement" in "the game of seduction [that] always adds a little zest to life." She fulfills her Eve-like "instinctual and biological" desires with the narrator, and from then on, they "both pretend that nothing happened" (Coelho 7). The encounter is a purely physical one motivated entirely by physical urges.

Next, the narrator enters into a romantic relationship with Marie, who represents the Faustian Helen in the second stage of his anima's development—the "romantic and aesthetic level" that remains marked by sexuality. It is a relationship that is deeper than a purely physical connection but does not reach the point of true intimacy. For example, Marie "know[s] what is going on in [the narrator's] soul," but she "pretends not to know" (Coelho 49). From an aesthetic perspective, their relationship is one born largely in appearances, as they are "often seen together at parties and receptions" as a celebrity couple (48). And while he notes that "there was between [them] a kind of love" it is "different from the love [he] felt for Esther (49).

Even prior to starting a relationship with Marie, the narrator's preoccupation with the missing Esther increases in prominence until she becomes the Zahir herself—an obsession representing the Virgin Mary aspect of the narrator's anima. He says that Esther "continued to grow" as a fixation not in his body, but in his "soul," as she "occup[ied his] every thought" (Coelho 48). He likens himself to a cathedral with "empty space inside ... where [he] worship[s] and venerate[s] what is dearest and most important," and he says that his wife fills that "empty space of [his] inner cathedral" (52). In this version of the narrator's anima, the Zahir elicits reverence from him. Her position within him has transcended the baser instincts of Eve and the romantic sexuality of Marie. His anima is now inhabiting space within him as an object of worship and "spiritual devotion."

The narrator discovers the final iteration of his anima when he reaches Esther at her home in the steppes—a reunion that occurs in a section of the novel titled “Return to Ithaca,” alluding to Odysseus’s final destination to signify the journey’s end. When he enters her house, “the room [is] flooded with light” (Coelho 292). In her presence, everything is illuminated, both literally and figuratively, as he has finally found his Sapiientia anima of transcendent wisdom. When Esther touches him, he does not have a physical reaction but an inner one. He suddenly begins “to understand what [he] did not want to understand” (293). She imparts to him her wisdom about the meaning of life, love, and God. She gives him “a piece of bloodstained cloth” (296) from the unknown soldier’s shirt to show that, now at the end of his journey, he has come to understand the “one truth, which is love” and has set his intention to “live in accordance with its laws” (235). In the end, he meets his fully formed anima and embraces her as an integral part of himself. In the final scene of the novel, the narrator puts his “hands on [Esther’s] shoulders and blesse[s] her just as [he] had been blessed” (296). In this moment, he comes to terms with his inner center.

While the narrator completes his hero’s journey in finding Esther, she, too, makes her own epic quest for meaning and self-discovery. Like “many of [Jung’s] patients,” she is plagued by “a sense of the meaningless, barren quality of life” (Goldenberg 443). Indeed, she feels “profound sadness [and] guilt or fear,” and longs for “the feeling [of] being useful” (Coelho 39). In her process of individuation and psychic growth, she also encounters each of Jung’s embodiments of the archetypal animus in his four stages of development: the wholly physical man, the romantic man/man of action, the bearer of the word, and the wise guide to spiritual truth (*Man* 205-206).

First, the narrator represents the physical man or “muscle man” like Tarzan, an animal-like figure driven largely by instinct (*Man* 205). Like his anima-counterpart Eve, the physical man is concerned only with biological motivations. In the narrator’s case, he is perhaps still the man whose first wife left him because he was “emotionally immature, and too ready to chase after any girl with big enough breasts” (Coelho 16). At the very least, he is out of touch with his inner self—“always looking for adventure in order to forget more important things” and perpetually in search of “adrenaline” (18), rather than “risk[ing] everything for [his] real reason for living” (19-20). He runs on physical stimulus. It is this stage of the animus that drives Esther to disappear on her own hero’s journey for self-realization.

Second, she encounters Mikhail, who represents the romantic/man of action. When she first meets him, he is a man with “a mission to fulfill” (Coelho 168), looking for “a way out” of his environment (173). He convinces Esther to employ him as her guide and interpreter, demonstrating his “initiative and the capacity for planned action” (*Man* 206). He is a man of action on the spot for Esther—risking the possibility of prison to help with her illegal enterprise. He even jumps at the chance to return with her to France when she asks him to help her continue the process of “freeing herself from her past” (Coelho 180). Once in Paris, he continues to take action, as Esther spurs him to start the performances at the Armenian restaurant, to go out into the streets and learn among the beggars, to meet “other people with special gifts,” and “to develop [his] unknown potential” (184). As a personification of Esther’s animus, Mikhail helps her actively progress on her quest for self-discovery.

Next she meets the nomad in the steppes, “the bearer of the ‘word,’” who, according to Jung, “often appear[s] as a professor or clergyman” (*Man* 205-206). In this case, the “word” comes in the form of a wise old teacher who has “magical powers” (Coelho 178). This stage of

the animus answers Esther's core questions, like why people are sad and what love is. From this experience, she is able to learn "how love grows" and how to "grow with it" (179).

Finally, Esther meets Dos, who is her wise guide to spiritual truth—and not coincidentally the grandson of the wise old nomad. This final stage of the animus ultimately provides her with the meaning of life that she has been searching for since she first asked about Hans and Fritz. She says of Dos, "He taught me to love myself [and] that my heart was at the service of myself and of God [and] that love should manifest itself free and untrammelled, guiding us with its force and driving us on" (Coehlo 294). For Esther, Dos is Jung's "incarnation of meaning" and "mediator of the religious experience whereby life acquires new meaning" (*Man* 206-207). Like his anima-counterpart Sapientia who navigates the inner world for the man, Esther's animus archetype of the wise guide is "a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious"; he "gives [her] consciousness a capacity for reflection, deliberation, and self-knowledge" ("Principal Archetypes" 522).

Like the narrator, Esther ends her epic journey by bringing her conscious and unconscious into harmony via the symbolic animus. At this point, she can be reunited with her husband who, having also achieved this level of harmony, can step into the role of Esther's fully formed animus. As with Odysseus and Penelope, the "reunion ... of the heroic animus and anima ... marks the completion of their respective natures and the fulfillment of their mutual quest (Harris 444).

While *The Zahir* illustrates the Jungian concepts of the anima/animus in the process of individuation, it also spotlights the immense sexism that is inherent in them. As Naomi Goldenberg explains in "A Feminist Critique of Carl Jung," the anima/animus "model functions with and sustains decidedly masculine and feminine stereotypes" and "gives women and men

qualitatively different kinds of unconscious” (Goldenberg 447). And this “inequity of the anima-animus model ... clearly favors men” (445-446). For example, Jung “considers the female consciousness to be governed by emotions and ... feeling ... while the more rational functions of thinking dominate the ... male consciousness” (Stupak 268). The feminine/anima aspects of the psyche are characterized by “vague feelings and moods, prophetic hunches, [and] receptiveness to the irrational” (*Man* 186), while the masculine/animus is marked by “the function of analytical thought,” which in women is considered unnatural behavior (Goldenberg 445). The animus is also characterized by strength in “spiritual firmness and inner support” (*Man* 207).

These supposed gender markers of the psyche align with the old, tired tropes of the weak, irrational, emotional woman and the strong, rational, analytical man. These are pillars of sexism that uphold the patriarchy, in which men are astute father figures and women are irrational children. Of course, Jung’s conception of the masculine and feminine is not surprising. His “world ... was one of male superiority and male dominance,” and so he “was what we would call a sexist” (Stupak 268). According to him, women should stick to feminine pursuits like becoming nursemaids or running kindergarten classes. In “studying and working like a man, woman is doing something not wholly in accord with, if not directly injurious to, her feminine nature” (Goldenberg 445). And if she becomes too obstinate from an overgrown animus, “only seduction or a beating or rape [will] have the necessary power of persuasion” to soften her (“Principal Archetypes 522). Jung’s conceptions about male and female personalities followed his times.

While *The Zahir* takes a more modern approach to gender (that Esther takes her own epic hero’s journey rather than remaining at home like Penelope is a break from the stereotype), it still draws on some common sexist themes and clearly privileges the male narrator. For example,

when he contemplates Esther's work as a war correspondent, a kind of precursor to her hero's quest for individuation, he does so within the context of his masculine, patriarchal power. He asks himself if he should have "let her go off" or (like a father) "should have put [his] foot down ... because ... [he] needed her with [him], needed her support." In the end he concludes that he made the right decision on her behalf because "she needed ... to get out and about, to experience strong emotions" (Coelho 40), as Jung says women are inclined to do.

The narrator similarly takes a paternal tone with his wife when he learns of her pregnancy by another man. Without seeking Esther's input, he unilaterally decides that she will "have to say no" to returning to work as a war correspondent because she is pregnant and should be concerned about the baby—even though, as she reminds him, he "didn't do anything to contribute" to the pregnancy (Coelho 295). Here again, he attempts to exercise patriarchal control over his wife. He reverts to the Jungian feminine stereotype that wants women to become nursemaids and kindergarten teachers instead of "working like a man."

To further these sexist themes, Esther is portrayed as primarily driven not by the desire for her own self-realization, but by dedicated service to her husband. She tells him that, due to some innate, Darwinian drive, "a woman's moment of glory" is "watching her man eat"; this is "what gives a woman the most pleasure within marriage" (Coelho 132). She "like[s] thinking about what to give [him] for supper" (134) and "feel[s] privileged to have a man like [him] at [her] side" (133). But due to her feminine preoccupation with emotion, she is unhappy and restless because she "can no longer feel the energy of love [and] passion flowing through [her] soul" (Ibid). Instead of being rational and staying at home with her husband, she must follow her irrational emotions and leave him without a trace.

Additionally, although Esther goes on an epic quest for her own self-realization, the journey is ultimately motivated by an overwhelming love for her husband. When he enters her home in the steppes, her first words to him are not “I have found meaning for my life” or “I have uncovered the answer to Hans’s question.” Rather, they are “I’ve been waiting for you” (Coelho 293). She goes on to tell him that she waited for him “like a desperate wife” (Ibid). After leaving him, she didn’t “believe it [would be] possible to love again.” Because of him, she “suffered greatly” and was “very bruised” (294). She does not disagree with the him when he suggests that she has “been waiting all morning for the door to open,” (295) and for him to walk in. Even though Esther exhibits some agency in deciding to leave, she still functions to service the narrator. He is privileged as the center of his wife’s life, and she is secondary, as Jung’s sexist stereotypes demand.

By contrast, Stupak argues in the 1990 article “Carl Jung, Feminism, and Modern Structural Realities” that the psychoanalyst’s anima/animus concept is not at all sexist. While the article notes Jung’s belief that “the anima, and hence the female consciousness, has its foundations in feeling” (Stupak 268), this consciousness is not inferior to the rational male consciousness because both are necessary for each sex’s psychic wholeness. According to Stupak, there is no sexism there because “Jung elevates feminine and masculine elements, and in essence, men and women, to levels of equal importance” (269). However, Goldenberg answers this argument nearly fifteen years earlier in “A Feminist Critique of Jung.” Here she calls for the rejection of archetypes altogether. In essence, she states that the problem is not rooted in viewing the universal characteristics of the female psyche as inferior to the male’s. The problem lies in asserting the existence of any universal characteristics of the female psyche at all. The problem

lies in the absolutes of archetypes that insist “women are the way they are because they are conforming to something out there which can never change” (Goldenberg 448).

Given the epic history and omnipresence of gender archetypes in Western mythology and religion, Goldenberg acknowledges that she is “suggesting nothing less than breaking down the hierarchy of the mind—to which all other hierarchies and authority structures are linked—whether political, economic, or religious” (Goldenberg 449). Her approach is radical and revolutionary, to be sure. However, it is absolutely necessary in order to free men, women, and non-binary individuals from the pervasive, restrictive gender constructs that have been established as absolutes through the stories of myth and religion.

Ironically, despite all its sexist themes, *The Zahir* hints at this kind of radical change. At the narrator’s first visit to the Armenian Restaurant, Mikhail says, “It took the world a long time and much effort to get where it is, and we organize ourselves as best we can” (Coelho 79). Here he may be referring to the mythological and religious stories that have been developed over the annals of time—the absolutes with which humans are expected to conform and “organize ourselves.” However, “something is missing ... the reason for our existence” (Ibid). The answer, according to Mikhail, is “telling stories that make no sense, looking for facts that do not fit our usual way of perceiving reality” (Ibid)—in other words, deviating from the archetypes we have assimilated and looked to as guidelines for being. This deviation will then, “perhaps in one or two generations” lead humanity to “discover another way of living” (Ibid) that abandons the archetypal absolutes that perpetuate sexism and other plagues on humanity.

Wholesale rejection of the archetypes and images that have long dictated expectations and explanations for human behavior is indeed a radical notion. It is especially revolutionary when those symbols are tied up in religious mores that countless people subscribe to as scriptural

truth. However, as evidenced by the process of individuation and its manifestation in *The Zahir*, those archetypes only serve to reinforce the sexism inherent in archaic symbols of the masculine and the feminine and their damaging patriarchal tropes. They are so ingrained in human consciousness that only a radical solution will suffice, and, for all its sexism, *The Zahir* points in the right direction.

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