

Freedom, Obsession and Love in Paulo Coelho's The Zahir

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Abstract: Paulo Coelho the famous Brazilian lyricist and writer is considered as one of the most famous and influential writers of modern time. The aim of this article is to critically analyze the execution of the themes of freedom, obsession and love in one of the most famous novels of this century, *The Zahir*. However, *The Zahir* which covers the story of a famous narrator searching for his missing wife named Esther is a not limited to the search of a missing person, rather it is a journey to find peace and discover one's true self. The narrator's search takes him to "many places, more than that, it leads him to a new understanding of the nature of love, the power of destiny and what really means to follow one's heart" [1].

Keywords: Freedom, Obsession, Love, The Zahir, Paulo Coelho.

1. Introduction:

The *Zahir* revolves around the protagonist of the novel the unnamed narrator's search for his missing wife. The unnamed narrator is a well known and famous writer who has several best sellers to his name is looking for his his missing wife named Esther who is a award winning journalist working as a war correspondent. "The *Zahir* is a 2005 novel and it's about an unnamed narrator who is obsessed by finding his wife, Esther who is a war correspondent who has just returned from Iraq. According to the writer Jorge Luis Borges, the idea of the *Zahir* comes from the Islamic tradition and is thought to have arisen at some point in the 18th century. *Zahir* means visible, present, incapable of going unnoticed in Arabic. 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" [2].

In Coelho's official biography 'A Warrior's Life' by Fernando Morais, Coelho accepts that the character of Esther is based on *Sunday times* journalist Christian Lamb. However, the character of unnamed narrator who is also the protagonist of the novel appears to be influenced by Coelho's personal experiences. "It is both believed and proved that writers are able to produce a great and moving work only when they reveal their most private thoughts and feelings in their writings. The influence of personal experience and reminiscences can be seen in the works of almost all the writers".[3]

The aim of the paper is to critically analyze the novel *The Zahir* written by Paulo Coelho to discuss and reveal the themes of freedom, obsession and love.

2. Discussion

a. Element of freedom

“Freedom is the very nature of human beings. Only with freedom one can enjoy and blossom. Without freedom, imagination becomes stagnant, attitude becomes stifling, concepts become a burden and information is of no value”[4]. Dr. Ursula Sadner in her article ‘Use Your Strength’ discusses in detail about the importance of freedom in a marriage. She believes that for a marriage to work successfully both husband and wife need to give up certain interests and hobbies if they do not include each other. She has a very strong opinion about freedom in marriages as she suggests that restricting each other’s freedom will influence both trust and love negatively in a couple’s married life. She asserts that “the only responsibility is for the family (even when there are no children) - that is to work for the family’s wellbeing and to care for your partner’s happiness. If the husband isn’t happy when his wife has hobbies that don’t include him, she has to give them up. If the wife doesn’t agree that her husband has other interests besides his job and their home, the husband has to give them up.” [5]

Both the narrator and his wife Esther live a life where they give lot of space to each other. They are a celebrity couple, believe in open marriage which gives them liberty to establish sexual relations with other people while staying together in the marriage. “Sometimes the extramarital relationships are explicitly incorporated into the marriage life. Many couples in many cultures seem to accept infidelity as part of their marriage. These couples do not face a crisis when the infidelity is exposed. Open marriages were popular in the 1970’s following the sexual revolution.”[6]

Coelho presents both the characters as free, confident and open minded. Coelho’s protagonist i.e. the narrator is someone who cherishes his freedom as the most important aspect of his life. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator is held as a suspect for his wife’s disappearance. However, he is released from prison, when found not guilty of the crime. Coelho describes the narrator’s state of mind as –

“I’m free. I’m out of prison, my wife has disappeared in mysterious circumstances, I have no fixed time table for work, I have no problem meeting new people, I’m rich, famous, and if Esther really has left me, I’ll soon find someone to replace her. I ‘m free, independent.”[7]

However the disappearance of his wife also forces him to realize the true meaning of freedom as he questions himself “what is freedom”?

b. Element of obsession

Obsessive love for partner has never been considered as a good sign for a relationship to grow. To some extent it is considered as a disorder as it leads to a situation where a person suffering from obsessive love disorder starts to suffer from jealousy that leads to unnecessary and unwanted problems. Mostly it occurs at the beginning of any relationship where both the partners tend to draw each other’s attention. Mason Komay in her article ‘Understanding Obsessive Love Disorder and How it Can Affect Your Life’ writes that “the first thing is that in any relationship, the people involved should have their own identities and should be able to follow their interests and friendships. However, when a

partner has obsessive love disorder, it leads to difficulty in pursuing that separate identity and those interests. That's because the disorder itself often leads to delusional jealousy and overwhelming intensity".[8]

Coelho's narrator obsession for his missing wife has none of the traits of a obsessive love disorder. Esther has been the narrator's inspiration. He knows she is equally responsible for him being a famous and well known writer. It was his wife who forced him to pursue his passion for writing and later handed over the draft to one of her previous boyfriends to get it published which eventually went on to become a best seller. The narrator's obsession for his wife is more of emotional in nature than jealousy. His obsession does not make him a harmful person to live with. Rather even in her absence, Esther inspires him to write another bestseller. Esther, besides being his wife, has been a guiding force in his life. What hurts him is that she chooses to disappear without telling him. Out of his obsession, this particular behaviour of Esther has lowered his self-esteem. However even after more than two years of Esther's disappearance and despite having a famous and beautiful actress as his girlfriend he finds it difficult to let go Esther from his imagination. The narrator accepts his obsession for his missing wife when he says,

"In the world of my imagination, Esther was still my companion, and her love gave me the strength to go forward and explore all my frontiers. In the real world, she was pure obsession, sapping my energy, taking up all the available space, and obliging me to make an enormous effort just to continue with my life, my work, my meeting with film producers, my interviews. How was it possible that, even after two years, I had still not managed to forget her? I could not bear having to think about it anymore, analyzing all the possibilities, and trying various ways out: deciding simply to accept the situation, writing a book, practicing yoga, doing some charity work, seeing friends, seducing women, going out to supper, to the cinema (always avoiding adaptations of books, of course, and seeking out films that had been specially written for the screen), to the theatre, the ballet, to soccer games. The Zahir always won, though: it was always there, making me think: I wish she was here with me". [9]

c. Element of love

According to R. Raffagnino *et.al.* "Love is a feeling that is especially expressed by the people involved in romantic relationships and is considered, along with a number of other factors (such as intimacy, commitment, and affection), one of the most significant components for a satisfying relationship and for its duration. These are aspects that, within the wider scope of relationship quality, are related to subjective well-being, especially in terms of happiness, life satisfaction, and the existence of more positive past experiences as opposed to negative feelings."[10]

Coelho, over a period of time, through his works, has redefined the meaning of love. His projection of love as a theme is more of emotional and spiritual in nature. In the novel, *The Zahir*, both the narrator and his wife love each other. However that does not stops them from have extramarital affairs occasionally. Their love for each other is away from the barriers of physical intimacy. As illustrated in one of their conversations,

"We've built our lives together. I love my man and he loves me, even though he's not always the most faithful of husbands".[11]

However, for the narrator, it was only when his wife disappeared without informing him, he realized his true love for her. Once he realized her love for her, the narrator start taking steps to find her. “ The spiritual aspect of marriage is the vehicle for our personal growth and it is invaluable for this purpose. The love, which is needed to stabilize a relationship, is of the type of love God display to each of us, an unconditional commitment to an imperfect person, nevertheless this takes energy and effort. It means caring about the other person as much you care about yourself”.[12]The narrator takes help of Mikhail, Esther’s friend to initiate the search to find her. Coelho very strongly believes in the true energy of love. He conveys this message through Mikhail who is on a mission to spread energy of love. In the novel, Mikhail declares,

“I have a mission to fulfil, and that mission is to spread the true energy of love throughout the world”.[13]

The narrator’s search for Esther lead him on a journey across countries where he explores and realizes true power of love and thus discover his “inner self”.

3. Conclusion

This paper while analyzing the novel *The Zahir* elaborates the primary themes of freedom, obsession and love. In the beginning of the novel the narrator finds out that he is being detained on the suspicion of him being responsible for the disappearance of his wife. But after being released, when he discovers that he is free to go and do whatever he wants starts cherishing his new found freedom, rather than grieving for his wife’s disappearance. But the new found freedom also makes him realize his mistakes that he committed before the sudden disappearance of his wife. This paper also highlights the theme of obsession in a positive way. The narrator’s obsession for his wife inspires him to write a bestseller novel. Further it helps him reorganize his life and add meaning to it. It helps him get over all his problems and starts finding new dimensions in his life. Finally, the theme of love is supported through Mikhail’s purpose of spreading the true energy of love in his life and the narrator’s realization of true love. The narrator’s search for his missing wife results in him finding Esther and understanding the power of love.

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