

Allegorical Tales in *The Zahir* and *Adultery*

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ABSTRACT

Coelho's novels *The Zahir* and *Adultery* are both alluring commentaries owing to his usage of allegorical tales and situations. Through these tales, there emerge many voices from the pages of these novels, interacting with and intersecting each other, sometimes dabbling in vacuum and this multiplicity of voices automatically makes these texts open to multifarious interpretations. Consequently, the absence of the domination of one voice means an absence of dominant narrative, even if the author does intend to do so and the reason is simple, the presence of literary device of allegory makes it impossible for any avid reader or critic to judge the novel from a single point of view and thus the text not just justifies the 'other sides' of the main narrative but also provides for their exposition. The overall impact being, a free play of different sets of sub-meanings due to profound parables which are to be taken together and assessed in totality, if one wants to reach at any reasonable conclusion, or conclusions. Moreover, there remains a tendency in learned writers like him to diversify the canvas of their text with a legion and a conglomeration of such stories within stories. The advantage of such a narrative technique is immense as it not just makes the narrative immensely captivating but also highlights the stress on the necessity of diversification of emotive impressions a text should expose its readers to in order to enhance their literary comprehension and subsequent cogency for a heightened expression and experience of life full of high morals and desirable ethics. An obvious drawback of such a narrative approach can be an absence of coherence in plot, a risk worth taking given the nature of human psychology- to which the novel must corroborate in order to justify its verisimilitude with reality. After all, in real life, events seldom follow a set pattern and there is always the presence of diverse voices and noises which remain intricately and unresolvedly muddled up together. It is the human intellect that has developed itself to cruise through such labyrinth and find its meaning from the multiple visions of truth. This research paper focuses light on his use of allegory in the above- mentioned novels. The research also focuses on the impact of the usage of allegory in these novels i.e., how a polyphonic effect in turn leads to the creation of a multiplicity of layers of meaning for the readers and the critics alike.

Keywords: allegory, fable, apologue, polyphony, layers, meaning.

Introduction

Allegory is defined as:

An allegory is a narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the “literal,” or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of signification. (Abrams 5)

The text of *The Zahir* contains many pertinent allegorical tales which can be discussed in light of the relevant contexts as can be imputed to their corresponding set of occurrences and also may be taken up as generalised lessons:

The narrative states that if two firemen go inside a forest and when they emerge out of the forest, the face of one of them is stained with blackness, which one of them will wash his face? The obvious answer being that as they are looking at each other's face, the man with dirty face, not knowing his condition, may utter that the face of another man was the same as his. The other man would sense that his face too must also be dirty and would end up washing it up. (Coelho, *The Zahir* 178-179)

The thing is, the story just told could be taken as an allegorical rendition of the relationships in today's world, as people in relation have a tendency to always look for themselves in each other's eyes. Now even in general occurrence it may so happen that a partner with clean slate may feel pangs of self-doubt and incompetence, thanks to the behaviour meted out to them by their spouse even if it was the other person who had blemishes on him. So, metaphorically speaking, the partner with zero fault may end up washing their face while other one still roams around with dirt smeared on his own. The tale is not just allegorical, it carries element of stark irony and sends a strong message for people in relationship. Naivety can be problematic both in life as well as relationships. It is better to carve out a balance of practicality and emotional dependence as relations, in this rapidly changing world, too evolve with time. Moreover, this tale adds an altogether new dimension to the narrative as it is not the voice of the author but a general point of view. The tale helps the reader to look at the happenings in the plot from a neutral point of view, an opportunity which is rarely available in literature.

The narrative includes a tale about the Mongolian creation myth according to which the world started with a wild dog representing femininity and a doe representing masculinity (Coelho, *The Zahir* 90). Such myths allegorically underline the message that the two different energies in nature come together and create the world, just like in Chinese philosophy of yang and yin. The old cultures have often tried to define the creation of world in terms of the dichotomy between male and female energies. According to myths of ancient civilizations, both orient and occident, the male and female energies are contrary to each other and at the same time each other's counterpart. By observing the simple phenomena in nature that it is only through their coming together that new life can begin, the philosophers of yesteryears deduced that the universe too must have started by coming together of these two energies where the male attributes in nature are represented through being furious, dominating and feminine energy is reflected through traits like being sensitive and instinctive but also docile, a force that works with passion as against reason.

Turkic people in Kazakhstan play a traditional equestrian game called *Kyz Kuu* to which the narrative alludes during the latter half of the novel (Coelho, *The Zahir* 316). It is an age-old allegorical representation of things to come that teaches the young girls whom to escape from and whom to allow to catch them and like all such sports, the game most likely has its origins in times when local cultures were in nascent stages.

It is also a reflection of a society, although primitive in its makeup, so sober and understanding that it teaches its young ones the nuances of love relations in a very frolicking and yet subtle manner. This approach of the society also lays bare the ground for a healthy understanding of each other's wishes and interests by the members of the opposite sex. Over all, the ritual is quite interesting and carries an anthropological touch to it. It also highlights the fact that some rituals remain intact even after centuries and even in the midst of the rise and fall of civilizations.

On one occasion, the narrative has a reference to the story of Ulysses and Penelope (Coelho, *The Zahir* 329). It is not just a simple story; it has become an all-profound allegory of the yearnings of lovers in different generations. As with other epics of the ancient world like the *Ramayana*, Ulysses journeyed through vast stretches of landmasses, always dreaming of meeting up with his beloved. Penelope on other hand, like any stock female character of old epics, went into mourning as soon as she got separated from her lover. Their lives are thus intertwined into a story of love and devotion; a story of larger-than-life dimensions about being loyal and waiting for one's love- a message to deeply ingrained in the basic tenets of human psychology since immemorial times.

Now this very rendition of an epic can also be taken as an allegory of all such love relations as the lovers' path is sometimes filled with all kinds of turbulences and difficult situations. Time and society always put checks on lovers and test the depth of their dedication to each other. It is only those who really have drunk the drops of true devotion, who succeed finally against the harsh restrictions of fate and society. Love, as the sages have elaborated, is the biggest strength that a person may carry in his heart and the best floodlight that can help him navigate the dark alleys of life. The allegory thus becomes a tale of all lovers who have ever loved, found obstacles in their paths, and fought relentlessly to get better of all these impediments and reunited with their beloved ones.

Coelho's novel *Adultery* is replete with fables which are defined as:

A **fable** (also called an **apologue**) is a short narrative, in prose or verse, that exemplifies an abstract moral thesis or principle of human behaviour; usually, at its conclusion, either the narrator or one of the characters states the moral in the form of an *epigram*. Most common is the **beast fable**, in which animals talk and act like the human types they represent. In the familiar fable of the fox and the grapes, the fox- after exerting all his wiles to get the grapes hanging beyond his reach, but in vain- concludes that they are probably sour anyway: the express moral is that human beings belittle what they cannot get. (Abrams 6)

The good thing about these fables remains their universal approach. It is not just Coelho; writers since ages have used this device to serve their motives and make speedy delivery of their message possible with least efforts. Maybe, it is a device that suits the human psyche well and a wise story teller is meant to be aware of the same. The novel carries many stories which are an apt description of many human conditions like the one below:

There is a story about a group of porcupines who were to choose between staying together and accepting the minor wounds caused by spines of fellow porcupines during the winters and to stay apart and risk death by cold. They decided to huddle together instead of taking unnecessary risk of extinction. (Coelho, *Adultery* 108)

The story is in fact a parable that represents the current human condition and reflects upon one of the major concerns of modern times i.e., the role of family in a person's life. Many a times people snap ties with their near and dear ones just to gain some extra freedom. In recent past, for instance, traditional societies like India have undergone massive reshuffling wherein joint families have literally broken down. There may be multiple reasons including the compulsion of young couples to move to bigger cities to earn money. Moreover, how many youths understand the blessing of having elders with them, guide them through thick and thin in life via their experiences?

At this juncture it becomes pertinent to analyze the trajectory of declining moral values in the society and also to assess the factors and forces that have conjured up and led to such a steep fall. And also, one needs to argue if common people in general run of humanity are really awake enough to grasp the value of enormous riches that life has granted them as the writer of *Sri Aurobindo: Some Aspects of His Vision* states:

Leaving aside the attainment of the Divine or any great spiritual Truth, the question may be asked: does life really care even for high ideals? Is it concerned with Truth, with God, with Beauty, with any high ideal? If we observe the working of Life we find it is rather concerned with physical needs, desires, vital instincts, greed, ambitions, impulses. These are real to it; the rest is shadowy. It is true that society gives these

ideals a place in its life, but its heart is not there e.g., ethics has a place in collective life but no society lives for ethics. It is for the satisfaction of the vital needs, utility, and desires of the body that a society lives. Society lives for desire, neither for religion nor for beauty. Only special individuals follow these high things- the saint, the ethical man, the artist, the thinker. Life seems to devote itself to efficiency in satisfying its vital desires. (Purani 59)

The text refers to a parable fit for all times as human conditions always remain the same whatever era it be:

A mouse approaches a wizard who changes it into a cat and then into a dog in order to relieve it from the fear of cats first and then the dogs. But as it was turned onto a dog, it started fearing tigers. the wizard then turned it into a tiger. But alas! Now it was perpetually afraid of the hunters. Eventually the wizard got irked and turned it back to a mouse saying that no one could help him as he did not understand his own development. (Coelho, *Adultery* 147)

Why did the rat behave in such a stupid manner? Is it his inability to understand life? Is he insecure about his position vis-à-vis the cats, the dogs and so on? Is it some kind of a mental blockage that prevents him from behaving appropriately? One may have multiple answers to such queries and in any case, the story is an excellent parable like many others in the novel which Coelho has used to display the predicament of people who are always afraid of being indebted to God. They are perpetually insulated to ideas of being grateful to God in their lives.

Now the basic idea is that if God gives someone success and he doesn't appreciate it, the Almighty may run out of patience and take away the bounties provided to him. The message of the story is simple, the mouse is supposed to appreciate the hand behind his success.

Humans are all bestowed with the faculty of assessing and understanding such complex phenomena by the wizard and being obliged is always going to act as a positive reinforcement for God, a simple thing the wizard looks for. Moreover, being a thankless rat is of little use to one's own self, the society and consequently to the maker Himself. Coelho's message is simple here- Love God and have a grateful heart!

In all, one thing stands out i.e., Coelho's effortless use of allegories to justify the needs of his narrations. These stories have also led to a thematic unification of the plots even as they provide a shredding of the coherent vision of the above- mentioned works. This dichotomy makes them even more pertinent and fruitful and lead to the overall amplification of literariness of these novels.

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