

THE QUEST FOR INDIVIDUALITY IN FARIBA VAFI'S *MY BIRD*

Elnaz Valaei Bakhshayesh^{1*}, Seyed Reza Ebrahimi²

¹Ms, Arab Open University, English Language and Literature Department, Oman, Email:

elnazvalaei79@gmail.com

²Ph.D in English Literature, Bijar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bijar, Iran, Email:

s.r.ebrahimi@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

One of the common themes in contemporary Persian literature in Iran is the psychological development of women and their challenges to find their path towards individuality. By applying Jungian "process of individuation," Fariba Vafi's novel *My bird* is analyzed to uncover the self-development of the female character. The motion of self-archetype is studied in relation to Jung's theory of individuality to study how the female protagonist experiences this process of personality development. The motif of re-birth emerges at the end of the novel when the female heroine reaches a level of recognition of the changes occurring within her. Other archetypal motifs that appear in the novel are the house archetype, the shadow archetype, and the individuation archetype which are discussed as they are the main structuring elements in the formation of the theme of the novel. This research aims to study how the psychological development of the female protagonist, based on Jung's archetypal theories, occurs.

Keywords: Jung's archetypes, shadow archetype, house archetype, individuation archetype.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is an established archetypal image of an Iranian woman? The author of the book, *Words, Not Swords*, answers this question as "For centuries, the ideal woman maintained a closed-in existence that did not intrude or merge with the outside world. She was a person of minimal transactions, contracted to a narrow space. She covered her body, guarded her honor (and that of her family), controlled her desires, averted her gaze, measured her words, and remained in her proper place" (Farzaneh Milani, 2011: 55). The established archetypal images for women are transferred to her by family mainly mother who has a great responsibility of raising her children according to the recognized virtues. The role of women, as mothers in transferring virtues ingrained in Iran culture, can be highly significant. In this regard, Kousha (2002) studied mother-daughter relationships in the context of Iran. According to her interviews with Iranian women, she realized that daughters repeat the same lifestyles, roles and patterns that their mothers had experienced before. In other words, daughters become the mirrors of their mothers' lives. And this pattern inherently continues with the next generation. Within each family, the type of relationship between mother and daughter can be different; however, according to Kousha, mother's status typically remains the same "as the primary caregiver" in their household (49).

The type of the literature, produced by women authors, has always become a tool to communicate and reflect their status in their family and society. To Milani, literature depicts the "constraints, self-determination, limitations and liberty, compliance and defiance" (2011: 182). One of the themes, in Persian literary works pertinent to woman's studies is her personality development from which a new archetypal image is born. The works such as Pirzad's *I will Turn off the Lights*, Belqeys Soleymani' *Khalebazi*, Moheb-Ali's *Don't Worry* present today's female writers in Iran have a dominant focus on woman's awareness of her inner world and her search of values such as individuation (Saeidian, Hosseini, 2013: 61-63). Honarbin- Holiday (2013) in her

book illuminates the noticeable changes in woman's position from domestic to public and political sphere. The writer believes that if Iranian women have become visible, it's certainly due to the "power of their ideas" that have strengthened them to challenge intellectually with the traditional beliefs (5).

Fariba Vafi, known as a popular post-revolution female writer with a realistic style, depicts "the day-to-day reality of life in contemporary Iran" (Kaminski). In her book, *My Bird*, Vafi focuses on two archetypal women: the mother and the heroine. The mother is depicted with an authority who has established the definitions of who 'a good girl/ woman' is, and the heroine who challenges her mother's restricting moral disciplines. This study reveals the process of self- development and individuation in the heroine through Jung's psychoanalysis theory and archetypes

The Notions of Jung's Psychoanalysis Theory

In Jung's psychoanalysis, man's psyche consists of two fundamental parts: "personal unconscious" and "collective unconscious". Jung calls collective unconscious "inborn" and "universal" because this part of the psyche is not associated with any individual experiences (Jung, 1968: 3). The existence of both psyches can be proved by their contents. The contents of the personal unconscious are called "feeling-toned complexes" and the contents of collective unconscious are known as "archetypes" (4). The archetypes are defined as "are typical and universal forms of apprehension which appear as primordial images charged with great meaning and power, images that impart a crucial influence upon our collective pattern of behavior" (Moreno, 1974: 4). The predominant archetypes, with effective role in the process of individuation, are the motifs, such as shadow, the mother, wise old man, anima/ animus, etc. (21). In Jung's theory, the archetypes of shadow, persona and anima/ animus are considered as the inherited basic patterns in human's unconscious psyche. Encountering and recognizing these archetypes results in individuation which portray the individual's psychological development.

The contents of the unconscious are demonstrated through symbols which possess multi meanings (Moreno, 1974: 35-36). It is vital to understand the significance of symbols which indicate that both unconscious and conscious mind have reached harmony. By recognizing these symbols "new situations and new conscious attitudes" appear (Jung, 1968: 289). The functions of symbols are to help us understand the meanings and concepts that are beyond our understanding and comprehension. They act like guidance to find the path through our inner and outer life challenges. This significant connection between inner and outer events, according to Jung, is called "synchronicity". In addition to this, for a civilized man, concentrating on within than outside world will lead the person to the path of Self- awareness (Jung, 1964: 19).

The Archetype of Individuation

Individuation is defined as "a process recognition- that's as one matures, the individual must consciously recognize the various aspects, unfavorable as well as favorable, of one's total self" (Guerin, Labor, et al., 2005: 204). Jung defines individuation as "the process by which a person becomes a psychological "individual," that is, a separate, individual unity or "whole" (Jung, 1968: 275). This is the process of unity and oneness between the conscious and unconscious. According to Jung, it is through individuation "that man, vainly seeking his own "existence" and making a philosophy out of it, can find his way back to a world in which he is no longer a stranger" (110). In the process of individuation a transformation in personality, as Jung calls, "rebirth" occurs which indicates a change in his common outlook and behavior. The person experiences individuation when her conscious mind has encountered and acknowledged the unconscious psyche contents such as shadow, anima/animus, wise old man and self (Moreno, 1974: 38). The Self is defined as "an inner guiding factor that is different from the conscious personality and that can be grasped only through the investigation of one's own dreams" (Jung, 1964: 162).

This research aims at studying how the female protagonist of *My Bird* experiences individuality and how this fiction fits in Jung's psychoanalysis theory.

2. MY BIRD

My Bird is the story of a housewife, the mother of two children who lives in Iran. The novel unfolds the story of a woman who is in search of her freedom. She is haunted by her childhood fears, mother's moral lessons, husband's dreams to immigrate to Canada and her unloved marital life. The reader discovers the world within the heroine through her monologues narrating her childhood memories of mother's controlling role, father's death in the basement of the house, dancing shadows and ghosts on the wall and their unaffectionate relationship with her husband. This is the story of a woman living a monotonous life and "looking at love doubtfully". She is expressing herself "through a loud and anxious monologue" (Saeidian and Hosseini, 2013: 62-63). In the beginning of the story, the reader finds her with her monologues:

"I move away from the window. Where should go? Where shouldn't I go? There is no good reason to

wander” She is like a bird in a cage with a desire to fly away but can’t find a reason to leave her cage. (Vafi, 2009: 50). However, she feels an “a desire for freedom” (Kaminski, 2013).

The reader enters the world of the heroine with her description of her living place “Look around and you think it’s impossible to be proud of this scene, even with patience and understanding. Smoky roofs and laundry that seems to be hung unwashed, tall and short buildings, very close to each other” (Vafi, 2009: 2).

As a young girl, she experienced a fear of not being as ‘good’ as mother and aunt expected, fear of seeing dancing shadows on the wall and fear of breaking the silence and speak. As she was growing up, the fear was still living within her blended with guilt. She was living a life filled with guilt for her infidelity and cheating on her husband in her dreams. She felt she was not a caring mother to her children. However, she hears a louder voice within her shouting to untie herself from boundaries and “shadows and spirits” to be born again (Kaminski, 2013).

3. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, first the archetypal or stereotype image of a woman in Iranian society, as well as in Persian modern literature, is discussed briefly and then the prominent themes would be investigated in the selected literary work. The psychoanalytical approach would help the researcher to follow the dynamics of individuality and developing the heroine’s new image through challenging the stereotyped and traditional archetypal images imposed by first socio and then family. To do so, the concept and theory of Jung’s archetypes will be discussed to demonstrate the female protagonist’s journey of self- exploration. It is aimed to make the connection between concepts like the archetype of shadow with the main focus on the archetype of individuality. Also, the house archetype will be analyzed in intimate association with the individuation archetype.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Jung’s psychoanalysis theory has been employed by some researchers who have depicted the successful process of the heroine’s self-development. In his dissertation, Snellgrove (2012) conducted a study focusing on Jung’s concepts of archetypes. The researcher selected three literary texts by three different female authors: Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The researcher studied how self- actualization can be defined in feminine terms in a patriarchal world. Elliott (2005) conducted a Jungian study analyzing E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. The researcher used Jung’s psychological theory to study psychological associations of the novel’s characters. The protagonists of the story encounter their unconscious inside the Marabar Caves in India. One of the protagonists experiences growth into personhood and the other experiences wholeness.

Not all protagonists’ adventures end in a successful self- development and wholeness. In Zhu and Han’s (2013) research study, the personality of protagonist was analyzed by using Jung’s archetypal theory. In this study, Jung’s archetypes, shadow, persona, anima and animus were used to analyze the personality of the protagonist. The protagonist failed to achieve wholeness since she couldn’t deal with her shadow, which was her naive and impulsive love story. It finally resulted in her tragic death.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Archetype of Shadow

According to Moreno, shadow, our unfavorable tendencies, is either personified in dreams in the form of symbols or can appear when we project our mistakes and inferior aspects of our personality in others (40-41). In meeting the shadow, recognizing this archetype dwelling secretly in our unconscious psyche requires essential conscious efforts such as “self-knowledge”, “considerable moral effort” and “self-scrutiny” (42). Jung describes this dark archetype as “a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well” (Jung, 1968: 21). Encountering with shadow and accepting it, according to Jung, is called “apprentice-piece” which is the preliminary stage of the individual’s development (29).

In this story, silence was recognized as a great virtue in her family. As a young girl, she had to adjust her attitudes to this moral virtue:

She recalls her childhood when silence had lived with her in her childhood:

I remembered that my silence has a history. I have been praised for it time and again. I was seven or eight years old when I realized not all children have this virtue. My silence was considered my best asset (Vafi, 2009: 19).

She remembers Aunt Mahboub telling her to keep things in her heart:

I don't like tattletales

She pressed her hand on my bony chest.

A woman should learn to keep everything here (28).

Behaving with "quiet poise and in a dignified manner" like controlling her voice and manner was considered a precious value for her (Milani, 2011: 55). Silence, as Farzaneh Milani writes, has a history rooted in Iran family culture. In fact, it is a "key criterion of her beauty and desirability, the pre-requisite of an ideal woman". "The expression *Sangin o Samet* [solemn and silent], still in abundant use to this day, defines an ideal woman who is self-effacing rather than self-promoting, enclosed rather than exposed, mute rather than vocal" (1992: 49).

The virtue of silence, as she was growing up, filled her with a sense that she was not enough and whatever she did was wrong. She thought she was nothing and couldn't perform her duties as a daughter, mother and wife, feeling being a disappointment to her family:

I have so many faults by now. They have been stacking up, one on top of the other, becoming like a heavy wet blanket that I want to pull over me and stay covered. I am not a mother, not a daughter, and not a wife. I am nothing. I cannot perform any of the roles that have been assigned to me. I was no good as a child, either (Vafi, 2009: 70-71).

I am nothing. I cannot perform any of the roles that have been assigned to me. I was no good as a child, either. My life did not matter. Maman was hoping for a boy and I turned out to be a girl (70-71).

Silence became a complex virtue for her. Although she was praised for that, she was suffering from the pain it was causing her. She wanted to break it and express herself freely. The imposed silence had become a pain and she felt how suffocating it was when she couldn't hear her voice saying about her desires in life. She wants to take it off just like an unfitting dress: "My silence was bothering me like a tight woolen dress in hot weather. I wanted to take it off" (22).

The major turning point was when she decided to loosen herself from mother's moral disciplines and her husband's preferred match to his ambitions. She realized that she belonged to her own unique world where she could speak up without adjusting herself to others':

"I want to stop and look at myself and my life. From far away like a lover, a close by like a stranger. I don't want to move to Canada. I don't want to spend the rest of my days adjusting to life over there because by the time I find my way around, life will be all over" (66).

When her daughter asked her what she wanted to be, she had a new image of herself. She wanted to become a dancer:

Maman, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

I say, "Don't chew on the pencil."

She takes the pencil out of her mouth. "Ok. Tell me."

"I am already a grown-up."

Now she has put the pencil in between her toes.

"I have already become what I wanted to be."

Shadi takes the pencil out of her toes.

"Maman" She pushes her bangs away. "Be serious."

I think, "Well, ... I want, I want ..."

All of a sudden, I say, "I want to be a dancer (75)

After revealing her true passion for becoming a dancer, she became more intimate with her inner being presenting her real Self. With this self-knowledge growing within her, the imposed virtue of silence started to transform to more connection with her Self, in a solitary form. One snowy night, after seeing her husband so determined to leave to Canada, she walked out of the house seeking a solitary moment. She found herself not desperate and dependent woman clinging to her husband any more. She feels a pleasant emerging inspiration from within to release all ties that make her appear dependent and needy:

"I have left the house to be alone and hear myself make a promise, a promise never ever to cling again, never again be dependent" (87).

She reached an understanding and knowledge that in order to leave the cage, she needed to break the silence, let others hear her voice and fly with her on wings.

5.2. The Archetype of the House

The house is regarded as an archetypal symbol in this study. It has a significant role in the development of the female protagonist. Understanding the symbolic function of the house opens the path to explore the contents of her unconscious mind. Both houses of her father and husband play great roles in her personality transformation. The house holds a significant relevance to two different periods in her life. In her childhood, she lived in a house with a basement where her father died lonely. This had evoked pain in her:

"Father had died like a child. His head has slipped off the mattress and he had died" (20).

After she got married, she saw in her dreams a basement without windows. She could remember that in her father's house the basemen had four windows: "The basement I see in my dreams has no windows. But the basement in my father's house had windows; four small windows" (Vafi, 2009: 43).

In fact, the basement in her dreams is the motif displaying her unconscious. As Moreno says, dreams are the natural products of our collective unconscious, the manifestation of which occurs merely through motifs (Moreno, 1974: 23).

After she freed herself from the fear and all tying boundaries, her perspectives towards her neighborhood and how they looked to her transformed. In the beginning, what she perceived from the world around her is boredom and nothingness:

Look around and you think it's impossible to be proud of this scene, even with patience and understanding. Smokey rooftops and laundry that seems to be hung unwashed, tall and short buildings, very close to each other (Vafi, 2009: 2).

The old homes are being taken down everywhere and new buildings are going up. The rose and jasmine bushes in the old demolished homes are so dusty that they wouldn't even inspire poets. Here and there, new homes appear a little further back than the old ones, with small balconies and latticed iron doors. The neighborhood has become like a gigolo who wears sunglasses and slicks his hair back, but his shoes are always old and torn (2).

At the end of this journey, she became one with the house which symbolically signified wholeness, with a significant relationship with her Self.

I am back in my own house. I tell myself I'll stay right here till the kids grow up. I won't go anywhere anymore. We'll stay here within these walls, the three of us. It's as if for the first time I face the reality of my life. As if only tonight I am able to throw away such nonsense like a shared life, the warm family unit, and other rubbish, and make up my own definition. This is my life and these two kids belong only to me. Now I have all the responsibility to continue as I see fit. The heavy pain makes me pipe away my tears. I feel I have become stronger (106).

CONCLUSION

The female protagonist experienced personality transformation signifying her rebirth. At the end of the novel, she could free herself from the cage of fears and silence by recognizing herself as a free individual, she could step into a world where she created an intimate connection with her being. She decided to stay and reconstruct a new image of life for herself and her two children. Her vision expanded to a world beyond the kitchen and walls of the house where she could see herself as a whole.

The path to maturity is the path of being aware of the darker side of the psyche that is identified as embarrassment revealed to others. Consciously identifying and recognizing it results in consciously making decisions to experience self-development. During the process of becoming conscious of herself, she realizes she needs to untie and free herself from the forced and limiting mindsets.

REFERENCE LIST

- Elliot, David W. (2005) *A psychological literary critique from a Jungian perspective of E. M. Forster's A Passage to India*. [online]. Master thesis, East Tennessee State University. dc.etsu.edu/etd/1069. Available from: <https://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2226&context=etd>.
- Guerin, Wilfred L. et al. (2005) *A handbook of critical approaches to literature*. [online]. 5th ed., Oxford University Press. Available from: https://uogbooks.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/wilfred_l-_guerin_earle_labor_lee_morgan_jeannbokos-z1.pdf. [Accessed: 30 July 2018].
- Honarbin-Holliday, M. (2013) *becoming visible in Iran. women in contemporary Iranian society*. New York: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd.
- Von Franz, M.-L. (1964). The process of individuation. In C. G. Jung and M.-L. von Franz (eds.), *Man and his symbols*. [online]. New York: Doubleday. Available from: https://monoskop.org/images/9/97/Von_Franz_Luise_Marie_Jung_Gustav_Carl_Man_and_His_Symbols_1988.pdf. [Accessed: 30 July 2018].
- Jung, C. G. (1959) *The archetypes and the collective unconscious*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge & K. Paul.
- Kaminski, Volker. (2013) 'The Iranian dream of emigration. Review of *My Bird* by Fariba Vafi. Translated from the German by Aingeal Flanagan. [online]. *Qantara*. Available from: <https://en.qantara.de/node/2518>. [Accessed: 16 September 2018].
- Kousha, Mahnaz. (2002) *Voices from Iran. The changing lives of Iranian women*. New York: Syracuse University.
- Milani, Farzanneh. (2011) *Veils and words. The emerging voices of Iranian women writers*. New York: Syracuse University.
- . (2011) *Words, not swords*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Moreno, Antonio. (1974) *Jung, gods and modern man*. London: Sheldon Press.
- Snellgrove, Christopher Alan. (2012). *20th century feminism: A Jungian exploration of the feminine self*. (Doctoral dissertation). (online). Auburn University, Alabama. Available from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10415/3284>. [Accessed: 1 August 2018].
- Saeidian, S. and Hosseini, S. R. (2013) A Sociological Study of Iranian Women's Role in Fictional Literature in the Recent Two Decades. [print journal]. *International Journal of Women's Research*, 2 (2), 59 - 72. Available from: https://ijwr.ut.ac.ir/article_50137_142b0cc1675010cfb089f97a1ae5a49b.pdf. [Accessed: 17 September 2018].
- Vafi, Fariba. (2009) *My bird*. Translated by Mahnaz Kousha and Nasrin Jewell, New York: Syracuse.
- Zhu, Jiang, & Lemeng, Han. (2013) 'Analysis on the personality of Maggie by Jung's archetype theory. (online). *Theory and Practice in Language Studies- Academy Publisher*, print journal 3(2), 324-328, doi:10.4304/tpls.3.2.324-328. [Accessed: 12 March 2018].