

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

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### Abstract

One of the common themes in contemporary Persian novels in Iran is the psychological development of women and their challenge 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.

**Key words:** 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*, answer 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 the mothers in transferring virtues ingrained in Iran culture can be importantly significant. In this regard, Kousha (2002) studied mother-daughter relationship in the context of Iran. According to her interviews with Iranian woman, she realized that daughters repeat the same lifestyles, roles and patters that their mothers had experienced before. In another words, daughters become the mirror 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).

Literature, produced by women authors, has always become a tool to communicate and reflect the "constrains, self-determination, limitations and liberty, compliance and defiance" (Milani, 2011: 182). One of the themes, in Persian literary works pertinent to woman's studies, which is becoming commonly prevalent 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 believes (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 disciplines. This study reveals the process of self- development and individuation in the heroine through Jung’s psychoanalysis theory and archetypes

## 1.1 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).

## 1.2 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).

This study aims at investigating 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 nameless housewife and mother of two children with domestic responsibilities living in Iran. The novel unfolds the story of a woman who is struggling with the loss of Self. She is haunted by her childhood fears, mother’s disciplines, 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 and how he was treated unkindly by her mother, dancing shadows and ghosts on the wall, her husband’s ambitions and their unaffectionate relationship. “*My Bird* portrays a woman’s sexual life who is also engaged in difficulties of her life, children and routines. Similar to some modern s, she looks at love doubtfully and reviews her relationships with her husband, family and children in her mind through a loud and anxious monologue” (Saeidian and Hosseini, 2013: 62-63). Throughout the story, the reader explores the root of her confusion and loss originates from the family traditions. In the beginning of the story, she defines her world merely restricted to the walls and windows of her house. She has not engaged herself with the world beyond the walls of her house. Like a bird in a cage, she is strange with the outside world.

"I move away from the window. Where should go? Where shouldn't I go? There is no good reason to wander" (Vafi, 2009: 50).

Behave with "quiet poise and in a dignified manner" like controlling her voice and manner is considered a precious value for her (Milani, 2011: 55). The reader enters the world of the heroine with her description of her unpleasant and smelly residential area "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).

She is confused between her responsibility as a caring mother and wife and her desire to care about her Self. An "insatiable desire- a desire for freedom" starts to emerge within her that causes separation from her husband (Kaminski, 2013). As a young girl, she experienced fear of not behaving as a 'good girl' as mother and aunt expected her, fear of uncle's gazes at her, fear of seeing dancing shadows on the wall and fear of her inner revolutionary feelings be manifested. And in her marital life, she experiences an unloved and unaffectionate relationship with her husband. Even in her dreams, she cheats on her husband. She is confused whether she should feel guilty for her infidelity in her dreams and not being a caregiver mother to her children or she should free herself from any restricting feelings to allow herself reach liberty. As her inner voice is getting louder and bolder, she learns to abandon her intimidation of "shadows and spirits" and create her own world free from mother's limiting values and husband's ambitions for the future (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. In another literary study done by Hernandez, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* was analyzed with the concept of individuality by using Jung's analytical psychology. The protagonist deals with her journey to reach wholeness. Atwood used Jungian archetypes which demonstrate the protagonist's journey of self-exploration. In Danylova's study, the protagonist's life journey in H. Hesse's novel 'Steppenwolf' was analyzed by using Jung's concept of individuality. In this study, the author has used both Jung's theory of archetypes and hermeneutical methodology. In order to understand his own Self, the protagonist, Harry Haller, had to overcome his ego 'I' and his shadow 'Steppenwolf' and to recognize his anima. 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).

Being embodied with the feeling of nothingness and loss of true Self has paralyzed the unnamed female protagonist in this fiction. Silence, recognized as a great virtue for a girl in her family, was born and has grown up with her. As a young girl, she was admired for respecting this virtue adjusting her attitudes according to what a good girl is expected to do:

She recalls her childhood when silence had lived with her during 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).

Silence, as Farzaneh Milani writes, has a history rooted in Iran family culture. In another words, 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 grows up, fills her with a sense of being not enough and whatever she does is a mistake. Silence had raised the feelings of fear and embarrassment that she is not enough and is unable to perform her responsibilities as a good girl in her childhood, and later as a devoted wife and mother:

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 has become a daunting virtue for her and she battle with this imposed discipline from within. She starts experiencing a rising resistance inside her against this forced value. This imposed silence has become a pain and she feels how suffocating it is when she can’t hear her own true voice presenting her true Self. 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).

She starts a reflection on her life when she realizes the voice of her inner world and the events of the outer world are in disharmony. Then she decides to stop being mother’s good girl and acting like her husband’s enthusiastic wife to his ambitions. She understands she belongs neither to her mother’s outlook towards raising a perfect girl/woman as society requires nor has to force herself to her husband’s unlikely ambitions:

“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 asks her what she wants to be, her answer demonstrates a new image of her is emerging which seems to be far unrealistic and strange from her typical roles as a faithful wife and devoted mother. Being able to voice her true desire by dancing which is a form of presenting herself and her existence fills her with unique power. She becomes one with her inner being and starts identifying and presenting herself as an individual with a voice that can differentiate her from her past image:

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)

One snowy night, after seeing her husband so determined to leave to Canada, she walks out of the house seeking a solitary moment. She finds 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).

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.

## **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. The house of the father and husband play a vital role in her personality transformation. The house holds a significant relevance to two different periods in her life. The first one was in her childhood in the basement of her father's house. In this house, as a child, she experienced mixed feelings of fear and torture.

When her father asked her about her day with her aunt, she had to be silent, for what she was always praised.

"I went mute, not out of wisdom but out of fear. My instinct told me that the answer to a question asked in the basement without turning the lights on would bring disaster" (Vafi, 2009: 20).

The basement also evokes pain when his father died there alone:

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

The second house, which belongs to her husband, signifies two different aspects; void and transformation. Both houses have pivotal roles in awakening her. She doesn't stop seeing the basements in her dreams of both houses. As Moreno says, dreams are the natural products of our collective unconscious, the manifestation of which occurs merely through motifs (Moreno, 1974: 23). The basements in her dreams are the motifs displaying the unconscious:

"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).

The process of individuation can be traced by comparing her transforming perspectives towards her neighborhood and how they look to her. The feelings she receives from the houses she sees can be associated with her inner feelings. In the beginning, what she perceives 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 becomes one with the house which symbolically signifies wholeness, reaching 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).

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).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The female protagonist experienced personality transformation that signifies 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 creates an intimate connection with her being. She decides to stay and re-construct a new image (life) for herself and her two children. Her vision expanded to a world beyond the kitchen and walls of the house where she sees herself as a whole. She became the bird that could fly freely from the cage of boundaries of enforced virtue.

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