

Love and lessons in the zahir



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The Zahir is a kind of novel that helps the reader deeply understand what life is and what it has to offer to the loved, unloved, and the people helplessly searching for love. Although the word 'love' is repeated numerous times, the central theme, ironically, of this novel is not actually 'love.' The central theme of this novel is the struggling journey of understanding yourself, and love just happens to fall under that struggle that the narrator endeavors for. Ever since the narrator's wife, Esther, had allegedly been announced missing, the narrator was determined to re-examine himself all over from the beginning. Although his habits of cheating and sleeping with lots of women was not a virtue of his, he has the character of determination, perseverance, and resilience. As the narrator strives for his finding of inner peace, he realizes all his flaws and faults, and all that made him so repulsive to some people. He had found the root to all his misery in life by deciding to listen to his missing wife's advice on writing a novel.

As he began working on his novel and meeting new people with new things to offer, he had found the problem within himself and why he did not bother solving it or even confronting it. Therefore, the struggle of understanding yourself is the prevailing theme in this novel, and that is what makes this story more of a life lesson and not just a banal novel about misery and self-pity. In the beginning of the story, the narrator was imprisoned due to the false accusation of murdering his wife, however, he got out in a day. When he got out, he was drenched in self-pity, curiosity, and anger. The narrator numbed his feeling by drinking a lot and bringing back younger women back to his apartment almost every night. However, one of Esther's coworker came to the narrator and informed him that Esther is still alive. From then,

the narrator decided to stay sober and begin writing a novel, just like what Esther had advised him to do a long time ago. During the narrator's writing, he realized that the character he had "invented" impeccably resembled himself. He decided to stop growing in self-pity and go find love instead of just waiting for it on his couch.

Finding love was only the first stage of the narrator to re-examine and understand himself profoundly. In one of his more serious relationships with a woman named Marie, he asked her, "Marie, let's suppose that two firemen go into a forest to put out a small fire. Afterwards, when they emerge and go over to a stream, the face of one is all smeared with black, while the other man's face is completely clean. My question is this: which of the two will wash his face?" To which she responds by saying the man with the dirty face. The narrator then explains in a long passage saying, "No, the one with the dirty face will look at the other man and assume that he looks like him. And, vice versa, the man with the clean face will see his colleague covered in grime and say to himself: I must be dirty too. I'd better have a wash. I'm saying that, during the time I spent in the hospital, I came to realize that I was always looking for myself in the women I loved. I looked at their lovely, clean faces and saw myself reflected in them. They, on the other hand, looked at me and saw the dirt on my face and, however intelligent or self-confident they were, they ended up seeing themselves reflected in me thinking that they were worse than they were." After his stay in the hospital, he leaves Marie because he finds out that he cannot love at all.

The second stage of the narrator's journey in re-examining and understanding himself is the stage of regaining self-esteem. The narrator

continues to write his novel because he thinks that it is the only way he could truly understand his character. Often, the narrator compares himself to other people, even the most simple beggar sitting on the sidewalk. When he is done with his thoughtful comparison, he comes to the conclusion that he is no better than the other person, sometimes worse than that person. “ The energy of hatred won’t get you anywhere; but the energy of forgiveness, which reveals itself through love, will transform your life in a positive way.” A quote in the book given by one of the narrator’s nurses while he was in the hospital for his epilepsy. The narrator subconsciously started describing the virtues of his main character in the novel that he was working on. Although the resemblance of him and his character seemed unclear to him, he figured it out by the very end of the novel. The narrator began to accept his flaws by spending a whole night writing them down. He realized that it always ended up drivel when he compared himself with others. There was now only one stage left to complete his eternity of a struggle, the stage of self-acceptance and finding inner peace with his worst fears and nightmares.

The last and final stage of the narrator’s great endeavor was the hardest to overcome. He had to accept who he is—with all the good and the bad—and had to come at peace with them and not hate himself for it. He began this by saying, “ If I want to find her, I’ll have to find myself first.” The protagonist had already finished his novel and now had to overcome this obstacle with no help whatsoever, he had to do this on his own, with his determination and perseverance. An important part of that stage was when he called Esther, his wife, the Zahir, hence the name of this novel. In Arabic, the word ‘ zahir’ acts as a noun or adjective, it translates to the word ‘ the conspicuous’ or ‘

visible.’ The reason that the title of the novel fits perfectly with the plot is because his wife is the visible truth that will show the narrator his path to blissfulness. However, in the novel the narrator says this about the Zahir: “The Zahir was the fixation on everything that had been passed from generation to generation; it left no question unanswered, it looks up all the space; it never allowed us even to consider the possibility that things could change.” He found self-acceptance in calling his wife the Zahir because, as much as he hates to admit, his wife is correct about him; that he’s a person who is scared of this world and chooses to hate people or break their hearts before it can happen to him. In other words, he would cheat, behave malevolently, or even hate people without knowing who they are because he did not want the same thing happening to him first. He realized that his selfishness and greed was what had caused Esther to “disappear” for a year. At the very end, Esther and the protagonist “coincidentally” meet each other in their favorite café in Paris, “Le Blanc Café” and talk about their journeys. They came to an agreement that both of them would be happy living by themselves because they accepted all their faults and iniquity, so there is no need to have someone by their sides to reassure their significant existence in the world. Esther ended their conversation by saying, “Love is an untamed force. When we try to control it, it destroys us. When we try to imprison it, it enslaves us. When we try to understand it, it leaves us feeling lost and confused.”

The Zahir is an intensely spiritual book that explores all the bad traits that humans have but are afraid to accept, like selfishness, greed, and sometimes a bit of conceit and vanity. It also gives you the answers to why

morbid humans are and how could we solve it or just embrace it because fate cannot change it. Contradicting this statement, the novel also says that we can control our destiny and make fate change for us. The novel shows what we could miss on while we are too busy engrossed in ourselves and not giving ourselves enough credit for who we are and who we are not. The energy of hatred won't get anyone anywhere; but the energy of forgiveness, which reveals itself through love, will transform your life in a positive way. This describes the struggle of everyone in understanding themselves, and this is why it is the most prominent theme in The Zahir.