

The Feminine Ideal in John Fowles' Vision

Drd. Iulia-Alina Mocanu

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași

Résumé: Les romans postmodernes de John Fowles apportent un éclairage différent sur la problématique controversée du rôle de la femme dans le cadre du processus complexe d'individuation souffert par les protagonistes mâles. Le lecteur est confronté non plus aux aspects anciens du rapport homme-femme mais à une nouvelle perspective concernant l'idéal féminin. Chez John Fowles le rôle de la femme acquiert une importance capitale et représente la source intime de toutes les métamorphoses auxquelles sont soumis les mâles. L'idéal féminin est illustré par l'écrivain sous la forme de plusieurs hypostases, s'embellissant de nouvelles nuances avec chaque représentation. Il apparaît sous le visage d'une muse – Erato – qui interfère avec la configuration du texte, il est incarné dans la personne d'une femme mystérieuse – Sarah Woodruff – qui dévoile un des côtés secrets de la féminité, il est à retrouver dans une lumière bipolaire, voire le cas de Julie/June dans *Godgame* ou il s'enrichit d'un rôle rédempteur comme dans le cas de Rebecca Lee du roman *A Maggot*.

Mots-clés : métamorphose, Anima, individuation, féminité, rôle rédempteur

The feminine figure has always been very controversial in the literary history. Most of the times, her role was misunderstood or misrepresented. Embodied in an angelic character or sharing demonic features, the feminine character had to cope with male power, which seemed difficult to avoid in a patriarchal society. This is also the case of John Fowles' novels where the feminine characters are always to blame for the decay of the masculine figures, and paradoxically they are also the very ones who contribute to the transformation of the male protagonists. Being represented by a muse – Erato – who interferes with the configuration of the text, a mysterious woman – Sarah Woodruff – who reveals a new side of womanhood, the bipolar status of Julie/Lily in the *Godgame*, the redeeming role of Rebecca Lee, the issue of the woman is rendered in a different new light with each novel.

There are many approaches that can be used in the exploration of such a complex issue. For instance, researchers such as: Hélène Cixous (*The Laugh of the Medusa*), Julia Kristeva (*Women's Time*), Sandra M. Gilbert (*Literary Paternity*), Alice A. Jardine (*Gynesis*) etc. present the women writers in a new light. Although we deal with a male writer, one might easily apply the feminist theories to the female characters. Taking into consideration Hélène Cixous's study – *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Rebecca Lee, one of the protagonists of the novel *A Maggot*, stands for the idea that the phallogocentric order can be “reordered”, in a world in which there is a series of relationships that suppress the feminine – the history of writing, the history of reason, the phallogocentric tradition, and the dominating syntax and grammar.

The novel highlights the strenuous effort of Henry Ayscough to discover the truth by rational methods, truth which is in fact represented by plural truths, each character coming with his/her own perspective on the events. As a consequence, the deposition of Rebecca Lee has to overcome all the impediments of the subjectivity of the other characters. Even if “the feminine is impossible to define, for definition captures the feminine in the masculine phallogocentric order” [1] Rebecca tries to reveal her new self – her redeemed personality, by explaining to Ayscough the degree in which all the experiences that she had undergone with His Lordship changed her from a *maggoty whore* in a *winged saint*. The metamorphosis can be observed also at the textual level where the meaning opens itself in another meaning which opens itself in another meaning, just like a Chinese box.

Rebecca Lee, a prostitute at Claiborne's brothel in London, is hired as a personal mistress by a Lord in order to serve his interests. However, the journey into unknown will present a defenseless woman who has to make her way out of the situation. The purpose of the journey is kept secret and nobody knows where exactly they are heading to. The narrative does not help very much the reader because it stops, and the truth about the events is revealed in a Q/A form. The questioning of Rebecca confuses Ayscough, who cannot make head or tail

from the story she tells. The woman tells the clerk that they (His Lordship – Bartholomew, Thurlow – Dick, and Rebecca) reached the cave where the master was looking for the healing waters for his impotency. They were welcomed by the Holy Mother Wisdom, who showed Rebecca June Eternal – where she had the possibility to meet Jesus and God. After this encounter His Lordship went back to his place – June Eternal, and Dick – his servant and alter ego – committed suicide. In a few months from that journey, she has become a true Shaker and got married to a preacher. Before this experience, Rebecca was unable to bear children, but at the time Henry finds her she is pregnant with Dick's baby.

Therefore, the protagonist has to fight the stereotypes of the eighteenth-century society. The heroine is subject to class discrimination – illustrating the poor and change, while Ayscough is identified as the representative of the rich and of conservatism. As a female she also has to deal with the lawyer's sexism and with the rigid patriarchal society. Her deposition brings forth this idea:

"A: ... As I was used when whore, so I may be used still. And all women beside.

Q: How, all women are whores?

A: Whores in this. We may not say what we believe, nor say what we think, for fear we might be mocked because we are women. If men think a thing be so, so must it be, we must obey. I speak not of thee alone, it is so with all men, and everywhere." [2]

In the lawyer's eyes she is not only a working-class girl but also a dissenter (her Quaker family from Bristol). The fact that she is married at the moment determines a mocking attitude in Henry towards Rebecca's changed marital status. This is also supported by the fact that now she comes forward as a Shaker prophetess who foretells change, and the self-conscious narrator reminds us that the belief of the age was "that change leads not to progress, but to anarchy and disaster. *Non progredi est regredi* runs the adage; early Georgian man omitted the *non*." [3]

In addition, the facts speak for themselves: what was in the beginning a journey to heal His Lordship becomes in the end a therapeutic experience for Rebecca, who is now pregnant, arguing that she is bearing the new Christ – a girl. She probably borrowed the idea from her religious faith which considers that the second coming of Christ will be under the form of a woman. Of course, for Ayscough this is a blasphemy. But Rebecca does not obey his advice and continues to support her idea. This is the point where, apart from the norms of her society, the heroine speaks her mind freely, ignoring consequences – an aspect of utmost importance for a woman living in that age. For her, speaking represents the possibility of change, heralding the transformation of social and cultural structures. In her former stage, preceding metamorphosis, she was used to unveil her body in front of men, in the latter stage she lays bare her spirit through words. In fact, Rebecca materializes in the form of a baby her religious views. As Hélène Cixous encouraged women writers to inscribe what they are saying, Fowles brings forth a character that chooses to signify her truth with her body.

The title itself alludes to the change that is going to take place in the protagonist – she evolves from a larva to a saint. *A Maggot* is the first of Fowles' novels in which a man, even if unintentionally, has the function of leading a woman towards self-awareness or authenticity. Thus, her individuation process reaches its full development, because Rebecca manages to achieve her goals. On the other hand, the other novels focus on protagonists for whom the individuation process is unattainable under all features.

The Mary/Magdalene hypostasis of the heroine presents her as a round character, fully developed, that succeeded in separating her spirit from the mundane desires, after being their most ardent representative. Her angelic face does not lure Ayscough, who has a clear, sharp thinking. But the science fiction features of Rebecca's story overcome his power of understanding, being unable to give a coherent impression over all she is saying.

On the other hand, *The Magus*, another novel of the same author, depicts a male character that undergoes the same intricate process of individuation. Nicholas Urfe desperately tries to make peace with his inner demons but his attachment to women is refused, being unable to complete his individuation. All women in his life bring him sorrow and confusion. Individuation, a Jungian concept, describes the complex process undergone by a human being in order to develop his/her personality, and it usually starts at mid-life. This process manifests itself in “realizing the existence of a collective as well as personal unconscious by experiencing the archetypal nature of images and dramas at the core of constellated complexes, and gradually diminishing identification with the ego and opening to the influence of the self, the archetype (original form) of wholeness at the core of the personality.” [4]

Not coming to terms to his mother, he cannot establish a durable relationship with all women in his life, unconsciously searching for his *Anima* on the deserted island of Phraxos. The insularity atmosphere gives him the feeling that he can actually round up his split self. However, all the events result in a deep confusion for Nicholas Urfe, who is unable to make a clear picture of his wishes, being tormented by his desire for several women – Lily/Julie, Alison. For him, Alison is just another woman, not the one, because they do not share profound feelings. So, once again the woman has to deal with a world established on patriarchal laws which do not grant her the possibility of defining her *Animus*. Lily and her twin sister are just characters in Conchis’ masques and their role is to lure the protagonist into the deepest side of his personality. They are the women who help him understand the true nature of the feminine personality and its importance in a man’s psychic life. From this point of view, these women are somewhat independent, having the opportunity to express freely their emotions and feelings. This is what gives him the impression of freedom, of time immemorial. Yet, Lily/Julie and June are just feminine figures created by Conchis (both Alchemist and Magician – *i.e.* the Magus) in his orchestration of events.

Later on, the protagonist finds out that Lily is in fact Julie and that she has a twin sister. Just as Rebecca was named Louise and Fanny, the reader is also misled by the narrator, who is in both cases unreliable. The female characters in *The Magus* Lily/Julie and June share the same situation with Rebecca Lee – they all have been hired for a role. In the former case, the women were brought on the island in order to perform in a play, but they were not given any details about what was going to happen. With respect to Rebecca Lee, she was hired for personal pleasure. All in all, they were all hired to serve some higher purpose - Lily and June serve as *Anima* figures in Nicholas Urfe’s process of individuation and Rebecca’s soul is redeemed by her encounter with Holy Mother Wisdom, and at the same time she has a major contribution to His Lordship’s master plan.

The *Anima* archetype represents a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious psyche. It appears personified in fantasies, dreams, and visions. The *Anima* is the personification of all female psychological tendencies in the psyche of a man, including feelings, moods, intuition, receptivity for the irrational, the ability for personal love, a feel for nature, and the man's attitude toward the unconscious. This image becomes conscious by real contacts with women, especially the first woman he encounters in his life. Normally this first woman is his mother, who is the most powerful image which shapes him. Therefore, Urfe’s projection of the feminine ideal is quite complicated because of the difficult relationship he had with his mother. As a grown-up, the protagonist projects the image of his *Anima* onto the women that attract him. Unfortunately, he is not aware of the fact that his projection does not correspond with who the woman is in reality. Nevertheless, this projection appears at an unconscious level.

The archetype quality of the *Anima* is embodied by the characteristics that appear throughout the ages. She is an eternal figure, wise but not overpowering, looks young, has the

feeling of being special, or having a secret knowledge. She is often connected to the earth or water and can have great power. She has both a light and a dark aspect. She can be the pure, good, noble figure, almost a goddess, but she can also be a prostitute, a seductress or a witch. The dark aspect will most likely appear when a man has suppressed or underestimated his female nature, treating women with contempt or carelessness. In mythology and literature she continues to appear as a goddess and *femme fatale*. His *Anima* helps him to tune himself to the correct inner values and thereby helping him to open the door to his inner world. Thus the *Anima* takes the role of guide and mediator in his inner world. This is why Nicholas has to take seriously the feelings, moods, expectations and fantasies sent by his *Anima*, and fix them in one form or another. However, his job does not help very much with this, because he only finds pleasure in the mysterious ways of the enigmatic character – Conchis, who plays with his mind and soul.

On the other hand, in *A Maggot*, Rebecca's personality seems to be split between her *Shadow* and *The Great Mother* archetypes. The *Shadow* would represent her life before the experience in the cave and the latter archetype reveals her changed self. The *Shadow* represents the unknown or little known characteristics of the ego. When Rebecca Lee is forced to cope with her *Shadow*, she becomes conscious and often ashamed of the characteristics and impulses that she denies in herself but sees clearly in other people, for example: egotism, spiritual laziness, unreal fantasies, intrigues, indifference etc. After her encounter with the Holy Mother Wisdom she is changed. Her metamorphosis is a result of the influence of this divine Mother upon her soul. In a woman the archetype of *The Great Mother* acts in a similar way to the *Old Wise Man* in a man. Any woman possessed by this archetype, believes that she is gifted with an unlimited capacity to love and to understand, to help and to protect, and she will exhaust herself in service to others. The archetype can be destructive when the woman is fixated on the belief that anybody within her sphere of influence are 'her children' and therefore they are helpless or dependent on her.

Unlike her masculine counterpart in *The Magus*, Nicholas Urfe, Rebecca evolves and manages to unlock the hidden powers in her personality. Therefore, she is granted access to the ultimate archetype – The *Self*, which enables her to achieve individuation. This is a very complex process that is not easy for a woman, especially in the eighteenth century, because there are a lot of paradoxes and many stereotypes. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the female protagonist to accept the superior and the inferior, the rational and the irrational, the order and the chaos, light and darkness, Yin and Yang.

The *Self*, according to Jung, is not a kind of universal consciousness. It is rather an awareness of our unique nature and our intimate connection with all life. This life is not only human but also animal, with plants and minerals, and even the entire cosmos. It gives us a sense of 'unity' and acceptance of life as it is, and not as we might think we want it to be. The *Self* is symbolized in the form a child, Christ, Buddha etc. In dreams it can sprout forth from an animal or an egg. The hermaphrodite, an often used alchemical image, is another symbol by joining the opposites of male and female. Other images are the difficult to obtain treasure, a jewel, a flower, a golden egg or golden ball, a chalice like the Grail, and all fourfold images like mandalas.

Rebecca bears a child who in her vision represents the second coming of Christ. In her evolution, the protagonist goes through several stages, and most important she finds a way to put together the paradoxes in her life, to tame her *Shadow*, to listen to the voice of the *Great Mother* inside of her soul, and to guide the voice of her *Self* towards the world through her prophecies and through her baby.

This is the specific point in which the postmodern feminine character differs from the regular characters of the age she is placed in. An eighteenth century character would not have access to such a spiritual development in a clear cut patriarchal society. Not only that the

novel is among the few which display such a complex character, but *A Maggot* is the only novel in which a feminine character reaches her fullest development. The hardship she had to endure is clearly stated in the novel when the narrator highlights the differences between the lawyer who questions Rebecca and her own beliefs:

“In truth these two were set apart from each other not only by countless barriers of age, sex, class, education, native province and the rest, but by something far deeper still: by belonging to two very different halves of the human spirit, perhaps at root those, left and right, of the two hemispheres of the brain.” [5]

Fowles’ narrator then goes on to explain that those, such as Ayscough, who are left-lobe beings (right-handed) are "rational, mathematical, ordered, glib with words, usually careful and conventional; human society largely runs ... because of them." [6] Conversely, those, such as Rebecca, who are right-lobe beings (left-handed) must be considered "poor at reason, often confused in argument; their sense of time (and politic timing) is often defective ... They confuse, they upset, they disturb. So truly are these two human beings of 1736. They speak for opposite poles, though long before such physical explanations of their contrariness could be mooted." [7]

All in all, by achieving individuation, the heroine places herself among the very few characters of John Fowles who evolve from an incipient state to a very developed stage of their personality. Nonetheless, the most important aspect is represented by gender. The novels of the British author deal mainly with men’s spiritual development. Thus, the fact that the development of a female character is focused on in *A Maggot* delineates that she is the representative of the Fowlesian womanhood, which reaches its climax with Rebecca Lee. In the end, the woman gains the freedom of speech and the redemption she has longed for all those years, when she was forced to prostitution in a society with no rights for women. Rebecca becomes a symbol for her time, a hint that change is possible as long as it is pursued.

Notes

- [1] Hélène Cixous, “*The Laugh of the Medusa*” in Adams & Searle (eds) 1990, *Critical Theory since 1965*. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, pp. 309-322;
- [2] John Fowles, *A Maggot*, Cape, London, 1985, pp. 421;
- [3] John Fowles, *op.cit.*, pp. 234;
- [4] Carl Gustav Jung, *The structure and dynamics of the psyche*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1960, pp. 92-104;
- [5] John Fowles, *op.cit.*, pp. 430;
- [6] John Fowles, *op.cit.*, pp. 431;
- [7] John Fowles, *op.cit.*, pp. 432.

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