

## Unfolding The Female Journey in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the representations of the female journey and its interconnectedness with female development in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2014). By re-visioning psychotherapist and author Maureen Murdock's journey paradigm and condensing it into three essential stages (The Separation, The Descent and The Rebirth), this study maintains the applicability of the heroine's journey to the two male-authored novels. Each heroine's journey begins when she becomes conscious of the fact that she has been living on the margins of her own life. Consequently, she becomes determined to challenge the conceptualization of traditionally-defined femininity, break free from the oppressive gender roles that were prescribed to them by patriarchy and ultimately define themselves as whole. The significance of this study stems from the fact that it provides an interpretation of how the two heroines' internal struggles are translated into the outside world in the framework of the postmodern novel, and that it juxtaposes the journeys of two women of different ages, times, social and cultural backgrounds, in order to foreground the universal, multi-dimensional, and transcultural nature of the journey motif.

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout time, the journey theme has played a pivotal role in literary texts in representing personal change and transformation, binding together diverse texts that belong to different genres, times and cultural milieus. Michaela Fay explains in *Gendered Mobilities* (2008), that the notion of "mobility needs to be reconsidered as a multi-layered concept, rather than the mere accumulation of miles travelled" (65). For that reason, this timely and universal theme is at the center of many monumental works of literature ranging from earliest forms of myth to contemporary novels, as it is considered to be a symbolic vehicle for self-exploration and an important instrument for identity formation. Even though the portrayal of journeys in literature has undergone great development, the presence of female characters in some of the most prolific literary works is almost non-existent; for they always remain at the margins and simply watch the male hero embark on his journey of self-discovery.

Similar to the development of journey motif, the definition of the hero in literature across different cultures, regions and times, has not witnessed any substantial change since the earliest myths and folktales. The hero is usually an exemplary figure who embodies certain heroic characteristics like courage, virtuosity and wisdom, and lives up to the societal values of an ideal individual. This definition of heroism, however,

falls short when it comes to defining the heroine. This is because the socially-defined ideals of male heroism are different from those of female heroism. In *Women's Realities, Women's Choices: An Introduction to Women's Studies* (1983), Bates et al. argue that "womanhood may be idealized as essentially childlike and associated with innocence, unworldliness, and vulnerability; the ideal woman portrayed in a novel or play may be vested with these characteristics" (p. 23). They also define heroines as "women who do not accept their fate passively. They think, choose, and act" (p. 40). In other words, instead of conforming to society's biased view of the ideal woman and her attributes, the heroine questions and challenges patriarchal "standards of virtue, achievement, intelligence, and physical attractiveness" (p. 41).

On that premise, this paper aims at exploring how the female journey is represented in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2014). By choosing women as their protagonists and by voicing their inner struggles and turmoil, Pynchon and Alameddine challenge the androcentric grand narrative of having a male hero go through and overcome dangerous and difficult obstacles. Instead, they move the female character from the margins to the center of the post-modern novel, by creating counter-narratives that encom-

pass women's spoken and unspoken challenges and trials on their life journeys toward wholeness. This study adopts a comparative methodology to analyze both novels, by examining the multiplicity of narratives and voices, as well as, the innovative literary techniques that are used to express and translate the inner struggles and turmoil of women onto the real world. In *Introduction to Comparative Literature* (1974), François Jost states that

[L]iterary works should be studied together, whatever their national origins, as soon as they are ideationally or factually related, as soon as they belong to the same current or period of time, the same aesthetic category or genre, or as soon as they illustrate the same themes or motifs. (pp. 12-13)

Hence, this paper will first, trace and identify the three stages of the heroine's journey in the aforementioned novels. Then, through comparing the journeys of the two heroines, the inclusiveness of Maureen Murdock's paradigm shall be put to the test. This act of re-visioning of literature aids in voicing the plights and experiences of those who have been silenced, disempowered and marginalized by society.

### THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), mythologist and scholar Joseph Campbell defines the hero as a "man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" (p. 18). Through his study of classical myths from different cultures, he argues that all myths are simply variations of a master "Monomyth," and traces a recurring pattern in all of the myths that he has studied. He then relies on that pattern in laying out an archetypal journey paradigm which consists of seventeen stages that he calls "The Hero's Journey." He defines the journey as an adventure that takes a hero "forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder," where "fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won" (Campbell, p. 28).

Despite the fact that Campbell's paradigm serves as an excellent tool that helps readers in analyzing the hero's external and internal journeys, it still falls short when used to analyze a female's heroic journey. In the case of the heroine, the journey begins when she realizes that society has not only shaped and molded her identity, but has also muffled and silenced her voice. As a result of patriarchy's attempts to stifle women's voices and cast off their experiences as unimportant, she sets out to attain wholeness; to recover her identity and find her voice in the world. In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972), Adrienne Rich argues that "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical tradition—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (p. 18). She also explains how important female writing is for voicing the societal victimization and anger that women experience every day, and encouraged women to subvert patriarchal knowledge, break away from male-dominated modes of expression and find their female voice, by embarking on an internal journey into

the abyss of their "inwardness," instead of repressing or simply disregarding the feminine power within them.

Taking cue from Rich, many feminists, spearheaded by psychotherapist and author Maureen Murdock, have realized the importance of exploring the journeys of women and therefore criticized Campbell's concept of the hero's journey. A point of contention amongst feminist scholars is that Campbell's paradigm is exclusively focused on the masculine journey. In response to Campbell's view of women as a mere phase in the hero's journey rather than active agents, Murdock, in her book *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* (1990), re-envisioning the model mapped out by him through a feminist lens. She expresses deep dissatisfaction with the status of women in the journey of the hero, and feels that Campbell's model is not adequate for studying and analyzing women's journeys. She explains that women "do not want to be *there*, the place that people are trying to get to. They do not want to embody Penelope, waiting patiently, endlessly weaving and unweaving. They do not want to be handmaidens of the dominant male culture" (p. 2). Therefore, she charts an alternative narrative paradigm that she finds to be more appropriate for studying the female journey, detailing ten stages that begin with the heroine's separation from the feminine and identification with the masculine, which pushes her to face a series of trials and challenges before she finally rejects binaries and achieves the integration of both the masculine and feminine within her. Even though the path of the journey is not easy, a woman still needs to embark on her journey as it "is a very important inner journey toward being a fully integrated, balanced, and whole human being" (Murdock, p. 3).

Similar to Murdock's re-envisioning of Campbell's concept of the hero's journey, this study aims at re-envisioning Murdock's female-centered version by appropriating her model to two postmodern novels written by men instead of women. Through tracing the journeys of the two female characters and the appropriation of Murdock's model of the heroine's journey to the male-authored novels, this study attempts to show that the authors are successful in giving a speaking voice to their female characters as well as in portraying their different inner journeys and quests to wholeness. This appropriation begins by breaking Murdock's journey model down to three core stages: The Separation, The Descent and The Rebirth. The reason behind the condensing of Murdock's ten stages to three is to create an even more inclusive paradigm that brings to light the unique and nebulous nature of each journey, for each woman takes different paths and overcomes different obstacles to reach different goals. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the American heroine's journey along with the Arab heroine's journey will foreground the similarities and differences between them.

### PHASE ONE: THE SEPARATION

In one way or another, Pynchon and Alameddine's high-spirited heroines manage to destabilize the pillars of the status quo and battle female inferiority within the male-dominated world, as they undergo different journeys and battle different dragons, whether they were in the form of physical charac-

ters like a father, mother, lover, or in the form of psychological obstacles like dependence, grief or insecurity. They succeed in fighting the crushing odds against them, as Oedipa finally claims her independence by immersing herself in the real world, and Aaliya battles alienation by finding solace in others around her.

During the first stage of her mystery-shrouded journey of self-discovery across Los Angeles, Oedipa Maas achieves her separation from the mother. The mother, in her case, is represented in her role as a housewife and the societal expectations that this role entails. In the opening scene of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa learns that her ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity had passed away, and had assigned her, along with one Metzger, as co-executors of his vast estate. Upon receiving the news, Oedipa feels exposed and put down (p. 3), because she had never tended to similar matters before. Between shopping trips to the supermarket and Tupperware parties, Oedipa has been acting out the role of the ideal housewife perfectly, for she describes her monotonous days as: “more or less identical, or all pointing the same way subtly like a conjurer’s deck, any odd one readily clear to a trained eye” (p. 2). Therefore, the event of Inverarity’s death marks the point where she is awakened from her deep slumber.

Murdock argues that when “a woman focuses on the process of the inner journey, she receives little recognition and less applause from the outer world” (p. 10). This is illustrated in the novel, when Oedipa decides to leave Kinneret and carry out her duties as co-executrix. At first, she tries to brush off the idea of executing Inverarity’s will, when her feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt emerge to the surface, namely because she “had never executed a will in her life, didn’t know where to begin, didn’t know how to tell the law firm in L. A. that she didn’t know where to begin” (p. 3). In a sense, Oedipa herself becomes the first person to doubt and underestimate her ability to make this journey, so she turns to others to look for support and validation.

According to Murdock, a lot of women learn to seek the attention and the approval of the men in their lives from an early age because men are in positions of power and authority. By trying to get the stamp of approval and acknowledgment from men, women “forget their own ambitions and... end up feeling bitter, passive, and cynical about what has happened to their lives” (p. 43). Similarly, this is what happens to Oedipa, as the first person that she seeks is her husband, Wendell (Mucho) Maas. She tries to capture his attention and starts to tell him about Inverarity’s will “in an access of helplessness” (p. 3), however, he interrupts her to begin his daily tirade about “not believing” in his job as a disc jockey. When she finally gets the chance to inform Mucho about her new duties, Oedipa asks him for advice and direction on what to do, and he replies that she has simply “got the wrong fella” (p. 6), and should ask their lawyer Roseman for help, instead.

Later that evening, Oedipa receives a three-in-the-morning phone call that is reminiscent of Inverarity’s phone calls. This time it is from her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, who asks her to partake in an experiment conducted by the community hospital to test the “effects of LSD-25, mescaline, psilocy-

bin, and related drugs on a large sample of suburban housewives” (p. 7). Even though Oedipa never asks Dr. Hilarius for help, this phone call conversation reveals what kind of relationship they actually share. Instead of listening to Oedipa’s concerns and helping her start her journey as her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, ironically, tries to keep her literally and metaphorically sedated. Oedipa, however, refuses his offer and hangs up.

Murdock indicates that in “most fairy tales the heroine is taken out of her state of waiting, her state of unconsciousness, and dramatically and instantly transformed for the better. The catalyst for this magical change is usually a man,” however, she explains that the transformation of the heroine “is usually the result not of rescue from without but of strenuous growth and development within, and over a long period of time” (p. 58). Toward the end of the first chapter, Oedipa contemplates the life that she has been leading and imagines herself as “a captive maiden” who is being kept as a prisoner in a high tower by “magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all” (p. 11). Similar to this Rapunzel-like figure, she is a prisoner of her status quo; living a mundane life with an apathetic husband and performing her housewife duties to perfection. Inverarity’s will acts as the catalyst that pushes Oedipa past the threshold of her own home, and prompts her to

examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disc jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (p. 11)

Instead of waiting for a knight in shining armor to save her from the tower, Oedipa decides to leave Kinneret and head south toward Inverarity’s headquarters; San Narciso, with “no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning” (p. 11). She packs her bags in her rented Impala while Mucho stands with his hands in his pockets.

Despite the fact that the numerous journeys which Oedipa leads in *The Crying of Lot 49* are all essential to her development and transformation, it is the journey from Kinneret to San Narciso that clearly marks her separation from the mother. In describing her current situation, Oedipa uses the image of “a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix” (p. 10). She is the spectator, the prisoner, the captive maiden and the spellbound Rapunzel who is waiting for a knight to save her from her tedious days by yelling: “hey, let down your hair” (p. 10). However, Oedipa’s passive existence is livened up, not by a rescuer, but by the promise of independence, freedom and responsibility that this heroic quest will bring about. On her way to San Narciso, Oedipa’s memory flashes back to the time when she had stumbled upon a circuit card for the first time, while she looks down onto the city’s arranged houses. She mulls over the fact that there “seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her” (p. 13), if she had bothered to find out. Ironically, Oedipa’s curiosity, which appeared to be non-existent in the past, becomes the main driving force of her journey to self-discovery. This longing for independence

and self-identification also lies at the heart of Aaliya's journey in Alameddine's novel.

By following Aaliya's heroic journey to wholeness, Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* sheds light on the hardships and limitations that hinder Arab women and prevent their emancipation. Like women all over the world, Arab women also have phantoms to kill, boundaries to push and ideas to challenge. Through the unreserved voice of Aaliya, Alameddine provides a feminist critique on the oppression that Arab women face every day, in different aspects of their lives, such as biased social conventions that govern matters of marriage, education and financial independence, in addition to other issues of violence, sexual harassment and most importantly, marginalization.

Born and raised in Lebanon, a place, as Aaliya describes, where feminism "hasn't reached espadrilles or running shoes yet; sensible heels are where it's at" (Alameddine, p. 126), she struggles with conforming to traditional and cultural constructs of femininity, and consequently decides to isolate herself from society and chooses a life of reclusiveness and seclusion instead. Normality, whether it is in appearances, behavior or thought, and the intolerance toward anyone who does not adhere to the same standards of normality, is one of the most important motifs in *An Unnecessary Woman*. Ever since she was a young girl, Aaliya was always bombarded with the question: "Why can't you be normal?" and the warning: "Don't try to be so different from normal people." However, Aaliya confides that asking her not to be different from normal people has always offended her, and what she actually sought after was being special.

According to Aaliya's family, and the social norms of 1940s Lebanon, choosing not to marry was not an option for young women, thus, education would always take a backseat once a suitor knocks on the door. Aaliya does not only resent the fact that her family had gifted her "to the first unsuitable suitor" (p. 13), who asked for her hand in marriage, but also admits that she regrets not knowing her options and exploring them before being "plucked unripe out of school" (p. 13). Aaliya's ex-husband, or as she calls him the "impotent insect" (p. 13), is not mentioned very often in *An Unnecessary Woman*. After all, their unconsummated marriage only lasted for four years, before he spoke the four words that would change Aaliya's life forever; "Woman, you are divorced" (p. 13). Aaliya's divorce is the event that triggers her decision to separate herself from the inferiority of the feminine. After he divorces her, Aaliya's husband leaves her the apartment, and never comes back. She remembers that, instinctively, her reaction to his departure was to clean the apartment wall-to-wall.

In his article "Bringing Lebanon's Civil War Home to Anglophone Literature: Alameddine's Appropriation of Shakespeare's Tragedies," Yousef Awad argues that the famous scene in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), in which "Lady Macbeth persistently tries to remove the blood from her hands finds an analogue in Aaliya's response to divorce" (p. 90). In a way, Aaliya's act of scrubbing her apartment clean proves to be cathartic, for not only does she purge the apartment of her ex-husband's presence, but she also welcomes the prospect of a new beginning with fresh-

ly-scrubbed floors and hole-free doilies. Aaliya's thorough cleansing of the apartment seems to be her means to cleansing her private space of the remnants of her ex-husband and his patriarchal representation.

Unlike Oedipa, Aaliya does not separate herself from the metaphorical mother only; she also manages to separate herself from her actual mother, who is "overly judgmental, rigid, and unsupportive" (Murdock, p. 19), and who "couldn't conceive of a world in which" husbands "didn't hold all the cards" (Alameddine, p. 14). In some cases, in order to achieve separation, the heroine must escape her mother's attempts to imprison her. These attempts, Murdock argues, stem from the "mother's bitterness about her own shattered dreams," and her jealousy of her daughter "who has had more opportunities" (p. 19). In *An Unnecessary Woman*, Aaliya is aware that her mother is a product of her rigorously patriarchal culture and biased social values. Consequently, Aaliya chooses to distance herself from her mother and the feminine ideals that she holds and represents.

## PHASE TWO: THE DESCENT

Once the heroine steps out of the false comfort of the status quo and separates herself from the mother, she commences her outer journey into new realms and uncharted lands, as well as, her inner journey into the depths of her psyche. During this phase of the heroic journey, which Murdock titles "The Road of Trials," the heroine faces many obstacles and overcomes many impediments as she climbs hills and mountains, crosses oceans and deserts and ventures into fields and forests, in order "to discover her strengths and abilities and uncover and conquer her weaknesses" (p. 46). Along the way, she gathers allies who equip her with the weapons and skills needed to complete her journey, and she slays dragons that sometimes manifest themselves in the form of friends, family members, partners, etc. and at other times these dragons embody "her own self-doubt, self-hate, indecisiveness, paralysis, and fear" (p. 48).

At this point of the journey, the focus shifts away from the outer journey with its dragons, to the inner journey where the heroine makes her descent and dives into the abyss of her psyche in an attempt to find the dragon that has been hindering her journey to wholeness. One way to view the phase of the descent is by comparing it to a period of pregnancy, where the heroine endures painful labor in order to give birth to a new sense of identity and self-worth that is not defined by patriarchal values and perimeters. According to Murdock, "the descent is characterized as a journey to the underworld, the dark night of the soul, the belly of the whale, the meeting of the dark goddess, or simply as depression" (pp. 87-88). She also adds that for many women and men the descent is "a period of voluntary isolation" (p. 88). And by making the descent and meeting the dark mother, the heroine identifies the real dragon that has been holding her back and sabotaging her heroic journey.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the second phase of Oedipa's heroic journey spans across the majority of the novel. Throughout her different journeys in San Narciso, Oedipa encounters different types of people with different backgrounds and af-

filiations. Some of the people she meets end up as her allies and try to help her demystify the conspiracies that surround Inverarity and his connection to the Trystero, while others hinder her journey and hold her back instead. Oedipa's long and complex task of investigating the secret behind the Trystero begins when she learns that Inverarity was involved in a lawsuit because he allegedly refused to pay a man called Tony Jaguar, who provided him with human bones that he harvested from Lago di Pieta in Italy, which were to be used in the making of cigarette filters.

And when one remarks that the story of Lago di Pieta resembles the plot of a Jacobean revenge play titled *The Courier's Tragedy*, Oedipa and Metzger attend one of its performances. Oedipa is puzzled and equally fascinated by the mention of the Trystero in the lines:

He that we last as Thurn and Taxis knew  
Now recks no lord but the stiletto's Thorn,  
And Tacit lies the gold once-knotted horn.  
No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,  
Who's once been set his tryst with Trystero. (p. 54)

After the performance, Oedipa decides to go backstage and talk to the director of the play, Randolph Driblette "to see about the bones" (p. 48). Oedipa's curiosity about the WASTE symbol and the Trystero becomes the driving force that pushes her to untangle the web of mystery surrounding them and Inverarity. She explains to Metzger that she is curious to know if there is a connection between both clues and asks him to be on her side and support her. However, Metzger leaves and announces that he will wait for her in the car. Pre-separation Oedipa would have never been bothered to peak behind the curtain and seek the director of the play to ask him about the meaning behind the Trystero, just like she did not bother to learn more about the printed circuit in her radio transistor. In this scene, Oedipa separates herself from her Rapunzel-like image, and instead of falling "prey to false notions of fulfillment" (Murdock, p. 57) by waiting for a savior to rescue her, she breaks out of the tower, while the savior waits in the car.

After watching Metzger disappear out of sight, Oedipa goes backstage to discuss the origins of the Trystero and the reason why it was included in the play with the director of the play. He tries to discourage her from reading too hard into the play, by explaining that it "was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything" (p. 56). As a result, when Oedipa asks him why he created the scene of the Trystero assassins and asks for a copy of the script, he reiterates the novel's mantra about truth and meaning when he says:

You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several, about why characters reacted to the Trystero possibility the way they did, why the assassins came on, why the black costumes. You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth. Wharfinger supplied words and a yarn. I gave them life. (p. 59)

Unlike Metzger, Driblette proves to be Oedipa's ally as he helps in steering her journey toward the right direction by advising her not to get caught up in the chaos of clues, in her search for truth or meaning.

Against Driblette's advice, Oedipa continues on her road of trials by following her trail of clues that leads her to a

home for senior citizens called Vesperhaven House, where she meets ninety-one-year-old Mr. Thoht. He tells her about his grandfather who rode for the Pony Express, and shows her a ring that he took from an Indian after he had killed him. To her surprise, Oedipa sees the WASTE symbol embossed on the ring, and deduces that WASTE was a rival mail carrier that has emerged in a rebellion against the brutal suppression of the Pony Express and Wells Fargo. She then seeks the assistance of Genghis Cohen, a famous philatelist who was hired "to inventory and appraise Inverarity's stamp collection" (p. 70). After showing her some of the stamps in Inverarity's collection, Oedipa realizes that the Trystero, which might still be active, dates back to the medieval era and has fought against the Thurn and Taxis postal system that controlled the entire mail delivery system across Europe.

During her visit to Yoyodyne, Oedipa notices a man sketching the WASTE symbol of the muted post horn on a piece of paper, and so she approaches him and inquires about the origin of the symbol. Even though the man does not provide her with any substantial information about the Trystero, he tells her about an engineer called John Nefastis, who has invented a machine that can only be operated by a group of people whom he designates as "sensitives." Curiosity again plays a significant role in Oedipa's journey progress, as she pays Nefastis a visit, in order to take the test that determines whether she is a "sensitive" or not. After a failed attempt to operate his machine, Nefastis propositions Oedipa, which causes her to flee his apartment screaming. Feeling overwhelmed by the multitude of clues and conspiracies that she has come across, Oedipa begins her descent into the abyss.

Oedipa contemplates the pieces of the puzzle that she has come across so far, and how every piece connects to the other. She tries to distinguish the relationship between Thurn and Taxis, the WASTE delivery system, the sign of the muted post horn, Wells Fargo and the Pony Express and the Indians who fought against them, and the fact that the Trystero still exists in the United States and is still active. Caught up in her reflections, Oedipa wanders about alone all night through the streets of San Francisco. During her journey to the abyss, Oedipa's feelings of loneliness and despair intensify, when she realizes that she is losing communication with the people around her, as she states: "Mucho won't talk to me, Hilarius won't listen, Clerk Maxwell didn't even look at me" (p. 88). Oedipa continues aimlessly on her excursion through the underbelly of the city, where she is bombarded by a profusion of Trystero symbols everywhere she goes. Eventually, Oedipa abandons her twenty-four-hour journey after her pursuit of a WASTE carrier who was delivering letters around Oakland ends at Nefastis' house. She realizes the power that the masculine within her has over her, and believes that in the abyss, there "was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world" (p. 132).

In an effort not to become a victim of her culture and a product of patriarchal traditions and values like her mother, Aaliya in Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*, decides to separate herself from the feminine, and to identify with the internalized father instead. According to Murdock's theory, the heroine's separation from the actual mother is a normal step in the heroic journey, as she considers it a reaction to

her mother's "total dependence on husband and children for fulfillment" (p. 66). Her mother's dependence pushes her to become "more independent and more self-sufficient than any man in order to achieve anything at all. She will depend on no one," however, this goal of surpassing any man she meets is not the real goal of the heroine's journey, and so she "drives herself relentlessly to the brink of exhaustion" (p. 66).

In a series of fragmented flashbacks, Alameddine delineates the troublesome relationship that Aaliya shares with her mother, and succeeds in illustrating the differences in both their identities, thoughts and actions. After Aaliya's husband leaves, her mother asks her to be thankful and to consider herself fortunate because her husband had divorced her, instead of remarrying again without divorcing her (p. 14). This way she now has the choice of marrying "a gentle widower or maybe a suitor of women more seemly who has been rejected a few times" (p. 14). However, when Aaliya does not marry again, her mother pesters her to leave her apartment, to one of her half-brothers, as it is her familial duty, because they needed the spacious apartment more than she did, for they all lived in small apartments and had large families. Her half-brothers try to terrorize her out of her own apartment and Aaliya admits that she did actually fear losing her home. This fear stems from the fact that after her divorce, Aaliya carefully eases herself out of patriarchy's firm grip and embraces herself in the privacy of her own apartment, where she becomes one with it. So, losing her apartment to her brothers means that she will lose herself and fall back into patriarchy's snares. For those reasons, Aaliya decides to alienate herself from the dragons, characterized by her mother and half-brothers, completely. Aaliya realizes that she has "healthy needs that deserve fulfillment" (p. 53), including the need for a room of her own, for autonomy and for individuality.

Murdock states that the reason why so many heroines become superwomen is because "their mothers did not have the choice to compete in a man's world... the choice of whether or not to have children" and as a result, their mothers "became dependent on the men who supported them and the children they raised" (p. 63). Because their mothers were robbed of choices and opportunities, the heroines push themselves and work hard, in order "to measure up and achieve according to male-defined standards" (p. 74). Unlike her mother, after Aaliya escapes the snares of her loveless marriage, she refuses to marry someone else and decides to take control of her own life. With the assistance of her best friend Hannah, Aaliya manages to defeat the dragon of dependency, for Hannah proves to be one of Aaliya's most important allies on her journey to wholeness. Hannah guides Aaliya along her road of trials by equipping her with books and magazines to read. Furthermore, Hannah helps Aaliya achieve financial independence by finding her a job at bookstore owned by one of her relatives (p. 22). Not only does Aaliya's job at the bookstore provide her with financial independence, it also presents her with the means of self-expression since she has unlimited access to books that she later reads, as well as, translates.

In addition to helping Aaliya on her road of trials by equipping her with the skills and weapons needed to kill the

dragons that face her along the way, Hannah's decision to end her life becomes a central thread in Alameddine's novel. Following Aaliya's divorce and her estrangement from her family, Hannah becomes an essential figure in Aaliya's life. Aaliya's feelings of grief and loneliness after Hannah's death multiply tenfold when she decides to retire to her books and translation as a way of distraction. She gradually makes her descent into the abyss, as she secludes herself and translates the hours away, and explains: "all in a weak attempt to avoid the fact that I found the world inexplicable and impenetrable" (p. 253). Aaliya never bothers to publish her work, as she believes that her work is not publishable because "[l]iterature in the Arab world, in and of itself, isn't sought after" (p. 107), and since her translations of translations are one step further removed from the original text, people would not bother to read them. Like Oedipa and Kate, Aaliya buys into the myth of never being enough and "evaluates her skills and knowledge through the lens of deficit thinking" (Murdock, p. 54). Murdock remarks on the dangerous impact of the heroine's belief that she is lacking, just because she does not measure up to male-defined standards of success, and argues that "because women have been socialized to express rage against themselves, the first target of their disdain will be mother" (p. 55).

During her journey to the underworld, Aaliya comes in contact with the real dragon that has been holding her back, her mother, whom she describes as having the ability to drain her voice and soul (p. 71). After years of estrangement, Aaliya opens the doors to her apartment to find that her half-brother and his wife are dropping her mother off at her foyer, announcing that the time has come for Aaliya to take care of her. Before having a chance to reject their demand, Aaliya's mother lets out a shrilling scream and pulls back away from Aaliya. The commotion caused by Aaliya's family prompts her neighbors to come to her rescue and force them all out of the apartment. Aaliya broods over this incident more than one time throughout the novel, for the image of her mother screaming and warding her off does not escape her memory. She realizes that the separation from the feminine and her estrangement from her mother are the reason behind her restlessness and loneliness. Consequently, she feels guilty about distancing herself from her mother, and starts to feel a "yearning for the feminine, a longing for a sense of *home*" within her own body "and community" (Murdock, p. 73).

### PHASE THREE: THE REBIRTH

Once the heroine achieves separation from the mother and makes her way on the road of trials, she loses touch with the feminine qualities within her such as emotion and intuition, and replaces them with the skills that she acquires along the way, due to the identification with the masculine. This chasm that develops between the feminine and the masculine causes an imbalance within the heroine, which leads to feelings of aloneness and estrangement. Therefore, the final stage of the heroine's journey focuses on bridging this split between both creative forces within her, and accepting both forces as part of her identity in order to give birth to a new sense of

wholeness. Murdock believes that in order for the heroine to heal the split between the masculine and the feminine, she “must be willing to face and name her shadow tyrant and let it go” (p. 158). Once a woman reclaims the feminine and accepts it as part of her identity and finds balance within her, the process of rebirth sometimes comes in the form of a creative process, such as writing, painting, cooking, gardening, and so forth.

After surviving her night-long journey around the Bay Area, Oedipa feels more defeated than ever, as she becomes overwhelmed with all the clues that she has gathered, the history behind the Trystero and the conspiracy theories related to it, so she decides to return to Kinneret. Even though Oedipa has witnessed the process of mail delivery through WASTE, she still hoped that once she sees Dr. Hilarius and tells him all about the Trystero, he would be able to convince her that the whole thing was only a figment of her active imagination, and that he would “tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest, and that there was no Trystero” (p. 100).

Ironically, Oedipa arrives at Dr. Hilarius’ office only to find that he has gone mad. She finds him locked away in his office with a rifle, shooting at anyone that approaches the office. While she is leaving the scene, Oedipa runs into Mucho who was there to cover the event for his radio station and after a brief chat with him, she realizes that he is under the influence of LSD, and has been taking LSD pills regularly, courtesy of Dr. Hilarius and his experiment which was now extended to include not only housewives, but their husbands as well. At this point, a feeling of panic overwhelms Oedipa as she realizes that she no longer knows her husband and she “could not quite get it into her head that the day she’d left him for San Narciso was the day she’d seen Mucho for the last time” (p. 111). Oedipa becomes aware that she cannot solve the mystery of the Trystero by herself, nor can she go back to her old life in Kinneret because things have changed for good after her departure. Consequently, she decides to move onward with her journey, and therefore, she seeks the help of her allies, Professor Emory Bortz and Genghis Cohen.

Determined to unravel the mystery of the Trystero, Oedipa meets with Professor Bortz, who informs her that Driblette has committed suicide, and provides her with resources to expand her understanding of the history behind the rivalry between Trystero and Thurn and Taxis. Attempting to reclaim the feminine creative force, Oedipa spends her days in libraries investigating the history of the two mail distributing institutions and their connection with Inverarity, with aid from Cohen. Oedipa’s reclaim of her creative force is embodied in her metamorphosis into a detective as she researches facts, gathers clues and pieces together fragments of information in order to demystify the conflict between the two distribution companies. Overwhelmed with feelings of defeat and despair, Oedipa realizes that she is now on her own. She eventually comes to the conclusion that there are four possible explanations to the mystery: the first being that the Trystero really still exist and that there is, in fact, a number of people who choose to communicate through it, or that she has been hallucinating, or that the whole mystery was

orchestrated by Inverarity in order to prank her, or that she has gone mad. Oedipa contemplates each possible explanation and decides that

She didn’t like any of them, but hoped she was mentally ill; that that’s all it was. That night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead. (p. 132)

When Cohen informs Oedipa that Inverarity’s stamp collection is being sold in an auction and that there is a special “book bidder” who will be attending the auction, she decides to go to the auction. She believes that the mysterious man who wants to bid on the stamp collection may be a crucial piece to the puzzle and could perhaps solve the whole mystery. Oedipa’s persistence to solve the mystery of the Trystero characterizes her new-found sense of wholeness. Had it happened before her journey, Oedipa would have abandoned the mystery long ago and retired to her old life in the suburbs, just like she abandoned the printed circuit card of her transistor. By the end of the novel however, Oedipa’s presence at the auction proves that she has become an independent whole, as she steps inside the man-filled auction room and sits alone “to await the crying of lot 49” (p. 142).

During her long journey on the road of trials, Aaliya starts to recognize “the fragmentation she carries from being an unmothered daughter” (Murdock, p. 137). As a result, she attempts to heal her inner feminine wound by making her descent to the abyss and facing “the protagonist of her nightmares,” her mother. Aaliya marches back to her mother’s house in an attempt to replace the memory of their last encounter with a better one. What is interesting about this encounter between Aaliya and her mother is the language that she chooses in describing it. After Aaliya’s sister-in-law and her granddaughter open the door for her, Aaliya compares the two women to “doorkeepers” (p. 215), and after that she compares her entrance to that of a knight who is preparing to fight a dragon: “She leads me through folding double doors, deeper into her den” (p. 216). Once she enters the living room, where her mother is sleeping, Aaliya takes notice of the black and white, life-sized portraits that cover one of the walls. One can argue that these portraits of the dead men who are “keeping a reproachful, stern eye” on her, as she enters the room, and tries to reconcile with her mother, represent the outdated patriarchal traditions that disapprove of the heroine’s decision to reclaim her feminine power.

Despite the fact that Hannah had appeared in her dreams the night before Aaliya decides to visit her mother in order to offer her courage (p. 46), it is Aaliya’s great-niece; Nancy, whom Aaliya assigns as her “sidekick,” that helps her with this task of reconciliation as she urges her to reach out to her mother and hold her hand in order to capture her attention. After a brief exchange of words, Aaliya learns that her mother’s feet are causing her pain and discomfort, and as a result, she resolves to help ease her pain. With aid from her new ally, Nancy, Aaliya washes and pares her mother’s feet, and then clips and files her toenails. This episode marks the beginning of Aaliya’s transformation as she descends to the abyss to confront the dragon; however, she finds her to

be a weak old woman who is in pain and in need of help. Through making a journey into the heart of Beirut to visit her mother, Aaliya seeks "to heal that wound by renewing and transforming this initial relationship" (Murdock, p. 137). She senses the relief of letting go of the destructive image of the mother and taking back the discarded feminine in order to reclaim her full feminine power (p. 152); as if "[t]he albatross fell off, and sank. Like lead into the sea" (Alameddine, p. 258, italics in original).

Murdock argues that women who have had unsupportive mothers and have had to become independent and make the separation at an early age, usually face "difficulty as adults asking for help and seeking out what they need because this type of guidance was never available" (p. 153). In a similar manner, Aaliya faces great difficulty in asking for or accepting help from her neighbors Marie-Thérèse, Joumana and Fadia when a burst water pipe floods her maid's room and renders her life's work unsalvageable. Not only do they comfort her and calm her down, but the three of them take turns in assisting Aaliya to retrieve her translations. Yearning to heal the split and in a desire to reclaim their long-discarded inner feminine, Murdock states that women start reaching "out to other women, coming together to name their experience of the sacred, honoring their connection with Gaia, and undergoing female rites of passage through women's gatherings and vision quests" (Murdock, p. 140). Ready to accept defeat "with no white flag to wave" (Alameddine, p. 265), Aaliya watches in awe as the three women synchronously move the crates one by one from the maid's room and lay them carefully on the bed sheets and towels that they have spread on the floor in the reading room. In silence, Aaliya musters her strength and joins her neighbors in moving the soggy crates like "caskets of war dead being returned home" (p. 269). This sight instills in Aaliya the strength that she needs to get back up on her feet and continue her journey. Aaliya begins to realize that the three women, of all people, have come together to help her find wholeness. This is evident when Aaliya starts drawing parallels between Marie-Thérèse and Hannah when she notices that she has sat on the same spot that Hannah used to sit.

Even though she declares that there "will be no resolution, no epiphany" to her story (p. 201), Aaliya's epiphany and rebirth arrives toward the end of the novel, in the shape of three women trying to make out what is written in the manuscripts that they were drying. Aaliya explains to the three women that the manuscripts, all thirty-seven of them, are not her own writings, but are merely translations of translations, which she has accumulated over the course of fifty years, as a whim or a way of passing time with no intention of publishing any of them. The three women urge her to publish her work and Joumana even offers to have a few graduate students from the university, where she teaches, to transcribe her manuscripts for her. However, Aaliya replies to Joumana's offer by telling her that no one would be interested in reading a translation of a translation. At this point, Fadia gives Aaliya the push she needs to leave her reclusive lifestyle behind and end her period of voluntary alienation, by asking her to change her methodology of working, as she explains:

"Look," says Fadia. "I don't have the same manicure every time. It's not just the color I change. I change the brand, I change the kind. Sometimes I have a morning manicure, sometimes an evening one. Sometimes the manicurist comes to me, sometimes I go to her. Why, every now and then, I even change manicurists." (pp. 285-286)

Like her translations that are removed from their primary text, Aaliya has alienated herself from her society. In a way, she has succumbed to society's view of her as unnecessary, simply because she is a childless divorcée who wants nothing to do with her family. However, Fadia's question triggers Aaliya's epiphany, as she starts to see the flooding of her apartment as an opportunity for rebirth. And in the closing pages of *An Unnecessary Woman*, Aaliya resolves to "swim in the murky waters," after years of simply studying it "snuggly nestled within the safety of a boat" (p. 290). Parallel to the beginning of the novel, where Aaliya contemplates which translation she should translate next, the novel ends with Aaliya torn between translating the original works of Yourcenar or Coetzee, which highlights the transformation that Aaliya has undergone and illustrates her newly-found confidence in taking on the task of translating the primary text.

## CONCLUSION

In their novels, Pynchon and Alameddine successfully challenge the outdated stereotypes of a female character being The Other, the antagonist or the marginal character, and replace them with portrayals of two women who are determined, active and fearless, by paralleling the inner journeys of their female protagonists with their outer journeys. In doing so, they illustrate the different obstacles and gender constraints that the heroine overcomes in the outside world, as well as, the impeding limitations that she eludes during her inner journey. By tracing the heroines' progression through the stages of The Separation, The Descent and The Rebirth in two different male-authored novels that belong to different times and cultural backgrounds, this paper has demonstrated, from a feminist perspective, the multileveled nature of the woman's journey. Even though every woman charts her own path and goes on a unique journey, the act of communicating these different journeys, documenting them and studying them, is an effort to depict an "arduous struggle against the hegemony of male power and many of society's patriarchal values and self-denying myths that have been incorporated within women's consciousness" (Quawas, p. 40).

By refusing to conform to the stereotypical roles and social expectations that were assigned to them by gendered societies, Oedipa and Aaliya personify resilience, heroism and persistence by bringing to light a variety of perspectives on heroism and wholeness. They embark on heroic journeys that are traditionally perceived as masculine endeavors. This paper has provided insight on how two strong women succeed in affirming their existence in the world and achieving wholeness. It has also unearthed a great deal of struggles that many women, who have been silenced, disempowered and marginalized by their society, face when they decide to resist traditional social and gender roles. Each heroine becomes the



projector in the planetarium as she projects her own identity and experiences into the world and refuses to simply exist as a projection of society's perception of a woman. This study has presupposed a postmodernist approach to the interpretation of the heroines' journeys in the two novels as it is not a definitive analysis or deterministic interpretation. It is simply a counter narrative, or a voice among the myriad voices that have taken interest in studying the heroic journeys of Oedipa and Aaliya. This study reiterates and highlights the possibility of transformation as these two novels bear hope to many other muted Oedipas and Aaliyas in the world.

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