

From *The Odyssey* to *The Zahir*: The Evolution of Penelopeia Across Time and Tradition

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Abstract

The story of a man who leaves home and strives to return has become one of the most enduring narrative patterns in world literature and folklore. Across centuries and cultures, it has been retold in myths, epics, folktales, and modern fiction—the story of the homecoming hero who, after long absence and peril, finds his way back to the place and the person he once called his own. This study explores the persistence and transformation of this universal motif through a comparative reading of Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Paulo Coelho’s *The Zahir*. It examines the evolving image of the waiting wife—from Homer’s Penelopeia, emblem of chastity and endurance, to Coelho’s Esther, a modern woman of independence and choice. Despite differences in setting, voice, and moral vision, both works embody the same human longing: to return, to be recognized, and to rediscover love that endures time and change. Beneath their differences lies the same truth—the heart to which every journey, whether physical or spiritual, must ultimately return.

Keywords: Homer; *The Odyssey*; Paulo Coelho; *The Zahir*; Penelopeia

Introduction

The husband who once set sail from his homeland to wage war in a distant land returns after long years of wandering and exile. Yet home is no longer as he left it. His palace lies overrun by arrogant suitors who devour his wealth and press his faithful wife to choose another husband. His appearance, transformed beyond recognition, conceals his true identity even from those who once served him with devotion. In silence he surveys what has become of his household, testing the measure of loyalty and deceit. At last, revealing himself through the act that only he can perform—stringing his unbending bow—he takes vengeance upon the intruders and restores the order of his home. Thus the long voyage comes full circle: the kingdom receives its king once more, and the faithful wife welcomes the husband who has at last come home.

This ancient scene of return, recognition, and reunion has resonated through countless retellings. Its emotional core—the trial of absence, the test of fidelity, and the rediscovery of identity—forms one of humanity’s most enduring narrative patterns. The longing to return after struggle is as ancient as storytelling itself. It is this archetype of the “homecoming husband” that underlies a vast corpus of myths, epics, and folktales across civilizations. *The Odyssey*, its earliest written version attributed to Homer, may rightly be called an “immortal story”—a narrative that transcends time and place. Transmitted through oral performance, manuscript, print, and

film, it continues to live across centuries. Its countless later reinterpretations attest to an inexhaustible creative vitality: from James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* to Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir*, which reimagines the ancient voyage as a modern spiritual quest. Beyond literature, Homer's epic has inspired an extraordinary range of stage and screen adaptations—from silent cinema to modern blockbusters. In recent years, the story has once again returned to film. Uberto Pasolini's *The Return* (2024), starring Ralph Fiennes as Odysseus and Juliette Binoche as Penelopeia, offered a tender, humanized interpretation of the myth—focusing on intimacy, age, and endurance. Meanwhile, Christopher Nolan's forthcoming *The Odyssey* (2026), with Matt Damon as Odysseus, promises a large-scale cinematic reimagining that will gather an ensemble of Hollywood's most prominent actors.

These are but the latest manifestations of an undying fascination. There is something eternal in this plot—something that continues to draw writers, artists, and directors from every generation to retell the story of homecoming in their own idiom. Such persistent retellings across genres and media testify not only to the narrative's durability but also to its psychological depth: the universal longing to return, to be recognized, and to reconcile with one's past.

Building upon this universal motif, the present study forms part of a broader inquiry into the image of Penelopeia across time and tradition. It focuses on a comparative reading of *The Odyssey* and Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir*, tracing how the figure of the waiting wife has been reimagined from the emblem of fidelity and endurance in ancient epic to a modern symbol of independence and self-realization. Through this juxtaposition, the paper seeks to glimpse the deeper mechanisms of cultural memory—the ways in which the archetype of Penelopeia continues to evolve, mirroring shifts in human consciousness and the changing ideals of love, faith, and identity. Although there have been attempts to draw parallels between *The Odyssey* and *The Zahir*, the existing scholarship has approached the connection from a very limited perspective. The most notable example is Mansour's article "The Postmodern Penelope: Coelho's *The Zahir* and the Metamorphosis in Gender Relations" (2006), which reads Coelho's novel primarily through the lens of gender relations and the transformation of the Penelopeia—Odysseus paradigm. However, no study has examined *The Zahir* as a modern reworking of the archetype of return (*nostos*), nor has any research explored how Coelho reinterprets the structural core of the Homeric journey—loss, obsession, wandering, recognition, and homecoming—in a contemporary spiritual context. This absence of a broader narrative-structural comparison constitutes the research gap that the present study addresses. By analysing *The Odyssey* and *The Zahir* side by side, this article offers the first sustained reading of Coelho's novel as a modern reimagining of the ancient homecoming myth.

I. *The Odyssey*: The Archetype of Return

Before drawing parallels or comparing Homer's epic with its modern reimagining in Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir*, it is essential to revisit the original narrative that gave rise to this enduring myth. *The Odyssey* stands among the oldest

surviving monuments of Greek imagination, traditionally attributed to Homer—the legendary blind bard whose name has come to symbolize the dawn of Western literature. Whether he was a single poet or a collective voice woven from generations of singers, the epic captures the moment when oral myth began to crystallize into written memory.

At its heart, *The Odyssey* recounts the long and perilous journey of Odysseus, the hero of the Trojan War, as he strives to return home to Ithaca. During his absence, a host of insolent suitors occupies his palace, consuming his wealth and urging his faithful wife, Penelopeia, to remarry. She resists them through both cunning and patience, weaving by day and secretly unweaving her work by night.

Odysseus himself is detained for years by the nymph Calypso, shipwrecked on distant shores, and entangled in the designs of gods and monsters: the Cyclops Polyphemus, the enchantress Circe, the Sirens, and the twin perils of Scylla and Charybdis. Each encounter serves as both literal adventure and allegory—a meditation on human will confronting divine caprice. When at last he reaches Ithaca, disguised as a beggar, he observes the corruption of his household before revealing himself in the contest of the bow—an act that restores both his kingdom and his identity.

Within *The Odyssey*, Penelopeia stands as one of the most enduring emblems of fidelity, wisdom, and inner strength. Her image unites two seemingly opposite ideals—the stillness of endurance and the subtlety of intelligence. Through her nightly deception at the loom, Penelopeia demonstrates intelligence and self-control rather than mere patience. Each day she weaves a shroud, promising to choose a new husband once the work is completed; each night she secretly unravels what she has woven. This act of deception is not a simple trick but a deliberate strategy that allows her to delay the suitors and protect her household for as long as possible. Surrounded by men who underestimate her, she manages to preserve her dignity, her autonomy, and her loyalty to Odysseus through calm reasoning and quiet resistance. The weaving itself, a task expected of women in her society, becomes a subtle means of power. By using the very tools assigned to her domestic role, she turns a symbol of obedience into an instrument of defiance. Her clever manipulation of time and circumstance allows her to survive in an environment dominated by force and arrogance. Through this quiet ingenuity, Penelopeia maintains control over her fate and over the moral order of her home until Odysseus's return.

This archetype—the faithful and discerning wife awaiting her husband's return—has echoed far beyond the shores of ancient Greece. Across world epics and oral traditions, from the Central Asian *Alpamish* to Japan's *Yuriwaka Daijin* and Korea's *Chunhyangga*, the same pattern recurs: the woman who guards love and honor against time, separation, and threat. The universality of this image suggests that Penelopeia is not only a Greek heroine but also a collective symbol of endurance and devotion of wives in the human imagination. It is this archetype, preserved yet continually reinterpreted, that finds a strikingly modern reflection in Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir*.

II. *The Zahir*: A Modern Odyssey of Love and Obsession

Published in 2005, Paulo Coelho's *The Zahir* may be read as a contemporary reworking of *The Odyssey*—a story of the journey, the absence, the wandering, and the return translated into the language of modern life.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1947, Coelho led a restless, unconventional life long before becoming one of the world's best-known novelists. Having abandoned law school, he traveled widely through Latin America, worked as a lyricist, and endured imprisonment during Brazil's military regime. His spiritual journeys and experiences of alienation later shaped the introspective tone of his fiction. Following the global success of *The Alchemist* (1988), Coelho continued to explore the themes of destiny, obsession, and faith—each presented as a form of pilgrimage. *The Zahir*, written between January and June 2004, extends this exploration into the terrain of love, loss, and return.

The novel opens with the unnamed protagonist—a celebrated writer—being questioned by the Paris police after the mysterious disappearance of his wife, Esther, a war correspondent. Though their marriage had endured for over a decade, emotional distance had long divided them. Esther's departure confronts the protagonist with the emptiness of his success and forces him into an inward journey that parallels Odysseus's voyage home. Like Odysseus, the protagonist must confront temptations and illusions. His lover, Maria, an actress, offers affection and understanding. Yet his thoughts remain fixed on Esther, whose absence becomes his "Zahir"—a word Coelho borrows from Islamic mysticism to describe an idea or person that occupies the mind completely. The search for Esther soon becomes a search for meaning itself. His path leads him to Mikhail, a young Kazakh interpreter who once traveled with Esther and who seems to possess a strange spiritual insight. Through Mikhail, the protagonist learns that Esther has left Paris for a remote village on the Kazakh steppe, where she lives among shepherds, weaving carpets and teaching French. In following her trail, he comes to understand the emotional blindness and self-absorption that had driven her away. When he finally finds Esther, she is pregnant and preparing for a new life. Their reunion is neither triumphant nor tragic—it is a moment of quiet recognition, a rediscovery of mutual humanity after time of separation.

While the parallels between *The Odyssey* and *The Zahir* are immediately apparent—the journey, the absence, the wandering, and the return—Coelho's novel transforms the ancient pattern in striking ways. The trials of his modern protagonist are not external but more psychological, rooted in loneliness, guilt, and the failure to love with awareness. Likewise, Esther's role as the "modern Penelopeia" inverts the classical image: she is no longer the one who waits but the one who leaves, seeking authenticity beyond the confines of marriage. Through this reversal, Coelho redefines the meaning of homecoming and fidelity for the modern age. The home to which his Odysseus returns is not a physical space but an inner state of reconciliation—with himself, with the other, and with the passage of time. These innovations—both structural and thematic—form the foundation for the comparative analysis that follows, in which the evolution of Penelopeia's image from antiquity to modernity will be examined in detail.

III. From Ithaca to the Steppe: Rewriting *The Odyssey* in *The Zahir*

The dialogue between *The Odyssey* and *The Zahir* spans centuries and continents, connecting the Aegean Sea with the Kazakh steppe. In Coelho’s novel, Homer’s tale of a man who travels the world to return to his waiting wife is transformed into a story of mutual searching: here it is the woman who leaves, and the man who sets out in pursuit. Yet even as their roles appear reversed, the ancient symmetry endures. Esther, a war correspondent who faces the turmoil of real battlefields, becomes a modern reflection of Odysseus’s courage, while her husband, left behind in comfort and success, must undertake his own journey across both geography and self. Coelho preserves the structure of the journey, the absence, the wandering, and the return, but reconfigures its moral center. His hero’s path—from the safety of Paris to a remote village on the Kazakh plain—echoes the sea voyage from Troy to Ithaca, while Esther’s absence transforms Penelope’s patient waiting into an act of defiance and self-discovery. What was once a tale of the hero’s homecoming becomes, in *The Zahir*, a meditation on love as a shared odyssey, where both man and woman must travel to find their way back to one another.

Correspondence of Characters

<i>The Odyssey</i>		<i>The Zahir</i>
Odysseus		The Protagonist
Penelopeia		Esther
Telemachus / Athena		Mikhail
Calypso		Maria

Odysseus, the wanderer returning from war, finds his modern counterpart in Coelho’s narrator—a successful writer estranged from meaning and from his wife. Penelopeia’s steadfast fidelity becomes, in *The Zahir*, Esther’s restless search for authenticity and truth. Even secondary figures echo Homeric archetypes: Mikhail, the spiritual guide, merges the roles of Telemachus and Athena—at once the companion, the witness, and the moral compass—while Maria, the fleeting lover, recalls Calypso’s seductive detour that delays, but cannot replace, the return home.

Correspondence of Structure

<i>The Odyssey</i>		<i>The Zahir</i>
Release from the island		Release from the police station
Journey from Troy and the islands back to Penelopeia		Journey from literary success to the search for Esther
Return to Ithaca and reunion with wife		Journey to distant Kazakhstan and reunion with wife

Both narratives trace the same cyclical pattern: the journey, the absence, the wandering, and the return. But while Homer’s Odysseus moves through external trials imposed by fate, Coelho’s protagonist navigates the inner

landscape of doubt, obsession, and self-awareness. The physical voyage across seas and islands becomes, in *The Zahir*, an emotional and metaphysical odyssey—an exploration of consciousness rather than geography. Explicit references to *The Odyssey* within *The Zahir* confirm Coelho’s deliberate intertextual dialogue with the ancient text. As the protagonist travels toward a Kazakh village, he recounts the tale of Odysseus and the Cyclops:

Many centuries ago, a poet described the wanderings of a man called Ulysses on his way back to an island called Ithaca, where his beloved awaits him. He confronts many perils, from storms to temptations of comfort. At one point, in a cave, he encounters a monster with only one eye. The monster asks him his name. “Nobody,” says Ulysses. They fight and he manages to pierce the monster’s one eye with his sword and then seals the mouth of the cave with a rock. The monster’s companions hear his cries and rush to help him. Seeing that there is a rock covering the mouth of the cave, they ask who is with him. “Nobody! Nobody” replies the monster. His companions leave, since there is clearly no threat to the community, and Ulysses can then continue on his journey back to the woman who waits him (*The Zahir*, 2005, 327).

Similarly, in a conversation with Mikhail, parallels are drawn between Esther and Penelopeia:

Do you remember yesterday, when Dos asked me to choose my name, I told you the story of a warrior who returns to an island in search of his beloved? The island is called Ithaca and the woman is called Penelope. What do you think Penelope has been doing since Ulysses left? Weaving! She has been weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes, as a way of putting off her suitors. Only when she finishes the shroud will she remarry. While she waits for Ulysses to return, she unpicks her work every night and begins again the following day. Her suitors want her to choose one of them, but she dreams of the return of the man she loves. Finally, when she has grown weary of waiting, Ulysses returns (*The Zahir*, 2005, 336).

Finally, in the novel’s closing passage, Coelho makes the connection explicit:

I’ve been waiting for you... I waited as Penelope waited for Ulysses... And if I did love another man, and was told you were about to arrive, do you think I would still be here? (*The Zahir*, 2005, 325)

These allusions reveal not only homage but reinterpretation. Coelho consciously recasts Homer’s narrative of return as an allegory of modern relationships—one where longing replaces conquest, and understanding takes

the place of vengeance. The eternal myth of homecoming is thus transformed into a meditation on love, absence, and the possibility of spiritual renewal in the contemporary world.

IV. Penelopeia Across Time: The Transformation of the Waiting Wife

In *The Odyssey*, Penelopeia—wife of the long-absent Odysseus—embodies one of humanity’s most enduring archetypes: the woman who waits. Her patience and intelligence sustain both her household and the fragile moral order of Ithaca. By day she weaves a shroud; by night she secretly unravels it, transforming time itself into an act of quiet resistance. Through this nightly labor she becomes the custodian of constancy, turning endurance into a form of agency.

In Coelho’s *The Zahir*, this ancient figure is not discarded but reimagined. Esther, the modern Penelopeia, steps beyond the walls of home—into war zones, deserts, and solitude. She chooses absence as her form of fidelity, vanishing so that both she and her husband may rediscover what love truly means. Her disappearance is not rebellion but a pilgrimage. Even in the remoteness of the Kazakh steppe, the old symbolism persists: Esther, too, spends her days weaving carpets. What once was a burial shroud woven under false pretenses has become, in Esther’s world, a carpet woven in solitude—a quiet act of creation that mirrors her search for meaning. In this distant setting, the loom survives, transformed from an emblem of endurance into one of renewal. Her threads, like Penelopeia’s, are the invisible lines that still bind her to the man she once loved. Yet beneath all transformation lies continuity. Though she may live and work among strangers, her essence remains that of the woman who waits—not passively but with awareness. She waits not for rescue but for recognition. Her final words to her husband reveal this quiet, unwavering core:

I’ve been waiting for you... I waited as Penelope waited for Ulysses... And if I did love another man, and was told you were about to arrive, do you think I would still be here? (*The Zahir*, 2005, 325)

In this moment, Esther speaks not as a modern emancipated woman rejecting tradition, but as its inheritor and transformer. She claims the right to wait on her own terms—to love, to err, to wander, and still to remain faithful to the essence of her feeling. In her quiet perseverance, the meaning of the journey is restored. She is the still point toward which every voyage turns—the quiet center that gives the journey its purpose.

Conclusion: The Enduring Power of the “Homecoming Husband” Motif

From its first written telling in *The Odyssey*, the story of the man who leaves home and strives to return has become one of the most resonant patterns in world literature and folklore. Across centuries and continents, it has been retold

in tales, myths, and modern narratives—the story of the homecoming hero who, after long exile and peril, finds his way back to the place and the person he once called his own. This ancient scene of return, reunion, and recognition has endured for millennia. Why has it remained so powerful?

From *The Odyssey* onward, many of these tales recount the adventures of a husband who, having left home, is unable to return for many years. They also tell the story of a wife who, despite hardship, preserves her fidelity and awaits his return. Such narratives resonate universally: any warrior, traveler, or wanderer separated from home and family can identify with the husband’s plight, while women left behind can empathize deeply with the wife’s endurance. At the same time, these stories portray dynamics that remain familiar even today: the husband who is unfaithful, the wife who forgives infidelity or abandonment, and rivalries among men competing for the same woman. In their focus on the complexities of male–female relationships, they reflect psychological and behavioral patterns that remain strikingly consistent across human societies. Each Odysseus may lose sight of his woman, drawn away by storms, desires, or pride, yet every path, whether of the body or the heart, leads back to her. For the journey’s true end is not victory or revelation but the embrace of the one who never ceased to wait. It is there—in the arms of the faithful, understanding, and long-waiting woman—that every wandering, whether of the flesh or of the soul, finds at last its home.

Each age reshapes the story in its own image. In Homer, the hero’s return restores cosmic and domestic order; in later retellings, the journey becomes a search for meaning, faith, or identity. Yet at the heart of each version remains the same pulse—the longing to return, to be recognized, to reconcile with what one has lost. This is why the “Homecoming Husband” motif endures. It binds together two perspectives: the wanderer who seeks and the one who waits. It speaks to the eternal rhythm of departure and return, of loss and recovery, that underlies human experience itself. It is precisely this combination of emotional universality and moral tension that sustains their vitality.

Building upon this universal archetype, the present study has traced the transformation of its central image—the waiting wife—from Homer’s Penelopeia to Coelho’s Esther. What begins as a tale of chastity and endurance evolves into a story of independence and self-realization, yet the essence remains unchanged. Beneath shifting cultural ideals, the figure of the woman who waits continues to embody the still point of return—the heart to which every journey, literal or spiritual, must ultimately return.

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