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Uncovering the self: psychological growth in Loulie Al-Nazari's journey in the Stardust Thief

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Abstract. This research investigates the psychological transformation of Loulie al-Nazari, protagonist of Chelsea Abdullah's *The Stardust Thief*, by combining Christopher Vogler's twelve-stage adaptation of Joseph Campbell's monomyth with Carl Jung's theory of archetypes. Three aims guide the study: identifying how Vogler's twelve stages manifest in Loulie's narrative arc, determining which internal and external factors drive her psychological development, and evaluating the resulting shift in her identity and self-perception. A qualitative descriptive design, supported by close reading and content analysis of the novel as primary data, is used to reach these aims. Results indicate that Loulie's arc realizes all twelve of Vogler's stages, opening with a forced call to adventure and advancing through mounting trials before reaching a decisive reckoning with her hidden past inside the ruins of the Queen of Dunes. Jung's archetypes account for the internal dimension of this development: the Shadow surfaces as the grief she buries after her tribe's destruction, the Persona takes shape as the Midnight Merchant guise she uses for self-protection, and the Animus emerges in the resilience and nerve she calls upon across the quest. Externally, the surrounding cast enacts Vogler's archetypal roles, Qadir as Mentor, Omar as Shadow, Mazen as Ally, and Aisha as Shapeshifter. As the narrative closes, Loulie edges toward individuation, reclaiming a name and history she once suppressed and arriving at a more unified sense of self. The research concludes that Abdullah's novel illustrates the continued cross-cultural relevance of the Campbell–Vogler model.

Keywords: Hero's Journey, Jungian Archetypes, Monomyth, Psychological Transformation, Vogler's Twelve Stages

INTRODUCTION

Narratives centered on heroic figures have accompanied human culture across generations, serving as a vehicle for exploring courage, selfhood, and inner change. Joseph Campbell terms the recurring pattern beneath these narratives the monomyth, or Hero's Journey, tracing shared stages of departure, initiation, and return across myths

drawn from widely different cultures and eras (Campbell et al., 2003). Christopher Vogler later reorganizes Campbell's pattern into a twelve-stage structure now commonly used to analyze contemporary fiction and film (Vogler, 2020). Beneath both models sits Carl Jung's theory of archetypes, which holds that the psyche houses universal symbolic figures, among them the Shadow, the Persona, and the Self, that reappear consistently in myth, dream, and literature irrespective of cultural background (Jung & Hull, 2025). Within contemporary fiction, the Hero's Journey retains its analytical value precisely because it links a protagonist's external ordeals to their internal change, making it possible to read narrative structure and psychological development as two expressions of the same process.

Within the Department of English Literature at Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, several recent studies share this interest in journey-based character analysis. Wijayanto (2025) traces the Heroine's Journey of Nora Seed in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* through Maureen Murdock's model, centering on inner healing and self-acceptance. Sembayu (2025) reads Bruce Wayne's arc in Matt Reeves's *The Batman* against Vogler's twelve stages, tracking how vengeance, trauma, and moral responsibility reshape the hero. Annur (2018) approaches heroism in Nicholas Sparks' *Dear John* sociologically, distinguishing civil, social, and military forms of heroic conduct. Together these studies confirm that journey-based and character-centered frameworks remain productive tools for tracing development, yet none pairs Campbell's and Vogler's Hero's Journey with Jung's archetypal theory to read a fantasy novel grounded in Arabic-Islamic storytelling, a gap the present study addresses.

The Stardust Thief (Abdullah, 2022), opening volume of the Sandsea Trilogy, is a fantasy novel steeped in the tradition of the Arabian Nights. Its protagonist, Loulie al-Nazari, is known across the sultanate as the Midnight Merchant, a relic trader who journeys the desert alongside her jinn companion Qadir. Behind this merchant persona lies a childhood trauma: the destruction of her tribe, after which she sets aside her birth name, Layla, together with the grief attached to it. Once the sultan forces her into leading an expedition for a legendary lamp, Loulie is drawn into a journey that compels her to face external peril alongside the buried self she has worked for years to keep hidden. Accordingly, this research investigates how the stages of Campbell's and Vogler's Hero's Journey unfold across Loulie's arc, which internal and external forces shape her psychological growth, and how her sense of identity is altered by the journey's end.

Vogler's (2020) model arranges its twelve stages within a three-act framework. Act I (Setup/Departure) contains the Ordinary World, the Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting the Mentor, and Crossing the First Threshold. Act II (Confrontation/Initiation) contains Tests, Allies, and Enemies, Approach to the Inmost Cave, The Ordeal, and Reward. Act III (Resolution/Return) contains The Road Back, Resurrection, and Return with the Elixir. Rather than a fixed template, each stage names a function the hero must pass through, a flexibility that accommodates Abdullah's adaptation of the quest structure to an Arabic-Islamic mythological world.

Jung and Hull (2025) hold that beneath a person's individual unconscious lies a collective layer shared across humanity, from which archetypes, recurring across myth, dream, and literature, take shape. Four of these archetypes anchor the present study. The Shadow gathers everything the conscious mind declines to accept, repressed impulses and weaknesses that, left unexamined, keep exerting pressure from below awareness. The Persona is the social mask a person wears in public life, useful for adaptation but capable of estranging its wearer from the self if relied on too completely. The Animus denotes the masculine principle within the female psyche, surfacing as courage and resilience when integrated, or as harshness and self-doubt when not. The Self, finally, is the archetype of wholeness, and individuation, the ongoing integration of the psyche's divided parts, corresponds narratively to the Return stage of the Hero's Journey.

METHOD

This research is situated within structuralist and psychoanalytic literary criticism rather than frameworks such as feminism, postcolonialism, or Marxist theory, given its focus on the individual arc and psychological change of a single protagonist, Loulie al-Nazari. Campbell's monomyth and its refinement into Vogler's (2020) twelve stages supply the structuralist side of the analysis, both being concerned with recurring narrative patterns (Selden et al., 2016), while Jung's theory of archetypes supplies the psychoanalytic side, addressing the unconscious forces that inform character behavior. Combining the two allows the study to trace both the structural shape of Loulie's journey and the psychological reasoning behind her transformation.

A descriptive qualitative design is adopted, oriented toward interpreting textual material, words, sentences, and narrative patterning, rather than quantifying data (Bazen et al., 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design pairs an intrinsic reading, carried out through Vogler's (2020) twelve stages to chart the structural progression of Loulie's arc, with an extrinsic reading, carried out through Jung's theory of archetypes to interpret the psychological logic behind her development, particularly through the Shadow, the Persona, and the Animus (Guerin, 2011).

The novel *The Stardust Thief* (Abdullah, 2022) serves as the sole data source, with dialogue and narrative description that reveal Loulie's suppressed grief, divided identity, and inner conflict treated as data. The researcher functions as the main instrument, reading, selecting, and interpreting textual evidence in light of the theoretical framework, aided by a tabulation instrument that sorts passages by chapter, page number, and a stage code (OW, COA, ROC, MM, CT, TAE, AIC, ORD, REW, RB, RES, RWE) corresponding to each of the twelve stages.

Data are gathered through a documentary technique: repeated close reading of the novel, identification of scenes and dialogue matching each of Vogler's twelve stages, and sorting of the identified passages by stage code. Analysis then proceeds in four steps, stage mapping, in which sorted evidence is assigned to the twelve stages; stage interpretation, in which each stage is read for what it reveals about Loulie's situation, conflict, and change; arc synthesis, in which the twelve stages are considered together as a single

continuous arc running from the Ordinary World to the Return with the Elixir; and contextual relation, in which the resulting findings are connected back to the archetypal and structural framework described above, from which conclusions about the shape of Loulie's transformation are drawn.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The discussion that follows responds to three questions: (1) how Vogler's twelve-stage Hero's Journey takes shape across Loulie al-Nazari's arc; (2) which internal and external factors drive her psychological growth; and (3) how her identity and self-understanding are transformed by the journey.

3.1 The Twelve Stages of Loulie al-Nazari's Hero's Journey

Table 1 sets out the twelve stages as they appear in *The Stardust Thief*, pairing each stage with representative textual evidence and a brief interpretation.

Table 1. Overview of Vogler's Twelve Stages in *The Stardust Thief*

No.	Stage	Textual Evidence	Interpretation
1	The Ordinary World	"Her mind filled with images of bloodshed and murder… her father, lying in a pool of his own blood" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 18).	An unwanted flashback exposes the trauma hidden beneath Loulie's poised Midnight Merchant exterior.
2	Call to Adventure	The sultan's soldiers seize Loulie and order her to lead a quest for a legendary lamp.	The summons leaves no room for consent, casting the adventure as a command rather than an offer.
3	Refusal of the Call	"I am not for sale," the merchant said coldly (Abdullah, 2022, p. 96).	Her icy refusal doubles as a display of control exactly when her control is being taken from her.
4	Meeting the Mentor	Qadir gives Loulie the enchanted compass: "the compass has never led me astray" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 36).	Qadir hands his guiding role to an object, honoring Loulie's agency in contrast to the sultan's order.
5	Crossing the First Threshold	Loulie's gaze "wavered again, without her permission" as she says goodbye to Dahlia (Abdullah, 2022, p. 136).	Her composure briefly slips, exposing emotion beneath the spectacle of a public departure.
6	Tests, Allies, and Enemies	A sandstorm fractures the group; the city of Dhyme conceals a possessed wali.	Loulie's market instincts must be re-tuned for a world that ignores the sultanate's rules.
7	Approach to the Inmost Cave	"Loulie dreamed of fire… impossible to tell victim from killer" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 176).	A recurring dream reveals the ruins stirring up buried memory well before the physical ordeal arrives.

No.	Stage	Textual Evidence	Interpretation
8	The Ordeal	The ruins of the Queen of Dunes force Loulie to relive her tribe's massacre.	External danger and inward reckoning fuse here; skill alone offers Loulie no shelter.
9	Reward (Seizing the Sword)	Qadir: "the ifrit are morally ambiguous. Let me try speaking with her" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 251).	What Loulie gains is unstable rather than settled: leads toward the lamp, alongside grief she can no longer bury.
10	The Road Back	"He had fooled her" — Qadir's true identity as a jinn king is revealed (Abdullah, 2022, p. 438).	This disclosure, paired with Omar's hidden agenda, removes the last certainties Loulie had held onto.
11	Resurrection	"Trust me… I need to keep you safe" — Qadir sacrifices himself in the Sandsea (Abdullah, 2022, p. 435).	Grief-stricken yet still moving forward, Loulie shows that her transformation can withstand real loss.
12	Return with the Elixir	"An end. Or, perhaps, a beginning" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 436).	The elixir she carries is internal: acknowledged memory and grief rather than a tidy, victorious homecoming.

3.1.1 Act I: Setup (Departure)

Act I situates Loulie within her ordinary world as the Midnight Merchant, a poised and guarded relic trader whose professional ease masks an unresolved wound. In the novel's opening shipboard scene, her confidence sits alongside an unbidden memory of her tribe's massacre, signaling that her command of the outer world rests on an unsettled inner one. The sultan's forced summons operates as her Call to Adventure, and her chilly refusal before a court of onlookers reads less as isolated defiance than as an early glimpse of the emotional withdrawal she repeatedly turns to across the novel. Qadir's gift of the enchanted compass, conveyed through memory and story rather than instruction, marks his place as Mentor and sits in deliberate contrast to the sultan's command. Loulie's departure from Madinne, mounted as public ceremony, is crossed not through triumph but through the quiet, unguarded look she shares with her friend Dahlia, hinting at the distance between the self she displays and the self she allows only at the margins.

3.1.2 Act II: Confrontation (Initiation)

The desert crossing exposes Loulie to a string of trials, a sandstorm, and the concealed danger of Dhyme, that erode the advantages her market reputation once secured, pushing her instead toward adaptability and trust. Mazen shifts gradually from stranger to genuine ally, while Aisha's guarded motives as Shapeshifter push Loulie to act despite incomplete knowledge. Her Approach to the Inmost Cave takes the form of a recurring dream of fire that rehearses the coming ordeal psychologically before she ever reaches the ruins of the Queen of Dunes physically, an echo that suggests the novel treats outer and inner thresholds as two versions of the same crossing. The Ordeal itself compels her to relive

her tribe's massacre and the name she has kept buried for nine years, marking the first trial in the story that skill alone cannot resolve. What she gains from it is likewise interior and unfinished: leads toward the lamp, but also a surfacing of grief she can no longer push back down, a threshold crossed rather than a prize secured.

3.1.3 Act III: Resolution (Return)

The Road Back turns on two unsettling disclosures, Qadir's hidden identity as a jinn king and Omar's true designs as the quest's real antagonist, that strip away the last certainties Loulie had leaned on since the ordeal. Resurrection arrives as the climactic clash within the collapsing Sandsea, where Qadir gives himself up so that Loulie and Mazen might escape; her grief-stricken but undeterred response, choosing to keep moving rather than break down, is what this stage requires as proof of lasting change. The novel's Return with the Elixir withholds a conventional resolution: Loulie does not arrive home victorious, yet she carries within her a rush of fully felt, unguarded memory. Its closing line, "an end, or, perhaps, a beginning," names the elixir this journey yields, not a settled identity, but a continuing ability to hold contradiction.

3.2 Internal and External Factors Shaping Psychological Growth

3.2.1 Internal Factors: The Shadow and the Persona

Chief among the internal factors is Loulie's buried grief and divided sense of self, which maps onto Jung and Hull's (2025) archetypes of the Shadow and the Persona. Layla, the child who witnessed her tribe's destruction, stands as Loulie's Shadow, the disowned portion of the self set outside conscious awareness because facing it directly is unbearable. The novel signals this from its opening pages: "Loulie was not here as a passenger. She was here as the Midnight Merchant" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 1), a line that enacts the very suppression it names. Her Midnight Merchant identity is a clear instance of the Persona, a professional role inhabited so completely that it stands in for the authentic self, a substitution Loulie eventually names herself once its protective use collapses: "The Midnight Merchant you know is gone. I may as well be a celebrity now" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 102). The ruins of the Queen of Dunes later draw this Shadow upward through a recurring fire dream where "it was impossible to tell victim from killer" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 176), the Shadow reasserting itself once the Persona can no longer hold.

3.2.2 Internal Factors: The Animus

A further internal factor is Loulie's Animus, the inner masculine principle that Jung and Hull (2025) associate with agency and resilience within the female psyche. Beneath her self-deprecating claim, "She wasn't a hero. She was simply a merchant with a knife…" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 71), decisive action follows, revealing a positive Animus at work underneath her own modest self-assessment. This Animus is most visible when her long-suppressed grief finally breaks into speech: "a dam broke inside of her, and the rest of the confession came out as a torrent of words" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 335), the willingness to voice what she has carried in silence overtaking the harsher, self-critical Animus. In line with DeValve and Braswell's (2020) observation that female heroic agency is frequently

relational, Loulie's courage emerges most clearly not in solitary action but when she is protecting or responding to someone she cares about.

3.2.3 External Factors: Archetypal Figures as Jungian Forces

The external factors take shape through the archetypal cast surrounding Loulie across the journey. Viewed through Jung's framework, each figure also answers to a facet of her inner psychological life, so that external and internal factors reflect one another structurally, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Archetypal Figures and Their Functions

Character	Vogler's Archetype	Jungian Correspondence	Function in Loulie's Journey
Qadir	Mentor	Trust set against the Persona's self-protection	Offers the guiding compass and, through his final sacrifice, forces Loulie to resolve her ambivalence toward connection.
Omar bin Malik	Shadow	Destruction externalized	The true antagonist, hidden behind Mazen's identity; his nearness before recognition mirrors how the Jungian Shadow works unseen.
Mazen bin Malik	Ally	Individuation underway	Demonstrates honest vulnerability and mirrors back Loulie's developing capacity for trust.
Aisha bint Louas	Shapeshifter	Independent judgment	Her guarded motives push Loulie to act and judge under incomplete information.

These archetypal roles also vary in steadiness across the novel: Mazen's Ally function starts out unstable because of his disguise, and Omar's Shadow function stays concealed behind that same disguise for most of the story. This unevenness implies that Loulie's outer world echoes her inner one; just as her Persona conceals her Shadow, those around her conceal their true archetypal roles as well.

3.3 Changes in Identity and Self-Understanding

Over the course of the novel, Loulie shifts from a guarded and fractured identity toward a more unified self-understanding, a shift consistent with what Jung and Hull (2025) term individuation. At the outset, her relationship to her Shadow is one of ongoing suppression: "Every time Layla buried them, they resurfaced, a reality she could not escape" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 6). The Ordeal within the ruins marks the point where this suppression first gives way, and after Qadir's sacrifice the protective distance dissolves altogether: "though she had become very good at forgetting, the memories still haunted her in her sleep" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 235), language that recasts suppression as a past strategy rather than an ongoing one.

Rather than disappearing, her Persona gradually loses its grip across the narrative. By the novel's close, Loulie has neither abandoned her merchant trade nor fully spoken the name Layla aloud, yet her relationship to that Persona has shifted at its core, matching what

Jung and Hull (2025) describe as a healthy relationship to the social mask, worn with awareness rather than mistaken for the only self available. Her Animus, meanwhile, travels from calculated bravery toward unconditional courage, most evident in her refusal to lose Qadir a second time: "She had lost Qadir once; she refused to lose him again" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 279), a resolve no longer dependent on favorable odds.

This movement toward the Self remains open rather than complete by the novel's end; Abdullah withholds resolution deliberately in its closing lines, "An end. Or, perhaps, a beginning" (Abdullah, 2022, p. 436). In place of false closure, the novel leaves Loulie integrated enough to survive what she has been through, carrying her grief instead of concealing it, and able to stand on unfamiliar ground without knowing what lies ahead.

3.4 Discussion

Read together, the three findings above show that Vogler's twelve-stage Hero's Journey and Jung's theory of archetypes work in tandem rather than as separate lenses within *The Stardust Thief*. Each structural stage of Loulie's journey lines up with a specific moment of psychological change: the Ordinary World plants the wound the Ordeal will later uncover, the Mentor's gift anticipates the sacrifice that will test her capacity for loss, and the Return with the Elixir coincides with the narrative shape of individuation. This alignment supports Vogler's (2020) own claim that the twelve stages name psychological functions rather than a fixed sequence, and shows that this flexibility accommodates Abdullah's adaptation of the monomyth to an Arabic-Islamic mythological setting.

These findings also build on the departmental scholarship discussed earlier. Where Wijayanto (2025) follows a heroine's path toward inner healing through Murdock's model and Sembayu (2025) applies Vogler's stages to a cinematic superhero story, the present study shows that pairing Campbell's monomyth, Vogler's twelve stages, and Jung's archetypes works equally well for a contemporary fantasy novel grounded in non-Western mythological material, reinforcing the cross-cultural claims both frameworks make about themselves.

One limitation of this study is its focus on the opening volume of the Sandsea Trilogy and on Loulie's arc specifically; Mazen and Aisha are considered only in terms of the archetypal functions they perform in relation to her. As an interpretive, qualitative analysis, the readings offered here also reflect this study's own analytical choices, and other readers using the same framework might reasonably highlight different passages. Later research could extend this analysis to the trilogy's subsequent volumes to see whether Loulie's individuation moves toward a fuller integration of the Self.

CONCLUSION

This research examined the Hero's Journey of Loulie al-Nazari in Chelsea Abdullah's *The Stardust Thief* along two main lines: the twelve stages of Vogler's model and the internal and external factors that shape Loulie's development. She begins as the Midnight Merchant, a professional persona built to conceal her grief and her buried name, Layla al-Nazari. The quest forced on her by the sultan leads her through escalating trials, a reckoning with her suppressed past inside the ruins of the Queen of Dunes, and,

eventually, an acknowledgment of what she has spent years hiding, carrying her through the Ordeal, the Resurrection, and finally the Return, where she emerges holding both acknowledged grief and a broadened sense of who she is.

The internal factors driving this development are her suppressed grief and divided identity, expressed through Jung's archetypes of the Shadow and the Persona, while the external factors work through four archetypal figures: Qadir as Mentor, Omar as Shadow, Mazen as Ally, and Aisha as Shapeshifter. Each of these figures places a distinct pressure on Loulie's underlying wound, steadily wearing down her defenses. Her shifting identity and self-understanding show up as a gradual movement from suppression toward acknowledgment: she comes to see that the grief she has managed for years is something to carry rather than bury, and that her Midnight Merchant identity, once a source of safety, has become an obstacle to real connection.

Loulie's emergence from the Sandsea at the novel's end marks the start of individuation and a more whole sense of self. She moves forward not because her pain has ended, but because she has learned to carry it without being undone by it. Her arc suggests that character growth does not depend on resolving every wound, but on the willingness to face them honestly, and it affirms that *The Stardust Thief* speaks to the continued cross-cultural relevance of Campbell's and Vogler's framework.

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