



Research Paper

The Penelopiad: The Weaving and the Unravelling Threads of a Postmodern Myth

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ABSTRACT: *Myth has held a meaning-making function in the history of discourse. Though the Enlightenment age heralded a period of scepticism and extreme rationalism, myth continue to represent the collective consciousness of human existence. The postmodern age signals a collapse of all-encompassing ideologies of the Modernist age and deconstructs its grand narratives. This paper seeks to examine the position of myth in the postmodern era. It will attempt to do so by examining Margaret Atwood's revisionary-fiction, *The Penelopiad*.*

KEYWORDS: *Myth- scientism- centrism- postmodernism-doubleness-indeterminacy-plurality*

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Though myth is considered to be a folklore narrative with little foundation in reality, the genre has been endorsed by secular and religious authorities. The function of myth has been to validate, justify and preserve the fundamental customs, values and beliefs of mankind. Myth is humanity's attempt to grasp the reason and the purpose for existence and seeks to establish the continuity of an accepted way of life. Joseph Campbell explains the four basic functions of myth as metaphysical/mystical, cosmological, sociological, and pedagogical (*Pathways*). While the metaphysical attempted to explain the wonders of creation, the cosmological attempted to describe the "shape" of the universe, the sociological to pass down "the law" of ethical and moral codes that define socio-cultural structures while the pedagogical lead through particular rites of passage that define the various significant stages of lives-from dependency to maturity to old age and death. The post-Enlightenment western world has firmly turned to science for an explication of the mysteries of the cosmos and the meaning-making function. This paper examines the position of myth in a postmodern world. It would like to posit that though postmodernism is not anti-myth (Faulconer, 2008, Wolin, 1985), the meaning-making function of myth has certainly undergone a dramatic change under the sign of postmodernity. The paper will comment on this transfiguration through an examination of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*.

The Enlightenment age spelt a death knell both to historiography and myth-making. Though the age of Enlightenment, with its attendant characteristics of reason, rational, empiricism and scientific precision, questioned religious dogmas, it also led to the development of reason as a dominant ideology that shaped narratives. Enlightenment thinking was a total contrast to myth. Modernism that arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was shaped by the development of modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities, followed then by the horror of World War I. The attitude towards history and myth remained largely the same as the Enlightenment age with its reverence for grand narratives. The only factor to be considered was the objective contemplation of the evidence at hand that would help arrive at the 'truth' as closely as possible. Thus, the progression of humankind seemed to be possible by an application of reason, to what Beverley Southgate adheres to as 'Scientism' and 'Centrism'. Centrism implied an acceptance of the single perspective. The privileged position of the single point of view is obvious in the Eurocentric perspective of the nineteenth-century. Thus, Enlightenment's stress on the rational to create the true continues well into the realism of the 19th century. The humanistic heritage of the Enlightenment (that reason and rationality can liberate human beings led to the strong opposition of myths and illusion and to a stress on realism in the 19th century) and the speculative view of history was rejected by philosophers like Nietzsche, Burckhardt and later Heidegger on one hand and by historicists on the other.

While modernism's demand for unity, certainty and universal centrality pays homage to the Enlightenment precepts and the desire for mythological meaning continues but the nature of this mythicization

has changed under the sign of postmodernism. The emergence of the postmodern culture to provide what Frederic Jameson calls the *cultural logic* within twentieth and twenty-first century capitalist societies has led to the re-emergence of myth with new meaning-making functions. Postmodern culture encouraged individuals to embrace a new mythology of self-creation and creative destruction. In this respect, it is a kind of hyper-modernism. But the postmodern myth does not subscribe to the grand narrative and instead allow individuals to find personal meanings in world that seemed to be suspended over the brink of the rational war.

The term 'postmodernism' though a part of critical discourse since the 1980s, remains a highly elusive term that defies definition. It suggests to be 'more modern' while being 'beyond modern'. Though the origin of the term might be uncertain, postmodernism has acquired a wide currency with time. But being unstable in its implication, its meaning has tended to shift and denote anything from incredulity to indeterminacy. While the postmodern is situated by its "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard), a "disposable simulacrum" (Baudrillard), "doubly corded, one-half Modern and one-half something else" (Jencks), merely a "buzzword" (Hebdige), it does not have a special place of origin. Postmodernism then occupies liminal spaces and operates meaning at junctures of closure and the margins of modernist productions. It does not profess to *nouveau styles* of creation, new practices of aestheticism or new fields in art, culture or philosophy. But what it does is that postmodernism decentres, debunks and delimits the boundaries between the 'high' and the 'low'. It axiomatically creates a dispersed, divergent and decentered structure (Deleuze's 'rhizome') as a binary opposite to trunk and branch structure of modernism. The postmodern retellings of myths seek to do this, decentring stereotypes of class, race and gender.

Margaret Atwood's 2005 novella, *The Penelopiad*, gives voice to one such artist who spent twenty years weaving and unravelling a shroud while waiting chastely for her husband to return from war. While Homer's *Odyssey* does not provide any agency to Odysseus' wife Penelope or the twelve maids who are hanged by Telemachus, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (the saga of Penelope, an apt punning on Odysseus' *Odyssey*), provides them a platform to express their points of view. The work was written as part of the *Myth Series* which was launched by Canongate publishing house in 2005 with the intention of having one hundred myths retold by the year 2038. The series involved the ancient myths from various cultures being reimagined and rewritten by contemporary authors.

The Odysseus and Penelope myth is a well-known legend from Greek mythology, Homer's *Odyssey* being the most accepted version of it. Although several years have passed since the fall of Troy, Odysseus has not returned to Ithaca, his kingdom. People begin to believe that he has died, leaving his wife, Penelope, the sole ruler of the kingdom. It means that she should marry since Telemachus, her son, is still young and untrained to be a ruler. This proves to be a good opportunity for others to try to take over Odysseus' kingdom. Thereafter, a slew of suitors descends on Ithaca, coveting the kingdom and raiding Odysseus' palace. They force their courtship on Penelope while Telemachus is helpless in keeping these suitors out of the kingdom. In the meanwhile, Odysseus, helped by his protectress, the goddess Athena, is finally able to make his way to Ithaca, slay Penelope's suitors and identify himself as her husband. Once the battle is won, Telemachus, under his father's direction, hangs twelve of their household maids who are accused of betraying Penelope and are thought to have had sex with her suitors. Penelope, knowing the fact that the maids were not in the wrong, does not defend them. Although Odysseus had returned home after many years, he soon sets sail again as a punishment for killing the suitors.

Numerous myths, legends, and folklores have squashed the voices of female characters. *The Penelopiad* subverts the myth of Odysseus, snatching the voice from the hero and according it to the women. It examines the issues and challenges faced by women in ancient Greece which is tempered by the issues and expectations faced by women in the contemporary society. Atwood's *The Penelopiad* recounts Penelope's life in hindsight from 21st century Hades. Penelope recalls her family life in Sparta, her relationship with her parents, her marriage to Odysseus, life in Ithaca, her dealing with the suitors in Odysseus' absence and the aftermath of his return. Penelope's narrative is interrupted by a Greek chorus of twelve maids who were hanged by Telemachus as Odysseus believed them to be disloyal. The maids express their opinion on the events and qualify Penelope's narrative with their reality. They lament their birth into lower-income households and their childhood spent as slaves with no parents or playtime. They dream of being princesses and sing of freedom. They compare their position to that of Penelope and contrast their lives to Telemachus', wondering if they would have killed him in his childhood if they knew that he would slay them as an adult. They blame Penelope and Eurycleia for allowing them to unjustly die. This postmodern interlude by the maids uses different genres every time including those of a skipping-rope rhyme, a lament, an idyll, a sea-shanty, a ballad, an anthropology lecture, a court trial and different types of songs.

The central metaphor of weaving, unravelling and reweaving morphs the text into a postmodern weave of intertexts and shifts focus to multiple story-telling perspectives, the double standards between sexes and classes, and justice. The novella is divided into 29 chapters including the introduction, notes, and acknowledgments sections. The universal perception of modernism finds abatement in the language and literature of the age, in the structuralism of Saussure while postmodernism offers language a narrative 'doubleness' and an ironic, self-reflexive, parodic action. Structured along the lines of a classical Greek drama, the storytelling of *The Penelopiad*

alternates between Penelope's narrative and the choral commentary of the twelve maids. Penelope narrates 18 chapters with the Chorus contributing 11 chapters dispersed throughout the book. And though Penelope's narrative uses a deliberately naïve prose and is largely delivered in first person, it is interspersed with Atwood's dry humour.

The novella highlights the richness of a postmodern plurality. Homer's *Odyssey* situate Odysseus as the matchless hero, be it through the stories that Nestor and Menelaus narrate to Telemachus or Odysseus' own narrative to a Scherian court. He fights monsters and seduces goddesses. Penelope, in *The Penelopiad*, debunks the saga of Odysseus as a hero and lover and accuses Odysseus of being a liar and a drunkard who fights a one-eyed bartender and boasts it to be a giant cannibalistic cyclops when in fact "the fight was over non-payment of the bill" (Atwood, 83). Homer portrays Penelope as an ideal wife, dutiful and patient whom he contrasts to Clytemnestra, the monstrous wife who kills Agamemnon on his return from the battle of Troy. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope is dissatisfied with Homer's version of her and also other myths that insinuate her loose character, a woman who slept with her suitors and gave birth to Pan. She rejects both the portrayals- of the ideal wife and the traitorous wife and admits to just trying to survive in a patriarchal world hostile to women. Again, the *Odyssey* makes the maids into traitors who consort with the suitors. Atwood's variant of the myth endows them with voice of their own, speaking freely from the symbolic Underground. Their perspective in Atwood's novel portrays them as innocent victims, used by Penelope to spy, raped and abused by the suitors, and then murdered by Odysseus and Telemachus. The plurality of voices and perspectives do not allow the readers to form simplistic opinions or value judgements.

The double standards between genders and classes are exposed throughout the novella. Odysseus commits adultery with Circe but expects his wife, Penelope to remain loyal to him. The relationship between the maids and the suitors is seen as treasonous and they are hanged while Penelope excuses her role in getting them killed. Again, Penelope condemns Helen for her involvement in getting men killed at Troy while she herself cared little for the maids whom she had enlisted to spy on the suitors and encouraged them to continue even though some were raped. Meanwhile, the maids express their dissatisfaction with the discrimination they faced because they belonged to a lower social class. They believe that the only distinction between Penelope and them is an accident of birth- while Penelope was born into a royal family, the maids were born into a poor one. In contrast to Penelope's royal parents, their parents were poor peasants who had to sell them into slavery to survive. Other than them belonging to distinct social classes, both Penelope and the maids were subjected to social and psychological torment by a harsh and cruel patriarchal society. Their domination by the men, resulting in lack of freedom and authority, is complete. While *The Penelopiad* underscores this male -dominance, it also highlights the patriarchal fall-back of male dominance, namely, female competition. The maids were not only forced to work all day, but they were also sexually abused and raped regularly. This is considered to be as a matter of norm. Despite her considerable shame and guilt over the maids' deaths, Penelope's perspective of saving herself rather than defending the maids because they belong to the lower class is strongly inspired by her form of dominance. Instead of lamenting the unfairness that renders her maids powerless when raped by suitors, Penelope perceives servant molestation as conventional social practice. She even rationalizes that the female servants are expected to be available to male visitors of the palace.

When it comes to herself, Penelope is slighted and feels that she was sold to Odysseus like a piece of meat. She is the consolation prize for Odysseus and is not courted for her appearance. The maids, during their choral commentary, however express their belief that Penelope has taken her marriage for granted when that is the only factor that separates her from their pitiable situation. Women from the lower classes wish to marry a man of respect and wealth not only to live a better life but also to escape abuse. Penelope's ego that manifests in her perception of her marginalization as a woman contradicts sharply with her obvious blindness to her maids' plight. Although the story is told by a woman, none of the women in it are innocent. They all appear to be at odds with one another. Penelope, for example, is forever envious of Helen's beauty and feels compelled to compete with her sister at all times. She is so consumed with envy that when Telemachus returns from Menelaus' court, she is more interested in finding out if Helen has lost her beauty with age than the situation there. Further, Odysseus is relieved that he did not marry Helen because she has not birthed any children whereas Penelope has given him a son while Penelope is bothered that Odysseus still thinks of Helen though he is married to her. She is relieved by the understanding though that birthing Telemachus, a male heir, has secured her position in Odysseus' life. The readers of *The Penelopiad* are compelled to relate with Penelope and the maids (unlike the larger-than-life persona of Homer's Odysseus) as they gain common human characteristics like insecurity, jealousy and distrust.

Through *The Penelopiad*, Atwood accords voice to Penelope and the twelve maids who were essentially objectified in the *Odyssey*. Though Atwood denies that *The Penelopiad* is a feminist novel, its political affiliations cannot be discounted. Atwood, to a certain extent, imbues the female characters, otherwise silenced in history and myth, with agency. *The Penelopiad*, underlines the need to reconstruct myths. It highlights the gender-blind character of the *Odyssey* and the male-focussed gaze of the myth. Atwood's revisionist work not only expresses Penelope's point of view but also depicts her flaws, making her a more relatable character. And while the novella delves into the difficulties and psychological and social pressures that women faced in ancient Greece, it also provides a contemporary social commentary on women's situation. But what makes the text truly postmodern is

the plurality it accords to the subaltern. Many myths, legends, folklores and history itself have suppressed the telling of women's stories. Atwood's version of *The Odyssey*, narrated by Penelope and the maids, tells the story of an ignored or underrepresented gender. The postmodern text liberates Penelope and the maids from the boundaries and limitations of the ancient myth and it does so through a hybrid text that parodically disrupts the hierarchy between the 'high' and the 'low'. It becomes a personalised metafictional record of the unrecorded aspects of Penelope's life.

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