

Transcending the Bounds of Temporality and Spatiality: Mythical Retelling of Femininity in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*

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Abstract

Poetry, despite the side-lining faced due to the profusion of the novel, has made a comeback marking its genuine presence with its ability to combine the imaginative and the creative to project the real. Contemporary poetry, pluralistic, experimental and diverse in form encompassing the nature culture and history of the world has been drawing intense thematic and theoretical attention to itself. Myths play an important role in literature especially in expressing modernist tendencies as done by the twentieth century poet T S Eliot. Similarly, the former Poet Laureate of Britain, Carol Ann Duffy, has subverted myths to bridge the gap between the traumatic experiences of mythical women and the contemporary ones. The paper *Transcending the Bounds of Temporality and Spatiality: Mythical Retelling of Femininity in Carol Ann Duffy's The World's Wife* intends to portray how Carol Ann Duffy projects the problems of women through parading female characters from history, mythology and fairy tales. The technique of mythical subversion has helped her to dismantle the popular notions associated with women (self-sacrificing and self-effacing). The paper thus examines in detail, using the elements of myth criticism, the poems in *The World's Wife* to find out the different facets of women presented by Duffy using mythical subversion.

Keywords: Myth Criticism- Revisionist Myth-making-Mythical subversion – Temporality – Spatiality-Femininity

Myths have been an integral part of cultures all over the world making it the basis of the stories and fairy tales that mothers and grandmothers have been lullabying to their children. At the same time some critics have pointed out difficulties in drawing a distinction between myth and fantasy. Though at a nascent stage they were dismissed off as childish and fantasy, very soon it was acknowledged that myths have the power to connect one to reality. They have been used by various disciplines like Philosophy, History, Literature, Sociology, Politics and Arts as it has the power to help one come to terms with the humankind. They have been used to define the mode of culture present in a society, the belief system of a nation and the underlying consciousness of an individual. This points out that myth is far above the concept of fantasy which is playful where the images used are unstable. Myths form the basis of most of the ancient cultures such as the Greek and the Roman. The Greek Gods and the warriors, their escapades, romance, battles, culture and lifestyle have been a great influence on various civilizations. They have held a sway on various writers and movie makers to create characters to portray modern perceptions. Coming to Europe, myths form a substantial part of the Scottish and Irish cultures. The Irish mythology and folklore permeate the literary arena of William Butler Yeats and John Millington Synge. These myths associated with Irish legends like Cuchulain helped to infuse nationalistic spirit in the people thereby fuelling the Irish revival. For instance, Yeats' poem "The Song of Wandering Aengus" about the Celtic God Aengus has been instrumental in defining his nationalism where he chose a Celtic God above the more preferred Gods of ancient Greek and Roman Mythology. Myths are thus put to various uses.

The former Poet Laureate of America Rita Dove in an interview opined: "Myth begins in anecdote-telling a story in order to entertain- but it also constructs a narrative as a

way of explaining our place and progress in the world...A myth or a legend becomes indispensable through the retelling. Generations repeat and elaborate upon the basic story: the really great tales are stolen by other cultures and changed to fit their new surroundings ... Why do we still repeat these tales and listen to them with pleasure? Because they touch the yearning inside us...They explain some of the mysteries of our existence and our relationships with each other.”(Ingersoll. 125) T S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is an exemplification of Rita Dove’s words. He used myths from various cultures to speak of the place and progress of humanity, man’s place in the world, his instincts and tendency to fall into pits. They at once become a source of chastising the vices committed by the people and a means of showing how these myths have been keeping various generations on the track. Eliot’s use of myth in the chaotic 20th C was a unique way of using literature to touch the core of war-torn Europe and the anniversary of the year 1922 is still celebrated for its publication. This is the power of myth that has enabled the glorification of 100 years of *The Wasteland*. It points to the intimate relation between myth and literature forming a mythographic understanding of human existence.

The English philosopher of religion, Don Cupitt makes an attempt to define myth in his book *The World to Come* where he says that a myth is: “extravagant and full of seeming inconsistencies and finally, that the work of myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate.” (29). He further states: “myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more or less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual’s life. Both for society at large and for the individual, this story-generating function seems irreplaceable. The individual finds meaning in his life by making of his life a story set within a larger social and cosmic story.” (29) Myths work on the individual mind from various angles as pointed out by the French Structural Anthropologist and ethnologist Claud Levi-Strauss in his work *The Raw and the*

Cooked: “it is not men who think in terms of myth but it is myth that operates in men’s minds without their being aware of the fact”(12) If this is the case then it could be interpreted also in terms of patriarchy that is prevalent in the society.

A deeper analysis of myths points out the predominance of male characters, be it Gods, demi Gods, Kings or warriors; they are all essentially men. Female counterparts often appear as weak and totally dependent on their male partners. They rarely make their appearance as smart and intelligent. It is in this context that myths have been recreated and subverted to develop a new perception of things. Innumerable writers have been using the technique of subversion to retell stories of yore as connected to contemporary life. In this process, they have also been able to tackle the dogmas of patriarchy for myths have glorified the role of the man as the warrior and the protector while the woman has often been picturized as scheming, plotting and instigating spreading viciousness around. The technique of subversion as mostly used by female writers have been a way of providing an alternative gender perspective.

The British literary arena is pluralistic with writers belonging to multiple ethnicities, gender, and nationality who have been writing on diverse themes of contemporary relevance. Though feminism is regarded as redundant, the problems of women all over the world down the centuries have been the same. Even with the economic and social independence they have gained, one cannot deny that they still remain shadowed by the dominant stumps of patriarchy. These issues have been dealt with in detail by the women writers all over the world using unique modes of expression. Some twenty years back women mostly wrote about their exclusions, sufferings, injustices, the absences they felt which has now changed to pave way for the postmodern woman who stands at par with her male counterpart. She no longer feels the need to belittle the male gender to achieve her position in the society. Self-willed, educated, determined, free-minded, she has turned every stone thrown at her to milestones.

Such a passion has crept into her writing where there is a free expression of the mind. The British poet Jo Shapcott uses science, fantasy and feminism in her poems that capture the minutiae of life. Selima Hill's poems open up the wide world of love where she claims that even violence is a product of intimacy. Contemporary British poet Rebecca Goss is different from the other female writers in her form and style where she harps on the life of the body. She speaks of those things which others think are unsayable. Thus, the literary stage is adorned by writers who have developed their own niche. Such is the former poet laureate of Britain, Carol Ann Duffy.

Succeeding Andrew Motion as the Poet Laureate of Britain in the year 2009, Carol Ann Duffy made history by becoming the first female, first Scottish and first bisexual poet to take over such a prestigious position. Though Duffy was considered to the post of Poet Laureate, the conservative attitude of Britain compelled the then Prime Minister Tony Blair to replace her with Andrew Motion. Later when she was given the position, Duffy proved herself to be the most eligible person for the post serving her tenure until 2019 with dignity, integrity and conviviality. Poetry has been a passion for Duffy from a tender age which was nurtured by her teachers and mother. Though Duffy published a number of works in the initial stages, it is the publication of *Standing Female Nude* in 1985 which established her reputation as one of the favourite poets of Britain. Unlike other women writers who harps on the subject of women, Carol Ann Duffy strays away from the female subject choosing every issue she found relevant in the society be it social, political, economic or cultural. They were all taken up irrespective of the gender involved, nevertheless, to a certain extent of being unperturbed by gender. It is with a similar mind and attitude that she published the collections *Selling Manhattan* (1987), *The Other Country* (1990), and *Mean Time* (1993). Unemployment, nuclear issues, drug abuse, alienation, financial crisis, racism, immigration, sexism, nostalgia, memory and the like form the major themes of the first four collections.

Here, she has carefully constructed the protagonists who are victims of the socio-political economic changes which resulted from the two World Wars and the Thatcherite rule. Even in comparison to her renowned contemporaries like Andrew Motion and Simon Armitage, Duffy seems to be passionately involved in depicting these issues, giving voice to the marginalized in the society irrespective of the gender to which they belong. However, Duffy takes a new turn in her collection *The World's Wife* (1999) where the attention is focused on female protagonists particularly chosen from history, mythology and fairy tales.

The World's Wife which is the fifth arrow in her poetic ambit is structured differently in form and theme bringing in characters from History, mythology and fairy tales who have not been much heard of. She returns to the world of myths to narrate experiences of women which have been the same in the ancient and the modern times. It is this fact which gets reiterated through her choice of characters who remained sidelined or ignored in history and mythology. The paper titled "Transcending the Bounds of Temporality and Spatiality: Mythical Retelling of Femininity in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*" makes a humble attempt at tracing how Carol Ann Duffy has used these female characters to parade before the world the strengths and weaknesses that are endowed in women. In the process it gets revealed that Duffy does it without wearing the mantle of a feminist and that she has not attempted to hurt any man. By placing these women in the contemporary setting, Duffy transcends the boundaries of space and time proclaiming that the problems of women have been the same down the centuries. The purpose is achieved through the technique of subversion where the stories of these characters have been twisted to create an alternative history of the world. In recreating these characters Duffy: "can articulate ordinary people's feelings and worries and in some small way be a form of consolation or utterance for common humanity – very much in that way as a form of unholy prayer." (qtd.in Smith 6).

Helen Carr in her essay “Poetic Licence” has pointed out that the male poet considers women as the passive image rather than as the energising creator, the object to be written about and not the subject who writes, the artefact and not the artist. Adrienne Rich, the American poet, essayist and radical feminist has raised concerns about the absence of a poem for women, poems that speak of the real woman and not as fantasies of men. The poems in *The World’s Wife* offer a strong reply to the postulations raised by Rich for they are not only anti-patriarchal but also essentially female providing an insight into who a woman is and what she can be, questions that have often been neglected before. Unlike the feminist writers who glorify women’s role in the world, Duffy portrays female characters exhibiting different facets of experiences. She does not intend to glorify women as self-sacrificing, effacing and incredible but poses the view that women are human beings with their desires, perceptions, deceits, jealousies and all the emotions that make up a being. The technique of subversion lends itself as an apt means of retelling the age-old stories in a new light where women get the privilege of speaking about themselves and their male partners. There is no deliberate attempt to tarnish the male counterparts but in the due course of the narration it only becomes natural for the men to get exposed with their vices. Duffy’s women exemplify the binaries of strength and weakness, desire and disgust, virtue and vice, likes and dislikes. The poem “Mrs Midas” is a subversion of the myth of King Midas who was blessed by God Dionysius to turn everything he touched to gold. While the boon is enjoyed by the husband, greedily turning everything in the house to gold the poor wife Mrs Midas silently watches in agony the growing distance between the two of them. She is unaware of what happened to her husband. It portrays the miscommunication between the two where she as a traditional wife adjusts herself to the whims of her husband who has even thwarted her dreams of becoming a mother. The pursuit of materialistic pleasures acts as a hindrance in their relationship and she misses his warm hands as she says: “who, when it comes to the crunch can live/ with a heart

of gold?" (12). But she takes care not to leave her husband for a better life that she could have attained. The poem becomes an indictment on the modern man's pursuit of money which is one major reason for the absence felt in relationships leading to divorce. Mrs Midas is not just one woman but she becomes a representative of the innumerable women in the society who are neglected by their husbands.

Though Duffy's women are from myths and fairy tales, they are placed in contemporary situations which enable the readers to identify themselves with the characters such they act as a bridge between the traditional and the modern. The recreated characters of Duffy are not saintly figures with only virtues to speak of. Some of them are traditional (Anne Hathaway), some arrogant (Medusa), some cruelly powerful (Queen Herod) and some are extremely virtuous (Mrs Midas). But they all nurture within them those human qualities that are universal. These qualities are tapped by Duffy to project them as women of this world and thus attempts to deconstruct their stereotypical portrayal through *The World's Wife*. "Mrs Tiresias" is a reworking of the myth of Tiresias, the Prophet of Thebes who was punished by Hera to live the life of a woman. The poem is retold from the perspective of the wife of Tiresias who remains in the background in mythology. In narrating the changes that come over her husband, Mrs Tiresias invites attention to the complexity of gender roles. The pains she underwent as a woman is fussed about by Tiresias, even writing to the Government to provide menstrual leave. Even after becoming a woman, Tiresias does not give up his selfishness. Mrs Tiresias offers a strong support to her husband enabling him to tide over the change. He remains the same. On realizing the futility of having a husband like him, she boldly moves on to find a female partner who is looked at by him with jealousy: "at her violet eyes,/ at the blaze of her skin/ ... her bite at the fruit of my lips,/ ... as she shook his hand saying How do you do" (17).

So is the case with Mrs Icarus where she openly announces the foolishness of the man she is married to. By saying “I’m not the first or the last/ to stand on a hillock”, Mrs Icarus refers to a community of women who are victims of their husbands’ obsessive pursuits. It brings many of the women discussed by Duffy, like Mrs Sisyphus, Frau Freud, Mrs Midas, Mrs Faust and the like, under the canopy of isolation they experience in their marital lives. Perhaps this is the reason why Mrs Beast advises all the beautiful women to find beasts instead of men: “they’re bastards when they are Princes./ What you want to do is find yourself a Beast.” (72).

When these women become the victims of male selfishness, Duffy does not forget to bring forth characters like Eurydice and Penelope who exhibit strengths of character and determination. The poem “Eurydice” retells the story of Eurydice who craftily tricks her lover Orpheus to return to the underworld where she could live happily, far away from being the muse of Orpheus’s poetry. She proves that a woman desires to be loved truly and not remain “trapped in his images, metaphors, similes,/ octaves and sextets, ... histories, myths ...” (60). Eurydice returns to the underworld becoming a self-sufficient woman. Penelope, the eponymous heroine of the poem “Penelope” refuses to remain mourning the absence of Odysseus who was busy in his errands. She devotes herself to stitching beautiful embroideries as she says: “I was picking out/ the smile of a woman at the centre / of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content.” (71) Duffy deliberately uses the name of the female characters instead of their husbands to reiterate that they have learned to be self-sufficient without the help of their male counterparts. They become examples of women in the society who are unwilling to tag themselves to men who are after selfish motives. They have a life to enjoy according to their will which they do fearlessly.

Duffy uses myths to touch the inner consciousness of her readers. The pristine relationship she nurtured with her mother, the staunch love she has for her daughter are

reasons for the intense ways by which she portrays the mother-daughter relationship in her poems; “Pope Joan” and “Demeter” being exceptionally remarkable ones. Through her anthology Carol Ann Duffy reactivates the closed histories and myths by reopening them as grounds for raising contestations and arguments about the position accorded to women and showing how myths have been shaped according to the whims and fancies of a patriarchal world. *The World’s Wife* is thus a revisionist mythmaking which posits a fine balance between the ancient and modern women raising arguments that could empower women to redefine themselves and their culture. Alicia Ostriker, critic and activist renowned for her Jewish feminist poems remarked in her essay ‘The Thieves of Language: Women, Poets and Revisionist Myth-Making’:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. ... the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience ... they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival. (qtd.in Ghosh 82).

This is exactly what Duffy has done; recreating myths to speak of the femininity of women by transcending the boundaries of spatiality and temporality.

Conclusion

Duffy's *The World's Wife* exemplifies the contemporary value of myths. With technological advancements, posthuman aid and style of living, myths have been regarded by many as dogmatic or rather age-old. However, writers like Duffy have fruitfully made use of myths though not in its original form to speak of contemporary situations of which patriarchy still has a strong hold. Female writers usually have a tendency to glorify the position of women and in the course of providing an upper position to women, they tend to dethrone men in harmful ways. This shakes the gender balance even causing a rift between the male-female genders. Duffy stands apart here when she subverts myths to speak of the position of women from an angle never before adopted by other female writers. She clearly proves that she is not a feminist who has taken her sword against the male community but only intends to provide a platform for women to express their femininity. Like men who have their virtues and vices, women also have an independent status where they would like to be what they are quite contrary to what Iago says in Shakespeare's play *Othello*: "I'm not what I am" (5). Duffy by presenting the multiple facets of women strikes at the core of patriarchy exposing the challenges it opens up before women. Mythical subversion has helped her in achieving the purpose and in reiterating the fact that the problems of women have always been the same. Her poems thus transcend the territories of space and time uniting women of the ancient and modern times. The myths become a pointer to the distance covered regarding gender perceptions and the distance to be covered where the horizon cannot even be seen. Unlike other poets, Duffy's focus is not on criticizing the male community but on rectifying the erroneous perceptions on women. There is no deliberate attempt to bring the man under censure. The only intention is projecting the diverse angles from which a woman can be viewed. Carol Ann Duffy thus uses revisionist myth-making or mythical subversion to create a new history where the woman is at par with her male counterpart.

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