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**Traversing the Persona: A Comparative Study of Characterization of Mary Magdalene in
Ki Longfellow's *The Secret Magdalene* and Elizabeth Cunningham's *Bright Dark
Madonna*.**

Abstract

Grand narratives have always been platforms for re-visitations. These re-visitations are made to facilitate a different perception of the canons. This paper attempts to bring to light the character of Mary Magdalene as depicted in two contemporary novels; *The Secret Magdalene* by Ki Longfellow and *Bright Dark Madonna* by Elizabeth Cunningham. The characterization is done in a subversive and strikingly opposite manner. The archetype of a penitent prostitute remains untouched by the authors. Rather an attempt to elevate her to a sublime level of spirituality can be traced. Concept of 'Gnosis' comes along with the characterization. An attempt is also made to bring out the three phases of feminism that run through the life events of the character, Mariamne. The two re-created characters attain the same level of divinity but through different means just as the temperaments of the characters are different. Thus a blend of feminism and spirituality enables the novels to be read as a discourse of spiritual feminism.

Key Words: Gnosis, Feminism, Spiritual Feminism, Patriarchy, Masculine, Divine Feminine.

The grand narrative of scripture offer a scope for a re-visitation as it is bountiful in themes, characters, history, culture and narratives. The revisiting is done mainly in the aspects of character, events, narrative etc. The characters re-sketches in different fabric are not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. Biblical canon presents a wide range of characters, figures and objects, some of which turn out to be archetypes. Scape goat, prodigal son, penitent prostitute are some instances. Many characters are re-presented and many events are re-told by manifold authors but garbed as fiction. Deviations are made so as to create a credible plot. The re-presentations explain the necessity of the changing times and trends.

The vignette of Mary Magdalene has become multivalent over the years. Very little are actually known about her. Yet there are strong hints given about her in the canonical Gospels. She is

perceived as a pivotal figure in the life of Jesus Christ. Mathew, Mark, Luke and John present her as a close follower of Jesus. But radical re-creation of the persona of Mary Magdalene has been done by many contemporary authors.

She is no longer looked down upon as a fallen woman but rather elevated to the level of a spiritual person, hailed as the apostle of the apostles. She closely followed the footsteps of Jesus Christ. *The Secret Magdalene* (2005) written by Ki Longfellow, an American novelist offers radically new perspectives on the persona of Mary Magdalene through the spectacle of the protagonist Mariamne. Mariamne, a Jewish adolescent, is brought up with Salome, the ward of her father, Josephus. He is a learned man, well versed in various streams of knowledge. Both Mariamne and Salome have a good taste for knowledge, especially those branches of worldly experience. As an aftermath of a disease she had been caught with in her childhood, Mariamne is endowed with a divine spark of knowledge (gnosis). As Ki Longfellow aptly puts it in one of her interviews: "Gnosis...is not a teaching ...but an experience...it is a direct, individual connection with the divine consciousness". (*Interview by Eio Books*.2006.08.10 .18oct 2017)This divine knowledge endows her with a power of foresight and extra ordinary senses. The girls are under the care of the slave, Tata. Once Mariamne unknowingly voices out her prophetic thoughts to the surprise of the guest at home, Ananias an Egyptian Jew from Alexandria.

"It is then I do something that changes everything, I open my mouth before all at the table and I speak.

NOTHING IS WRITTEN BUT WHAT EACH MAN WRITES, IF CHANGE IS INTENDED .THEN CHANGED THINGS SHALL BE" (*The Secret Magdalene* p:161)

Due to this strange behavior of Mariamne her father banishes her from home, Salome and Tata join her. Once she is out of the domestic constraints and frees herself to a wider world of knowledge, the quest for knowledge ensues. They find it difficult to move on in the identity of girls. So they disguise themselves as boys and travel as child prophets. Salome and Mariamne master various branches of knowledge. Later on they move to Alexandria which was their dreamland and the ultimate seat of knowledge. There they get well versed in philosophy and other streams of knowledge. In the due course they get acquainted with John of River, who claims himself as the herald to Messiah's arrival. It is through John, The Baptist Mariamne meets Yesu , John's cousin. There blooms a synergistic relationship between the divine masculine and divine feminine .The gradual augmentation of their closeness makes them soul mates who share manifold thoughts and ideas. The profound knowledge she acquires from Alexandria brings them closer and closer. Gradually Mariamne becomes the strongest disciple and a passionate follower of Yesu. She accompanies Yesu throughout his ministry .When Yesu heals, and preaches Mariamne follows. To Cana, Bathany, Gethsamene, and even when Yesu is crucified .The ministry of Yesu is said to be carried out by Mariamne.

Longfellow throws light to the unexplored terrains of the story of Mary Magdalene who is portrayed as a prostitute in the bible. The image is subverted to the image of a knowledge seeking and very enthusiastic girl. The threads of feminism are woven into the fabric of the story. Mariamne, the protagonist cum narrator is presented as a girl of twelve at the opening of the novel. Gradually she plunges to a meta-physical sensibility by acquiring knowledge which was forbidden to females at that period. The idiosyncratic faculty of a secret or divine knowledge (gnosis), which reached her as an aftermath of some disease prompts her to voice out the metaphysical thoughts. The rendering of the character of Mary Magdalene is in contrast with the canonical characterization. The deconstruction of matter and treatment is evident throughout. Mariamne challenges various hegemonic structures deep rooted in patriarchy or masculinity. She challenges the power structures of masculine theology and the hegemony of knowledge which was reserved for the males. Mary Magdalene is presented in a new light of divinity, as an apostle who journeys with Jesus Christ. Even Jesus Christ is taken down to a human level depiction. But the threads of feminism run through. The three waves of feminism as proposed by Elaine Showalter, that is, the phases of imitation, protest and self-assertion are materialized in the spiritual journey of Mariamne. Expelled from her house she finds it delightful to be free from the chains of domesticity. Voiced against the social confinements Mariamne attempts to mark her protest. Philosophy was her passion and succor.

“Though I love Gods and though I love goddesses more, I love philosophy most” (*The Secret Magdalene* p: 88.)

As the first scroll is aptly titled ‘The Voice’, the voicing out of Mariamne culminates in her expulsion from house. The readiness to move away from her house is a clear gesture of dissent. This she took as an effective channel for pursuing knowledge which was a forbidden fruit to the females of the time. The disguise made by the girls accounts for the phase of imitation. They try to emulate the ways of the males so as to fit into the social system of learning. The gender politics of the society silences them. But later when the true identity is revealed Mariamne proves herself to be a self-contained individual. Longfellow presents a similar array of the characters as told in the Bible. But they are fit into various different yet related backdrops .Even the references to various situations are recaptured .The reference to Mary Magdalene getting ready to be appeared at the dining table before a guest (a rare chance given to the females) recounts the anointing scene.

“Dressing with more heed than ever I have, scenting even my feet with sweet oil----to dine at table is such an honor and so rarely conferred”. (*The Secret Magdalene*, P:69)

The faculty of Gnosis which Mariamne is endowed with elevates her to a supreme level of a spiritual being. As Elaine Pagels observes “Gnosis involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. Yet to know oneself at the deepest level is to know GOD”. The undertones of spiritual feminism touch the realm of feminist theology as Mariamne attains a level no less than a deific persona. The acknowledgement Jesus Christ gives to Mariamne as a close associate of him itself is a fine instance for the attribution of divinity in her. The concept of gnosis radically intertwines

with the concept of spirituality in the novel. This deliberate synchronization culminates in the depiction of Mary Magdalene in a new light. The title becomes significant as Magdalene retains in her the secret divine spark of knowledge. The undertones of feminist theology linger throughout as she is elevated to the realm of a god sent prophet.

The Secret Magdalene presents Magdalene in the fabric of spirituality whereas Elizabeth Cunningham's *Bright Dark Madonna* gives a somewhat opposite vignette of Magdalene who is called Maeve. Cunningham has penned a series of novels under the title *Maeve's Chronicles* which includes *Magdalen Rising: The Beginning* (2000), *The Passion of Mary Magdalene* (2006), *Bright Dark Madonna* (2009) and *Red Robed Priestess* (2011). The novels present a vista of the multifaceted persona of Mary Magdalene. This series probes deep into the character of Maeve, and facilitates a better, multi-dimensional perception of the character. It presents Maeve from her birth and draws the line of life through the four different books of the series. The first book of the series *Magdalen Rising* heralds the life story of Maeve. Her birth as the daughter of eight warrior witches, upbringing, getting into the whore house and how she becomes the priestess of the whore house and such things are getting revealed through the four novels of the series.

Bright Dark Madonna offers a paradigmatic reading of the character of Magdalene. A furious step forward to the grand narrative depiction. Maeve is seen at the outset of the novel as pregnant with Jesus' baby. In the Bible she is delineated as a penitent prostitute who later follows the footsteps of Jesus Christ. A sublime treatment of spirituality is employed in *The Secret Magdalene* whereas *Bright Dark Madonna* though hints at a similar perception, ends up in presenting Maeve as a saint who is astonished at the sainthood attributed to her. The introductory chapter The Prologue: My Feast Day, How I become a Saint expresses the sense of wonder faced by Maeve herself.

"I am telling another story now, the story of how I became a saint. I'm telling it because I don't quite know how it happened, and I'm curious to find out". (*Bright Dark Madonna*, P:176)

A different facet of Magdalene –Christ duo is explicitly brought forth by Cunningham. Magdalene is not portrayed as a close disciple of Jesus, rather as the lover and the mother of Jesus's child. Cunningham gives a preface to the persona of Maeve for the new readers. The chapter is titled 'Maeve's Curriculum Vitae', two points which throw light to the temperament of Maeve's character are:

“*She loved and loves Jesus from before and beyond time in all worlds.

*She never became his disciple or anyone else's for that matter. She is not disciple material.” (*Bright Dark Madonna*, P:129)

Maeve's protest against the power structure of religion is contrasted with her ascension as a saint. The disciples of Jesus, Paul and Peter, contrive to oust Maeve from the fame of sainthood by keeping her away from the matters of what will become the Christian religion.

Even though the apostolate power and pomp never lure her to compete with them, they consider her as a rival.

“Some people do see my failure to wrest the mantle of Jesus’s authority from Peter’s shoulders as the beginning of problems that still haven’t ended”. (*Bright Dark Madonna* p: 215)

The hesitance of the church authority ,undoubtedly the male folk ,to accept the status of Magdalene in Jesus’ life is obvious .Mary of Bethany ,the friend of Mary Magdalene tries to convince her about the mission or the status Jesus has entrusted with her .The threads of spiritual feminism are woven into a perfect fabric so much so that they give an authoritative and clear vision of Mary ,as an associate of Jesus Christ. The power structure of masculine theology is deconstructed. Maeve becomes the spokesperson of crucified Jesus Christ. Mary of Bethany urges her,

“He doesn’t want everything to be left to Peter and the men. He wants you to speak for him”. (*Bright Dark Madonna* P: 261)

Maeve is forced to take up the responsibility of continuing Jesus’ work of healing and loving people. “You have a duty to speak, Mary ...You were his wife”. (*Bright Dark Madonna* P: 274). Maeve is pregnant with Jesus’ baby whom the apostles plan to bring up .But Maeve runs away from them and gives birth to her daughter Sarah in her temple/whorehouse at Magdala. As the story unwinds the three female figures, Maeve, Sarah and Virgin Mary are threatened by the ‘patriarchal ecclesia’ and they escape to Galatia and settle down there. There they live in isolation and earn fame as healers.

Mariamne and Maeve share some commonalities in their personae. They attain the vintage status of spiritual feminine through their association with Jesus Christ. Both of them encapsulate the prime single concept of spiritual feminism but the means vary. As archetypes of spiritual feminism Mariamne and Maeve tread novel routes to empathise with Jesus. Spiritual feminism can be regarded as cultural resistance to the power structures of patriarchal hegemony.

“Spiritual feminists have uncovered and recovered female deities to symbolize female sacred power and mirror women as holy.....(they) have publicly challenge exclusively masculine images of God and named female deities .They speak of the Great Mother, Goddess, Grandmother, Sophia and Mary.”(*Encyclopedia of feminist theories* .ed by Lorraine Code)

Mariamne counters the patriarchal hegemony and reaches the spiritual feminine through ‘gnosis’ or enlightenment. But Maeve becomes a coequal to Jesus through the life and love they share between each other .A perfect blend of human and spiritual elements make these characters adorable as well as accessible. As Mary Ann Beavis comments “Mary is more than the human

disciple of a divine Christ, but the fully equal sacred feminine. At the same time she is human and accessible". (*The Deification of Mary Magdalene*. 14 Oct 2017)

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