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Re-weaving the Legends

Abstract

The paper tries to focus on the significance of revisionist myth making and how it tries to redefine the roles of both women and culture, thereby re-inventing a new tradition, leading to an act of creation. The work analyzed in this perspective is 'The Penelopiad' written by Margaret Atwood which is a sharp, brilliant and tender re- vision of a story at the heart of the western culture: the myths about Penelope and Odysseus. Homer's 'The Odyssey' has been hailed as one of the primary epics in Western literature. Being regarded as one of the greatest epics, the text has been a source of readings and re- readings. The text opens up to a whole lot of interpretations and revisionary readings. The paper looks into the narrative which Atwood has woven, wherein she gives Penelope new life and reality and sets out to provide an answer to an ancient mystery.

The study of ancient myths and their influence in our culture have attracted attention of scholars, especially of in the field of literary criticism. A deeper analysis of myths can help us acquire insights into the mystery of creative process. The word 'myth' comes from the Greek word, 'mythos' means ' word', 'speech', 'tale' or 'story'. A myth may be a story that is narrated orally, but usually it is given a written form. It can also be told through painting,

sculpture, music, and dance. The mythology of a community or a group of people is the structured collection of their myths, their description of the world, the past and the future, as they perceive it. The newest edition of Oxford English Dictionary distinguishes ‘myth’ and ‘legend’. Myths are classified as sacred stories concerning the distant past, particularly the creation of the world; generally focused on the Gods. Legends are stories about the (usually more recent) past, which generally include, or based on some historical events; generally focused on human heroes. ‘Folktales’ or ‘Fairytale’ are stories which lack any definite historical settings, often include animal characters. They are often tales of adventures, sometimes peopled with fantastic beings.

According to Sigmund Freud, myth is a projection of psychology into the external world. His account of “Oedipus Complex” at the core of psychic life is itself an example of how myth can frame the way we understand an experience (Sellers 3). For Carl Jung, myth is the central informing power and he connects myths and dreams to interpret myths as the projection of what he called the “collective unconscious” of the race. Claude Levi-Strauss draws on structural linguistics to analyze the composition of myth. He sees myth as a mode of communication, like language or music. In music, it is the sounds and the relationship of sounds to other sounds that is important. Whereas in myth, it is the narrative and the structure of the narrative, that invites attention (Sellers 6). Alicia Ostriker identifies myths “as the sanctuaries of languages where our meetings for ‘male’ and ‘female’ are ‘stored’” (Ostriker 11). According to Simone de Beauvoir, “myth is a transcended idea that escapes the mental grasp entirely” (Beauvoir 284). As myths are so powerful, it can penetrate deeper realities and seems to dominate power systems.

Hence, myths have the power to justify and even legitimize practices and attitudes. As they have greater influence on the society, they try to project a viewpoint and try to “naturalize” it. Myth-makers construct the myths in such a way that they project their views.

Hence by bringing forth these myths, they try to influence many generations of people and force their views on to them. Hence, women writers felt the great need to revise and rewrite these power filled structures.

Hailed as a “visionary interpreter of contemporary feminist thought”, Margaret Atwood is one of Canada’s most successful and popular writers. Atwood attempts a re- vision of ‘The Odyssey’ from the point of view of Penelope. Here Atwood takes up the most challenging of myths and transforms it in her novel ‘The Penelopiad’. The novel is a sharp, brilliant and tender re- vision of a story at the heart of the western culture: the myths about Penelope and Odysseus.

Homer’s ‘The Odyssey’ has been hailed as one of the primary epics in Western literature. Being regarded as one of the greatest epics, the text has been a source of readings and re- readings. The text opens up to a whole lot of interpretations and revisionary readings, The plot outlines and traces the homeward journey of the Greek hero, Odysseus and explores the chaos caused by his prolonged absence from Ithaca; his ‘loyal wife’ Penelope is under siege from various suitors and his son Telemachus has grown up without knowing his father. Achilles, Odysseus and Hector are present throughout the narrative of the story. Odysseus especially is being epitomized for his bravery and adventure; whereas about Penelope, Homer says little: “Patient they used to call me”(TP 2) But her husband’s roaming take on meaning only against her rootedness. Without her, Homer’s ‘The Odyssey’ would be no less than picaresque. Penelope is the lodestone of home that gives purpose to his rambles .Odysseus fought for ten years at Troy and spent another ten reaching Ithaca, while Penelope “waited and waited and waited” (TP 2), discouraging importunate suitors. Her weaving forms a facet parallel throughout ‘The Odyssey’ to her husband’s weaving journey home.

Atwood re-visualizes the events in Penelope’s entire life: her childhood, the twenty years when Odysseus was in voyage, and the period after his return. Atwood brings about a

detailed account of Penelope's childhood, whereas in 'The Odyssey', one can hardly see any references about her childhood. In a very ordered and regular fashion, Atwood tells the story of Penelope. Penelope's father, king Icarious of Sparta, ordered that Penelope should be thrown into the sea because he had been told by an Oracle that his daughter would weave his shroud. Penelope was later rescued by a flock of purple –striped ducks and towed her ashore.

'The Odyssey' projects Helen as a model of feminine beauty, and praises her beauty. In 'The Penelopiad', Penelope describes Helen as the "Woman Who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames?"(TP18). Penelope comments on the concept of marriage, "Marriages were for having children were not toys and pets. Children were vehicles for passing things along."(TP20). One can also see Penelope, remarking on having daughters. If one has daughters instead of sons, "you needed to get them bred as soon as possible so you would have grandsons" (TP 20). Penelope here exposes the traditional ways in which women or girl children were underrated. Girls were underrated during those days as is evident from Penelope's words. In the chapter titled, 'My Marriage', Penelope describes about her marriage to Odysseus. She says: "And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat. A package of meat in a wrapping of gold, mind you. a sort of glided blood pudding"(TP33).

Feminist rewriting can be thought of in two categories- as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered woman and as a task of construction- of bringing in alternatives. In 'The Penelopiad', Odysseus is pictured only in the background, "... I knew he was tricky and a liar. ." (TP 83). Atwood's Penelope is not at all a passive figure. She says "I can't pretend that i enjoyed a certain amount of this. Everyone does, we all like to hear songs in our praise even if we don't believe them" (TP 84). Homer had depicted Penelope as the "quintessential faithful wife". But the picture Atwood paints in her narrative is a confident Penelope.

Atwood places an inconsequential incident in Homer's 'The Odyssey', the story of the twelve maids who were hanged during the slaughter of the suitors that followed on the Odysseus's return at the centre of her narrative. In fact in many versions of the epic, the hanging of the maids is omitted altogether. Atwood places the horrific episode at the heart of her narrative. By contrast, their killing occupies less than a dozen lines in the original (Book XXII).

In 'The Odyssey', the maids were the victims, "but in 'The Penelopiad', Atwood gives them enough space and voice. By assigning them the task of the chorus, Atwood allows these girls to tell their own story, and in a way empowers them too.

The maids sing of their helplessness:

You had the spear
You had the word
At your command
...
We danced on air
The ones you failed
The ones you killed (TP5)

Atwood thus emphasizes the use and abuse of twelve young female maids, who served as slaves to Penelope and as sexual play things to the suitors who arrive to seize control of Penelope's estate. The maids end up dangling at the ends of nooses as Odysseus perceives their acts as their betrayal. Marginalized twice on account of their gender and class; they were slaves, as well as seen as mere sex objects.

In the chapter "The chorus line: kiddies Mourn, a lament by the maids", the unhappy and unlucky birth and life of the young maids who were born to the poor is duly highlighted. There is real representation of the hardships of these maids in 'The Penelopiad'. They pray

to Gods and prophets to alter their life. But they lament: “But no hero comes to me, easily or late-Hard work is my destiny, death is my fate” (TP 44)

At the end of the novel, there is a judgement scene, the trial of Odysseus in the court. The Attorney for the defence talks in favour of Odysseus for killing the suitors. When the judge is about to dismiss the case, the maids raise their voice suddenly: “you have forgotten about us. What about our case? He hanged us in cold blood. Twelve of us! Twelve young girls! For nothing!(TP 143). Judgement is left to the respondent. Atwood emerges as an aggressive prosecutor of mythological standing, but the readers are called upon to make their own judgements. The lines spoken by the maids disturb every reader:“We are serving girls, we’re to serve you. We will never leave you. We’ll stick to your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row” (TP 157).

In Atwood’s retelling of the story, Penelope and the maids get a new life and reality. As Diana Purkiss has pointed at the significance of retrieving a marginal voice, Atwood has made a genuine attempt to rewrite the myth of Penelope. Atwood tried to shift the focus from male to female character, transposed the terms so that, what was negative became positive and she has also given voice to minor characters in the myth thereby shifting them to significant characters..In the essay, “Sorties”, Helene Cixous has attempted to look at the thought processes of a child who reads Homer and Virgil (Sellers 33).

Here, Adrienne Rich’s “Re- vision” attains relevance In the words of Rich, ‘Revision’, “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction- is for us (women) more than a chapter in critical history, it is an act of survival”(Ostriker 235) .This in fact has been prominent on women writers’ agenda, in the last decade and all the institutions- social, political, cultural, economic and religious have come in for a critical re-vision in women’s writing. Feminist re- visions have become an

effective way to look for a re- survey in literature. Re-vision can take place basically in three levels- such as re-visualizing, re –interpreting the myth and re-imagining of the character (s).

Revisionist myth making, hence turns out to be one of the efficient methods to redefine the positions of women in our culture. By employing this method, a writer is trying to redefine and re-examine the set roles by the society, leading to a cultural change. According to Alicia Ostriker:

Old stories are changed, changed utterly by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy or as the pillars sustaining phallogentric “high” culture. Instead they are corrections; they are representations of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases, they are instructions for survival (Ostriker 215).

Hence, feminism needs to bring in a “rethinking of thinking itself”, where re- vision is not simply a “looking back”, nor a a mere “act of survival”, but should gradually evolve into a re-visionist remaking of the past and re-invention of a new tradition, an act of creation.

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