

The Present-Day Medusa: Foregrounding L'écriture Feminism in the Contemporary Retellings of Mythology

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Abstract

The myth of Medusa as the petrifying woman, a monster, who is herself decapitated for her beauty and her powers to transfix has been circulated widely in western mythology and culture. She has been allegorized as the figure of supreme feminine beauty, sexual desire, of rebellion, punishment and inflicted terror. *Helene Cixous* in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" uses the myth of Medusa and counteracts the millennia of misogynist depiction of women and their sexuality. In fact, it was mainly in this essay that *Cixous* introduced the concept of L'écriture feminine writing, which concentrates on the representation of the feminine body and questions the male oriented thought process which suppresses female voice. It is one of the most influential theoretical constructs for women writing in the contemporary times, using which *Cixous* criticizes *Freud's* understanding of female sexuality as a lack and *Lacan's* idea of phallus being the ultimate signifier of authority and control.

Women, often believed to be "the other" gender has always been understood and explained in terms of binary opposites, as whatever the man is the woman is not. In this process of othering, myths are often used as the most powerful tools by patriarchy to subordinate women. Many writers depend upon the ancient myths to negotiate such patriarchal ideologies. As a result, women in literature, especially in mythologies are either silent or have been largely misrepresented and portrayed negatively. The lack of male characteristics and qualities make women inferior, according to the general patriarchal beliefs but with the support and encouragement of various feminist movements, many writers have made attempts to rewrite and reinterpret these myths. Such attempts challenge the prevailing ambivalent or stereotypical representation of women by fostering a feminist ideology that rejects patriarchal bias.

Throughout history, women have been excluded from any kind of writing that could allow them to contribute in the making of history and culture. Being considered less intellectual, women have been, over centuries tamed to be silent, especially when it comes to expressing their needs in the dominant world of men. Therefore, one of the major concerns of the feminist theory was the way, women's ability to speak gets silenced, both in relation to sexist situations and to the way in which discourse itself is constructed. Indeed, there has been a systematic deprivation of women; not only in life but also equally in language and literature. Thus, in the light of efforts made by *Helene Cixous* and other feminists, the paper highlights the phenomenon of increased production of retellings of the ancient myths, which provides new representation of female subjectivities that break the stereotypical thought process and emphasize autonomy. It attempts to answer how

the present is shaped by the competing past and in doing so, it not only remakes the present but also creates a new past. The paper offers a textual analysis of the novels, "The Penelopiad" by *Margaret Atwood* and "Girl meets boy" by *Ali Smith*, explaining as to how the aforementioned works attempt to break the clutches of traditional orthodox and rewrite female experiences through a new version of myths but somehow end up consciously or unconsciously following the same heteronormative hierarchies.

Keywords: Myths, L'écriture feminism, revisionist feminist fiction, female sexuality.

There is a voice crying in the wilderness, *Catherine Clement* and *Helene Cixous* say— the voice of a body, dancing, laughing, shrieking, crying. Whose is it? It is, they say, the voice of a women, newborn and yet archaic, a voice of milk and blood, a voice silenced but savage.

(*Gilbert, 1*)

Literature from time immemorial has represented women in a silhouette of gender stereotype, be it in poetry, fiction, prose or in the genre of mythology. The forms of gender discrimination have been almost universal and women have been a silent population throughout the world. Men have always been projected as productive, intellectual, rational, whereas women were relegated to a position of second-class citizen. The human civilization has been strongly influenced and dominated by patriarchal thinking but at the same time, there have been women fighting to free themselves from the clutches of suffocating male oppression. The lack of male characteristics and qualities make women inferior, according to the general patriarchal beliefs but with the support and encouragement of various Feminist movements, socio-political structures and institutions, the reinforcement of gender equality was initiated. Such attempts challenge the prevailing ambivalent or stereotypical representation of women by fostering a feminist ideology that rejects patriarchal bias.

Although, women in literature, especially in mythologies are either silent or have been largely misrepresented and portrayed negatively to negotiate the patriarchal ideologies but the prolific works of various feminists encouraged and defended the political, economic, social and personal rights of women. Therefore, one of the major concerns of the feminist theory was the way, women's ability to speak gets silenced, both in relation to sexist situations and the way in which discourse itself is constructed. Indeed, there has been a systematic deprivation of women; not only in life but also equally in language and literature. Thus, while the various powerful waves of feminism championed the cause of women by condemning gender difference and advocating equality in the so called 'men's world', some post structuralist feminist like *Helen Cixous*, *Luce Irigaray* and *Judith Butler* concerned themselves with the elaboration and deconstruction of gender difference in particularly language. They assumed that the inequalities that exist between man and women are not natural, but rather a social construct. It is preordained and is created by men to retain their authority on women. The problem, however increased when various male writers started generalizing these particular attributes, which they associated with women. Even to the extent of portraying these inferior characteristics in various literary works, novels and other media sources. This further led to the construction of a particular image of the so called 'ideal women' and fused a bias in the mind and attitude of the human society. Thus, the main focus of these feminists was to refashion the language and myths which assert women as inferior and humiliate their existence. This effort is a method, employed by them to claim the male space for women.

The works based on mythology has continued to influence and fascinate people from antiquity to the present day. Myths have been considered traditional sacred narratives that intend to explain the relationship between the entire universe and the human experience. A single explanation of myth is never adequate as its definitions vary significantly. On one hand, myths are sacred or symbolic stories and on the other hand, they are stories which misrepresent or are fictitious. But in both the cases, myths influence the human life. It includes certain narratives which human mind takes to be crucial to their understanding of the world, as it ostensibly relates events in the form of stories to propagate certain practices, beliefs, rituals and other phenomenon. Often myths are constructed, sanctified and circulated for legitimizing certain orthodox views and practices. They become a means to naturalize particular world views, even if that harms the society and promote gender discrimination. Indeed, myths are important part of human civilization, as one feels culturally impoverished without them but the need for myths is as real for women as it is for men. Yet the situation is asymmetrical because it seems that while men have myths on their side, women have myths against them. Therefore, such gender prejudice can be easily traced in almost all the tales of mythology, for instance the famous myth of Medusa.

The myth of Medusa as the lapidifying woman, a monster, who gets beheaded for her beauty and her powers to transfix has been circulated widely in western mythology and culture. She has been allegorized as a figure of supreme feminine beauty, of sexual desire and inflicted terror. *Helene Cixous* in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" uses the myth of Medusa and counteracts the millennia of misogynist depiction of women and their sexuality. She contradicts Freud's recourse to the myth as "a symbol of terror and unintelligible feminine sexuality". She rather presents her feminist critique through the figure of a laughing Medusa, an effort to turn the myth of Medusa, the allegedly castrating and decapitated women into a living Medusa, who mocks at this mythology and explores femininity and her sexuality, outside the patriarchal registers and against the age-old misogyny. Thus, her essay specifically refers and counter attacks *Sigmund Freud*, reference to Medusa and the theory of feminine sexuality that his psychoanalysis as well as *Lacan*, following *Freud* had suggested.

Cixous interprets Medusa's death as a masculine attempt to silence the voice and end the language of women. She attempts to deconstruct *Freud's* theory of the "Castration Complex" in men during the Oedipal stage of psychosexual development and *Lacanian* theory of Symbolic order in the development of language. *Sigmund Freud* in his short text "Medusa's Head" (1963) puts forth the idea that the decapitation of Medusa's head is a symbol that manifests the castration complex in males in the oedipal stage wherein realizing the absence of the penis or phallus in the mother, the male child inevitably identifies with the father and separates from his mother in the fear of castration. "To decapitate = to castrate" (1963, 202). The "terror of castration" occurs when "a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother" (202). The psychoanalyst *Lacan*, dwelling on *Freud's* theory exclaims that after the separation of child from his mother, he gets familiar with the patrilineal world, constructed by his father. This new world which is systematized by concrete rules and order is named as the 'symbolic order' by *Lacan*. His idea that the structure of language is centered by the Phallus and that language within the symbolic order is representational, where a single signifier is connected to a single signified is contested by *Cixous* as she

argues that the subject position of “woman” or the “feminine” is on the margins of the symbolic and thus it is less firmly anchored and controlled by the phallus.

In fact, it was mainly in this essay that *Cixous* introduced the concept of *L'écriture féminine* writing, which concentrates on the representation of the feminine body and questions the male oriented thought process which suppresses female voice. This phenomenal work highlights the importance of women as writers. According to *Cixous*, it is through the bodily experience that women can give birth to a powerful genre of writing such as *L'écriture féminine*, which subverts the phallogocentric discourse of masculine writing, along with the logocentric representational system through which it functions.

In the spirit of *L'écriture féminine*, various other writers, especially contemporary fiction writers are engrossed with the art of feminist revisionist myth fiction, which introduces the characteristics of modern-day medusa in each and every character. This phenomenon of reverberating mythical past has gained immense popularity, all across the globe. For instance, the “Canongate Myth series”, which is an initiative taken by *Jamie Byng*, a Scottish publisher to collect short stories in which the ancient myths from myriad cultures is retold by contemporary writers. Thus, the genre of revisionist mythological fiction provides a platform to interrogate the cultural hierarchies and socio-moral conventions. Many prolific writers like *Margaret Atwood*, *Ali Smith*, *Jeanette Winterson* and others have contributed to the success of the Canongate series by producing million seller books like “*The Penelopiad*”, “*Girl meets Boy*” and “*Weight*”, respectively.

Atwood in her novella, “*The Penelopiad*” attempts to highlight and rewrite female experiences and their internal monologue through a revised version of the famous story of *Homer's Odyssey* and his wife *Penelope*. In the original text, the female characters such as *Penelope* and her twelve maids are portrayed as the silent victim of the patriarchal world but the character of *Atwood's Penelope* is essentially more than a mere faithful wife. She is witty, clever and a modern-day woman, who has her own individuality. *Atwood* in the very introduction of the novella makes clear her intentions to rewrite the tale of *Odyssey*. “The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is *Penelope* herself” (*Atwood* introduction xxi). In the original text, the character of the maids is questioned, they are assumed to be treacherous but *The Penelopiad* provides us with the other side of the story. They are portrayed as innocent faithful maids, who were following the commands of their mistress, *Penelope*. They were asked to spy on the suitors by all means, even if they had to flirt or sleep with them, for the safety of *Penelope* and her son, *Telemachus*. “I told my twelve young maids – the loveliest, the most beguiling - to hang around the Suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent. No one knew of my instructions but myself and the maids in question; I chose not to share the secret with *Euryycleia* – in hindsight, a grave mistake. This plan came to grief. Several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist” (*Atwood*115). Although later in the novella, *Penelope* does mention that the maids were not entirely faithful as some of them did actually fall in love with the suitors but still this is the only version of the tale, where the loyalty of the maids is presented. The reason of their unfortunate death is due to the miscommunication and not the treachery of the maids.

Homer's “The Odyssey” revolves around the achievements and struggles of the hero of the novel, *Odysseus* but *Atwood's* work attempts to present a facet of female existence in the patriarchal world. She gives importance to the so called less important characters of

the story, who obviously happens to be the women. She successfully depicts the life journey of Penelope, who struggles from the very day; she enters the world as she was always deprived of parental affection. "When I was quite young my father ordered me to be thrown into the sea I never knew exactly why, during my life time, but now I suspect he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shroud. Possibly he thought that if he killed me first, his shroud would never be woven and he would live forever." (Atwood 7) Penelope's childhood taught her to be self-reliant, strong and independent. Also, her marriage was not based on love but on a property agreement between her father and her would be husband, Odysseus. "And so, I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat", says Penelope when describing her marriage to Odysseus (Atwood 39).

Penelope knew it very well that no matter how clever she is, she will always be treated as inferior to her husband. "I was clever, everyone said so – in fact they said it so much that I found it discouraging – but cleverness is a quality a man likes to have in his wife as long as she is some distance away from him" (Atwood 29). Penelope was able to showcase her intellect, strength and skills, only after her husband left for the Trojan wars. It is remarkable, the way she uses her wit to trick the suitors and is able to delay their advances towards her for years, as she cannot possibly stop them with her physical strength. "She must complete a woven shroud for her father-in-law before she can choose a new husband. She works on it all day and then at night she would undo her progress" (Atwood 112). Also, she was witty enough to persuade her maids to spy on the suitors for their motives and plans, as aforementioned in the paper.

Thus, in *Homer's* *Odyssey*, her life background and perspective on her husband's time away is not shared. She is just portrayed as a devoted wife, who awaits for her husband's return, like a minor flat character but *Atwood's* Penelope is much stronger and wiser, who does not spend twenty long years, crying and awaiting for her husband's return but acts according to the situation and keeps away the suitors from fulfilling their treacherous intentions. Her improvised character indeed resonates with *Cixious's* modern day medusa. Penelope's side of the story makes clear that she is well aware of the artificial construction of female myths by the patriarchy. She even exclaims this in the beginning of the novella, "How they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself. What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself, she sounds guilty. So, I waited some more." (Atwood 3) Thus, Atwood not only, successfully weaves the revised tale of Penelope but also concentrates on the art of narration and introduces a new, alternative tradition of women writing.

Similarly, *Ali Smith* rejiggers *Ovid's*, mythological tale of Iphis and Ianthe from *Metamorphoses* in her novel, "Girl meets boy". She attempts to reframe *Ovid's* description and perception of classical myths for the twentieth century readers by developing a new, liberating queer feminist model. In the ancient classical period, the word "queer" was used as an insult, as it was generally considered a colloquial term for homosexuals, which was embedded by a strong homophobic significance but with changed times, the meaning of queer changed as it lost its negative connotation. It not only referred to people, who were attracted to others of the same sex but also talked about their sexuality, bodies that did not conform with the societal dominant norms. It turned into a movement of struggle against the dominant heterosexual culture, which gave voice to those marginalized sexualities that could not fit into the traditional discourse of gender and sexuality. There are hardly any classical tales that projects homosexuality in a positive light, even *Ovid's*

mythological tale of Iphis and Ianthe, accepts the homosexual relationship only when Iphis is turned into a boy by goddess Isis. Smith through her version of the classical myth attacks this stereotypical notion and presents a beautiful love story of two girls.

She uses her writing as a tool to project a new, liberated thinking, which changes people's perception of gender and equality. Her work, "Girl meets boy" creates a fictional space, which allows refreshing the ancient Ovidian theme of metamorphoses in contemporary context. Smith mainly focuses on the metamorphoses of the characters, describing their desires, the fluidity of their identities, according to their sexual preferences and societal norms. She uses water as a metaphor to express this fluidity of identities, which gradually broadens the mindset of the characters. It is precisely through the notion of fluidity that queer theory formulates a new understanding of gender identity by rejecting the binaries between men and women. The novel is divided into five parts and revolves around the life of two sisters, namely Imogen and Anthea, who live together in the city of Inverness in Scotland. Both the sisters' work in a company called Pure, which manufactures bottled water. Anthea, unlike her sister does not like her job as she despises the company's strategy of marketing and fooling innocent people. Another boyish looking girl, named Robin, who is a graffiti artist, is introduced later in the novel, with whom Imogen gets romantically involved and the love story of girl meets boyish girl evolves.

The theme of *Ovid's* metamorphoses is highlighted in the novel, when Anthea sees Robin for the first time. "My head, something happened to its insides. It was as if a storm at sea happened, but only for a moment, and only on the inside of my head. My ribcage, something definitely happened there. It was as if it unknotted itself from itself, like the hull of a ship hitting rock, giving way, and the ship that I was opened wide inside me and in came the ocean. He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life. But he looked really like a girl. She was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life" (*Smith* 44-45). Anthea, considered by her sister to be straight until now, falls in love.

She finds it difficult to begin to accept that her sister is 'One of Them' (*Smith* 55). Apart from her some other characters in the novel, for instance, Dominic and Norman, her co-workers at Pure, also show their dislike towards homosexuality and discuss lesbianism in terms of 'marked underdevelopment' (*Smith* 69). Initially it becomes really difficult for Imogen to make peace with the fact that her sister is not "straight" and is interested in the same sex. She looks for categories to place her sister's sexuality. "what's the correct word for it, I mean, for you?", Robin replies simply, "The proper word for me ... is me" (*Smith* 76).

Smith highlights such taboo of constructed societal binaries, where it is essential for everyone to fit in the category of either "straight-normal" or "gay-abnormal". Her understanding of gender is inspired from the prominent work, "Gender trouble" by *Judith Butler*, which highlights the instability and fluidity of gender categories. *Butler* asserts that such categorization of gender should be discarded. She supports her argument with the theory of *Michel Foucault* and affirms that humans are social products, controlled by societal norms and various power structures.

Smith projects the need for the society to accept and respect every kind of relationship in its true sense, through her writing. It should not be like the myth of Iphis and Ianthe, where Iphis had to transform her body to make things work. "Old stories repeat themselves, but always to new ends and always to this end: a renewal of vision" (*Smith* 38). She clearly asserts through her writing that her purpose of reworking on the ancient tale in the contemporary times was to force the readers to consider a different point of view in the story. She transposes the ancient tale to the present time and depicts that love

cannot be caged in any category and same sex relations can be successful without the transformation of one of the partners into the opposite sex. Thus, *Smith's* retelling is a story of love and fluidity of identities. She challenges the myth of fitting into societal categories and creates an uplifting story about the importance of accepting oneself and others.

However, the purpose of my paper is not just to highlight the techniques and methods employed by the aforementioned contemporary writers to provide an equal space in the misogynist world but also to question whether the efforts put forth by these writers are sufficient to find solution for the so called "Gender trouble" in our society? Are they really successful in doing justice to their claim of providing freedom to the believed oppressed characters in various ancient mythological characters? Indeed, to some extent their respective works do contribute to the making of an independent, modern and assertive individual, be it man or woman, homosexual or heterosexual. Their efforts do contribute significantly in the trend of retelling of mythology, which inspire a lot many people to understand the importance of individual rights and equality but somehow, I feel their methods are not completely successful in deconstructing the performance of normative gender roles.

For instance, *Atwood's* novella, "The Penelopiad", is believed to be the revised version of the Odysseys tale, written from a feminist perspective but still it consciously or unconsciously leads to the social construction of gender. Women from their birth are trained and taught to become faithful, successful wives or mothers and men being the so called 'most important gender' for the society are trained for other important political, social, economic works. Marriage for them is not even a concern; it is solely for the purpose of their entertainment, pleasure and birth of their heirs.

Atwood's characters unravel the myth of defloration, by their gendered performance. According to the defloration belief and as mentioned in the novella, "the bride had been stolen and the consummation of marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape.... A conquest, trampling of foe, a mock killing". (*Atwood* 44) *Atwood* presents the myth as an act of play, where Odysseus tells Penelope, "forget everything you've been told", he whispered, 'I'm not going to hurt you, or not very much. But it would help us both, if you pretend. I've been told you are a clever girl. Do you think we can manage a few screams?' (*Atwood* 44). Penelope performs her femininity "in ways that were suitable for the wedding night" (*Atwood* 48). In order to please him she even behaves in a "winsome and flirtatious manner". (*Atwood* 58) But why is there even a need for Penelope to pretend or perform her gender? She forgets her own individuality in the process of maintaining the myth and masculinity of her husband. She does not contest against the ritual of making her a toy, objectification of her sexuality but chooses to ignore it and *Atwood* in order to project her efforts in revising the old myth, tries to cover this evil by the caring pretentious performance of Odysseus, who does not want to hurt his wife but also does not have the courage to voice out against the wrong. Also, why it is only the duty of Penelope or any other women to be faithful towards their partners and not expect the same faithfulness in return. The society and its norms would have definitely questioned the character of Penelope, if she would have agreed to get involved physically with any one of the suitors but nobody questions the mighty Odysseus, when he sleeps around with several Goddess and whores. His actions are considered to be part of normative masculine trait.

Atwood uses satire as her armor to hide Penelope's concern for her beauty and her jealousy towards her cousin, the beautiful Helen. In fact, the entire discourse of beauty is itself sexist in the sense that women are supposed to become the perfect Barbie to gain importance

and attention of the world. Also, from the very beginning of her novella, *Atwood* seems to be troubled by the killings of the maids in the original work but she does not provide any reasonable answer to those killings in her work as well. The character of Penelope as the courageous women did not voice out against the injustice done to her maids.

Although, *Atwood* in her novella attempts to depict Penelope as an, intelligent, strong women but still her efforts to manage her husband's estate on the island of Ithaca for twenty years, single handed are not appreciated, the way it should have been. Her cleverness to keep the suitors away from her estate is not discussed much but rather her cries and feeble nature, waiting for her husband to end the chaos is highlighted. Even after enduring so much trouble, at the end her faithfulness is questioned but what about the faithfulness of Odysseus, to whom the society provides all the rights to cheat his wife and share the bed with other Goddesses and whores.

Also, Ali Smith's work, "Girl meets boy" claims to depict the fluidity of gender, which cannot be controlled or caged but does she really provide that much of freedom to her characters to choose their own gendered identities? In fact, the title of the novella, itself contributes in establishing the normality of heterosexual relationships and the abnormality of homosexuality; it reads as "Girl meets boy" and not "Girl meets Girl". Although she asserts that her work is a tale of love and transformation, revelations, story of girls and boys, girls and girls, an attempt which hints towards the freedom of gender preference and beauty of homosexual relationships but by providing masculine characteristics to Robin, she herself restricts that freedom of love and gender preference. Her work is believed to be a revised version of *Ovid's* myth of Iphis and Ianthe and the very need for this revision was because both these female characters were not given the freedom to choose their sexual preference. In order to stay together, Iphis had to transform into a man but *Smith's* rewriting is no different from the ancient tale. Although, her characters, Imogen and Robin does not undergo any transformation but still she attributes masculine characteristics to Robin for their relationship to work. But why is there even a need for one of the homosexual partners to behave or act like the opposite sex? Why can't two girls or two boys be happy together, having the same personality?

Thus, there is no doubt that the revisions of ancient myths by various contemporary writers have contributed a lot to liberate the characters from the limitations of imposed identities, as witnessed in the ancient myth world. The characters, that were represented as oppressed and marginalized in the past are empowered and fore grounded in the postmodern world.

Adrienne Rich mentions in her famous essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" that, "re-vision is an act of survival, consisting of looking back, seeing with fresh eyes, entering an old text from a new critical direction", in agreement to her statement, I believe that surely there is yet a lot to be explored, analyzed and contemplated in the retellings as well. The aforementioned and discussed works of *Margaret Atwood* and *Ali Smith* reconstruct the classical myth and attempts to invalidate the false knowledge of the past to the best of their abilities. Such revised works employ the technique of *L'écriture féminine* writing to deconstruct gender roles and provide voice to the suppressed but there is always a room for further analyses and further revisions to offer different suitable versions of the events and the characters.

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