

MEMORY IMPACTS THE MYTHS ON FEMALES AND FEMINISM: AN ANALYSIS OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE PENELOPIAD

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Abstract

Memory (in the form of history) is something that helps tradition and culture to be carried to the future generation and at the same time, it is dangerous weapon to create irrelevant myths to keep the marginalized as ever and to keep up patriarchy as ever. Memory is a tool of gratitude and vengeance as well. The paper's motto is to give a deep study on Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* which is the revision of Greek myth *The Odyssey* and voices the dumb characters' plight in the classic myth. It argues the issues from theoretical to societal approach. It associates the theme of myth and the theory of feminism with the text of Atwood. Myth is infused with memory of human. The novel is a narration of Penelopiad's memory which is ignored since years. The paper also describes how the so called feminine qualities were created by society and made women to believe that they must be feminine. It addresses the matter that innocence, love and loyalty of women are played on in every aspect of life. It also brings out that how the female worries in myth and the real world are one and the same. Finally the paper brings out that

mythification serves as a powerful weapon used to control the voiceless who tries to voice against suppression.

Keywords: The Odyssey, The Penelopiad, mythification, revisionism, feminism, memory and misconception

Myths are universally and orally told stories that echo and contour lives- peoples' wishes, worries, expectations, and endow with narratives that hark back to define well the humanity. Every country has myths and they are represented in their Literature. Like that of Ramayana and Mahabharata which comes under Classic of Hindu Mythology, Iliad and Odyssey comes under Classic of Greek Mythology. These myths personifies human virtues in the form of characters such as Ram, Lakshman, Arjun, Odyssey, Achilles, Ajax, Menelaus, Agamemnon, Hector Aeneas, etc. In the contemporary literature there is a culture of retelling a myth in a memorable way in the name Myth Series.

The relationship between memory and myth is complex and interconnected, as both play significant roles in shaping cultures, societies, and individual identities. Memory refers to the capacity of the human mind to store and recall information and experiences. Personal memories of individuals and collective memories of communities form the foundation of myths. Myths often emerge from attempts to explain historical events, natural phenomena, and human experiences that were significant to a particular culture or community. Over time, these memories can be embellished, transformed, or distorted, giving rise to mythological narratives.

Myths are shared stories, beliefs, and legends that are passed down through generations, becoming part of a culture's collective memory. They serve as a way for societies to make sense of their origins, beliefs, values, and worldview. Myths provide a sense of identity and belonging, reinforcing cultural norms and values.

In ancient cultures without a written language, myths were a way to preserve historical and cultural knowledge. They conveyed important lessons, morals, and teachings from one generation to the next. Myths often featured heroic figures, gods, or ancestors, who embodied certain virtues

or characteristics that were seen as essential for the community. Myths are not merely factual accounts of historical events but also carry deep emotional and psychological significance. They can address existential questions, fears, hopes, and dreams that are common to humanity. Myths often explore themes of love, betrayal, death, rebirth, and the struggle between good and evil.

As memories are passed down through generations, they can be subject to various cultural and psychological influences. Oral traditions, storytelling, artistic representations, and rituals contribute to the evolution and transformation of memories into mythological narratives. The retelling of stories over time can lead to the inclusion of symbolic elements, making them more archetypal and universally resonant. Myths provide a cultural framework that shapes how people perceive the world around them and their place within it. They influence belief systems, religious practices, social structures, and even political ideologies. Myths contribute to the construction of a shared reality within a society. Due to the intertwining of memory and myth, it can be challenging to separate historical truth from the symbolic and metaphorical elements present in myths. Some myths may have kernels of historical truth, while others are entirely fantastical.

Memory and myth are interconnected aspects of human consciousness and culture. Memories serve as the raw material for mythological narratives, which, in turn, shape collective memory and cultural identity. Myths provide a framework for understanding the world, imparting values, and preserving cultural heritage across generations.

The writers, Chinua Achebe, Margaret Atwood, Karen Armstrong, A. S. Byatt, David Grossman, Milton Hatourn, Victor Pelevin, Donna Tartt, Su Tong and Jeanette Winterson are the contributors of the Myth Series. The rewriting can otherwise be called as 'revisionism'. Among the above mentioned writers Margaret Eleanor Atwood who is called as a prophet of dystopia is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, inventor, teacher, and environmental activist. Since 1961, she has published 18 books of poetry, 18 novels, 11 books of non-fiction, nine collections of short fiction, eight children's books, and two graphic novels, as well as a number of small press editions of both poetry and fiction. Atwood has won numerous awards and honors for her writing, including the Booker Prize (twice), Arthur C. Clarke Award, Governor General's

Award, Franz Kafka Prize, and the National Book Critics and PEN Center USA Lifetime Achievement Awards. A number of her works have been adapted for film and television, increasing her exposure. The titles she owns are Order of the Companions of Honour twice in her life, Order of Canada Order of Ontario and Fellowship of the Royal Society of Canada. The themes in Atwood's works are myth, feminism, nature, power politics, power of language and identity.

Memory of a generation has both good and bad anecdotes in it. It helps a set of people of the after generation to be humanistic, the other set of people to be cunning and to take revenge for their ancestors' suffering, some of the others remain the same without accepting the changes and thereby without any progress. Memory sometimes serves as a source of constant fear, irritation, love and hatred. All the personal questions are answered from one's memory and that gives one's identity. If a wrong memory creates a wrong impression and it is transferred to generation after generation that becomes a wrong history or past fact. The novel *The Penelopiad* brings to light the wrongly transferred history by male chauvinism and in favour of a myth of beauty of a women.

Feminism is a very vast subject where Atwood's thoughts on it are a greater contribution. The very speaking of feminism like a fascination makes it unreal in the double stranded world. Atwood's works presents the reality that feminism is considered a myth (imagination) and every work ends with the hope and likeliness of winning. In *The Edible Woman* the protagonist, Marian Mac Alpine, ends up keeping herself away from the clutches of patriarchal society and in *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator surfaces herself and becomes a saintly figure to escape the clutches of patriarchal society. The pity is when the women in the novels get the revelation of being misconceived as subordinates, they are ridiculed as insane. Both the works ends with a hope for an emancipation being fed up with double strands of life. It is no doubt whenever Atwood's works are in the hands of the readers a magical spell overtakes them to a feminist world. Likewise Atwood did not consider *The Penelopiad* as a feminist novel yet it is politically aligned with the feminist movement. She wrote the novella yielding to the request of publisher Jamie Byng of Canongate Books for the publication of an international project called the Canongate Myth Series that was to be translated into several languages. *The Penelopiad* was translated in 28 languages. Atwood is tricky and brave in choosing the myth of *Odyssey and Penelope* and naming the novella

The Penelopiad, while, Homer's *The Odyssey* an androcentric text has already won the world, even after its historic inaccuracy. Atwood had read *The Odyssey* when she was a teenager and the reminiscence of the imagery of Penelope's twelve maids hanged inspired the 64 year old writer to write *The Penelopiad*. *The Penelopiad* carries back the life of Penelope from 21st century Hades.

Now that I'm dead I know everything... Since being dead- since achieving the state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness- I've learned some things I would rather not know, as one does when listening at windows or opening other people's letters. You think you'd like to read minds? Think again...sacks is full of words- words you've spoken, words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you.(TP 1)

The dead Penelope recalls her life in Sparta with Odysseus, her struggles in the absence of Odysseus and the upshot of her story. She had a challenging relationship with her parents: over affectionate father and that was only after attempting to murder her for the fear of an oracle and a negligent mother. She was married to Odysseus, who won her in the suitors' contest. Though Odysseus was mocked by Helen Penelope's cousin and other maids for his short physique, Penelope never minded and led a happy life. She was an alien in her in-laws palace and disliked by her mother-in-law, Anticleia and the nurse Eurycleia, who became friendly later. Right after the birth of Telemachus, Odysseus got a call for war and left Ithaca to Troy. Penelope ran the Kingdom and nurtured Telemachus as a single parent. Rumours of wars telling Odysseus' death reached the ears of hopeful Penelope who was intelligent enough not to believe the rumours. But as the rumours were spread a number of suitors started proposing Penelope who was old enough to understand the reason behind was to loot her wealth and kingdom. She was clever enough to tackle the violent suitors by convincing them that she would accept one of their proposals after finishing her father-in-law's shroud. She enrolled twelve maids with the task of unraveling the shroud at night and to spy on the suitors. Eventually returns Odysseus in disguise, though Penelope could recognize in the first sight she didn't reveal his identity till the suitors were massacred. The misfortunate maids too were hanged to death when Penelope slept, as they were doubted for being with suitors and as Odysseus was unaware of the task assigned by Penelope.

Penelope was not as famous as Helen because she possessed the so called Masculine qualities of intelligence and running the kingdom. If the drama of Homer's *Odyssey* was enacted hopefully girls acting would love taking up the role of Helen who is the epitome of beauty and for whom the ten years war took place rather than choosing who faced the world cleverly with chastity. It seems Atwood is possessed by the spirit of Penelope when she was urged to do the task of writing. She speaks the mind of the dead Penelope. She expresses her admiration of Penelope to Phyllida Lloyd, the director of *The Handmaid's Tale* film, who also directed *The Penelopiad* that Penelope was speaking from the dead world to the living world and wanted to tell that she was not what people had preconceived. She is not famous like Clytemnestra or Helen of Troy being failed to be a tragic figure, a killer or suicides in distress. But that doesn't mean her life didn't have a tragedy or distress. Penelope is emphasized for her intelligence but not for beauty. "By the time the suitors got around to her she was quite old for those times, so you know they were after the loot. I'm quite old myself, so I'm not at all worried about playing her."(TG 8)

The patriarchal society distinguished human nature into masculine and feminine qualities, the extreme version has worsen the world and gave rise to the want of vast theory, feminism and a great parade of feminist exhibit their works all over the world. Thus renowned feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, says, 'Women and men are made, not born' which means the complex social process is responsible for Beauvoir's statement suggests that gender roles and behavior are not inherent and that social positioning should not be determined by sex. When the risen Feminism irritated the society it drew a stereotype to corner feminist and to stop them from raising their voice against the evils that suppresses the voiceless victims.

Myths about feminists are that they hate men, they are angry, they are unattractive and not feminine, they all pro-choice, they cannot be religious, they are career women and do not support stay-at-home moms, they are Bra- Burners who hate sex, they can only be women and they don't believe in marriage. As a result of the misconception on feminism and feminist the people who really work for gender equality fear saying 'I am a feminist' rather say 'I'm not a feminist, but I am for equality'. The society that created various myths for female world and when something came into rescue also suffers the same. There is a systematic power structure designed some 400

years ago structure that gives all privileges only to men. If one likes to eat a fish he cooks it and relish, if he likes his car in blue color he paints it blue. Being a car or fish that's not a matter when it comes to a social being a woman, if the male society likes her to be quiet the family will grow her a calm child, if it likes her wearing traditional dresses, it trains her to wear it. A girl is considered as a possession of her parent, siblings, spouse, and then children calling out 'She is mine, I'll do whatever I wish' and the quoted words are the answer received by the person who comes for rescue. A girl actually longs to hear the words 'She is mine; I'll let her do whatever she wishes'. All feminist writers even Atwood had nervousness that her work would be butchered into a stereotype. This is proved in an article by Natasha Walter, director of *Women for Refugee* and the author of *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*. She says,

It is hardly surprising that a writer of such inventive fiction would be nervous of the idea that her work could be pigeonholed into any ideological framework. There is a fear among many female writers and film-makers that to call your work feminist means to curtail its imaginative impact and suggest it should be read as propaganda. (TGW)

The power struggle is faced by every woman doesn't matter whether she is rich or poor, queen or maid, beautiful or ugly, chaste or unchaste, empowered or underpowered. She has to struggle for the very reason she belongs to female sex. She is lavishly under estimated for she belongs to female sex. The twelve innocent maids who were hanged voiceless seek justice at least in the far developed educated world who finally recognized there is no change in the laws against the slave women. Atwood has ironically used the word educated men and educated world. The twelve maids represented twelve months of the year. Later they found themselves one with Penelope counting that after all she is a woman and says,

Yes correct the number of lunar months is indeed thirteen, so there ought to have been thirteen of us. Therefore, you say- smugly, we might add- that our theory about ourselves is incorrect, since we were only twelve. But wait- there were in fact

thirteen! The thirteenth was our High Priestess, the incarnation of Artemis herself. She was none other than Queen Penelope!

Thus possibly our rape and subsequent hanging represent the overthrow of a matrilineal moon-cult by an incoming group of usurping patriarchal father-god-worshipping barbarians. The chief of them, notably Odysseus, would then claim kingship by marrying the High Priestess of our cult, namely Penelope

No sir, we deny that this theory is merely unfounded feminist claptrap. (TP 131)

Right after Penelope's birth her father received an oracle that his daughter would be the cause of his death. He ordered his daughter to be killed. "My father was king Icaris of Sparta... ordered me to be thrown into the sea. I never knew exactly why, during my lifetime, but now I suspect he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shroud." (TP 3) Her father arranged her marriage and numerous suitors approached, he conducted a race in which Odysseus won by cheating and with the support of Helen's father Tyndareus for Odysseus had done things favor for him. "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". (TP 7) A girl is valued as a raw meat and she is made edible by cooking and garnishing as per the wish of the in-laws. Hence the myth-making on marriage where a girl is gifted to the winner as in today's world a girl gifted to a man with all dowries challenged. To choose a partner or to be chosen as a partner both the cases she is valued less. A man if wishes a girl and dejected by her rejection throws acid to kill her beauty. Poor woman doesn't even know how to escape a rape. In this novella Penelope escaped wooing of her suitors with her intelligence and unwavering mind yet it is not much valued. It is like Raam's chastity is valued higher than Sita's as for women to be chaste is not a great deal.

Odysseus who left his nation and beloved family for the sake of rescuing the epitome of beauty Helen, wife of his friend Menelaus is highly exposed in the Greek literature. Helen who was not loyal to her husband and eloped with Paris was valued much than Penelope who was very

sincere to her husband and looked after Ithaca, her in-laws country with great care so that country not to be looted. Penelope was highly chaste whereas Odysseus is not expected to be loyal to his wife. The comfort lies at least when he valued Penelope as an intelligent. The society's least botheration to give power in the hands of women is because of its misconception of women as living dolls, representing beauty and pleasure. This shows how the world denounces a simple responsible woman but glorifies the women with sexual nature. This is again a myth-making that women are source of lust and for which the ten years war took place and several legendary figures shed their blood in the war field. Helen had many legends as guardians but for Penelope her dignity was the guardian for the twenty long years.

I never got summoned much by the magicians. I was famous yes- ask anyone- but for some reason they didn't want to see me, whereas my cousin Helen was much in demand. It didn't seem fair- I wasn't known for doing anything notorious, especially of a sexual nature, and she was nothing if not infamous. Of course she was very beautiful. It was claimed she came out of an egg, being the daughter of Zeus who'd raped her mother in the form of a swan... If you were a magician, messing around in the dark arts and risking your soul would you want to conjure up a plain but smart wife who'd been good at waving and had never transgressed, instead of a woman who'd driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames? (TA 16-17)

Every simple woman on earth struggles for existence. Penelope is an existentialist struggler who escaped her father's attempt to murder her, her suitors wooing her, also saved her son and above all proved her loyalty to her husband besides the scandals that gossiped she had lied with the suitors. She ruled the kingless empire concealing all her tears and tempts of suicide. All the twenty years she spent her life with the hope of her husbands' return and wished to gift back the kingdom with at least some profit.

Penelope dearly loved her son Telemachus and it was for his sake she withstood the actions of the suitors. He resembled his father in almost everything and it is obvious to be like his father

both are brought up by the same nurse Eurycleia. If Telemachus was taught to respect women there would have been a hope for women emancipation but it didn't. When he was questioned by his mother:

He denied that he was a child any longer, and proclaimed his manhood- he'd come back, hadn't he, which was proof enough that he'd known what he was doing. Then he defied my parental authority by saying he didn't need anyone's permission to take a boat that was more or less part of his own inheritance,... He claimed his father would have been proud of him for showing some backbone and getting out from under the thumbs of the women, who as usual were being overemotional and showing no reasonableness and judgment.

By 'the women' he meant me. How could he refer to his own mother as 'the women'? What could I do but burst into tears? I then made the Is-this-all-the-thanks-I-get, you-have-no-idea-what-I've-been-through-for-your-sake, no-woman-should-put-up-with-this-sort-of-suffering, I-might-as-well-kill-myself speech. (TP 18-19)

Penelope was highly upset and felt like lost the meaning of her living, hearing the things from her son's mouth. She felt failed as a mother. Every mother at least has the responsibility to make her son a solemn man respecting woman. The whole world's need for feminism would vanish if a girl baby taught to value self-respect and if a boy baby taught to respect a girl's opinion and feelings. Psychology says frailty is there in every woman and this is again a myth. Shakespeare quoted "Frailty thy name is women" in some sense but that was misused in today's context. Penelope never shows her weakness to her enemies rather proved her strength by withstanding the twenty years long pain. Probably there would be again a misconception on women's endurance as a weakness. Endurance is a powerful medicine used by women at the end of hurting left by myth-making.

The imagery of water and boat is associated with Penelope and other women throughout the text and it is obvious when she says “Water is our element, it is our birth right” being one of the daughters of Naiad. All the women had a fascination for boat because it is the imagery of rescue. Naiad Penelope’s mother and sea nymph advises her daughter in her plight to be like water.

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can’t go through an obstacle, go around it, Water does. (TP 36)

The advice given by Naiad to Penelope is to endure things and it is applicable for all the women. Without pain or sufferings or trial, experience is a waste. All that is undergone develops qualities such as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. The characters are built when things are endured with patience. It actually purifies hearts, expands souls and creates tender humanity with charitable and worthy beings as the children of God. Trials and tribulations are the best educators. This is understood by every good woman on earth. Thus with the harmless weapon of endurance she overcomes the myths levied on her. Endurance aggravates the myths created by memory.

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