


Deconstructing Gender and Myth in Margaret Atwood's <i>The Penelopiad</i>			Literature
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Abstract			
<p>Margaret Atwood's novella <i>The Penelopiad</i> presents a revisionary account of Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> from the contemporary position. In this paper it is shown that how Atwood not only deconstructs gender but also the mythical version of male narrative of Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> by giving voice to the female characters that otherwise remain imprisoned in the traditional gender stereotypes. The mythical patterns and beliefs turn out to be instrumental in encapsulating and shielding the reality of gender. The truth behind Penelope's celebrated chastity and Odysseus's courage is deftly investigated to prove the hollowness and instability of gendered identities.</p>			

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Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* was published in 2005 as part of the first set of books in the *Canongate Myth Series*. It is a revisionary account of Homer's famous epic *Odyssey*. In this novel Atwood reconstructs her own version of Homer's *Odyssey* from contemporary position. She provides different dimension and perspective to gender, mythical beliefs and perceptions about traditions, customs and characters in her novella and impregnates them with new outlook and voice.

Atwood deconstructs the gender and myth associated with the male narrative of Homer's *Odyssey* by giving voice to the female characters in her novella, setting them free from the stereotypical fetters of femininity. The story is narrated by Odysseus's wife Penelope and the twelve maids who were innocently hanged to death by Odysseus and his son Telemachus. Atwood unravels myths as a, "universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives- they explore our desires, our fear, our longings, and provide narrative that reminds as what it means to be human"^(1TP). She criticizes Homer's *Odyssey* as, "not the only version of the story. Mythic material was originally oral and also local, a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another" (*TP* xx). Her contemporary narrative of "tale-telling highlights gender and class issues which go unchallenged in *The Odyssey*: the physical and sexual exploitation of servant girls" (²Howells 13).

Homer's *Odyssey* is about the return of King Odysseus from Trojan War, to his kingdom Ithaca after twenty long years. He is known to have spent ten years fighting war on behalf of Helene's husband king Menelaus to bring Helen back from Troy. For the remaining ten years he is believed to have been lost and wondering in the Aegean sea, "trying to get home, enduring

hardships, conquering or evading monsters, and sleeping with goddesses” (*TP* xix). His wife Penelope, King Icarius’s daughter, and Helene’s cousin, has been famous for her unflinching fidelity being, “quintessential faithful wife” and known for her, “intelligence and constancy” (*TP* xix). Penelope not only remains faithful and waits for her husband for twenty long years, but at the same time turns down the marriage proposals of the suitors. She cunningly postpones her decision of marriage by maneuvering the trick of choosing one of the suitors after the completion of shroud weaving of her father-in-law. The story meets its end with the slaughter of the suitors and twelve maids by Odysseus and his son Telemachus and the reunion of Penelope with Odysseus after twenty long years of departure.

Under the influence of postmodernism gender identity emerged as a primary domain of cultural studies in the 1990’s. It was established that the identity of a person is constructed through socialization using culturally shared materials and it is not fixed rather represents multiple masculinities and femininities which are performed not only by different men and women in the same circumstances but by same men and women under different circumstances. Critics like Foucault, Stuart Hall etc. stressed on the acculturation of men and women in society where gendered identities of men and women are seen to emerge from cultural and discursive constructions. The discourses may be defined as “anything which carries meaning. Language, images, stories, scientific narratives and cultural products are all discourses... Social practices like segregating work, giving away the bride in marriage and so on also carry meaning”⁽³⁾Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 81).

The discourse that constructs the gender may be destabilized to deconstruct it. These constructed identities can be deconstructed and subverted following Judith Butler’s arguments. Butler states that it is through the reiterative performances of people from generations that the binary categories of masculinity and femininity have permeated in our culture and society as theoretical norms and standards. The very reiterative and performative nature of the Law that encourages the construction of such biased norms also enables the disruption and opposition of that Law. Butler argues that by undermining the norms which are dominating and subordinating it becomes thinkable to subvert and destabilize “the false stabilities of normative gender” (¹*Gender Trouble* 135- 136). Applying this performative account of gender construction in *The Penelopiad* we find that gender identities are discursively constructed in the traditional myths, “ancient customs” (*TP* 27), and practices which create stereotypes of masculine and feminine gender that can be deconstructed.

Atwood by giving narrative of the story to Penelope and the twelve maids not only deconstructs mythical version of male narrative but also contests, “the official account of the Grecian myth by exposing the power relations that structured the social hierarchies of Grecian Society: the enslavement of female servants, the silencing of aristocratic women, and the glorification of male heroes” (²Đlapkaskaitė 143). The novel also subverts the gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity establishing them to be discursive constructs of myths,

traditional beliefs, practices, conventional patterns and norms. Atwood, while presenting the contemporary outlook of the Homer's *Odyssey*, "aligns herself with Frye's delineations of myth" and "describes how female conventions established in Homer's epics are "still very much with us" (³ Atwood 222). She subverts Homer's *Odyssey* by "mythologizing and demythologizing" (⁴ Staels) and probes the answers of the questions that remain unanswered in Homer's *Odyssey* like, "What led to the hanging of maids, and what was Penelope really up to? She states, "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" (*TP* xxi).

The novel unravels the influence of society, including family, school and other institutions that result in the construction of gender. Atwood shows how different gender roles are imparted to girls and boys from childhood onwards. Whereas girls are taught "craft" (*TP* 67) to prepare them for their married life, boys are taught hunting and fighting and to be "naturally" "in control of the kingdom" (*TP* 71). For men the aim of their life is to achieve the "economic success" as "no young man considers marriage as his fundamental project" (⁵ Beauvoir 450). On the contrary Girls are trained and brought up for their only aim of life i.e. marriage and child birth. Marriages are described, "For having children" and for this girls are "bred as soon as possible" to produce "sword – wielders and spear- throwers" (*TP* 25).

In the novella the myth of defloration is exposed by Penelope and Odysseus by their performances as bride and groom. Penelope is warned by her maids of the painful process of defloration where she would be "torn apart as the earth is by the plough and how painful and humiliating that would be" (*TP* 42). Kate Millet describes the long held myth associated with the defloration of bride as:

All patriarchies have held virginity and defloration in elaborate rites and interdictions ... Fear of defloration appear to originate in a fear of the alien sexuality of the female. Although any suffering endured in defloration must be on the part of the female (and most societies cause her- bodily and mentally- to suffer anguish), the social interest institutionalized in patriarchal ritual and custom, is exclusively on the side of male's property interest, prestige or hazard. (¹48).

Penelope unravels the horrible picture of defloration where it was believed "that 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" (*TP* 44). She undermines the myth as "play-acting" and "fiction" by stating the words of Odysseus who 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?'" (*TP* 44). Penelope performs her femininity "in ways that were suitable for the wedding night" (*TP* 48). In order to please him she even behaves in a "winsome and flirtatious manner" (*TP* 58).

Odysseus is described to be an active and “excellent raconteur” and Penelope as a passive listener, which “he valued most” in her as it’s “an underrated talent in women” (*TP* 45). Despite being aware of his cunningness and also being suspicious of the veracity of his stories, she still listens to his stories with great interest and appreciates him as well to sustain the myth of his masculinity. Penelope is shown to be young, dependent and immature in comparison to Odysseus of whom she held “a great opinion” admiring him, having “highest confidence in him” (*T P*56), whereas Odysseus being independent, mature displays the “manner[s]” “of an older person to a child” (*TP* 57).

Penelope’s running of the vast “estates of Odysseus all by myself [herself]” after the departure of Odysseus to Trojan War, tramples another myth of women being incapable of manly tasks. She states that, “in no way had I been prepared for such a task during my early life at Sparta. I was a Princess after all work was what other people did” (*TP* 85). Penelope transcends her immanence and the gendered space that surround her, taking over what has been, “usually considered a man’s business” (*TP* 89). Penelope’s subversion of the feminine identity, undermining the common held perception of women being unfit for men’s job becomes possible in Butler’s words “by ‘rejecting’ the false stabilities of normative gender and explore “the gender discontinuities ... in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire”⁽²⁾ Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 105). The gender identities emerge as unstable and flexible that can be appropriated by the people of either sex. Penelope not only dexterously runs Odysseus’s state but also cunningly manipulates the ploy of shroud weaving befooling the suitors, who assemble in Ithaca to usurp her throne by marrying her. The myth of the Penelope’s faithfulness hyped in Homer’s *Odyssey* too is deconstructed. It is argued by Howell that “Atwood is playing with two levels of myth here” the Homeric myth of faithful Penelope and cultural myth of women as either submissive or domestic” (3Howells 9). Penelope comments in *The Penelopiad* , “Hadn’t I been faithful? Hadn’t I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation - almost the compulsion to do otherwise?” (*TP* 2).

It is argued by Beauvoir about women’s chastity that “Patriarchal civilization dedicated woman to chastity, it recognized more or less openly the right of the male to sexual freedom while woman was restricted to marriage” (395). 4Greer’s arguments too can be added here that “the chastity which warrior barons clapped around their wives when they went to war was the outward emblem of the fruitlessness of the struggle, the attempt to provide a barricade for a belly” (247). While Homer’s description of Penelope maintains the myth of her chastity and faithfulness, Atwood’s version of the story reveals the truth of her faithfulness and fidelity by stating Penelope’s response to the plea and speeches of the suitors, “about my [her] ravishing beauty and my[her] excellence and wisdom”. Penelope confesses, “I can’t pretend that I didn’t enjoy a certain amount of this. Everyone does; we all like to hear songs in our praise, even if we don’t believe them” (*TP* 104).

She further remarks, “Which of us can resist the temptation of being thought indispensable” (*TP* 80)? She admits her emotions, “I occasionally dreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with if it came to that” (*TP* 105). Penelope also questions the patriarchal hierarchy which recognizes “more or less the right of male to sexual freedom”⁽¹⁾ Beauvoir 395) and confines women to gendered spaces of feminine virtue, chastity, and faithfulness, restricting them to the status of inferior and passive *other*. Thus “Penelope “both questions the social structure of dominant order and remained dangerously complicit with them”⁽²⁾ Đlapkauskaitė 143).

She comments over Odysseus character:

While he was pleasuring every nymph and beauty
Did he think I would do nothing but my duty?
While every girl and goddess he was praising
Did he assume I would dry up like raisin? (*TP* 149)

Social and cultural construction of gender in accordance with patriarchal expectations and ideologies endows men with superior and dominant positions where nothing forbids them “to act as masters, to take inferior creatures” (Beauvoir 396). Whereas for woman there are strict guidelines and laws to guard their virtue and honour “she should defend her virtue, her honour; if she yields, if she falls she is scorned; whereas any blame visited upon her conqueror is mixed with admiration” (Beauvoir 395). Penelope is believed to be, “a risk until... safely married, because who knew what upstart fortune hunter might try to seduce me[her] or seize me and run away with me”(TP 30)? After marriage Odysseus threatens Penelope, that if she is found “sleeping with some other man...he would be very cross indeed, and he would have to chop me into pieces with his sword or hang me from the roof beam” (*TP* 71), while he himself on his way back home after Trojan war, is portrayed as having sex-affair with goddesses and whores and his heroism is praised and celebrated, leave apart the question and criticism of his marital infidelity. Penelope is instructed by maid Eurycleia to guard her honour and virtue to the plea of suitors and maintain her fidelity towards Odysseus. She tries to “harden” Penelope’s “heart against the suitors and their ardent pleas” so that she remains, “faithful to the very last gasp” (*TP* 106). She recited “folk sayings designed to stiffen” her in her “dedication” towards her husband (*TP* 89).

Thus woman is expected to give her husband “her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required” (*TP* 449), whereas no such devotion is made on the part of man.

In Atwood’s narrative Homer’s exalted version of Odysseus heroism is belittled “through popular rumour and gossip to the level of tall tales”. Penelope was well aware of “his slipperiness, his wiliness, and his foxiness”... “his unscrupulousness”, but, “turned a blind eye... kept” her “mouth shut, or if opened it sang his praises ... didn’t contradict, didn’t ask awkward questions, didn’t dig deep”(TP 3). She accepts all this because “To love her husband and to be happy is a duty she owes to herself and to society; she readily persuades herself that she feels a great love for her husband”... “Very often the wife’s persists in her pretense of love through morality, hypocrisy,

pride or timidity” (Beauvoir 481). Finally after reuniting with Odysseus after twenty long years Penelope states, “The two of us by our own admission- were proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other” (TP 173). The truth of their gender identities is revealed to be performative where both Odysseus and Penelope conceal their true identities disguising it under constructed and performative masculinity and femininity according to the traditional myths and cultural expectations. Whereas Odysseus, “conceal[s] his identity and his intentions”, by concocting “fraudulent life histories”, telling her, “the nobler versions, with the monsters and goddesses, rather the more sordid ones with the innkeepers and whores” (173). Penelope tells, “how tediously faithful I’d been” (TP 173).

The hundreds of suitors, presuming Odysseus’s death due to his failure to return from Trojan War on time, assembled in Ithaca to marry Penelope. They not only exploited and “gobbled up” and use the edibles and animals but also “raped” and “seduced” several of the maids (TP 115). They “helped themselves to the maids in the same way they helped themselves to the sheep and pigs and goats and cows” (TP 116). They are described as, “vultures when they spot a dead cow; one drops, then another, until finally every vulture for miles around is tearing up the carcass” (TP 103). These suitors who were of the age of Penelope’s son treated her as no better than sexual commodity. From the modern day Hades, Penelope questions Antonius’s intentions in proposing her to which he replies, “Widows are supposed to be consumed with lust (TP 102), and you could probably still squeezed out one or two little brats” (TP101). Thus we see that the image of woman is constructed as that of sexual commodity that are sexually objectified and humiliated by men. It is explored that whereas gender and class exploitation not only leads to sexual abuse of maids but also results in their innocent hanging by those in power, Penelope’s Cousin Helen, despite her notoriety and flirting nature escapes narrative justice in Homer’s *Odyssey*. “Unlike the Penelope of Homer’s *Odyssey* who mitigates Helen’s guilt by stating that “It was god[Aphrodite] who drove her to do [her] shameful deed” Atwood’s Penelope adamantly insists upon “Helen’s guilt and her suitability to receive justice measures by exhibiting the intentionality behind Helen’s indirectly violent acts and by undermining her ostensible genealogical connection to the Gods, who, in Atwood’s texts, are largely peripheral to and exempt from systems of human justice. (1 Kapuscinski 5). Atwood’s doesn’t absolve Helen for her sin of exploiting men using the bait of her eternal feminine image. This rejects another stereotype of women as oppressed and subjugated, underpinning the assertion that women can be as strong and oppressive as men. This provides as with various and multiple masculinities and femininities which are performed not only by different men and women in the same circumstances but by same men and women under different circumstances.

Unlike Grace in *Alias Grace*, Oryx in *Oryx and Crake*, and Iris Chase Griffin in *The Blind Assassin*, where the female narrators, “have all disappeared by the end of their life stories- into death or back into the text- and only their voices remain”, in *The Penelopiad* “this pattern is reversed”, as Atwood gives the narrative to the ghosts of Penelope and twelve maids who

negotiate with us from modern day Hades (2Howells 7). Penelope and twelve maids as ghosts narrate the different version of Homer's *Odyssey* highlighting many furtive details, endowing it altogether different perspective which was either biased or overlooked in *Odyssey*. It can be argued here that Penelope is able to unravel and disclose the truth behind myths only after her death as patriarchal society doesn't permit woman to express her views and attain freedom. This is similar to Iris's criticism of society and her husband when she writes scathing novel under the guise of her dead sister Laura. "Thus The *Penelopiad* writes back to Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Illiad* to uncover the ideological manipulations of language through which linguistic signifiers(3 Đlapkauskaitė 143), as 4Barthes reminds us, are robbed of their meanings" and turned into the "Speaking corpses" of mythological concepts"(133).

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