

Remaking the myth of Helen in Margaret Atwood's poem "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing"

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Summary:

This study aims at shedding light on women's exploitation and liberation at the same time in Atwood's "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing." It is divided into an introduction and five other sections and a conclusion. The introduction introduces the reader to the world of myth and how they participate in framing the mind of the primitive man concerning different issues and phenomena. The first section gives some definitions of myth which concludes that there is no specific definition for it. The second one is devoted to the relationship between myth and literature which proves that the origin of literature was mythical. The third section tackles remaking myth in modern and postmodern literature. The fourth one talks about how the poet uses myths to express her desired themes while the fifth section deals with one of Atwood's poems to show the areas of allusion to the original text and differences with it. Then comes the conclusion which sums up the result which the study reached.

1. Introduction

As soon as the name "Helen" is mentioned, one cannot but remember Helen of Troy, her mythical birth, her growing, her marriage and kidnapping and her surpassing beauty. Helen the most salient female mythical figure has undeniable significance in different literary genres from epic to drama

and poetry. Writer and poets approaches this mythical character in various ways to serves his/her aims and needs. As myths have been always indispensable source of inspiration hence it is convenient to shed light first on the world of myth and on myth itself for it accompanied every human's activity since the dawn of existence.

Myths had long played a vital role in man's life. They affected society and culture and shaped religious frame of human's mind. They represent man's continuous search for a meaningful explanation for creation and some other natural phenomenon which, at that time, seemed inexplicable. Myths produce stories of didactic purposes to teach and entertain people. Hence, myths turn to be of great effect on different aspects of human life including his/her religious beliefs, social values and art as well.

Myths started from dim eras and took the shape of oral stories which have specific structure and certain heroes to convey a message. Myths passed down from one generation to another orally. Later on, they were recorded by different writers; therefor the stories of these myths appeared in different versions. The ancient myths were then used by different writers and poets as both materials for their literary works and source for poetic inspiration.

What is worth mentioning is that the stories of myths witnessed many changes and modifications by writers and poets as they added many aesthetic dimensions to the original ones. The additions and modifications came to suit and harmonize with the beliefs and values of the society. (Evans, 2018. p.15)

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychology, had found in myths a rich source for assigning some psychological dilemmas and disturbance. He dealt with them from fresh perspectives. Hence, myths came to be a source of different branches of knowledge. Myths were retold in new ways to suit the

continuous progress of civilization, and are still used even nowadays. (Armstrong, 2008. P.4)

The myth is like a chameleon term for it overlaps with some other terms and concepts like fantastic traditional stories, legends, fairy tales and some religious rituals. The word mythos of Greek origin, which means "word" or "story" is associated with fabulous and unreal world. (Brzeziński, 2016. 13-26). Recently, "in the Modern era the word myth has become" as Tofighian suggests "a general term used to refer to revelation, folktales, sacred scripture, fairy tales, legend, epic and even community hearsay" (Tofighian, 2010. 3-4)

It is a common believe that the term myth resists definition as it is not easy to give one specific definition of it, therefore is no precise one definition of myth. Alost everyone knows what is myth but it is not that easy to explain it. As the philosopher St. Augustine puts it in his autobiographical book **Confessions** saying "I know very well what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked and try to explain, I am baffled." (cited in Ruthven, Kenneth, 2017. no p.) To define a myth one needs to explore various branches of knowledge for it is, like other concepts, affected by environment and the progress of culture. As a result, it witnessed gradual modifications and changes.

No two definitions of myth agree to the same points about its origin and its relation to religion. However, they agree that the origin of myths is unknown and that it has a close relationship with religion.

In Oxford English Dictionary 1994 myth is defined as a "traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events". (page 18) While in Collins English Dictionary 2018, further

features and dimensions are added to myth. It sees that it has a relationship with the beliefs of people as myth is defined as “ a **well-known** story which was made up in the **past** to **explain** natural events or to **justify** religious **beliefs** or social customs”. (P. 3063)

Seymour-Smith, a famous British critic, sees myth as” a form of high literature. It is a relatively fixed traditional story formulated in a poetic form that helps it be recited and circulated orally between generations.” (Seymour-Smith, 1985. 25-179) In addition, he concentrates on the myth secrecy and its timelessness, he adds:

It is sacred, and does not refer to a specific time but rather to an eternal truth, through an event. It occurred, and it has major comprehensive themes, such as: creation, formation, the origins of things, death, and the other world. Its centre is the gods and demigods, and man has a complementary, not a major role in it. (Seymour-Smith, 1985. p. 439)

Concerning the authorship, there is no known author for the well-known ancient myths, Seymour-Smith suggests that a myth is:

The product of a collective imagination... a collective phenomenon that expresses the group's contemplations, wisdom, and the essence of its culture. Ancient man believed in all the worlds transmitted to him by myth... and disbelief in their contents was considered disbelief in all the values that draw the individual to his cultural group. (Seymour-Smith, 1985. p. 439)

Deretic, Irena, a philosophy professor adds a social role to the myths, saying:

... a myth is a genre of folklore or theology consisting primarily of narratives that play a fundamental role in a society... this is very different from the use of myth which simply means something that is not true. Instead, the true value of a myth is not a defining criterion. (Deretic. 2020. pp. 441–451.)

Hence, a myth is not only a tale told for entertainment, it is told in a ritualized manner that distinguishes it from the experience of everyday life. Myth conveys divine information. It transforms spiritual, psychological and religious information through its imaginative events. (Eliade, 1960. P.3)

2. Myth and Literature

Since the dawn of existence, Man found himself as stranger and he tried to understand the world around him and explain the natural phenomena. As he failed to find interpretations, he attributed all these phenomena to a kind of unexplainable powers which take heaven as dwelling. These powers, as he imagines, control heaven and earth and direct the destiny of man as well. From the beginning, man's relation to these powers came to be various. Man turned to these powers to appeal them to help him and not to leave him to face the difficulties of life alone and to worship hoping to increase fertility of land, man and even animals. His worship came to be a mixture of magic and rituals. (Gorky, 1973. p.31)

Man began to work hard to gain his gods' satisfaction. He started with some religious movements accompanied with rhythmical utterances which, as he thought, gives man "that feeling of internal strength of communication with god" (Caudwell, 2020. p.32-33) and to help in "exalting him to union with his group and god" (Bodkin, 1934. p.323). Man projected the influence of rhythmical and musical language of poetry on his gods. He saw that they might affect gods as they affect man, for poetry is "a special form of words, which has the power, magical power, to evoke certain responses in the hearer" (Reeves. 2017. p. 10).

In addition, man regarded gods as the main source for his poetic inspiration. They gift man with the ability of composing poetry. Hence the relationship between man and gods may have been the first images of myth. At those

dim eras, any person who could compose poetry was looked at as gifted or inspired by gods.

2.1. Mythmaking in Modern Literature

In modern age, myths continue to be present strongly in literature. Poets continue their predecessors' techniques in making use of ancient myths for their poetic subjects. Modern poets try to adapt and revise ancient myths to suit their desired themes and needs. In mythmaking no superstitions like gods and other supernatural powers appear. The most important subjects that are dealt with are those which have existential touches like the question 'Why are we here?', 'Who are we?', or 'What is our purpose?' etc. (Johnson, 2017. pp. 19-50.)

One of the main purposes of using or mixing myth and literature is to reshape the ancient tales of the past. Myth is considered a short knowledge that accompanied with certain emotions which, in fact, resulted from this knowledge. (Reeves. 2017. p. 20). Critics put the prominent poet T S Eliot in the vanguard of poets who uses myths in their poetry. He made use of different myths to express different messages. "*The Waste Land*" for instance is regarded as a huge store for myths which are taken from James George Frazer's **The Golden Bough**. All the areas of mythical intertextuality in this poem express loss, alienation, aridity and so on. (Brown, 2016. pp. 15-24).

Another outstanding poet who utilises myths skilfully in his poetry is W.B Yeats, especially in his masterpieces "*Sailing to Byzantium*" and "*The Second Coming*" which are full of mythical allusions. (Reeves. 2017. p. 11).

In Postmodern literature, writers began to mix the old with the new. That is to say, writers employ myth to deal with or to solve contemporary problems like the clashes among classes, and the oppression and marginalisation of

women. Postmodernism rejects a single universal truth and instead celebrates diversity and plurality. Another feature of postmodern poetry is that a poem comes to be a mixture of different sources, like religion, science and myths. (Jameson, 1991. 184)

2.2. Margaret Atwood and the world of Myths.

One of the outstanding poets who use myths in her poetry in a very unique way is Margaret Atwood. She did not simply use the myths as they are, rather she revises the old ancient myths to meet her poetic needs. Her revising and remaking of myths comes hand in hand with her first collections of poems **Double Persephone** (1961) which included different myths. In addition, she became one of the notable poets who contributed in the new movement which is critically called postmodernism.

She tries to make her literature suit the air, style, mood and setting of postmodernism. She focuses on remaking and rewriting old myths to express her ideas about her contemporary society, dealing mostly with feminine problems. She wants to make the voices of women be heard clear and loud as she expresses their problems and issues. Atwood tries to give voice to women by giving voice to some female characters in ancient myths especially when these characters fit the subject Atwood deals with. On this she says:

Perhaps all writing, is motivated.... to bring something or someone back from the dead.... The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more. (Atwood, 2014. P. 156.)

What is worth mentioning is that Atwood is a devoted feminist, and she works on both the second and the third waves. Through these waves, Atwood tries to express her feminist ideologies which she believes. In her

mythical feminist poems, Atwood presents different feminine ideologies which range from victimisation of women which appear in the second wave to the use of women's sexuality in the third wave.

Gender issues have been widely dealt with by myths, but if myths narrate a tale, Atwood deals with this tale from a feminine perspective. She always deals with myth in a way that makes the binary opposition of male and female clear. Femininity and masculinity are seen as myths that have their presence in the feminist's works. (Nischik, 2020, p. 259). Atwood absorbs mythical stories of male and female and employs them in a way that shows females as powerful and is able to ask for her liberation.

2.3. Helen of Troy: Mythical Allusion

As soon as Helen is mentioned the first thing comes to a cultured mind is beauty. She was the offspring of Zeus and Leda. The mythical story goes like this Zeus took the shape of a swan and seduced the mortal Leda who gave birth to Helen. (Thomas, 2007. no p.)

While the story of Helen's rape is controversial whether she gave herself willingly to Paris or she was kidnapped, yet Atwood deals with the second probability. Helen is looked at as a victim of Paris who seduced her and also a victim of her husband Menelaus, who looked at her as one of his objects that he lost. For both men, Helen is merely an object; one sees her as an object for his sexual desires, while the other treats her as an object that he possesses. Though Helen in Homer's epic was given a chance to choose a husband and she chose Menelaus, yet her choice came as a result of no further choices for she loved none of her suitors, so literally, there is no other better choice. Women were deprived of their free wills and objectified by the patriarchal society. Hence, Homer made an icon of females out of Helen but this icon is captivating and troubling. (Thomas, 2007. no p.)

Atwood in her poem "*Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing*" makes it clear that women had long been objectified and are still but in a different way.

As for the story of Helen, one can simply see the marginalisation of women. Though Helen is the most beautiful woman and though the whole story revolves around her, yet she is not counted as a protagonist. She has a second minor role and has little to say. She is looked at a reason behind the destructive Trojan War and the story tells about a kind of rivalry between Penelope and her cousin Helen, something that has been used simply to created unrealistic problems among women to give the chance to men to keep women under their control. (cited in Bickford, 2023. p. 37). Hence, in the original myth Helen comes to be an antagonist rather than a protagonist.

The original story depicts Helen as a careless woman who forgets her role as a mother and as a wife. In addition to that she does not feel the responsibility towards her city. Thousands of people were killed in the war where Helen was the main cause of it. She failed in all these responsibilities and the only act she succeeded in is to fulfil her sexual desire.

However, in Atwood's skilful hands Helen is turned to be a different character as she is presented from different perspective. She expresses women's problems as giving their bodies in order to gain money and power. Atwood uses this myth to show how women are objectified and looked at "*as a meat sandwich*" (Atwood, 1995. 11). She is created just to satisfy men's needs. The poet uses some figures of speech like simile to express how men deal with a woman who dances in front of them. She describes them as "*ready to snap at my ankles*" (Atwood, 35) just like hungry dogs.

The modern society, which Atwood refers to, deals with women badly as it had long dealt with Helen:

Margaret Atwood's poem "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing" shows the dangers of being prized for one's looks. Atwood shows that even the most extreme beauty can't necessarily protect us from the drudgery of work. Even the most beautiful woman in the world might find herself descending to the underworld of the sex trade. (Berkey-Abbott, 2016. p. 191)

In the poem, Atwood expressed women's suffering through revising and remaking of the most beautiful woman, Helen. As representing the ideal beauty of women, Atwood chooses Helen as she is always representing a constant interest for men. Men always look for beauty of body rather than soul. Women are looked at to be sold as objects. *"wall me up alive in my own body"* (Atwood, 1995. 71, 72). Men look at paintings only because of their beauty and they gaze at women as if they are "for sale", and those women *"dance for them because they can't"* (Atwood, 1995. 38), women are able to do the things that men cannot:

naked as a meat sandwich.

Selling gloves, or something.

...

They gaze at me and see

a chain-saw murder just before it happens,

(Atwood. 1995, p. 33)

Consequently, women are not happy with what they do, but rather they are forced to do it only to satisfy the desires of men and to gain their living in a very harsh society. They have been thrown in the streets to dance and smile, yet it is a bitter smile which is mixed with a tears. Smiling turned to be difficult: *'its the smiling/ tires me out the most'* (Atwood, 1995. 48, 49) due

to their suffering. Helen is forced to dance and forced to smile in this era the same way ages ago when she was handed as a prize to Menelaus and then taken by force by Paris, in either case she is just like an object to be possessed.

Some critics see that Atwood empowers Helen as she says: *'I keep the beat, / and dance for them because/ they can't'* (Atwood, 1995. 38), because Helen is empowered with beauty which cannot be gained but bestowed by gods. On the other hand, this beauty is a point of weakness for it is given by gods, and she may be deprived of according to god's wishes. From another perspective, beauty is a weapon that she can use. However, Atwood in fact empowers Helen by giving her voice, something she is deprived of in the original myth. The story in the poem is told by Helen, she is the one who is speaking telling her story, thoughts and feelings.

Margaret Atwood changes the mythical Helen from a wealthy queen to a dancer, who dances for money, yet she is still objectified, however, Helen feels proud and she knows that is now having the power. Speaking with so much confidence she says:

You think I'm not a goddess?

Try me.

This is a torch song.

Touch me and you'll burn. (Atwood, 1995. 79 – 82)

This means that the difference in place and time does not affect Helen. Though she lost her prestige as a queen, yet she trusted herself as an off spring of Zeus: *'You think I'm not a goddess? / Try me.'* This makes Helen fully confident as she is of divine origin and she can use her power when she needs it. Atwood's Helen has "[t]ransposed to a commercialised culture, and earning a living as best she can, Atwood's bar-dancing Helen

knows what she is about and the risk she runs from the responses she provokes" (Nicholson, p. 90)

The poet changes the women's ideology from searching for love and sacrificing expensive things for the true lover to a searching for power through getting more money and using her beautiful face and body in the right way. The poet expresses the difficulties women face in a totally patriarchal society. She shows the difficulty for women to find a good job even if she is beautiful and of a good origin. For Atwood's it is better for Helen to lose dignity than to work in a boring job with "*minimum wage*" (Atwood, 1995. 6). In both images of mythical Helen and the remade one, Helen suffers to a point that brings her to her doom. (Bickford, 2023, p. 37)

Atwood recreates the character of Helen and transforms her from a pretty wife who caused the war to a victim in a patriarchal society. She is changed from a queen to a dancer who dances naked using her beauty to earn a living. Atwood transformed Helen the queen, to a totally modern ordinary woman who needs a work to earn her living needs, in doing so, Atwood changed the picture of the perfect Helen who needs the admiration for her mare beauty in a male-dominated society. Helen nowadays, in the poet's eyes became an independent woman who does not need a husband, a prince, or a king to support her, she became an independent woman financially and socially. Helen now uses her feminine power as a tool to live, unlike the original Helen who used her beauty to survive and to choose to escape with Paris, she now uses it as a power to live, not as weapon to start a war.

Conclusion:

To conclude, though myths belong to ancient times but they are still adorned and enrich literature. Historians use myths as stories which were

credible at these times and which were part of religious rituals. As literature differs from history in retelling the mythical stories as they were, one can touch the modifications in retelling the mythical stories and events to suit the target purpose of writers. Hence, writers of different literary genres found in the world of myth a fertile source to express their desired themes. As they employ myths so that they can say much in little. That is to say, they express their ideas by merely alluding to certain myths. What is worth mentioning is that writers change, modify, absorb and even reverse the mythical story to make it more effective and functional.

In modern literature, these processes continued and deepen to writers who use myths to deal with so many contemporary problems. Margaret Atwood, as a feminist poet knows how to employ certain myths to serve her needs. In her poem *"Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing"*, Atwood presents the well-known myth of Helen from another perspective. Helen is no longer a beautiful woman who attracts kings and princes' favours. She is not looked at as of a divine offspring, and the Trojan War starter. Instead, she is looked at as any ordinary woman who is objectified by men. Men are attracted to her body rather than other distinguished merits in her. Hence, the poem comes to be a defence on women's rights which are denied to women in a patriarchal society. Through this message, Atwood tries to awaken females from their false dream and to say that men are running after their burning desires only. Hence, the poem is a feminine one which tries to defend women against the patriarchal assault.

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إعادة تشكيل أسطورة هيلين في قصيدة مار غريت أتوود "هيلين طروادة تقوم بالرقص على المنصة"

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الكلمات المفتاحية: أسطورة. أتوود. هيلين طروادة

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تسليط الضوء على مسائل استغلال المرأة وتحريرها في الوقت نفسه في قصيدة أتوود "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing". وتقسم الدراسة الى مقدمة وأربعة مباحث أخرى. تقدم المقدمة القارئ الى عالم الأسطورة وكيف ان الاساطير ساهمت في تشكيل عقل الانسان البدائي بخصوص مسائل وظواهر كثيرة. ويقدم المبحث الأول بعض التحديدات للأسطورة. والذي يستنتج انه ليس هناك تعريف محدد لها. ويكرس المبحث الثاني للعلاقة بين الأدب والأسطورة ويتوصل الى أن أصل الكتابات الأدبية كان أسطوريا. ويعالج المبحث الثالث إعادة صناعة الأسطورة في الحداثة وما بعد الحداثة. ويناقش المبحث الرابع كيف أن الشاعرة استخدمت الأسطورة لتعبر عن مواضيعها المعنية. فيما جاء المبحث الأخير ليعالج قصيدة أتوود ويحدد مواطن التلميح الى النص الأصلي والاختلافات معه. ثم تأتي الخاتمة التي تلخص أهم النتائج التي توصلت اليها الدراسة.