

Rewriting Myth in Contemporary Poetry: A Review Article

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ABSTRACT:

The Current article reviews selected studies written about rewriting Myth in Contemporary Poetry as a tool of resistance to oppressive regimes and restoring cultural identity and memory. Employing a qualitative methodology, the review selects studies based on their thematic relevance and prominence in critical discourse. It examines poets from diverse cultural and gendered backgrounds. The article reviews how rewriting mythological narratives, whether Greek, Irish, Indigenous, or Mesopotamian, are reimagined to challenge dominant discourses, reclaim marginalized voices, and reshape original traditions. Existing research on poets such as Louise Glück, Joy Harjo, Ocean Vuong, Margaret Atwood, and others through the lenses of feminist, postcolonial, and Eco critical theories is reviewed. It has been concluded that existing scholarship acknowledges the aesthetic and political power of mythic rewritings, and covers the feminist, postcolonial, and ecological approaches. Yet, there is still a gap in research that explores how AI poetry rewrites and interacts with myths, as this field is increasing in importance. Additionally, there are still gaps in the intersectional analysis and comparative approaches in terms of how rewriting myths across different cultures corresponds to each other. This review identifies these gaps and suggests new directions to explore myth rewriting as a multidimensional literary strategy in contemporary poetry.

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Introduction

Ever since the dawn of time, myths have been a foundational narrative that carries the beliefs and cultural heritage of different nations across the world. The Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines myth 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” (2023). Theoretically, Roland Barthes (1972) defines the concept by stating that myth is “a type of speech” — a semiotic system that rationalizes ideological messages and turns culturally constructed meanings into taken-for-granted truths (p. 129). Therefore, this review will analyze how contemporary poets 'speak back' through this semiotic system, countering the 'taken-for-granted truths' mainstream ideologies. They offer a symbolic framework through which societies interpret morality, origins, and identity (Campbell, 2008; Doty, 2000). Particularly, in poetry, myths provided poets with a rich material through which they could draw on collective memory and archetypal patterns (Kroll, 2011). Nevertheless, contemporary poets changed the way myths are integrated in poetry; they have shifted the focus from repetition to revision.

Nowadays, poets engage myths with contemporary needs such as challenging dominant ideologies, representing suppressed voices, and reframing identities (Zajko & Leonard, 2006; Ostriker, 1986; Eysteinson & Liska, 2007). This article reviews how contemporary poets from diverse cultural backgrounds, genders, and poetic schools rework myth to amplify marginalized voices and challenge hegemonic ideologies and oppressive regimes. Through exploring the critical theories and poetic styles involved in the process of rewriting myth, this review traces growing frameworks in mythical poetics from feminist approaches to postcolonial and eco-poetic transformation. Joy Harjo, Louise Glück, and Ocean Vuong are selected to be the data of this study because their poetry is highly engaged with rewritten

mythical tales i.e. their works exemplify the varied and politically potent uses of myth in twenty-first-century verse (Harjo, 2015; Glück, 2006; Vuong, 2016).

This review adopts a qualitative methodology. Poets and critical studies were selected based on their thematic relevance and prominence in critical scholarship on myth rewriting from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, with a deliberate focus on works that looks at themes of resistance and cultural identity taken from diverse cultural and gendered backgrounds.

Historical and Cultural Context of Rewriting Myth

From Gilgamesh to Yeats' Irish revival, myths form a roadmap to the cultural heritage and moral values of different societies. In simple terms, Myths are narratives that are passed down through generations. They shape people's collective consciousness and document the moral and spiritual values of their societies. In poetry, poets have long used mythology in their writings, elevating them into vehicles that carries their people's stories across time and place. The Epic of Gilgamesh, which comes from the ancient Mesopotamian culture of what is now Iraq, is the oldest myth known to humans. It is a deep reflection on fundamental ideas like morality, friendship, and what it is to be human. Modern poets brought this epic back to life to deal with more modern issues, such as the conflict between how fragile we are and how we look for purpose in life. Contemporary poets revived this epic to tackle more modern concerns such as the tension between human fragility and the quest for meaning in life. In her poem "The Death of Gilgamesh," Yusef Komunyakaa rewrites the story of Gilgamesh by imagining that his grief and fragility symbolize the current fragility and emotional repression of the masculine. Thus, the relevance of this myth to modern life, as Benjamin Foster notes, lies in its "universal reflection on the human condition" (Foster, 2001, p. xxvii). This shows how the earliest known myth serves as an example of how mythology examines universal existential questions that haunts human consciousness.

Greek myths are among the most well-established and documented myths. Many contemporary poets draw inspiration from them and reintegrate their narratives to discuss modern issues. Sylvia Plath infuse her poetry with mythological female figures like Medusa and Persephone to express her personal suffering and broader social injustices that faces women. She uses this strategy to merge her individual experiences with feminist concerns (Hasan, n.d.). Moreover, poets such as Lorna Goodison and Ted Hughes resist traditional depiction of Greek myths, using them to address familial and social tensions. (Martiny, 2010). Thus, modern poets conceptualize Greek myths to draw parallels between ancient and contemporary societal issues. The Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter has commonly been viewed as a tale of feminine oppression and seasonal change. However, poets like Louise Glück have reintroduced the myth to highlight existential issues. In her *Averno*, Glück uses the Persephone figure not to discuss the common maternal bond between a mother and her daughter but to question identity, autonomy, and emotional detachment in the modern world (Glück, 2006, pp. 15–19). Her reinterpretation reflects what Margaret Homans calls the "revisionary mythopoesis" of women writers who use myth to "contest masculine traditions of authorship" (Homans, 1980, p. 24). Critics have noted that her treatment of the myth reflects the fragmentation of contemporary identity and the uncertain, in-between emotional and psychological spaces in which desire exists. (Keller, 2012). She blurs the lines between an ancient myth and contemporary life struggles.

Poets like those of the Celtic Revival, led by figures such as Yeats, revived myth to forge an Irish national identity in a time of historic turmoil, invoking heroic mythical characters such as Cuchulain to inspire political action during events like the Easter Uprising (Kearney, 1992). Modern poets, such as Seamus Heaney and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, were involved with sea myths to express the cycles of life and cultural identity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of past and present (Howley, 2022). Subsequently, many scholars have noted that Irish mythology has been appropriated to glorify heroic masculine figures for political and nationalist purposes. Eavan Boland resists this tendency by reviving female Irish mythological figures like Queen Medb or Cailleach Bhéara to expose the intentional neglect of female heroes in dominant narratives about Irish history. Boland asserts that her goal is "to return the Irish woman to the center of the poem" (Boland, 1995, p. 4). In this way, she counters both colonial and patriarchal powers and reclaims female agency within the Irish cultural heritage (Ní Dhomhnaill, 1997, p. 88).

Lastly, Indigenous mythology functions not as a static framework but as a living organism, especially in Joy Harjo's poetry. Inspired by Muscogee (Creek) oral traditions, Harjo invokes the trickster figure, the spirit of the world, and animal ancestors to confirm Indigenous survivance—a term Gerald Vizenor defines as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of stories" despite colonial erasure (Vizenor, 1999, p. 1). In her poem *She Had Some Horses*, Harjo herself notes that the combination of myths with personal experiences is a means of resistance and cultural continuity. A detailed analysis of the poem reveals Harjo's technique of myth rewriting. She employs repetition and a chant-like form that mimics the indigenous oral storytelling traditions and ceremonial chants. Thus, the interaction between oral traditions and written forms is essential in Indigenous rewritings

As can be noted, the use of mythological narratives of Mesopotamia, Greek, Irish, and Indigenous traditions in contemporary poetry is not a static or aesthetic value. Rather, a dynamic narrative of resilience, re-signification, and resistance. These writers demonstrate how rewriting myth is a means of reclaiming voice, challenging dominant historical narratives, and articulating alternative ones.

Theoretical Framework of Rewriting Myth

The process of myth rewriting in contemporary poetry is grounded on a diverse range of critical literary theories, all of which share a basic assumption that myths are not a static narrative rather a dynamic structure that keeps evolving and it's always capable of adapting to reflect the new cultural values of different societies (Segal, 2004; Doty, 2000). The earliest critical assumption regarding myths was made by Northrop Frye's core concept of myths as a literary archetype; his ideas still influence readers and highlight how poets draw on deeply embedded and shared collective stories and values to add depth and significance to their poems (Frye, 1957). However, newer critical theories have given special attention to the potential of myths in discussing contemporary issues like race, gender, and more complex political issues. This section provides a survey of the main critical theories that dealt with myth rewriting:

- A. Feminist Mythopoeitics: Feminist critics such as Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker have argued that to counter the patriarchal narratives embedded in canonical literary works of the West, feminist writers must focus on reclaiming myths. Ostriker, in her (1986) book entitled *Stealing the language: The emergence of women's poetry in America*, views the "revisionist mythopoeisis as a strategy of difference, where female

poets rewrite myth to claim back their power, challenge inherited gender roles, and give voice to marginalized groups” (211–212). Canadian author Margaret Atwood, for instance, is a central figure in feminist mythopoeitics. In her work *The Penelopiad* and *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing*, she reclaims the voice of many female characters that were quiet for a long time. In this way, she obviously aligns with Ostriker's notion of "revisionist mythopoesis," that employs myth to "steal the language" of patriarchy and challenge current gender discourses. Several studies have examined Atwood's approach to subverting patriarchy through these mythological female figures. Zhou (2024) asserts that Atwood turns Helen and Penelope from passive heroes into complex individuals who challenge dominant patriarchal norms. In the same way, Akkoyun (2021) examines the work of Atwood, Anne Sexton, and Carol Ann Duffy from a feminist point of view. He argues that all of them employ irony and intertextuality to rework classical and fairy-tale myths. Anne Sexton's *Transformations* rewrites Grimm's fairy tales with confessional emotionality mixed with dark humor to expose the gender based violence embedded in traditional narratives. Whereas, myth inspired poems of Carol Ann Duffy, such as those in *The World's Wife*, reclaim the voices of mythic women such as Medusa, Eurydice, and Mrs. Midas to reframe them as autonomous narrators. These myth-based poetic endeavors seek to decenter male-dominated mythic structures.

- B. Postcolonial and Decolonial Revisions: Postcolonial scholars point out the need to decolonize myths, especially for societies that were subject to colonial powers, since these colonial powers work hard to erase the indigenous storytelling and impose foreign mythologies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). Thus, for such cultures, the use of myths became a tool of resistance and reclaiming the cultural identity of colonized nations. The first Native American U.S. Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo, claims back Indigenous culture and presence through the use of Muscogee (Creek) cosmology. She actively decolonizes the poetic space by centering Indigenous knowledge systems, thereby writing back against the cultural erasure enforced by colonialism Harjo blends tribal myth and personal memory in *She Had Some Horses* (1983) and *A Map to the Next World* (2000), employing animal spirits and the trickster character to put survivance into act, which Vizenor (1999) describes as "an active sense of presence." In Harjo's poetry, myth is reclaimed as a living epistemology with roots in spirit, community, and place. Ocean Vuong, in his 2016 poem *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, offers a different approach to post-colonial resistance by reconstructing mythic frameworks, drawing on battle memory and familial pain. As a Vietnamese-American poet, Vuong uses fragmentation and archetype to re-signify myth as a diasporic instrument for making sense of dislocated identity and inherited violence.
- C. Eco Myth and Environmental Resistance: Eco-critics have also emphasized the strong symbolic connection between myths and Mother Nature, discussing how contemporary poetry utilizes mythology to critique environmental destruction by capitalist societies and reestablish a sustainable relationship with the earth (Garrard, 2012). Garrard's Eco critical Approach shows that poets like Harjo are not merely celebrating nature beauty through myth. Instead, their work presents an ecological critique to the capitalist world view that exploit nature, by using myth as to show the

inseparable bond between land and spirit are inseparable. This is particularly apparent in the poems of indigenous writers, where myth and land are intimately linked and storytelling is an effective strategy to fight back. Joy Harjo's Indigenous poetics is a crucial example. In her poetry, myth, and nature are inseparable—land, animals, and ancestral spirits are all active agents. Harjo's poetry is a tool of resistance against colonial aggression toward people and especially land, she employs her poetry to expose the destruction of environment by the colonizers, promoting harmony between people and their sacred land. Oró-Piqueras & Mina-Riera (2018) bring to attention how poets such as Angela Carter and Margret Atwood allude to mythological figures in their poetry to revive the connection between the human body and nature which is lost due to Capitalism. For instance, Atwood's *Mud Poems* and Carter's *The Magic Shop*, both depict the fragility of the body and nature due to Capitalist exploitation. These previously mentioned examples employ ancient mythological narratives to expressing recent concerns regarding climate change and environmental conciseness.

While these theoretical lenses overlap in their focus on resistance, they examine myth rewriting from distinct angles. Feminist critique focuses on countering the patriarchal structures within myths, postcolonial lens seeks to decolonize myths from imperialist ideology, and eco-criticism explores reviving the bond between human and nature. Moving beyond using poets as mere examples, a thorough analysis reveals how a single poet such as Joy Harjo can operate at the intersection of these frameworks. This demonstrates that myth rewriting is not a static rather a dynamic field.

The above-mentioned critical lens explores the vital role of rewriting mythology in contemporary poetry. They highlight the important role mythology play in poetry in bridging the gap between old and new generations, restoring the cultural pride of marginalized cultures and challenging prevailing Colonial narratives. While, there is substantial body of research that examines rewriting mythology under the lens of feminist, Postcolonial and ecological theories. There is there is a noticeable absence of research exploring comparative, cross cultural approach. Most studies focus on one poet or a particular culture, leaving a gap in understanding how merging different poets from different cultural backgrounds would reveal shared universal suffering. Additionally, As AI-generated literature becomes more popular questions arise regarding the effectiveness of myth rewriting in AI generated literature. Thus, there is an absence in literature that explores digital and artificial intelligence influence myth-based poetry.

Conclusion

This article reviews the role of myth rewriting in modern poetry. It shows that modern poets rewrite canonical mythological narratives not for a mere aesthetic value, they utilize these narratives to resist biased mainstream discourses that oppress marginalized people. The article argues that the selected poets weaponized myths to express their cultural identity and keep it alive in Capitalist, patriarchal, colonial hegemonies. Furthermore, the review argues that modern poets utilized mythical narratives to discuss pressing modern feminist, ecological and postcolonial issues. Additionally, it has been noted that while feminist, postcolonial, and ecological approaches have attracted much scholarly interest. Yet, Comparative and cross cultural approached remain understudied, such studies can show how different traditions (e.g. Greek V.S. Indigenous) deploy mythic resistance and how they correspond or differ from each

other. Additionally, the emerging field of AI-generated poetry presents a new frontier and requires further investigation to show whether AI poetry which lacks lived experience can meaningfully rewrite myth. By addressing these gaps, we can better understand mythological rewriting as a dynamic field which can benefit the existing literature.

إعادة كتابة الأسطورة في الشعر المعاصر: مقال مراجعة

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المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة عدد من الأبحاث المعاصرة التي عالجت إعادة كتابة الأسطورة في الشعر الحديث بوصفها أداة مقاومة للأنظمة القمعية ووسيلة لاستعادة الهوية الثقافية والذاكرة الجمعية. وتعتمد الدراسة منهجاً نوعياً يقوم على اختيار الدراسات ذات الصلة الموضوعية والاثر النقدي، مركزة على شعراء من خلفيات ثقافية وجندرية متعددة. وتبحث في كيفية إعادة توظيف الأسطورة- اليونانية، والأيرلندية، وأساطير السكان الأصليين، وبلاد ما بين النهرين- بما يسهم في تفكيك الخطابات المهيمنة واستعادة الأصوات المهمشة وإعادة تشكيل التقاليد الموروثة. وتشير نتائج المراجعة إلى أن الدراسات السابقة التي تناولت شعر لويز غليك، وجوي هارجو، وأوشن فويونغ، وماغريت آتوود، وغيرهم، من منظور النقد النسوي وما بعد الاستعمار والنقد الإيكولوجي، قد أبرزت القوة الجمالية والسياسية الكامنة في إعادة كتابة الأسطورة. غير أن ثمة فجوات بحثية ما تزال قائمة، ولا سيما فيما يتعلق بتفاعل الشعر المولّد بالذكاء الاصطناعي مع الأساطير، وفي الدراسات التداخلية والمقارنة التي تربط بين الثقافات المختلفة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى ضرورة توجيه البحث المستقبلي نحو استكشاف إعادة كتابة الأسطورة بوصفها استراتيجية أدبية متعددة الأبعاد في الشعر المعاصر.