

## RE-VISIONING MYTHMAKING: CONTENDING FEMALE VOICES IN DUFFY'S *THE WORLD'S WIFE* AND ATWOOD'S *THE PENELOPIAD*

P Devipriya<sup>1</sup>, Smrutisikta Mishra<sup>2</sup> & Liju Jacob Kuriakose<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, NIT Puducherry, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, NIT Puducherry, India

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Alliance University, Bangalore, India

Received: 15 Feb 2022

Accepted: 21 Feb 2022

Published: 23 Feb 2022

### ABSTRACT

Mythologies have long perpetuated the idea of patriarchal world order as they “justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs” (Graves 21). Revisionist Mythmaking, according to Ostriker, is an effective strategy to re-define female identity and to make “corrections” to constructed “images of what women have collectively and historically suffered” (73). *The World's Wife* is a collection of poetry by Carol Ann Duffy, narrated by prominent mythical and historical figures' wives, offering counter perspectives to the existing Western canon. Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is a novella written in the form of a mock-heroic that narrates the story of Penelope, better known as the wife of King Odysseus. An analysis of both these works showcase the shift in narrative and lay bare the inherent injustice afforded to women in mythological renderings. This paper attempts to study how Duffy and Atwood attempt to redefine narrative epistemology by subverting high culture handed down as normative through traditional mythology.

**KEYWORDS:** Revisionism, Myth, High Culture, Narrative Voice, Canon Formation

### INTRODUCTION

Canon building is empire building. Canon defence is national defence. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested (Morrison 132).

Feminist Revisionism is an intellectual practice rooted in the desire to prioritize female voices in literature, history, or culture. Feminist revisionism seeks to subvert traditional androcentric mythology institutionalised as canon and commodified through popular culture. It strives to redefine our cultural understanding of women, by propounding an alternate narrative epistemology rooted in women-oriented myths and legends. In Western cultures and literary canon, the reification of certain myths and narratives have historically shaped beliefs that traditionally privilege male-centric narratives to exclude female voices. Feminist positioning towards literary studies problematizes “historical imbalance”, that is, “the acceptance as normative of several traits extrapolated from a limited number of mostly male literary texts” (Buell 134). Therefore, mythology or literary canon seldom had space for women voices that were assertive, leaving aside the wicked seductress or lunatic woman shrieking her way into literary works. Revisionist Mythmaking is thus a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery in traditionally handed-over stories and myths to transform the literature, and the culture women have inherited over the centuries.

Myth is a folklore genre consisting of narratives or stories that play a fundamental role in a society, such as foundational tales or origin myths. The main characters in myths are usually gods, demigods, or supernatural humans. They are part of the tradition unique to a culture. A myth is usually handed down over time through oral stories and folklore. “Myth belongs to high culture and is handed down through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority” (Ostriker 72). Mythical narratives were reinforced through oral literature or religious texts. Greco-Roman and Christian mythologies have traditionally upheld the notion that independent female figures were vile and wicked with the only other narrational possibility for women as damsels in distress, with no independent space as a character with agency. For example, the universality of a male hero undertaking an adventure is a possibility that no female character is afforded in traditional mythologies around the globe, particularly in the West.

This paper attempts to study how Duffy and Atwood redefine narrative epistemology by subverting ‘high’ culture handed down as normative through traditional mythology.

### REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING AND CANON FORMATION

Revisionist Mythmaking is a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery and its connotations in the social context of lived experiences of women. It becomes a means of exploring and attempting to "subvert and transform the life and literature women poets inherit" (Ostriker 211). Lisa Tuttle has defined feminist theory as asking "new questions of old texts" (184). Feminist critics challenge gender stereotypes embodied in mythology in an attempt to subvert the social and literary conventions supporting an essentially patriarchal regime and hierarchy. Literary traditions are undermined and taken apart in these poems to reveal social conventions, employing "the Other" as the primary subject.

“Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.” (Rich 18)

The French critic, Claudine Hermann introduced the term, *thieves of language* (alternatively translated as *tongue-snatchers*) in *Les voleuses de langue* (1976) published originally in French. She looks at language as the major tool of women’s oppression and education as a means to make women parrot male discourses. She analyses the need for women to creatively invent their own language in order to express themselves more fully.

In *The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking* (1982), Ostriker furthers the arguments of Hermann by espousing that women should strive to be “female prometheuses” who steal and use man’s language and narrative to their end (211). She studies revisionist works of women poets to understand the importance of the narrative voice since ‘who’ tells the story will determine its course, action and ultimate end. According to her, the logocentric project of the west is fundamentally flawed as it is essentially patriarchal. Women must “seize the speech” and make it say what they want it to mean. Revisionist mythology offers a potent tool for “redefining ourselves and consequently our culture” (Ostriker 71).

Lawrence Buell discusses the lack of women writers in canon and syllabi in his work, *The Extra: Literary History without Sexism? Feminist Studies & Canonical Reconception*(1987). He problematizes mainstream literary studies as working in a “historical imbalance” and the acceptance as normative, many of the traits being extrapolated from limited, mostly-male texts. However, Buell argues further that revisionist literature cannot function as a mere addendum to the

Western Canon, instead he argues that feminist literary studies should aim at the inclusion of revisionist literature in the mainstream canon, and academia. Buell says that “to create a...syllabus... is to engage in canon-making activity” (114).

To accept the western canon and to present feminist as an alternative cannot be an end in itself. He argued that American literary historiography cannot place feminist works from the past as a mere act of tokenism, but must rather challenge the existing norms. It posits the need for feminist revisionism to be a part of the canon so that classics do not reinforce gender stereotypes.

### **DUFFY'S WOMEN SEIZING CONTROL OF HISTORY**

Carol Ann Duffy's celebrated anthology of poetry titled *The World's Wife* (1999) is a collection of thirty poems that sets to challenge the logo-centric, patriarchal narratives that the contemporary west has inherited, and continues to propagate through their 'sacred' mythologies, 'objective' histories and narratives. Ian Gregson's contention that “the desire to give a voice to those who are habitually spoken for is... one of the most important motives of Duffy's work” (99) is particularly true in the case of *The World's Wife*. Most of the characters featured in the collections are derived, along with historical figures, from the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythologies. It involves adapting the genre of dramatic monologue, where the wives of prominent mythical and historical figures tell their speculative tales to an unseen listener or, in some cases, reader, often undermining the heroics of the male figures. Unlike the traditional tales or histories which narrate the adventures or glories of men where female figures are either silenced or erased, Duffy places them at the center of the narrative while undertaking a subversion of the Western Canon, which traditionally used fictional women characters to remain in the margins or in other cases, as “an edifying legend, A stick used to beat other women with” (Atwood 2).

These characters always speak in first-person, assuming an autobiographical pseudo-authenticity for their personas while telling their own version of the dominant narratives on their husbands' adventures or achievements. These figures then try to seize control of the hitherto handed-down tales or histories to subvert them by refashioning the tales. These poems work at once, poke fun at the patriarchal logic of these narratives, and force the reader to challenge authority, which has authenticated the previous versions of these tales. The choice of personas showcases a menagerie of female figures linked to the western religious and historical narratives. The characters in *The World's Wife* can be categorized as the significant female other of popular men under three broad categories: mythical figures such as Midas or Sisyphus, historic figures such as Charles Darwin, and finally, cultural icons such as Elvis Presley.

The lack of any distinction between historical and mythical figures within these poems reveals the enmeshing of patriarchy within not just what is perceived as fiction i.e., the mythical, but also what is understood to be objective i.e., history. These stories unabashedly contradict and undermine the original stories resisting the need for objective reading, especially history. While contradicting the myths, scriptures, and gods, it disrupts the authority and sacredness of these texts, which are deeply ingrained in western cultural memory.

Carol Ann Duffy, as a poet and as a performer, has termed her writings feminist entertainment. Naturally, the tone and setting of these monologues are set for performance. Therefore, these poems are ripe with the irony and humour that is easily performable as a recitation.

### The Demotic Language of Mrs. Darwin

The shortest of these poems is Mrs. Darwin, which is structured to be a diary entry from April 7<sup>th</sup> 1852, which predates Darwin's influential theory of evolution and Charles Darwin's magnum Opus's publication *Origin of Species* (1859).

7 April 1852.

Went to the Zoo.

I said to Him –

Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds

Me of you. (Duffy 147)

This diary entry presents the idea of human evolution, as explained by Charles Darwin, was derived from a quip made by Mrs Darwin about how similar he looked to one of the Big Apes. The objectivity of this historic discovery does not concern the narrative as the narrator is disinterested in discoveries made by her husband. The wife's demotic language is a conscious choice that mocks the gaudiness associated with mainstream epistemologies of Western science and philosophy.

The choice of Mrs. Darwin as a historical figure in the narrative is essential, as it showcases the unchanging nature of patriarchy even as the Western epistemologies shift focus from a mythical understanding of humanity and its origin to that of a scientific one.

### The Parody of Mrs. Sisyphus

The poem titled Mrs. Sisyphus parodies human pursuits over existential concerns. It posits that the philosophical pursuits of patriarchy come at the expense of the lived realities and experience of female lives. While Mrs. Sisyphus, representative of women worldwide, juggle housework, raising children, and other domestic chores, her famed husband can bask in the glory of existential acts. The poem is an irreverent and quirky take on the tale of Sisyphus, who is eternally punished to roll a boulder up a hill in Hades.

The pursuits over art, philosophy, or literature were traditionally a vocation of men, whose wives were to deal with the domestic space. From ancient times, the privilege to take up artistic or philosophical ruminations were undertaken by men who then would leave their women to resolve the worldly affairs without ever even having time to “pop open a cork or go for so much as a walk in the park” (Duffy 141).

As with her other poems, Mrs. Sisyphus develops in a demotic style, where the monologue speaks informally and colloquially in anger on her husband's estrangement from the lived realities of her life. Sisyphus is not identified by his name but is referred insultingly as "the jerk", "the dork", or “the berk”. She wonders whether she shares this fate with the wives of other famous men engaged in worldly pursuits, Noah or Bach. They are three women who are never spoken of by the world, never written myths about, and are faded off into the oblivion of history and mythology. She finds the male pursuits, artistic or otherwise, ignoring the women of their lives as worthless. They “might as well bark at the moon”, she says (Duffy 141).

### **The Anxiety of Mrs. Midas**

Mrs. Midas is a satiric take on the story of Midas, and his boon turned bane. The speaker tries to explain how to her wonder, she finds out one fine day that her husband had somehow wished for an ability to shift things to gold upon touching them. Mrs. Midas talks of her horror as she watched her husband turn things to gold. She describes her husband's vanity and greed in making this reckless wish.

He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne.

The look on his face was strange, wild, vain. (Duffy 132)

As she comprehends what he had asked for, she is scared both for herself and her husband. She locks herself up in a room places a chair on to the door lest her husband comes in. She is worried he would, in his newfound power, turn her into a work of art. She describes mockingly how gold (aurum) is a metal that no matter how shiny and valuable it may be cannot be consumed. This meant that her husband would eventually starve to death. She takes him out to the woods and realizes eventually how she cannot see him as he had become delusional and was losing his mind. She casually describes how she sold the rest of the gold-turned materials in her house and went off to live on her own. She ends her monologue, remembering how warm his touch felt and how much she missed not being able to touch him anymore.

### **The Mockery of Mrs. Faust**

Duffy tells the story of the German philosopher Dr. Faustus through the character of his wife Mrs. Faust. The poem proceeds as a list of material possessions and achievements but sharply reflects the lack of love in their relationship. As Faust goes on his reckless living, his wife notes how the moral decay commences as his greed and lust take over him, and he loses the sense of himself. She leaves him as she realizes he is no longer his old self but obsessed with the powers and riches of the world. He goes on reveling in his glory, and as his end nears, he leaves her his possessions while Mephistopheles drags him to hell. Mrs. Faust, at the end of her narrative, reveals the irony in the deal made by Faust as she mocks him,

I keep Faust's secret still –  
the clever, cunning, callous bastard  
didn't have a soul to sell. (Duffy 135)

Duffy's narrative satirizes the greed of men and where that takes them. The character's observatory glance at her husband as he progresses into his moral decay draws attention to the celebratory nature of a man's selfish nature and reckless exploits and the effect it has on female counterparts.

### **MYTHIC SUBVERSION IN ATWOOD'S PENELOPIAD**

Penelopiad is a novella written in the form of a mock-epic that tells the story of Penelope, wife of King Odysseus. Penelope recounts her life in hindsight in her afterlife from 21<sup>st</sup> century Hades. She talks about her life in Sparta, being married to Odysseus, her plight in dealing with her suitors in the absence of Odysseus and the aftermath of his return. While Homer's versions of the epic detail the travails of Odysseus and his return from the troy war, Atwood renders voice to the story from Penelope's perspective. Penelope points out how Homer misrepresented her in his depictions of her life and character and how he was quick to judge and portray her in her female weaknesses. The novella also has insights into the life of the 12 chambermaids who serve as a chorus in the story.

No sooner had I performed the familiar ritual and shed the familiar tears than Odysseus himself shambled into the courtyard [...] dressed as a dirty old beggar. [...] I didn't let on I knew. It would have been dangerous for him. Also, if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognize him: it's always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness. (Atwood 135-137)

Atwood challenges the mythological patriarchy, which privileges male valour and sidelines feminine voices. She subtly draws attention to the injustices built into the system and how she as a woman, had to fend for herself and her kingdom in the absence of her famous, celebrated husband. The renewed storyline at once challenges the literary tradition and the masculine authority which derive their moral and cultural power from mythical tradition. The underlying aim is to subvert the existing mythical and cultural normativity, as an old story gains a new perspective from the point of view of the central female character. Atwood endows the narratorial power to the marginal figures of Odysseus, Penelope, and the twelve maids. "I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids" (xxi).

According to Judith Fletcher, "There is a sustained metaphor in the *Odyssey* linking speech and sexuality, doors and chastity, which is supported by the idea that a word has a physical nature, and that to speak is to let a word cross a boundary" (Fletcher 89). The central male figures are scornfully mocked as pompous and foolish. For example, in *Penelopiad*, Odysseus is not a hero but a drunkard who lies about his own fight with a one-eyed barman fighting with the mythical Cyclops. The text incorporates however, the doubly marginalized voices of the lower class women, as they find themselves in place of the classical Greek chorus. The slaves and maids are provided thereby, a space within the narrative of Penelope, voicing dissent against the double standards against them.

We were animal young, to be disposed of at  
will,  
Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used,  
discarded when bloomless (67)

The chorus works to satirize the injustices meted out to them as maids and as members of the lower echelons of Greek society. In the original text, the maids are murdered for their adulterous liaisons, while Odysseus is free from the punishment for his own misadventures with Circe. The heroics of the mythical past are mocked as the voices of polyphony, and "alternate possibilities of the construction of truth" (Khalid and Tabassum 17) are ushered into the text, breathing justice into the feminine peripheries of the Western canon.

## CONCLUSION

The common trope uniting the women in Duffy's poetry and Atwood's Penelope is their resilience and survival instinct. When glories of men fighting in wars (Odysseus) and inventing evolutionary theories (Darwin) take center stage in writings by men, the lesser-known heroic acts of survival by women are left out in fictional and historical documentation. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir observes that "few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling class than the myth of a woman: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse" (285). Revisionist Mythmaking attempts to bridge this gap by creating fictional accounts that enable spaces for women's voices. It gives way to newer perspectives for looking at familiar myths and stories. Penelope manages a kingdom and fights for her survival in the absence of her

husband. She does not have her famous husband who won wars to save their own kingdom. Mrs. Sisyphus juggles family and household chores to make both ends meet as her husband engages in mindless pursuits that earn him fame. Mrs. Midas has no use for a husband whom she cannot love or touch as he turns objects around him to gold with his newfound boon. Duffy and Atwood try to showcase through their writings the cost that the wives of famous personas of history and fiction, myth and legend, pay for their husbands' glory. This did not matter throughout history. In a patriarchal society that has very little space for women's voices, the choice.

Duffy and Atwood, through their writings, tame the arrogance of the mythical buttressing of Western patriarchy, by rattling and deconstructing them within the confines of a renewed narrative and subjectivity, using an updated language and wit, thus displacing them from their elevated pedestal. The texts demand the audience to ruminate upon and interrogate the mythical legacy of discriminatory cultural legacies and its universal applicability that placate marginalizing of the female gender. The familiarity of mythical tales is challenged with politically charged wit to lay bare some weighty shortcomings of modern society. These personas are self-conscious as they constantly engage with the relevance of myths as primordial grand narratives while situating the past with a commentary from the present. The degree of irreverence exhibited by these narratives persistently challenges the handed-down authority in Western mythology and revolt against the patriarchies of the past and the present.

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