

Strong Myths Never Die: A Postmodern Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

- C M Dhanumol

Abstract: Myths are mysterious phenomena. They are the symbolic projections of people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations. They are at once provincial and yet universal. Though they belong to a pre-literate and pre-historical era, they keep recurring in all ages and are a part of our contemporary society. Myth is not to be equated with literature, but there exists a symbiotic relationship between the two. Setting a different trend, post-modern myth criticism as well as mythical literature replaces the classical (Greek and Roman) myths by local myths and interweaves ancient myths and modern stories, attributing a splendid, contemporary colour. In the article, I have dealt with the application of myth and archetypes by Margaret Atwood in her novella, *The Penelopiad* and an effort has been made to vindicate 'the melancholic feminist voice' of Penelope and the maids. The paper also seeks to examine the 'epic distance' and the mythical method from a postmodern perspective.

Keywords: myth and literature, Epic distance, post-modern notions, archetypes.

Myths are mysterious phenomena. They project symbolically peoples' hopes, values, fears, and aspirations. They are at once provincial and yet universal. Connecting the members of a society to their tradition and past, they bind a tribe, a society or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities. In *The Language of Poetry*, edited by Allen Tate, Philip Wheelwright explains "Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living" (11). Primarily, Myths are basic stories or human dramas about our recurring, persistent struggles with life and death, good and evil and are designed to assist us to cope with any problematic human predicament. They perhaps exist more in the hearts of men than in reality, but express the needs, longings, desires and aspirations of men and represent something beyond the mundane nature of their life, the limits of their life and the confines of their actions. Commenting on the symbiotic relationship between myth and literature, Thomas Bullfinch, a renowned expert on mythology, notes, "Without a knowledge of mythology, the elegant literature of our own language cannot be understood and appreciated" (Bullfinch's Greek and Roman Mythology: The Age of Fable, Introduction vi). While studying the literature of our past and present day, knowledge of mythology is fundamental and vital if

a student is more attentive to the allusions and references of one such as Shakespeare when he invokes the Muses or uses the story-within-a-story technique by telling of Pyramus and Thisbe as part of the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*. Much of the beauty and effectiveness of Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* is forfeited without a proper knowledge of classical mythology. Even a cursory glance at twentieth century literature, especially the works of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Eugene O' Neill and Alice Walker, would highlight the amazing mix of myth and literature and the creative amalgamation and transplanting of archaic myths in modern society. T. S. Eliot's mythical method (in *The Wasteland*) attempts to give a shape and significance to the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy' hovering over Europe and draws upon Christian mythology from *The Bible* to Dante, Greek myths, Arthurian legends and Indian myths.

Scholars like Carl G. Jung, Northrop Frye, William Righter, John J. White, Philip Wheelwright and Joseph Campbell have traced out the relationship between myth and literature on the one hand and myth and archetypes on the other, in their critical peregrinations. In *Myth, Poetry and Critical Theory*, Lillian Feder elucidates the connection between myth and literature:

"Myths are used in literature in three ways: mythical narratives and figures are the overt basis on which plot and character are created; or they are submerged beneath the surface of realistic characters and action; or new mythical structures are invented that have a remarkable resemblance to traditional ones." (53)

Setting a different trend, post modern creative artists, who are more concerned with written versions rather than oral myths, replace the classical (Greek or Roman) myths by national and local myths. Their mythopoetic imagination interweaves ancient myths and modern stories, attributing a splendid, contemporary colour. Margaret Atwood, the author of more than thirty five acclaimed works of fiction, poetry and critical essays, is one of the most talented contemporary Canadian writers deeply concerned with issues of gender discrimination, antagonistic relationship between women and the concept of freedom and identity. She is perhaps best known for her novels, in which she creates strong enigmatic women characters, excels in telling open ended stories while dissecting contemporary life and sexual politics. Generally her novels explore women's psyche; she exploits the use of mythology to afford powerful framework to her novels accommodating the basic premises of archetypal literary theory. In her novella, *The Penelopiad*, retelling an ancient mythological story, she provides Penelope a new life and reality and in this way she gives voice to the voiceless 'maids' who have been purposely ignored, judged and condemned as traitors. "I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself" (*The Penelopiad*, xv). Since she is a feminist writer, this novella also endorses some feminist reassessment of *The Odyssey*, even though she disagrees saying, "I wouldn't even call it feminist. Every time you write something from the point of view of a woman, people say that it's feminist."

Margaret Atwood celebrates mythopoesis at its peak form, for most of his works are mythological in nature. *The Penelopiad* is a 'modernized feminist version of 'Odyssey' or a contemporary feminist rendering of Odyssey, which follows the Epic in subject and imitates classical Greek drama in style. It requires occasional reference to the Homeric original and the Greek myths to understand its significance exactly. When dealing with *The Odyssey*, an epic and *The Penelopiad*, a novella, two disparate works of art and two genres come with particular differences, but are sophisticated works of literary invention. Instead of using a separate time-frames, one for the epic age and the other for the modern, Atwood fuses them into single one presenting characters, events and situations pertaining to the Epic as contemporaneous with the present time. The 'Epic distance' between the past and the present is blurred when Penelope addresses us, the readers, from the 21st century Hades where she is currently staying. Elements from present life also find their expression in the novel, emphasizing how contemporary elements are added to an ancient story. For instance, Penelope mentions the word 'internet' in the chapter 'Asphodel' and in the same chapter she expresses her interest in the invention of electric bulb: "I was very interested in the invention of the light bulb, for instance, and in the matter-into-energy theories of the twentieth century. More recently, some of us have been able to infiltrate the new ethereal-wave system that now encircles the globe and to travel around that way, looking out at the world through the flat, illuminated surfaces that serve as domestic shrines"(The *Penelopiad*, 16). The characters are presented as more human and their language is no longer the high language of the Epic but a more colloquial. Penelope conveys various emotions like jealousy and anger. The Gods are not given much respect that they earned in the Homer's work of art; Penelope even doubts their existence. The rigid boundary between the high genre and the low genre seems to be distorted and it goes a step further, deliberately mixing the past with the present or one genre with another as a typical postmodern fiction. Moreover, reminiscing the pluralistic aspect of postmodern society, author makes abundant use of pastiche – mixing of multiple genres or styles – throughout the text. Structured similarly to a classical Greek drama, the storytelling oscillates between Penelope's narrative and the choral commentary of the twelve maids. Penelope narrates eighteen chapters with the Chorus contributing eleven chapters. The chorus uses a new narrative style in each of their chapters, beginning with a jump-rope rhyme and ending in a seventeen-line iambic diameter poem. Other narrative styles used by the Chorus include a lament, a folk song, an idyll, a sea shanty, a ballad, a drama, an anthropology lecture, a court trial, and a love song.

Atwood dedicates a large part of her novella to the maids unlike Homer, who permits the maids to make only quick appearances. She endeavors to explore two major questions from the maids' perspective, "What led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?" In fact, they were innocent victims, used by Penelope to spy, raped and abused by the suitors, and then murdered by Odysseus and Telemachus. Atwood attempts to show the truth (?) that occupies a third place between the

myths and the biased point of view. When the portrayal of the maids in *The Penelopiad* is compared to that of *The Odyssey*, there exists a huge fissure. The maids are presented as treacherous in the Epic while Penelope provides us a different version of story. Penelope says, "I told my twelve young maids-the loveliest, the most beguiling-to hang around the suitors and spy on them, using whatever enticing arts they could invent. No one knew of my instructions but myself and the maids in question; I chose not to share the secret with Eurycleia-in hindsight, a grave mistake. This plan came to grief. Several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist" (*The Penelopiad*, 92).

The maids lament their childhood as slaves with no parents or playtime; they are always expected to obey their master. Penelope herself admits, "I even instructed them to say rude and disrespectful things about me and Telemachus, and about Odysseus as well, in order to further the illusion. They threw themselves into this project with a will: Melantho of Pretty Cheeks was particularly adept at it, and had lots of fun thinking up snide remarks. There is indeed something delightful about being able to combine obedience and disobedience in the same act" (93). However, Penelope tells us that the maids were not entirely innocent since "several of them did fall in love with the men who had used them so badly. I suppose it was inevitable. [...] I knew it perfectly well. I forgave them, however (93). Initially, the maids are presented to us as faithful and loyal, and their deaths are not the result of their indecent behaviour but of some disastrous miscommunication. However, when Eurycleia tells Odysseus about the unfaithful maids, Penelope gives two explanations for the event: "It was my fault! I hadn't told her of my scheme [...] There could be a more sinister explanation. What if Eurycleia was aware of my agreement with the maids [...] What if she singled them out and had them killed out of resentment at being excluded and the desire to retain her inside position with Odysseus?" (127-128).

The maids argue that Penelope had been unfaithful to Odysseus, and together with Eurycleia, she decided to make sure the girls were dead, so they could not tell Odysseus about her betrayal: "...Point out those maids as feckless and disloyal/ Snatched by the Suitors as unlawful spoil, /Polluted, shameless, and not fit to be/The doting slaves of such a Lord as he (119). But, Penelope challenges this, claiming she had not been unfaithful. "These stories are completely untrue.[...]The more outrageous versions have it that I slept with all of the Suitors, one after another -and then gave birth to the Great God Pan, who could believe such a monstrous tale?"(113-114). Therefore, the reader is in a bewildered state and still is not given a satisfactory answer. But, it may be the fact, that Penelope orders the maids to spy on the suitors but hides the plan from Eurycleia. Even though Homer's work does not explicitly states that Penelope was indeed loyal, the maids deliberately provides us with the name of her lover—"Some said with Amphinomus she was sleeping. Masking her lust with gales of moans and weeping ;(117)" and claim that Penelope killed them to save her skin. Thus the postmodern rendering of *The Odyssey* gives voice to the insecurities or voiceless and

marginalized people, preserving a melancholic feminist tone, who display enough guts even to criticize Godly figure, 'the incarnation of Goddess Artemis'. However, since Penelope keeps telling us that she never betrayed Odysseus' trust and remained faithful with such a pre-eminent virtue, we can only wonder who is telling the truth. Helen thinks Penelope is boring and vulgar while Penelope condemns Helen for her involvement in getting men killed at Troy and she is most critical of Helen whom Penelope blames for ruining her life. Because of the diverse voices the reader is no longer sure about the truth and the novel leaves us with an open-ending. Bakhtin's 'polyphonic concept of truth' is reflected here to signify the contradictory and 'unfinalizable' statements of the maids and Penelope. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic and scholar, exemplifies that truth is a number of mutually addressed, albeit contradictory and logically, inconsistent statements. His postmodern concept of 'carnavalesque' is also relevant in the context, in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish and interact together. According to Margaret Atwood, "[...] myths cannot really be translated with any accuracy from their native soil— from their own place and time. We will never know exactly what they meant to their ancient audiences." (Margaret Atwood, "The Myths Series and Me" in Publishers Weekly.) Every people have their own distinctive mythology that is reflected in their legends and folklores; myths acquire its particular shape and significance from the cultural environments in which they flourish. But, generally myth is universal. The recurrent images found in various mythologies are known as universal symbols or archetypes or 'collective unconsciousness' in the words of C. G. Jung. Unlike a sign in which the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, a symbol enjoys a multifaceted status, since the bond between the signifier and the signified is concrete. One of the essential features of the symbol is its 'double intentionality'. An archetypal symbol or image is polysemous in nature which accumulates layers of meaning and significance over time. Philip Wheelwright points out four major features of the archetypal symbol- semantic congruity, semantic polyvalence, semantic ambiguity, and contextual variability.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood re-writes archetypes of female submissiveness and victimization while using contemporary ideas of justice and a variety of genres. In this novella, she employs two major archetypal images even if it is pregnant with plenty of archetypal symbols and allusions. To begin with, archetype of the Great Mother – Indicating the lost matriarchal culture or female-centered religion, the great mother archetype has various facets like fertility, love, wisdom, abundance, birth, growth and is known to create as well as destroy. In Greek mythology, this archetype is commonly related to the goddess Artemis—a symbol of chastity and fertility. Artemis, Apollo's sister, goes armed with bow and arrows and has the power both to send plagues or sudden death among mortals, and to heal them. In the chapter, 'The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture', Penelope is compared to Artemis by the maids. "For we were not simply maids. We were not mere slaves and drudges. Oh no! Surely we had a higher function than that! Could it be that we were not the

twelve maids, but the twelve maidens? The twelve moon-maidens, companions of Artemis, virginal but deadly goddess of the moon? (128)[...] the thirteenth was our High Priestess, the incarnation of Artemis herself. She was none other than-yes! Queen Penelope!" (131) Artemis was a revengeful person also, who punished several people, including Actaeon, son of Aristaeus, when he stayed to watch her bathing in a stream "-And renewing our virginity, as Artemis renewed hers by bathing in a spring dyed with the blood of Actaeon?" (130) Like the goddess Artemis, Atwood's Penelope is also a vengeful person. The maids refer to the fact that the second stage of matriarchal lunar cult is suppressed and superseded by the 'Dionysian' stage of emerging patriarchy and the rape and execution of the maids by men represent the overthrow of the matriarchal society in favor of patriarchy. "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," (131). They also state that they were hanged to serve as a substitute for Odysseus himself. In that case, the murder of the maids would cause the land to grow infertile. Atwood emphasizes Frazer's fertility myth and neutralizes that there is no valid reason for the killing of the maids.

The next major archetypal symbol is the trickster figure, which is related to mischievousness, unexpectedness, disorder etc. It can move between past and present, between the world of the dead and the world of the living. Odysseus himself travels to the underworld to speak to Teiresias, as mentioned in the chapter—"The Chorus Line: The Wily Captain, a Sea Shanty' where the maids sing: —To the isle of the dead then he next took his way,/ Filled a trent up with blood, held the spirits at bay,/ Till he learned what Teiresias, the seer, had to say,/ Odysseus the artfullest dodger! (77). When he visits his wife in the underworld, he again crosses the boundary between the dead and the living. He is also connected with the other famous trickster figures in Greek mythology, Hermes and his grandfather Autolycus. In the novella, Atwood conserves the trickster characteristics of Homer's Penelope. She uses the trick of the Shroud to stall the suitors delaying her marriage decision and protect her chastity. Penelope also crosses the boundary between the real world and Hades when he addresses us from the underworld, referring to the location. The trickster is an archetypal shadow figure for fool or fraud too. Eventually, Penelope turns out to be a fraud as she sends the maids to spy on the suitors hiding the secret plan from Eurycleia and it results their murder. The maids too can be linked to the trickster figure when they mislead the suitors, flirting with them only to report their findings to their mistress at night.

In fact, Atwood herself displays the trickster qualities rewriting the classical myths in an innovative style and adding the novel voices of Helen and the maids. She amalgamates the mythical elements and the modern story in order to contribute the rare female trickster archetypes (like Penelope, the maids), acting like a trickster figure herself. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, published in 2005 as part of the *Canongate*

Myth Series, is a piece of brilliance, in which Penelope reminisces on the events during the Odyssey, life in Hades and her childhood. Atwood believes that the roles of Penelope and her maids during Odysseus' absence had been neglected brutally. The reduced status of the ever-waiting, faithful wife, Penelope and the watery image of the maids are rejuvenated through her challenging venture of retelling the epic story. In the age of post theory, where the predominance of the margins, tyranny of postmodern media culture and cybernetics change the entire world order, it is imperative to emphasize the contemporary conceptions of mythology. With the post war 'Derridean' realization that "centre cannot hold", the rigid boundary between the high and low art, privileged and marginalized is destabilized. In this post modern rendering of the Greek myth, she coalesces mythical elements, dream, modern notions, novel style, interlude, chorus and different types of songs such as idyll, ballad etc. She has a penchant for the mythical aspect and the classical tone which brings her close to the modern sensibility; and she follows specifically Jungian ideas and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to re-invent a number of timeless concepts and structures of meaning. Particularly in today's world where multicultural and cross-cultural readings of literary texts are necessary and demanded, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* deserves special mention as a masterful work of literature.

References :

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Bulfinch, Thomas. *Mythology. Abr.* Ed. Edmund Fuller. 1967. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1972.
- Bulfinch, Thomas. *Bulfinch's Greek and Roman Mythology: The Age of Fable*. Ed. Paul Negri, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2000.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2957.
- Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths: The Complete and Definitive Edition*. London: Penguin Books, 1955.
- Wheelwright, Philip. Brooks, Cleanth. Richards, I. A. and Stevens, Wallace. *The Language of Poetry*. New York: Russel and Russel Publications, 1960.

