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## RECLAIMING MYTHICAL WOMEN

*Challenging Patriarchal Narratives and Empowering Female Archetypes*

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**Abstract:** History bears proof to the fact that women have always been relegated to an inferior position in the society. Their representation in literature and other art forms, too, has been nothing short of being an enchantress, a wicked witch, or a devoted mother – merely mentioning their existence with relation to the protagonists. Take for an instance the famous mythical character of Menaka, an *apsara* in the court of Indra, who had to make certain life choices and give up her daughter in order to have a chance at a normal life, as suited to the patriarchy. Or, take clues from the characters of Sita and Ahalya, who had to provide proofs to their respective husbands as a measure of their faithfulness towards them, and undergo severe penance throughout their lives. History has been cruel to such women of much importance, but the recent developments in the genre of fiction have given a considerable space to such women whose voices have been suppressed for a very long time. Having been relegated to the side-lines for so long, these voices have now come up with thoughts and desires of their own, as a symbol of the ‘second sex’ finally being given a chance at representation in the contemporary society. This paper attempts to study the lives of two such women – Draupadi (from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*) and Penelope (from Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*), their experiences in times of war, their suppressed voices, and finally their struggle to establish dominance in an overpowering patriarchal world. This paper also attempts to establish the relevance of studying such voices in the contemporary times, for these women are not just epitome of beauty and compassion, but they also serve as commendable examples of bravery, leadership, strategic competence and “survival of the fittest” instinct in the midst of severe hegemony.

**Index Terms –** Feminism, patriarchy, gendered voices, suppression, mythology, subversion, rewriting, hegemony, resistance.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Due to patriarchy, ancient epics usually feature a larger-than-life tribal or national protagonist who fights bravely to liberate the tribe or nation. *The Iliad*’s Achilles and the *Mahabharata*’s Arjuna are legendary for their battlefield oaths and superhuman feats. When you look closer at these epics, you’ll see that women are the ones behind these heroes, goading them into action, inspiring them to great feats, or tormenting them bitterly till they initiate wars or combats of tragic dimensions (Hughes 40). Epic women initiate war, forcing their male counterparts to save them. Epic women like Helen, Penelope, Sita, and Draupadi have always been marginalised as wives, sisters, and mothers to their male counterparts. Aristotle forbade tragedies about women because of their inferiority to men. Their stories have gone unrecorded because they lack the heroic attributes needed to be the saviour.

The widespread feminist movement has changed how epic women are portrayed in literature. Writers explore old works to modernise human values and predicaments. These writers challenge gender and class norms and reframe prior misrepresentations of certain situations. One issue is how epic world female characters are treated. Due to the underrepresentation of one gender, several writers and activists have advocated for gender equality. Since time immemorial, patriarchy has caused severe hegemonic conditions. Thus, writers are revisiting the past and giving voice to the oppressed gender. Margaret Atwood and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s postmodern adaptations of the *Odyssey* and *Mahabharata* have favoured women. These writers have attentively examined Penelope (*The Penelopiad*) and Draupadi (*The Palace of Illusions*), sharing their wartime experiences, suppressed voices, and struggle to dominate in a patriarchal environment. Atwood and Divakaruni rewrote the classics from a female perspective since 21st-century women are like multi-talented, multi-tasking Penelope and Draupadi.

## II. RECLAIMING SPACES FOR WOMEN

One should always remember that these immortal women of the East and the West were mortals once, and the way they transcended their worldly problems can serve as an inspiration to the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman whose predicament is similar to theirs in several ways. In fact, till date several Penelopes and Draupadis are trying to survive in this hegemonic world. While Penelope is nearly drowned by her paranoid father because of some oracle announcing her to weave her father's shroud, Draupadi is called "the Girl Who Wasn't Invited" (1) and has to lead a lonely childhood. Draupadi remembers in *The Palace of Illusions*:

A gaunt, glittering man walked toward my brother and me as we stood hand in hand. He held out his arms – but for my brother alone. It was only my brother...that he wanted. Dhri wouldn't let go of me... We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together.

I didn't forget that hesitation, even though in the years that followed King Drupad was careful to fulfil his fatherly duty... But I couldn't forgive him that initial rejection. (6)

Not all women till the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been as lucky as Penelope in surviving death. Especially in developing countries like India, female foeticide and infanticide is a common occurrence. The lucky ones who manage to survive continue to feel the same pangs as Draupadi and Penelope. One such moment Penelope recalls in *The Penelopiad*:

...what could my father do? He took me back... No doubt he felt guilty about what he'd almost done: he became rather too affectionate towards me.

I found this affection difficult to reciprocate. There I would be, strolling hand in hand...along a cliff edge or a river bank or a parapet, and the thought would occur to me that he might suddenly decide to shove me over or bash me to death with a rock. (12-13)

Both of these girls had to work hard from a young age to improve their most valuable attributes, attractiveness and pale skin, in order to fit in with the expectations of their families. Fair skin and other feminine characteristics have always been important, but modern marketing for fairness creams shows just how central these characteristics have become. However, Penelope and Draupadi had the experience of having their families publicly reject them and subject them to psychological abnormalities. While Penelope was often ridiculed by and compared to her beautiful cousin, Helen, Draupadi had to undergo a severe routine:

In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl. I paid for it by spending hour upon excruciating hour being slathered in skin-whitening unguents and scrubbed with numerous exfoliants by my industrious nurse. (8)

Draupadi and Penelope defy the expectations placed on them by society and the people in their lives, and they achieve great success as a result. They make themselves at home by valuing themselves and disregarding conventional standards of beauty. These girls suffer through puberty trying to achieve the ideal standard of beauty, only to find themselves at the altar. For many of these women, marriage is mostly about practical concerns, like having children and ensuring political stability; it has little to do with more abstract feelings like love and desire. The marriages of Penelope and Draupadi are, in fact, merely conquests by the heroes to win the approval of the different kingdoms present. Kunti, Draupadi's mother-in-law, made matters more difficult by insisting that Draupadi marry not only Arjuna, the victorious hero, but also his four siblings. Even though it was unethical for a woman to marry five husbands, this union was justified by sage Vyasa in *The Palace of Illusions*:

To keep me chaste and foster harmony in the Pandava household, Vyasa designed a special code of marital conduct for us. I would be wife to each brother a year at a time, from oldest to youngest, consecutively. During that year, the other brothers were to keep their eyes lowered when speaking to me. (Better if they didn't speak at all.) They were not to touch me, not even the tips of the fingers... Each time I went to a new brother, I'd be a virgin again. (119-120)

The predicament of Penelope after her marriage to Odysseus might not be as brutal as that of Draupadi, yet she still had to endure a number of tribulations – the first one being her mother-in-law Anticleia. Penelope mentions that her "mother-in-law was circumspect. She was a prune-mouthed woman, and though she gave me a formal welcome [Penelope] could tell [Anticleia] didn't approve of [her]" (30).

Penelope and Draupadi as women stand apart from other characters in the *Odyssey* and the *Mahabharata* respectively. They're rebel princesses who later on become strong queens and raise themselves above all hardships, challenges and struggles rather than surrendering. Draupadi had the courage to question the elders when she was gambled away by her husband. She strongly stood before the assembly and cursed the Kauravas, thus bringing upon a huge change in history. The incident of her disrobing only made her come to the final truth, i.e.,

All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands. I'd believed that because they loved me they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me...there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering... I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought. The choice they made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies. (194-195)

Draupadi's plight has never been understood, yet she has always been held responsible for starting the Great War of Kurukshetra. She personifies the female rant about being degraded as a tool of lust in the male-dominated society. She could have remained a silent victim of this oppression, but instead she has opted for the more drastic measure of taking violent revenge on her oppressors. Draupadi, as a woman, declares her independence from the rest of the group. Penelope faces a similar situation as Odysseus embarks on the journey to the Trojan War. She plays the part of a single mom who is trying to provide for her son, Telemachus. Furthermore, she takes charge of running the kingdom of Ithaca while its king is away. Since the woman has no agency of her own, patriarchal factors like as honour and property are irrelevant to her, as they were in Draupadi's storey. Penelope acts more like a deputy or guardian, keeping things under control for the master. She doesn't just hold the suitors at bay who are after her for the sake of the throne; she actively participates in state affairs. To keep the "vultures" at bay, she enlists the help of twelve of her most trusted servants (60). If she doesn't remain silent, Penelope will be accused of betraying Odysseus and Telemachus when they publicly hang the twelve maids and slaughter the suitors. No one, not even her husband or children, could possibly understand the anguish she endured hiding from predators for so long. And discrimination based on gender and socioeconomic status has been commonplace for decades, if not centuries. Penelope, the ideal wife, would never have an affair, but Odysseus may.

### III. CONCLUSION

Although history shows that Penelope and Draupadi have been blamed for atrocities committed in both the West and the East, the trials they endured and the reasons they resorted to such behaviour have been lost to time. *The Penelopiad* and *The Palace of Illusions* provide a platform for these women to have their own opinions heard. As Helen Cixous argues in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa":

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her movement. (875)

Through sheer determination, autonomy, and confidence in themselves, Penelope and Draupadi mount the stairway to grace and honour, demonstrating the managerial qualities of team coordination, leadership, strategic and communicative competence, and administrative skills. They maintain their honour no matter how hard the outside world attempts to destroy them. As they journey together, they represent women of diverse ages and backgrounds. In their own versions of the epics, Atwood and Divakaruni reject the submissive lives of the women and instead stress Penelope and Draupadi as the motivating powers that eventually change the destiny of a whole dynasty.

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