

## CONFRONTATION OF MYTH AND REALITY IN THE NOVELS *THE PENELOPIAD AND THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

*Samadhanam Emimal. M., Research Scholar, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore*

*Dr. S. Christina Rebecca, Head, Professor, Department of English,  
Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore*

### **Abstract:**

*The study attempts to highlight the predicament of postmodern art which confides with the traditional art form by subverting the antique foundation on which the great epics are placed. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* attempt to represent the marginalized versions through the eyes of the typical postmodernist Penelope and Draupadi. The study hinges on the critical formulations of the postmodern literature in defamiliarizing the traditional model by decoding the antique text with the ironic glamorization that dismantles the antic disposition of truth where the myth and the reality confront with each other highlighting the difference between the mythical world of the past and the present world of reality. The study challenges the conventional understanding entailing the grand narratives and focuses on the mythical level of restructuring, where each adaptations of the myth is unique to an author's specific construction of the story demonstrating a shared style of replaying old stories in new contexts through modern perspective.*

**Key Words:** *Postmodernism, Myth, Reality, Re-telling, Mininarrative, Reconstruction, Metanarrative*

### **Introduction**

The word Myth comes from the Greek word 'Mythos' which means 'Story'. Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives. They explore one's desire, fear, longing and provide narratives that reminds us that Myth never dies or evades but gets modified accordingly. Since myths and legends are the repository of one's collective senses, their actuality can never be exhausted. Myth is the framing device that interrogates particular socio-cultural and historical moments. Myths deal with the evolution and establishment of human societies that attributes meaning to customary practices and tradition. Literature is more like a sophisticated human endeavor which acts as a platform to record sacred entity in the form of stories and legends. One such endeavor is the work of Homer and Vyasa, *The Odyssey* and *Mahabharata* respectively. Literature has often borrowed stories from various cultural myths, using them as an important source in developing plots and themes which are reworked, reconstructed and recreated coping to the contemporary thinking trend.

Each adaptation of myth is unique to an author's specific construction of the story and these novels, *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood and *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni demonstrates seemingly a shared style of replaying the old stories in new contexts and modern perspectives. These novels *The Penelopiad* and *The palace of Illusions* offer an alternative narrative to a grand myth by Penelope and Draupadi who comments on their experiences and events that happened many years ago to the modern reader from their own perspectives. As this lay a contrasting stroke between the mythical world and the world of reality. Myth is the fabrication of ancient narratives which alters at every juncture narratives irrespective of the period in which they are spoken. As Bruce Lincoln in his work *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship* provides a genealogical study regarding myth

where he states that “Myth is an ideologically weighted narrative about figures and events from a remote past which shapes contemporary ideologies” (3). Thus, these two novels attempt to unmask the ideological imperatives behind every sacred history or myth which brings an alternative version of the grand narrative where it goes on de-constructing, re-constructing and re-interpreting the existing narrative.

Warner, Marina in her work, *Six Myths of our Times: Little Angles, Little Monsters, Beautiful Beasts and More* regards Myth not as fixed entities, but as the changing symbols which can reveal historical, social and cultural elements as well as the agendas behind them. Warner brings out a wide difference between myth and reality as “. . . a return to reason, for simply stripping away illusions, ignores the necessity and the vitality of mythic material in consciousness as well as unconsciousness to the reality” (20). According to Warner, reality comes to the forefront when myth is stripped of its illusions. Myth is dismantled in the mininarratives like *The Penelopiad* and *The Palace of Illusions* in such a way that it has been explored and the confrontation between myth and reality takes place. Finally reality takes a leaping bounce in all its attempts to reassemble the antique model.

Mircea Eliade in her work *Myth and Reality: Religious Tradition of the World* states, “Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the 'beginning’” (5). According to Eliade myth is a 'sacred history' so its boundary includes the important role played by gods and goddess. Even the *New Encyclopedia Britannica* defines myth as, “Myths are specific accounts concerning gods or supernatural beings” (“Myth”). Thus, these definitions of myth evidently share a common view that the role played by the gods and goddess occupies a major place in the mythical tradition of Greek mythology and Hindu mythology pertaining to the works of the Homeric epic *The Odyssey* and the Vyasic rendering of *Mahabharata*.

The Atwoodian narrative *The Penelopiad* lapses with the sacred tradition and shows the decline of faith in the keystone that established the very foundation of Greek mythology. Atwood has subtly employed the overarching idea regarding 'sacredness' and 'divinity'. She subverts the very idea of 'gods', 'goddess' and 'divine'. As in one instance Penelope says, “. . . only an idiot would have been deceived by a bag of bad cow parts disguised as good ones, and Zeus was deceived; which goes to show that the gods were not always as intelligent as they wanted us to believe” (TP33) and even Penelope goes to the extent of saying “It's true that I sometimes doubted their existence, of these gods” (TP34).

Divakaruni on the other hand, in her novel *The Palace of Illusions* does not make a strong breach between belief and disbelief but she has declined the eccentric idea about 'gods' and 'goddess'. As she delimits its typicality by bringing a contrasting idea of how human beings with a saintly nature were considered gods which they are actually not. She says:

I didn't pay too much attention to the stories, some of which claimed that he [Krishna] was a god, descended from celestial realms to save the faithful. People loved to exaggerate, and there was nothing like a dose of the supernatural to spice up the drudgery of facts . . . Krishna was a Chameleon. With our father, he was all astute politics, advising him on ways to strengthen his kingdom. He commended Dhri on his skill with the sword but encouraged him to spend more times on the arts. He delighted Dhai Ma with his outrageous compliments and earthy jests. And me? Someday he teased me until he reduced me to tears. (TPI 10, 11)

Divakaruni through Draupadi has brought a contrasting idea and reorganized the foundational pattern of the mythic tradition which in turn is contrasted with the reality, thus creating a strong emphasis on the reality which was overlooked and camouflaged in the antique narratives.

In another instance, the belief in myth is at stake regarding 'oracle', the secrecy of the oracle is parodied in both the novels. The myth of the oracle is said to be the divine whisper of gods about the life, fate and its course. Penelope in one instance subverts the idea of oracle and its authenticity as she says, “But he must have misheard, or else the oracle herself misheard the gods often mumble out of confusion” (TP7).

She justifies her argument saying that the oracle of the shroud was the issue for her father Icarus but her father-in-law Laertes. She says because of this confusion in the oracle her life was ruined as she recalls her childhood and recollects the trauma she faced when her father, in order to save his life, wanted to drown her. As she says, "When I was quite young my father ordered me to be thrown into the sea . . . he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shroud. Possibly he thought that if he killed me first, his shroud would never be woven and he would live forever" (TP 6). This shows how the authenticity of the oracle is decried in the Atwoodian narrative and finally Penelope says "Oracles were notoriously ambiguous" (TP 89). She even says that, "it's amazing and awful how the living keeps on pestering the dead" (TP 149).

Divakaruni on the other hand, through her narrative potency with peculiar affective quality, carried this contradictory ideological matter in disguise. Thus, Draupadi is caught in the tension between the oracle which was more like a riddle and this underlies the fact that the mystical pronouncement of the oracle is just the ironic strategic checks that makes life more hectic and uncomfortable. Divakaruni through her narrative has brought a conscious interrogation of the mythological assumption and subverts it with logical reasoning. Divakaruni says that the events and situations in every endeavor happen according to one's thought, which is made into action. But life is not just the course of an oracle coming true. She illustrates it through Draupadi, when she says "The spirits answered me so obliquely, in riddles that were more hindrance than help" (TP 21). She also mocks at this idea and how idiotically people fall for these kinds of things coated with the fake name of divinity. She says, "Fortune-tellers are always predicting weddings. They know that's what foolish girls want to hear most. That's how they get fatter fees" (TPI 35).

Thus, both these novels decipher the traditional ethnic practices and contradict with the logical endeavor of understanding. This is often suppressed in the conceptualization of myth and its components. As one turns blindfolded and refuses to uncover the fictitious belief that envelops and diminishes reality which is brought vibrantly out through the postmodern narratives. Both these novels are not merely a reworking of myth in the light of romantic ideology but an implicit critique of the mythical principalities which are applauded in the traditional version of *The Odyssey* and *Mahabharata*.

Linda Hutcheon uses the term "Historiographic Metafiction" which questions the history and traditional myth and by their contradictory urge to establish a new myth of the past which bounces with reality. She specifies, ". . . it makes ground for rethinking and reworking of the forms and content of the past always works with in convention mentions in order to subvert them" (5).

Adhering to this concept Atwood provides direct parodic references to the myth of Penelope's web. This wears a Parodic aversion towards the so called truth that underlines it. Penelope says that the myth or the idea was created by her not any oracle or prophecy dictated it. Though this was the reality, claiming it as divine might add on a firm strategy to her version or creation of idea. She comments on this saying, "I used to that it was Pallas Athene, goddess of weaving, who'd given me this idea, and perhaps this was true, for all I know; but crediting some god for one's inspiration was always good way to avoid accusation of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not" (TP 89). She says that she has invented the myth of the shroud weaving in order to escape from the lusty brooded young suitors and this is very evident when she says, "Perhaps this shroud-weaving oracle idea of mine is baseless. Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better" (TP 8). Atwood makes an emphatic attempt to draw a clear distinction between the myth and the reality. The episode of Penelope's web brings to the light, the drift between the notional idea of myth and the emphatic reality that is often overlooked.

Similarly, the episode of disrobing Draupadi, one of the significant episodes in the epic that is often spoken and debated takes up a parodic subversion, turning our focus and understanding of the epic or in particular that incident to a different realm of meaning. The humiliator, the victim, the savior, the spectator and defender takes up a different stance in Divakaruni's narrative gives a deep insight into the mind of Draupadi which gives an alien understanding and view on that particular instance.

The victim of unspeakable misery is no longer a trembling woman struggling with Dussasan to

save her from humiliation. She is no more of an antique woman helplessly calling for a rescuer but she is a different woman altogether. Divakaruni has given a different presence for Draupadi who is portrayed with courage and patience. As she said:

No one can shame you, he said, if you don't allow it. It came to me in wash of amazement, that he was right. Let them stare my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? Then and not I should be decency. . . I felt my muscles relax, my fist open. He smiled, and I prepared to smile back. (TPI 193)

These lines show the difference that Divakaruni has brought in her narrative. Here the relationship between Krishna and Draupadi is no longer as a savior and the devotee or the victim, it is far beyond it, it is more like a strong bond of friendship that soothes the pain of the heart with the balm of love and peace.

Both the authors have made implicit attempts to bring in the reality which is very far from the mythoi tradition. As both Atwood and Divakaruni engulfs the space between myth and reality by reasoning out the traditional illogical mythic believes and recreate it as a new myth of past crammed with reason. The common event that both the epics share is the dreadful war the Trojan War in *The Odyssey* and the Kurushetra War in *Mahabharata*, but the novelist versions of the epics re-presents this great event and configure it in the contemporary understanding as a postmodern rendering. As in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope points out to Helen the different understanding of the context 'war' in the two different worlds of myth and reality and elucidates the meaning evolved in the present reality. She says, "I understand the interpretation of the whole Trojan war episode has changed", I tell her, to take some of the winds out of her sails. 'Now they think you were just a myth. It was all about trade routes" (TP 151). The portrayal of the battle of Kurushetra and its aftermath presents perhaps Divakaruni's most radical modification of the original plot. There is a strong focus on the female consciousness and in particular Draupadi's conscious, which is broadened and gives an alien insight of the war and its events which is omitted in the older text. As she says, "But there's something more Vyasa didn't put down in his Mahabharata" (TPI 314).

The postmodern relationship between myth and reality is the parodic reworking of the textual past of both 'world' and 'literature'. The textual incorporation of the intertextual past acts as a constitutive element of the postmodernist fiction. At first glance it would appear that it is only its constant ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity that distinguishes between the two different worlds of past and the present. Postmodernism offers a sense of present for the past which is altered, re-interpreted, re-presented with more logical stances.

In the postmodern novels, the convention of myth and reality are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied. By drawing an ancient myth, both the authors Atwood and Divakaruni have invoked a refabricated frame of meaning which enabled a multiple possibilities in the postmodern narrative, there by manipulating a transfer of change from homogeneous to heterogeneous voicing, fixed to unstable truth, from harmonized identity to multidimensional identity. Here myth acts as a perfect postmodern vehicle which brings in the reality challenging the traditional narrative by reworking the antique model. The total transformation of events and identity of the characters presented in the postmodern text highlights the reality that is shadowed in the grand version. In the novel *The Penelopiad* Penelope, who is pictured as the mouth locked faithful icon, undergoes a transformation that makes the reality striking and apparent. As she says:

I kept my mouth shut. It's my turn to do little story-making. I owe it to myself . . . once, people would have laughed if I'd tried to play the minstrel-there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts-but who cares about public opinion now? (TP 3)

This kind of transformation can also be seen in Divakaruni's novelization *The Palace of Illusions* where Draupadi up the role of a narrator and tells her own version of the great epic which tears the fake mask and the biased pretensions of the primordial mythic narrative and exposes reality with legitimacy and



authority. The subtleties of the mythic narrative, *Mahabharata* takes up a differing conceptual approach in the mininarrative which enables to comprehend the false affectation and to make a distinction between the myth and the reality as separate stratification. As Draupadi says “It was my turn to play the storyteller. And so I began” (TPI 13). The potency of myth has declined from the prestigious position it enjoyed. This is reflected in the lines of Draupadi, as she says “were the stories we told each other true? Who knows? At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing . . . we'd have cobbled it together from rumors and lies . . . from our agitated imaginations” (TPI 15).

In the novelization of both epics the predominant configuration of the myth is subdued and the legitimization of reality takes an upper hand showcasing its supremacy. As in both the novels the portrayal of afterlife events and their belief in its eternal bliss is often doubted and given a shallow stroke without any emphatic stimulation, devoid of the so-called divinity. As in the novel *The Penelopiad* the depiction of Asphodel which is supposed to be the halls of death and darkness and where the bad ones are punished seems more like a field filled with spirits loitering and fulfilling their unfulfilled desires. Penelope even goes to the extent of cursing god for their biased nature, as she says:

Helen was not punished, not one bit. Why not, I'd like to know? Other people got strangled by sea serpents and drowned in storms and turned into spiders and shot with arrows for much smaller crimes. Eating the wrong cows. Boasting. That sort of thing. You'd think Helen got a good whipping at the very least . . . after having driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city go up in flames. (TP 18)

This shows the very belief system on which the myth is based itself is shaken and counter-feted with reality, disclaiming the divine and noble nature of myth in general and grand narratives in particular. This heretical approach of the postmodern narratives dismantles the stature of the grand narratives by dislodging mythical credence of events and thereby takes up a heterodoxical approach surfacing the reality.

In the novel *The Palace of Illusions* Divakaruni also takes the postmodern streamline by creating a sense of skepticism about the mythical rituals and rites and through Draupadi she confronts the mythical ideas with more logical reasoning. As in one instance Draupadi says, “I was skeptical about the entire endeavor. Even if there were lokas, what proof was there that the dead could be promoted from one to the next based on what we did here on earth?” (TPI 157). Draupadi finally concludes by saying that these ideas were created by the sages to make people restrain from the evil and wicked deeds by creating a fear bred virtuous life style. Thus, Divakaruni counter-angles the mythic mold with complementary reality which is the uniqueness of the postmodern narrative.

There is vast difference between two worlds, the mythical world and the world of reality. This difference is visibly sketched by Atwood in her novel *The Penelopiad*, as the conversation of the judge in the trail of Odysseus clearly states this argument saying, “However, your client's [Odysseus] times were not our [modern] times standard of behavior were different then” (TP 147). This in another way also implies that myth and reality are two different entities that often overshadow one another. The works of realistic mould like postmodern narratives, through its demarcation of boundaries and limitation showcases the reality which is been overarched by the grand narratives. By its mythical overplay, the grand narratives falsify the normative reality.

Linda Hutcheon comments on the characteristics of postmodernism and its components saying “. . . it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (231). As in the narratives, the Atwoodian version and Divakarunian adaptation Penelope and Draupadi gains more attention and significance. Though the novelist exposé legitimizes their cause and reason simultaneously, it subverts the main criteria for which they are known. As both female characters, Penelope in Homeric epic and Draupadi in vyasic grand tale are known for their chastity and faithfulness towards their husbands which is subverted in the novelization of the epics. Penelope's loyalty is praised by Agamemnon in the Homeric version stands unswerving

contrast to the portrayal of Penelope by Margaret Atwood. Agamemnon says:

'... Shrewd Odysseus! ... You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius' daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope' (qtd. in TP xi)

This notion of archetypal portrayal of Penelope has been subverted in the parodic reversion of the epic. As she says, "He'll chop me up for tending my desires! While he was pleasing every nymph and beauty, did he think I'd do nothing but my duty?" (TP 118). In another instance she comments about the suitors and her secret attraction towards them, as she says 'I can't pretend that I didn't enjoy a certain amount of this ... I occasionally daydreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with' (TP 83, 84) this shows a strong rival of ideas that has been told in the antique model.

In the novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi who is known to be the faithful wife of the Pandavas confesses her dark desire and her secret attraction for someone else, which readers would never have imagined. Draupadi reveals her inner mind to the readers saying that she secretly loved Karna, the arch enemy of her husbands from the beginning but due to fate and circumstances she couldn't reveal such feeling towards him. She justifies it by saying that if she is destined to love and marry Pandavas, it should be Karna the first because he is the first born of Kunthi. This part of the narration cannot be found in the grand narratives. As she says, "I saw a different pair of eyes ... what evil magic does it possess to draw the human heart so powerfully to it?" (TPI 193- 194). In the end Draupadi expresses her happiness of being united with her beloved, Karna in the heavenly abode. "I reached my other hand for Karna ... the only one I've ever needed" (TPI 360).

One of the key elements that are predominantly found in both these postmodern narratives is the plurality of ideas and truth claims which stand as strong contenders for the traditional mythical coding. The combat between myth and reality reaches its high intensity here in this altercation. As the unique style of the authors there is a perfect blend of the theory, the typicality of contemporary thinking trend, semantic and stylistic peculiarities which together glamorize the postmodern narrative. As a *mélange* of conventional and contemporary composure these novels enabled Atwood and Divakaruni to disturb the precincts between myth and reality. In Atwoodian narrative, Penelope's account of her husband's adventure and journey gives a clear glimpse of the postmodern sway in the trend of modern thinking which is an overwhelming reality. As she says, "Odysseus told me of all his travels and difficulties \_ the nobler versions, with the monsters and the goddesses, rather than the more sordid ones with the innkeeper and whores." (TP 137).

In Divakarunian adaptation, though it does not take up a direct conflicting pattern Divakaruni has managed to bring out a multidimensional portrayal and narrative which is very different from the original source. As pointed out by Andrea Custodi saying, Draupadi is extolled in the traditional epic as "perfect wife chaste, demure and devoted to her husbands" and in the modern version she is portrayed as "intellectual, assertive and sometimes down-right dangerous" (213). The characters and events from the original source are re-used with a difference that deviates from the antique literary relic shedding of its mythical colour and fragrance coded with reality and actuality.

An important trait of postmodern narrative is an amalgamation of the past and the present, whereas the novel *The Penelopiad* best illustrates such a trait, as the Videotaped trail and Anthropology lecture of the hanged maid's best illustrate how myth is very different from that of reality. Through the narrative technique, the novels showcase the absurdity of myth and its predominance. This fragment from the novel *The Penelopiad* stands as the best example bringing out the difference between the two worlds more emphatically.

*Judge:* What's going on? Order! Order! This is a Twenty-first century court of justice! You

there, get down from the ceiling! Stop that barking and hissing! [Pointing to the Furies] Madam, cover up your chest and put down your spear! [Pointing to Pallas Athene] What is this cloud doing in here? Where are the police? Where's the defendant? Where has everyone gone? (TP 148)

The postmodern narrative generates the tension between the historic myth and novelist reality. The unique style of each author articulates the notion of flexibility highlighting the difference, tearing away the false pretensions and bringing to the surface often overlooked ideas. Caroline Alexander in her essay "Myth made Modern" comments on how myth has been used in the postmodern narrative says, "Myths . . . have been readdressed, readjusted, reinterpreted . . . apparently to dislodge the tale from its mythical motive and relodge it with modern mirth" (1-3).

### Conclusion

The mythical reworking of the ancient epics is often contrary and explores the logical alternative behind each illogical illusion. Atwood and Divakaruni coping with the contemporary techno-modern world of reality pairs each myth with its remade version that somehow justifies a reason for which it was done or told. In the novels *The Penelopiad* and *The Palace of Illusions* the reworking of myth stands an exemplary illustration in retracing the genuine motive behind each myth which might be a parodic version of the classical myth. Postmodernism provides a liberating space for one's opinion or an individual perception which is against the established notion of ideas or a commonly held thought. The postmodern narratives privilege idiomatic approach against a generic outlook. The mythical distortions also enable in promoting the reality fostering the skeptical attitude towards the events and narrations of the grand narratives.

### Works Cited

1. Lincoln, Bruce. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.
2. Warner, Marina. *Six Myths of our Times: Little Angles, Little Monsters, Beautiful Beasts, and More*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
3. Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality: Religious Tradition of the World*. New York: Waveland Press, 1998. Print.
4. "Myth". *The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia*. United States of America: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., Vol. 10, 1978. Print.
5. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teaching of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
6. \_\_\_\_\_. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.
7. Alexander, Caroline. "Myth made Modern". *The New York Times*. 11 Dec. 2005:1-3
8. Custodi, Andrea. "Show You Are a Man! Transsexuality and Gender Bending Character of Arjuna/Brhannada and Amba/ Sikhandin". *Gender and Narrative in Mahabharata*. Eds. Simon Brodbeck and Brain Black. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.