

Sisterhood in Question: Rewriting a Life of Binaries in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

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ABSTRACT: *In Atwood's The Penelopiad (2005), a feminist rewrite of Penelope's character from Homer's Odyssey, we find that a relationship among women as shown in the novella is dysfunctional and fractured. The subject position of a woman in the narrative has not been of great help to objectified women to the disadvantage of women and their rights. The narrative voice of a woman has not addressed the patriarchal and ideological world constructed on the binaries among women. The women, even in Atwood's writing, have been portrayed in the stereotypical fashion which disrupts sisterhood among female characters and exhibits differential power relations among them. Instead of writing back to the patriarchal canon, we read in the text about the Penelope-Helen rivalry, Penelope-Actoris mistress-slave relationship, Eurycleia-Anticleia tug of war and their displacing Penelope as Odysseus's deputy in the house in his absence, and Penelope's narrative and maids' counter-narrative reflecting on how their uneven relationship capitalized on maids' horrendous slavish sufferings.*

Keywords: Sisterhood, Canonical, Rewriting, Representation, Binaries, Narrative-Conternarrative

In *The Penelopiad* (2005), Margaret Eleanor Atwood takes up the case of Greek heroine, the *faithful* Penelope, the wife of a Greek hero Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, vis-a-vis her *corrupt* twelve maids hanged mercilessly by her son Telemachus at the end of the epic. Penelope's narrative exposes the oppression and sexual corruption ordained, defined, and promoted by patriarchy through the institutionalized system of slavery throughout history. Her life has been problematic from Sparta, her native land, to Ithaca, her husband Odysseus' homeland. Her retelling in *The Penelopiad* narrates narratives her fractured relationship with her parents, cousin Helen, mother-in-law Anticleia, defacto mother-in-law Eurycleia and son Telemachus. The twelve maids in chorus mourn at their unprivileged birth and life and demand justice against their hanging in cold blood.

Research Methodology

The women have been historically othered and marginalized by patriarchy and metaphorically colonized by their male counterparts whose gendered canonical writings silenced women's identity and silenced their voice in the course of their writing where the male took the subject position of the narrative and objectified women in a biased manner. The feminist rewritings like Atwood's *The Penelopiad* is an attempt to recover the silenced voices of the women. The classic texts like Homer's *Odyssey* were built around binary opposition of male-female to glorify male heroes and stigmatize women. The classic texts "authenticate" and canonize the "law of father," and validate the process and apparatus of colonization while erasing and silencing the colonized "other" in the structure of the narrative and in "the 'grandstand view' of imperial history" (*Nation and Narration* 318). Smith studies Said's position about the marginalized in relation to the European Imperialist forces. She recommends that the colonized people need to address their othering by "rewriting and righiting our (their) position in history" (28). It is like speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves or more appropriately giving space to those in texts who were formerly erased on designs in the discursive empire of the texts. The rewritngs as a corrective process of representation should have presented authentic images of women but the way the women have been presented in binary opposition to one another in the novella questions the limitation of rewriting process.

Besides the hierarchical inversion in the narrative, the women stand in opposition to other women in connivance with the patriarchy that tries to

fix women in masculine order instead of re-righting them in history. For the theme of identity, the researcher adapts to the Lacanian symbolic order that obeys the law of father. In case of present study, the other is in opposition to the patriarchal Other, where "the Other [. . .] the locus in which is constituted the I who is speaking with him who hears" (*The Psychoses* 273) and tries to evade the fixed images. The process of othering not only arises out of the gender-polarity but there is ample textual evidence that the same gender can also become a planted agent for othering.

The researcher takes both Spivak's and Bhabha's positions side by side in the analysis to figure out if the voice of the marginalized has been recovered or remains in the "shadow." Spivak notes that there is "absence of a text that can 'answer one back' after the planned epistemic violence of the imperialist project" ("The Rani of Sirmur" 251). She analyses postcolonialism in the context of gender, closely studies the place of women and finds them further marginalized by the subservient patriarchy in the colonized society. Contrary to Spivak, Bhabha talks of collective resistance and his concept of the "partial presence," is a way forward to subvert the authority and imposed silence on the colonized since the "voice of command is interrupted by questions that arise from these heterogeneous sites" ("Signs Taken for Wonders" 116). To incorporate the feminist perspective, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" takes an essentialist stance regarding the politics of voice. Spivak in the essay considers that women in many societies have been metaphorically colonized and othered and "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 287). It implicates that the silencing of subaltern women extends to the whole of the patriarchal world. It is unlike Bhabha since Parry in "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse" reads Bhabha's standing on the politics of voice and concludes that "his readings of the colonialist text recover a native voice" (24). The rewriting should have created space for the inscription of "lesser part" of the binary/humanity and challenge what Gayatri Spivak calls the "epistemic violence" ("The Rani of Sirmur" 251) carried out against the marginal.

MacLure argues that "the stability in case of the binary opposition is (temporarily) achieved is always at the cost of suppression of some 'other'. [. . .] we can continually try to glimpse the trace of what has been silenced or 'othered'" (286). In the textual analysis of the text, the

researcher has used deconstructive readings to identify the binaries, understand the suppressed other in the narrative and visualize the erased voices. The rewriting enterprise has decentered male narrative with a female voice but the woman protagonist has again decentered and relegated the other women characters to margin of the writing. The close reading of the text deconstructs the positions of privilege in the text and “its sympathies” (Belsey 170) and poses questions about the voice, othering, representation, justice, identity, and reality of the unrepresented in the rewritings. The researcher deconstructs the gendered subject position(s) and the tensions between the contradictory orientations in the text. For the application of deconstruction on the text, the researcher has developed understanding from Barry’s deconstructive process that evolves the verbal and the textual stage of reading. The verbal stage is a close reading that looks in the text for paradoxes and contradictions. It helps in looking for the internal contradictions, breaks, gaps, fissures, discontinuities, incoherences, incongruities, unreliability and slipperiness in the narration. The “textual” stage of the analysis is looking for flashbacks, flash forwards, “shifts or breaks in the continuity” of the narration. This reflects the instabilities in the identity formation and meaning making process of the text. The shifts in narration are not only in terms of time but Barry has also identified various other kinds which may be shifts in focus, tone, point of view, attitude, pace, vocabulary. The “textual” stage of analysis takes a broader spectrum of study as Barry instructs us by saying, “[n]ote that *omissions* are important here, that is, when a text doesn’t tell us things we would expect to be told” (75).

The Case of Penelope and Her Twelve Maids

Margaret Atwood is evidently concerned about the unquestioned relationship between Penelope and the twelve hanged maids and the question “what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?” (Atwood xiv). Her question regarding Penelope and her maids, and stated purpose of rewriting is likely to make the text a closed text based on the writer’s single and definitive point of view. My reading of the text moves beyond “intentional fallacy” which states that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 468). As the name of the novella shows, it is dominantly about Penelope and the maids who appear in the form of chorus that compromises their individuality in a way. However, the other ancillary

women characters like Anticleia, Eurycleia and Actoris have their own influence and impact on the plot that shapes up the estranged sisterhood among the alienated Helen, Penelope and maids. It is important to note that Penelope's voice in the novella is occasionally cut off by the hanged maids' chorus. They trace their lives back to their deprived childhood life, and share with the readers how they were raped by the Suitors at their will, and no one was there to protect their honour. They had no sexual rights and they were an easy target to the Suitors' sexual advances and assaults. They plead their case by telling the internal audience and the Judge, a character hearing the case of Odysseus' killing of the Suitors, that they were not the transgressors but victims of sexual violence. Their master had not listened to them patiently and sympathetically. Their case for justice is dismissed at the end of the story but they do not budge even an inch from their claim of innocence and keep asking for justice. Odysseus's homecoming in Homer's *Odyssey* is accompanied by bloodbath, and he restores patriarchal "order" in the house through killings of the Suitors, and, his son Telemachus, while pursuing the "symbolic order" of his father, kills all maids who were on service to the Suitors:

I swear I will not give a decent death to women who have heaped insults on my head and on my mother's, and slept with the Suitors. [. . .] he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare [. . .] so the women's heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long. (Homer 342)

Telemachus's hanging the maids bespeaks the patriarchal order restored by violence in the name of protecting the honour. Those who cause "insults" to a man by violating his structure are required to meet an exemplary death. They cannot live and do not deserve a "decent" death. The women were ensnared to meet their ordained "pitiable end." Here, the maids have not been given a chance to defend their case. No one has listened to their side of the story. Patriarchy, here, has not given them a chance of fair trial. If sexual corruption is the charge, why has not Odysseus been declared guilty for his out of marriage sexual liaisons and escapades? If Odysseus has been forced by the circumstances so were

the slave women of lowly social ranks who had no way to refuse to the willful patriarchs. They were not the cause of insult for their master but, rather, they were insulted and have been victim of sexual violence. Weisser and Fleischner understand that “Women who behave oppressively toward other women operate under a false consciousness, having internalized patriarchal values, including misogyny, a wish for power, competitiveness, aggressiveness” (7). The maids were ensnared and “entangled” in the “nooses” of patriarchy, and got hanged for the sins of omission which were committed by the very patriarchy that was responsible for their sad demise.

Penelope and Helen

In *The Penelopiad*, we find that any relationship between any two women is fractured and shows tendency towards sibling rivalry, “sisters at odds with each other is one result of patriarchy” (Kaplan 67). It partially nullifies Spivak’s understanding that, in the narrative, “ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 287). Penelope, cousin to the mythical Helen of Troy, is found jealous of Helen throughout the novella and her narrative consolidates Helen’s (Helen) naturalized image in the “symbolic order” of Homer, the father of epic writing. Lacanian premises regarding Symbolic order is that the child associates itself with the father and disassociates itself from the mother who lacks “phallus,” the symbol of power. “The Signification of the Phallus” is a lecture that Jacques Lacan delivered in German on 9th of May, 1958, at the Max-Planck Institute, Munich. Here, he explains the role of phallus associated with male, as the signifier of meanings in the patriarchal cultural system. Lacan interprets that phallus as “the privileged signifier,” is “the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier” (218). According to Lacan, the paternal law (Homer’s in *The Odyssey*) structures all linguistic signification, termed “the Symbolic,” and so becomes a universal organizing principle of culture itself. This law creates the possibility of meaningful language and, hence, meaningful experience through the repression of primary libidinal drives including the radical dependency of the child on the maternal body. Hence, “the Symbolic becomes possible by repudiating the primary relationship to the maternal body. The “subject” who emerges as a consequence of this repression becomes a bearer or proponent of this repressive law” (Butler 101). This

repressive law structures the world and suppresses the possibility of multiple meanings (or narratives) in favor of the univocal and discrete cultural meanings in their place. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope repudiates Helen by holding her responsible for her sufferings and asserts to the audience that Helen was her wistful husband Odysseus' first unfulfilled wish. Helen and the nameless twelve maids find their representation against/in relation to the canonized metaphor of fidelity, Penelope. In case of Helen, Penelope does not give her any different identity and adheres to the same traditional image of flirtatious Helen. Penelope fails to save, protect or defend her maids from her Suitors, husband Odysseus and her son Telemachus. Here, the women have been presented as binaries to one another. *The Penelopiad* has established that in the absence of master, a woman, Penelope, cannot properly run the worldly affairs, drive off her ardent Suitors and handle Odysseus's Estate.

In Penelope's narrative voice, she keeps on defining herself with reference to Helen. Penelope has been set up as a binary to Helen by patriarchy. They were men who ran wild to Troy to rescue Helen to address their hurt pride whereas no one helps out Penelope beset by the Suitors. Helen remains a source of anxiety for Penelope even after death:

I never got summoned much by the magicians. I was famous [. . .] whereas my cousin Helen was much in demand. (16) [...] she (Helen) was nothing if not infamous. Of course she was very beautiful. It was claimed she'd come out of an egg, being the daughter of Zeus who'd raped her mother in the form of a swan. (17)

She is, here, a binary to Helen. She resents the fact that Helen is "much in demand." She withholds the "reason" behind magicians' othering of her soul. The criterion of summoning one's soul is not popularity as she was popular but has never been preferred. It highlights the hypocrisy of patriarchal culture that idealizes her for her sacrifices but showers its attention upon Helen who has been "infamous" for violating the set standards. Helen's mother's story is also a story of seduction and "rape" allegedly committed by Zeus, a god, "in the form of a swan." "Coming out of egg" or being Zeus's daughter is not as much a point of her dearness to the men as is her sensuousness. The story of Helen's mother also needs a rewriting contrary to Greek spirit, where "it was more an honour than an insult to have your daughter 'taken' by a god" (Morales 86). She has been a victim of rape as it was generally known that "she'd

(Helen'd) come out of an egg, being the daughter of Zeus who'd raped her mother in the form of a swan" (17). Zeus's illegal daughter has been identified with the vice of illegal relations whose foundation has been laid by her illegitimate father. By birth, Helen has been the product of such patriarchal aggression and violence. She has been treated as a "toy" in the hands of men who fought their battles and settled their scores in her name. Man has been shown as a symbol of lust and source of all worldly trouble whereas the women have been, directly or indirectly, victimized. Naddaff notes quite interestingly, "Sappho corrects the Homeric representation of the cause of the Trojan War. Whereas it might appear that men suffered through war because of and for Helen, they were moved by a force greater than her, their love of "horsemen," "foot soldiers," and "a fleet of ships." Helen then did not cause the war; rather, she is the cause of men's desire for war, which they love and find most beautiful, *kallistos*, in life" (95). However, Penelope's narrative reinforces her canonical representation and "fixity" ("Of Mimicry and Man" 66) in the text.

A woman has been misrepresented in Greek literature as enticing "man eater," "Siren" epitomized in the character of Helen as Penelope recalls, "I was not a man eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen who loved to make conquests just to show she could" (Atwood 23). Constantinidou reviews *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* by L. E. Doherty and notes how epic story models and stereotypes female characters in the narrative, and how it positions them (Arete and Penelope for example) as internal audience in the male-centric epic. According to the review, the external feminist audiences taken as "actual audiences" are at less powerful positions in the patriarchal society: "[F]emale narrators are given a more powerful position than women listeners" (245). Constantinidou associates Helen, Arete and Penelope as exceptional and privileged members in the aristocratic and patriarchal society. Female participants in the story either belong to aristocratic class or are divine. Penelope has never been a cause to kill unlike Helen who has been misrepresented and erased in Penelope's narrative. To win heart by covert means has been offered the only art of a woman. Enticing men into a relationship has been termed as a woman's "conquests." After the death of her mother-in-law and mad father-in-law Laertes she had to run the "vast estates of Odysseus all by myself" (Atwood 68). When Helen has got men's attraction through the wealth of physical beauty, Penelope's suitors have thronged around her for the dowry and Odysseus's Estates, "I was a kind girl—kinder than

Helen [. . .] I was clever [. . .] a quality a man likes to have in his wife as long as she is some distance away from him" (24). In opposition to Helen, she lacks "beauty" which men highly appreciate in a woman. She offers "cleverness" and fidelity to patriarchy in comparison with her "rival" Helen whose "beauty" led to infidelity in canonical version of the story. "Cleverness" has been a counter-strategy to patriarchy's advances in Penelope's case. In spite of the war of Troy and the resultant killings, Helen still is prized in her life and life after by men whereas maids are hanged for their "sins" committed under compulsion.

Odysseus and Helen's Abduction

The men in the novella started targeting Helen for her sensuousness right when she was less than twelve years old. Penelope recalls Odysseus's version of Helen's abduction by Theseus and Peirithous, and how she evaded a rape on account of her minor age. Her brothers fought a war against Athens and got her released. Therefore, the war of Troy is sequel to this war. Penelope relates Helen's arrogance to men's attentiveness to her, "she took their deaths as a tribute to herself" (Atwood 60). Helen has been misrepresented as sadistic, loving scenes of blood spilled out and violence exercised over the strife for her. As a binary to Penelope, Helen is sheer "selfishness" and "deranged lust" (61). She ran away with Paris the prince of Troy, the younger son of King Priam to Menelaus's rage. While discussing the matter with Odysseus, Penelope says, "I repressed a desire to say that Helen should have been kept in a locked truck in a dark cellar because she was poison on legs" (63). Penelope's short legs are, here, comparable with the "poison(ous)" legs of Helen. In comparison with Jane and madwoman in the attic in *Jane Eyre*, Penelope is in favour of imprisoning a woman in a "dark cellar" on the charge of having "poison" on legs when she has excused Paris on having similar legs.

Penelope got information about Troy in the songs. She came to know about her husband's "wooden horse filled with soldiers" trick (66) and the fall of Troy followed up by "a great slaughtering and looting in the city. [. . .] innocent boy children were thrown off a cliff, and the Trojan women were parcelled out as plunder" (66). What followed the fall of Troy contradicts the official logic behind the attack at Troy and "the 'grandstand view' of imperial history (*Nation and Narration* 318)" where such minor details of the events get no place. Helen's case was just an excuse for "slaughtering," and "looting." Even innocent children and Trojan women who were not a party to war business were

mistreated. The “excesses” of war made no difference between the common women and aristocratic “King Priam’s daughters.” It is to be noted when the “innocent boy children were thrown off a cliff,” and the men were butchered; the girls and women awaited a worst fate. They were thrown in slavery and were, thus, profit-making enterprise—“plunder.” Penelope informs the readers that the current interpretation of Trojan War has changed: “Now they think you (Helen) were just a myth. It was all about trade routes” (Atwood 151). These stories reveal that Helen was just a ruse for an attack on Troy.

Penelope’s Wedding Gift: Third person Singular Narrative

Actoris is Penelope’s “wedding present” from her father. She is dislocated from the margins of Sparta to those of Ithaca. Her geographical displacement is comparable with her third person presentation in Penelope’s narrative. She could not find room even for a single dialogue or monologue. Penelope recalls how her father was mindful of not sending off a “blooming” girl with her:

As she was not at all young even my father would not have been so stupid as to send a blooming girl with me, a possible rival for Odysseus’s affections, especially since one of her tasks was to stand sentinel all night outside our bedroom door to prevent interruptions she did not last long. Her death left me all alone in Ithaca, a stranger among strange people. (Atwood 46)

This exchange of “present” was painful and woeful for the person who was reduced to a “present” from her status of a human being. In comparison with Helen, she was not a “blooming girl” and a “possible” rival to her. Her life and story finished in one line, “she did not last long.” A girl of minor age who could not protect herself has ironically acted as a “sentinel” for the newly-wed couple. It is quite paradoxical when Penelope’s displacement was out of choice and as a result of marriage, this slave girl had no will. She was just driven off to Ithaca from Sparta. However, this girl saved Penelope from estrangement in Ithaca. Her presence connected Penelope with Sparta. She had to stand on the whole night just to “prevent interruptions.” This also reveals how a slave girl led a life of discomfort just for the trivial comfort of her new master. The triviality of her job, “to prevent interruptions” proved too heavy on her life and caused her death.

Anticleia: An Absence

Penelope has not been the only woman suffering from the pain of waiting. Anticleia, Odysseus's mother, also was equally miserable and concerned about her son, has been put into oblivion. She has also been the victim of "slanderous gossip", "I found it difficult to believe, as who would want to seduce Anticleia? [. . .] Sisyphus was a man so tricky he was said to have cheated Death twice [. . .]" (Atwood 38). Odysseus's father has been considered Sisyphus. It means that either his mother has been violated by a man or he has been a product of an illicit relationship. Considering Sisyphus as father can be edifying a man to be god-like. His mother has been a victim of seduction. Penelope's understates Anticleia's seduction. There are chances that the present episode of seduction by a "tricky" man is not out of will but a result of "cheat" that was Sisyphus's business. If this story is true as the word goes, Odysseus has inherited the trait of cheating from his illegitimate father who has "cheated death twice." Patriarchy has been overstated which is in direct interaction with gods and can even outwit them. The concept of heroism based on "craftiness" and unscrupulousness has been mocked at by Penelope in the text. If it is Anticleia's "infidelity" or she is a victim of rape, remains unanswered in the text.

Penelope's Othering by Anticleia and Eurycleia

Disowned by her own father, won as a "second prize" (Atwood 28) by her husband and brought up by an unmotherly mother in a strong patriarchal culture, Penelope is treated coldly by her mother-in-law in Ithaca, Odysseus's home. She could not have a dependable relationship in her life. Even the women like Eurycleia and Anticleia othered her and aggravated her troubles. Her mother-in-law did not "approve" of her as she was fifteen years old and therefore was considered "very young." To be young has been taken a disqualification in a bride and daughter-in-law. "When I tried to speak to her she would never look at me while answering, but would address her remarks to a footstool or a table. As befitted conversation with the furniture, these remarks were wooden and stiff" (57). Penelope's mother-in-law's looking at a "footstool" or a "table" instead of at Penelope shows her apathy towards her. Anticleia's "silences" and coldness are partly derived from her snatched status as a mother by Eurycleia. Othered in her own home, Anticleia grows "stiff." Eurycleia sustains her authority by taking over the role of mothering, firstly, from Anticleia and later on from Penelope. Here, "mothering" a child is political, and source of power and influence in the patriarchy-

ridden society. Penelope has “little authority” in her new home in the presence of domineering Eurycleia and the mother-in-law (57).

Eurycleia is more influential in the house than Penelope’s mother-in-law, Anticleia “who ought to have taken charge in this way (like Eurycleia) was content to sit silently and say nothing” (50). Her “most frequent expression” to Penelope as she recalls in the narrative was, “You don’t look well” (50). Disillusioned by strong Eurycleia, his husband’s favourite maid, “so highly had he (Odysseus’s father) valued her (Eurycleia) that he hadn’t even slept with her (49),” her mad husband, and absent son, she avoids human contact and starts talking to furniture and makes the inanimate objects as her audience for the rest of her life. Odysseus’s former nurse, Eurycleia is taken a “trouble” as she is an authority in the house and “intensely reliable.” In the novella, the mothers are othered by a woman in the strife for much needed “power” and ensure their worthy status in the home. Eurycleia’s specialty was that “nobody was the world’s expert on Odysseus the way she was” (51). Mothering a male child is a source of power, authority and influence for a woman. Eurycleia had fund of knowledge about a woman’s stereotypical role. She tells Penelope, “We’ll have to fatten you up,” she would say, “so you can have a nice big son for Odysseus” (51). She imagines Penelope as prospective “bearer” of heir (Blundell11). Bearing a child only has limited her role in her post-marriage life. Eurycleia does not want her to share her powers.

Penelope and Patriarchy’s Othering of the Chorus Singing Maids

Penelope’s ethereal voice is interrupted by the Chorus sung by the maids who have been hanged by Telemachus on the charge of sexual corruption. Their voice is synchronized and it leaves the reader with the question why a “crime,” which caused their hanging was not a crime for Odysseus and Penelope. The chorus, however, limits their individuality and compromises their identity as Spivak notes that “woman’s voice is not one voice to be added to the orchestra; *every* voice is inhabited by the sexual differential” (*In Other Worlds* 132). Who were the hanged maids? It can be found in Section IV of the novella. Genealogically, they are “fatherless” “and motherless”:

Spawned merely, lambled, farrowed, littered,

Foaled, whelped and kittened, brooded, hatched out their clutch.

We were animal young, to be disposed will,

Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used discarded when
bloomless.

He was fathered; we simply appeared,

Like the crocus, the rose, the sparrows engendered in mud.
(Atwood 54)

Here, all the verbs related to animals, their birth and young ones have been used for the maids. They are the outgrowth of the world like “the crocus, the rose the sparrows engendered in mud.” Their birth synchronized in time with the princeling. They were sexually assaulted and suffered from child abuse as the expression “used discarded when bloomless” bears out. Here, “He” is an antithesis of “we.” The maids compare and contrast their lowly childhood with Telemachus’s privileged life. The Twelve maids describe their “sore-footed” mothers and their birth as binary to Telemachus and his mother Penelope. Princeling Telemachus’s birth was “longed for” in comparison with their birth which met the hostile air. In the phallic centered society, the power to kill and not to be questioned was the birth right of a master, “The male slaves were not supposed to sleep with the female ones [. . .] They sometimes fell in love and became jealous, just like their betters, which could cause a lot of trouble” (70). In comparison with the life of “betters”, the slaves had no sexual rights. Though dehumanized in the patriarchal world, they were not devoid of the human feelings of “love” and jealousy. Their life was a life of a drudge right from their childhood. They were abused at will since their childhood, “If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse” (11). In comparison with Penelope and Helen, these maids are not a prize. The image of their collective hanging and “twitched” feet from the classic text is re-enacted but, here, the souls of the maids protest at the tragic ending. They give their own version of their presumed sexual corruption:

with every goddess, queen, and bitch

from there to here

you scratched your itch

we did much less
than what you did
you judged us bad (Atwood 5).

we scrubbed the blood
of our dead
paramours [. . .] (6).

The “goddess, queen, and bitch”—all mean the same individual in the “nobler” version of Odysseus’s heroics. It is a paradoxical situation that a crime committed in “much less” frequency and intensity is declared highly punishable and “bad” in comparison with Odysseus’s heightened sexual perversion that is much more in degree and ranges from a divine entity, a “goddess” to a woman of noble rank, a “queen”, and a “bitch”—an unrealistic representation of a woman and whore. Odysseus scratched his “sexual” itch with “every goddess, queen, and bitch” around the globe as the phrase “here and there” asserts unlike the maids whose liaison was restricted geologically. Their crime was “much less” in comparison with their master’s but they were “judged” as “bad” and hanged in cold blood. They owned Penelope’s Suitors as their own “paramours.” It was painful to “scrub” the blood of their unofficial lovers spilled by their ruthless master.

The circumstantial evidence is against Odysseus who was already married in comparison with the unmarried and “can-not-marry” maids. It is ironic that their killer was to judge their crime and issue the verdict against them. The maids have been the victim and recipient of double standards of patriarchal justice. Irigaray notes “Whatever inequalities may exist among women, they all undergo, even without clearly realising it, the same oppression, the same exploitation of their body, the same denial of their desire” (164). The maids have directly questioned the blurred judgmental values of men. Their relationship with these men of social prestige was likely to raise their status and value in the society. In the absence of true love, sexual rights and right of marriage, they were left with no other option but to be intrigued by these men. This gory spectacle failed them in their lives and led them to their collective hanging—all caused and decided by the powerful patriarchy around.

The maids are “creatures invented by men” (Blundell 10). They are bracketed as defiled, hanged together by patriarchy and get a collective identity in *The Penelopiad*. They are united in their cause to find justice for them. Their individual identity subsumed under their common kind and they found a kind of “sisterhood” among them. It was a collateral murder without any court proceeding, presenting eyewitnesses, proof and guilt. They were named as corrupt by Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, and put to death in a gruesome manner. No one stepped forward to defend them and their killings remained unquestioned. It was a kind of witch hunting. They were named witches and put to death remorselessly.

Maids and Penelope’s Fabulist Infidelity

The maids counter the patriarchal version of an exalted princess Penelope. However, the maids have also defamiliarized the eulogized version of Penelope’s story and hints at her possible infidelity which went unrecorded and unnoticed. She absolves herself of the sins at the cost of their bloodshed:

Others (said), that each and every brisk contender
By turns did have the fortune to upend her,
By which promiscuous acts the goat-god Pan
Was then conceived, or so the fable ran. (Atwood 117)

The maids voice a “fable” about their mistress, according to which, she has had the Suitors, as her clients “by turn” in “brisk” succession. This rumour overstates a woman’s endurance level. The Greek heroes like Odysseus or heroines like Helen are born out of normal seductions; a god’s conception needed “promiscuous acts” of huge magnitude and “fable” of a large canvas.

The fable’s overstated description reduced Penelope to the institutionalized character of a lusty whore. When all the goddesses, women of nobility and maids were victim of seduction, rape and imposed illicit relationship, how it is possible that Penelope goes free of “slandorous gossip.” When a normal human child is a product of an illicit relationship between a man and a woman, the number of men has been increased frightfully in order to give birth to a “god.” Penelope responds to this allegations and terms it “the more outrageous” version and a

“monstrous tale” (113-14). When the demonized maids in the “sordid” version “heaped insults” on their master’s heads in the patriarchal “nobler” version, even if she had intimacy with “over a hundred” Suitors, she was deified by giving birth to “the Great God Pan.” According to the Chorus, she pleads to the Nurse Eurycleia that the maids must be “silenced” in order to save her by exempting her of the charge of sexual corruption for the sake of “Odysseus’ honour” (119). Penelope had not shared their blame. Her purity was exemplified at the cost of their collective sacrifice, “And I in fame a model wife shall rest/All husbands will look on, and think him blessed!” (120).

Penelope admits that the maids were her “most trusted eyes and ears” (90). They kept her informed of the men’s planning. They enabled her to devise pre-emptive strategy well in time by employing her quality of cleverness. She protests how patriarchy had given no sex rights to maids. They were defenceless and had contributed positively in Penelope’s defence. Their services have rarely been acknowledged in the canonical text. As “muted group”, Blundell relates, in general, about the Greek women, their “subjectivity has been denied to us” (11). Penelope confirms to the readers that “no one cared who might worm his way in between their legs” (Atwood 25). Eurycleia’s babies kill Penelope’s Suitors and her nursed girls.

While discussing types of property and ownership of women in Ancient Greece, Schaps builds his arguments on the archival “manumission-inscriptions” that “the Hellenistic woman” had the “capacity [. . .] to free a slave” (7). His argument makes room to argue that Penelope might have considered freeing the maids who were suffering at the hands of the Suitors. Instead, the maids were acting on Penelope’s instructions to “pretend to be in love with these men” in order to protect the honour of their master in his absence and were offering their bodies as human shield to Penelope’s body, “Several of them did fall in love with the men who had used them so badly. I suppose it was inevitable. They thought I couldn’t see what was going on, but I knew it perfectly well. I forgave them, however. They were young and inexperienced, and it wasn’t every slave-girl in Ithaca who could boast of being the mistress of a young nobleman” (Atwood 93-94). It is ironic and contradictory that sexual labour and a state of being abused “so badly” has been interpreted as “love” by a woman. They were “young” but not “inexperienced,” as the text bears the proof that they were being sexually manhandled since their childhood. However, a woman’s reaction to maids’ sexuality is different

from a patriarch. The patriarchy declared their sexual labour as an unpardonable and unforgivable sin when Penelope was ready to forgive and redeem them of the charge. The slave girls in Ithaca could “boast” of nothing in their life when they had no rights. The excruciating pain, inflicted insults, and physical and sexual labour left them with nothing to take pride in. A “nobleman” is traditionally an ascribed fixture not achieved in life. It has nothing to do with the noble deeds. The promiscuity of a man is enshrouded under the cover of “nobleman.”

The women have been presented as objects to be used by men. The maids were bound to “serve” their master since their childhood. Once Odysseus is away, Telemachus and Penelope become their masters. The role of a master is taken up by a woman here. However, she is a demi-master displaced as a master by her own son and colonized by the presence of the Suitors. Though maids were young and the Suitors mated with them, they dream of being married to the “young” heroes and being “happy and free” (44). However, no one among the Suitors opted for any of them as a wife. They are human beings of flesh and blood. Their desires to be loved and taken care of have not been rationalized.

The maids were dehumanized and demonized for being engaged with the male members of the society while the latter were being eulogized at the same time. Ray (2009) notices that “Spivak urges a sex-analysis that would disclose how the repression of the clitoris [. . .] is the governing principle of all patriarchal societies” (118). Contextualized by Spivak’s understanding, the maids were repressed by the sexual acts. Their body parts have been used against their will and their misuse disempowered and dispossessed them of their will and right over their own bodies. Here, sex as an act of aggression leads to the repression of women. The maids’ hard life of slavery, “repression” and sexual vulnerability is thwarted by the sleep and ensuing dreams. It is a time of peace and rest from manual and sexual labour. There is a marked difference and contradiction between the real oppressive world of patriarchy and dreamy world of matriarchy, “And hoist our skirts at their command / For every prick and knave” (Atwood 100). They were physically colonized as servants and their wombs were violated and desecrated by the guests and masters alike, as they say “[d]irt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls” (11). Penelope, as a mother to her adopted daughters, has othered them by becoming an accomplice to their sad demise. Their hanging explains how the master of a house was not only master of the slaves,

their life but also of their death. They were treated as sex toys by the male members of every age irrespective of the fact that they were minor. They were sexually assaulted, utilized and thrown away. They were sexually distraught and traumatic, vulnerable to patriarchy.

Odysseus's Trial: Penelope Versus Howling Maids

In a “mock” court of 21st century, the case against Odysseus proceeds. Initially, the allegation on Odysseus, “a legendary hero of high repute” (141) is the murder of the Suitors. The Attorney for the Defence defends his client Odysseus by arguing that his killing the Suitors was an act in “self-defence” (142) but when it comes to the killing of maids it was an act “within his rights” (143) on the charge that “They’d had sex without permission” (144). The Judge standardized *The Odyssey* as “the main authority on the subject” and confirmed that they were raped to no one’s aid. Penelope is called by the Judge as witness to the court of justice. She says that the maids were like her “daughters” and were victim of rape which was “a deplorable but common feature of palace life” and the charge against them was not of being a party to rape or sex but that “they were raped without permission” (146). Judge, sadistically, keeps chuckling at their case. His attitude towards them shows how patriarchy retained its double standards over the centuries. He dismisses the case by assessing their rape as a “regrettable but minor incident” to be excused to a man having an “exceedingly distinguished career.” Failed by patriarchy and “a twenty-first-century court of justice,” the maids return to the “the Angry Ones” “Erinyes,” the “Furies” for justice and retribution for Odysseus’s “blood guilt” (147). The “ruined,” had-been misrepresented and now underrepresented maids are inextricably linked to Odysseus’s “exceedingly distinguished career.” They would keep on haunting and invoking the readers, critics, audience and writers unless and until they act as conscientious judge and bring Odysseus to book, who has been hiding himself in “songs and in plays, in tomes and in theses, in marginal notes and in appendices” (148).

Artemis's Companions: Renewing Virginity through Sacrifice

The twelve maids explore the possibility if they can have an alternative representation when the canonical text is intended on presenting them as whores. As it has been in the classic literature and Christianity that (undue) suffering redeems the sufferer, they implore that their sufferings

should elevate them to the status of something higher than their abysmal misery and disloyalty. The twelve maids reclaim their virginity by claiming themselves to be “companions” of “virginal” Artemis who was the goddess and “a virgin huntress” (March 136). She avenged the people who intend to violate her virginity or of her nymphs. They have renewed their virginity as “Artemis renewed hers by bathing in a spring dyed with the blood of Actaeon?” (Atwood 129-30). If Artemis, the goddess, can renew her virginity by killing Actaeon who is said to have seen her naked while she was taking bath. She avenged this violation by transforming him into a deer and “had him torn to pieces by his own hounds,” (March 136) so had they through their sacrifices and scrubbing the blood of their “paramours.” The image of paramours for the rapists is self-contradictory as Morales observes that “[p]erhaps the most pernicious aspect of the representations of sexual violence in classical mythology is the repetition of the lie that women enjoy rape” (87). The maids’ final plea is quite contrary to the patriarchal mode of writing. They ask the “educated minds” of this age to discard “sordid” part of their lives and accept their status as “pure symbol” (Atwood 133) of virginity. In order to get a new and revised image, they present the historical evidence from the Jewish calendar where “the number of lunar months is indeed thirteen” (130). They visualize Queen Penelope as the “incarnation of Artemis herself” and themselves as Artemis’s nymphs. If Penelope is glorified, they can also be. They associate themselves with her in order to get a “nobler” presentation of their blurred identities.

In *The Penelopiad*, the erased maids alienate the readers of Penelope’s idolized fidelity. By questioning her association with the Suitors, they challenge the patriarchal discourse which has created her epitomized image often used as a “stick” to “beat” other women with when they do not match with the level of her typified sacrifices. Their concerns have interrogated and exposed the contradiction in patriarchal assumption that gives, on one hand, ideological writings where the “sordid” versions are for women and, on the other hand the “nobler” for men. The text leaves the readers with the question as to why their sacrifices have not been acknowledged, and they are not a paragon of fidelity in spite of their exemplary and rarely found loyalty with their absent master Odysseus and mistress Penelope. While the concern has been shown for the doomed characters of maids and overlooked sufferings of Penelope, it is, however, limitation of the text that it has given birth to so many binaries and conventionalized iconic figures of women. All the women have been agonized at various levels, locations, social positions and phases of life;

the difference is only in the degree of affliction. Their right to justice remains elusive in the text, and patriarchy terms the injustices heaped on them as an act of patriarchy carried out within its right.

Particularly in *The Penelopiad*, the sexual violence has been used as a powerful tool by patriarchy to erase the voice, identity and true representation of women. They have been condemned to a life of sex-workers, sex slaves and sex object in the backdrop of slavery, extra-marital affairs, illicit relationships, deception by men feigning and disguising as gods. From Penelope to Helen and from the seduced mothers of Helen and Odysseus to the sex-bondage of maids, the women are suffering in the otherwise heroic and legendary world of Greek heroes and their warfare. The chorus singing maids respond to the highly praised image of Penelope and her fidelity by arguing that she saved her skin by sacrificing them, and exploiting her powerful position as Odysseus's wife. The maids are all for justice and require from the readers and writers to acknowledge their exemplary sacrifices for their absent master Odysseus and then-besieged mistress Penelope. However, the limiting factor for this rewriting is the emergence of new binaries which unconsciously strengthens the conventional seductive figures of women like Helen. This rewriting has been influenced by the patriarchal and canonical writing. The rewriter and her narrators sometimes revert to the canonical images in the rewriting. The project of justice, equality and equity remains elusive by the end of this text.

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