

Perspective of Gender Roles on Margaret Atwood's the Penelopiad

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Abstract:

The most actively and purposefully practiced agenda for ages has been based on mythical patterns and beliefs, which are useful in encapsulating and hiding the reality of gender. Likewise, feminist writers and philosophers have investigated the causes, methods, and effects of the longstanding systemic oppression of women through myths. This project concentrates on how modern female writers have reconstructed gender identities to benefit women. *The Penelopiad*, a 2005 novella by Margaret Atwood defies the conventional ideas of femininity by depicting a variety of strong female characters. The patriarchal dominance that accuses this sensitive gender of passivity and the pervasive misrepresentation of women in mythologies served as the main sources of inspiration for this work. Therefore, this project shows how Atwood reconstructs gender identities in *The Penelopiad*. This work is examined in this research to see what gender roles the patriarchal Greek culture has assigned to both men and women.

Keywords: The Penelopiad, Gender identities, Femininity, Greek Culture.

The concentration on the Canadian landscape and nature, the examination of cultural identity and relationships, and the representation of marginalized voices are all the characteristics of Canadian literature. The beginning of the English language, Canadian literature can be identified with the early seventeenth century in Newfoundland with Jacobean poetry. The explorers influenced narratives in the decades that followed. The first authors of Canadian literature were the visitors like adventurers, explorers, British officials, and their wives, who recorded their experiences in letters, maps, journals, and diaries. The Canadian literary documentary tradition hints at the details of these documents, journeys and locations.

Margaret Atwood was born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. She was the second daughter of Carl Edmund and Margaret Dorothy Killam Atwood. Atwood was a poet, novelist, literary critic, short-story writer, and creator of children's books. She is a well-known writer all around the world. She has become a significant character in Canadian literature. Her first book, *The Edible Women* was published in 1969 which marked the start of her creative career as a novelist and the book had been hailed as the best novel of 1969. *Surfacing*, Atwood's second book, was published in 1972, which displayed her strong nationalist, feminist, and ideological goals. *Lady Oracle* (1976) received the Canadian Bookseller Award in 1977 as well as the City of Toronto Award. The 1979 book *Life Before Man* helped Atwood gain notoriety on a global scale. She was on the editorial board of the newly founded Anansi Press in Toronto, was a founding member of the Writers Union of Canada, and was a supporter of Amnesty

International.

The novella *The Penelopiad* belongs to the parallel book subgenre. It was released as the first book in the Canongate Myth Series, which retells classic tales by modern authors. The book was nominated for the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature in 2006 and was shortlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award in 2007. The Canadian playwright and director Ann-Marie MacDonald performed *The Penelopiad* at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, England in the year 2007. Kelly Robinson directed the performance, which starred Maev Beaty as the novella's protagonist, Penelope. Margaret Atwood made *The Penelopiad* into a play and presented it in 2012 at the Nightwood Theatre in Toronto, Canada. Kelly Thornton directed the play, which starred Megan Follows as Penelope.

Penelope's tale starts with her decision in the afterlife to provide her perspective on her union with Odysseus after many years. Meanwhile, the maids introduce themselves through a song by accusing Odysseus that he murdered them. Penelope starts by describing her early years, saying that she was born to a Naiad mother and King Icarius of Sparta. Growing up, Penelope learned that Icarius tried to drown her in infancy by pushing her into the sea, but a group of ducks saved her. The maids make comments about Penelope's upbringing and contrast her royal parents with their own slaves and parents. The *Penelopiad* retells the story of the Odyssey from the perspective of Penelope and her twelve maids. The story is told in retrospect, with Penelope and the maids in their afterlife reflecting on the events that happened before.

Penelope deserves praise for remaining faithful and loyal to her husband throughout his absence. Her unshakable dedication and keeping the memory of her husband underscores the necessity for women to act as obedient, patient, and devoted spouses. The quotation presents Penelope as a model wife who exemplifies these traits. The patriarchal nature of the society is reinforced by the focus on Odysseus as the clever and lucky man who got Penelope. Odysseus is elevated to a position of authority and achievement, whereas Penelope is mostly praised for her loyalty to him.

The fact that Penelope has so many suitors shows that she is seen as a desirable and eligible woman. Their attempts to compel her into marriage as well as their approaches show a power dynamic that limits her freedom of choice. Penelope's individuality and ability to decide her own fate are threatened by the suitors' presence. It draws attention to the pressure and expectations put on women to adhere to society conventions and marry in accordance with the preferences of others. Atwood addresses Penelope's relationship to Helen of Troy, a beautiful person who took part in the Trojan War. By putting the two cousins side by side, it contrasts Helen's infamous elopement with Paris, which started the war, with Penelope's loyalty and faithfulness. This contrast serves to highlight Penelope as the model of morality and fidelity while subtly criticizing Helen's deeds.

The male-dominated narrative that elevates her as a representation of faithfulness, but mainly to reinforce social expectations on other women, is referred to as the official version in this context. The fact that Penelope's loyalty was used to uphold repressive gender stereotypes is what gives rise to her resentment. She asks why more women cannot be as considerate, trustworthy, and all-suffering as she

has been and suggests that this is because of the unrealistic and onerous expectations placed on women. She has come to the conclusion that her sacrifice has not given her agency or respect, but has instead been used as a tool to restrain the desires and acts of other women, which is the source of her bitterness.

The Penelopiad illustrates how the male figures in Odysseus' household hold positions of control and decision-making while the feminine viewpoint is ignored and discounted. Atwood emphasizes the unequal power relations and the manner in which gender standards affect family dynamics through language and images. It is important to note that Odysseus is shown as ruling the kingdom, which conforms to long-standing gender stereotypes that assign men the roles of leadership and authority.

The word choice of Atwood highlights the family's power dynamics and divergent viewpoints. It implies that there is a perpetual struggle inside the family for dominance or influence, with various family members vying for power or the ability to affect outcomes. The gendered aspect of power dynamics, where men are supposed to be the key decision-makers and their authority is subject to negotiation or challenge from other male figures, is highlighted by the fact that this battle is specifically acknowledged in the context of a male-dominated society.

The final notable factor is Penelope's absence and exclusion from the decision-making process. Penelope's lack of agency and the family's disrespect for her voice and thoughts are highlighted and she is excluded from decisions regarding governance despite being Odysseus' wife, suggesting that her opinion is viewed as being less important or irrelevant. This fits with traditional gender roles in which women are frequently marginalized and excluded from positions of authority and power.

According to Atwood's depiction of Penelope, the reason she is unprepared for the job is not her own lack of ability but rather the constraints placed on women as a whole by society. The paragraph criticizes the gender stereotypes and expectations that limit women to particular roles and keep them out of positions of authority and responsibility. It also emphasizes the inherent disadvantage and unfairness that women experience when they are abruptly put into new positions and tasks without the necessary training or support. Atwood emphasizes the social restrictions that limit women's freedom and the presumptions made about their capabilities based on their gender and social standing by juxtaposing the typical tasks allotted to women with the difficulties Penelope encountered in managing the estates.

Penelope's strategy of boosting the estates of Odysseus shows her initiative and skill in overseeing the family's finances. However, the focus on enhancing the estates specifically for Odysseus's favor draws attention to the gendered expectation that wives assist and serve their husbands. The fact that Penelope's efforts are motivated by her love for Odysseus and her desire to win his approval suggests that her agency and achievements are ultimately viewed in connection to the important male in her life.

Speaking of societal standards and gendered divisions of labor at the period, the lines suggest that some jobs, including overseeing estates and acquiring wealth, were traditionally considered to be the purview of men. Penelope defies expectations by succeeding in this stereotypically masculine environment, demonstrating her capacity to excel in a position not typically given to women. Penelope appears to still uphold cultural standards of femininity and modesty, nevertheless, as seen by her desire to present her

successes with womanly modesty. This suggests that there is ongoing pressure to uphold gender standards and avoid coming off as arrogant or boastful, even when women succeed and break through traditional gender barriers.

Atwood portrays how Penelope was expected to adhere to established gender roles and be a devoted wife. She makes a point of emphasizing her sobs and faithfulness over the twenty years of Odysseus' absence, demonstrating her dedication to her job as a loving wife. The fact that Penelope said that Odysseus was filled with longing for her even when enfolded in the white arms of goddesses implies that they had a power dynamic. Odysseus, as a masculine hero connected with might and conquering that supports the idea that men are heroic and women are passive. Penelope is portrayed as eagerly awaiting his homecoming.

The Penelopiad is viewed as an attack on culture and literature that mistreat, denigrate, and subordinate women in myths by assigning them to passive, servile characters. Through presenting multiple viewpoints and aspects on gender, mythical ideas about customs, traditions, and characters with a new outlook and voice, patriarchal foundation on the exclusion and suppression of feminine traditions is challenged. The novella investigates how society affects how gender is constructed. Atwood exemplifies the differences between gender roles and how they are ingrained in both boys and girls from an early age. Boys learn to hunt and fight to rule the kingdom, while girls learn crafts to prepare for marriage.

Penelope has always been a mysterious character. She is regarded as the epitome of a good woman. She is portrayed as the tolerant, enduring, devoted, wise, and moral wife. She is a symbol of fidelity and tenacity. From the start, Penelope stood for all that the Greeks considered to be a morally upright and good woman: the house, the hearth, weaving, and fruitfulness. In addition to being faithful and waiting for her husband, Penelope also turned down the marriage proposals from new suitors. Through the art of weaving, she evaded their desired offers while being sly and dishonest in delaying her marriage decision. Penelope weaves a funeral shroud for her aging father-in-law, delaying her marriage decision until its completion.

Atwood's *The Penelopiad* was successful in illuminating how *The Odyssey*, a literature with a masculine perspective, was created without taking gender into account. Atwood criticizes Greek patriarchal culture by presenting the story of the mute and imprisoned female characters in Homer's epic. The narrator breaks silence and declares the gender identity by using the process of rewriting. *The Penelopiad* evaluates how female characters were handled in *The Odyssey*. Atwood addresses the marginalization of characters by making the twelve maids who were hung upon Odysseus' home coming into a Greek chorus and giving them a haunting and collective voice. Atwood presents the atrocities experienced by the women and emphasizes the effects of a narrative that excludes their viewpoints by examining the voices of the suppressed women.

The gender perspective presented by Atwood in *The Penelopiad* also serves as a criticism of masculine arrogance and the abuse of authority. She exposes the less noble sides of Odysseus' character and behavior, calling into question his heroism. Atwood exposes the poisonous masculinity present in the story and challenges the exaltation of male heroes through Penelope's observations on their marriage

and her experiences with Odysseus' adultery and protracted absence.

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* offers an elaborate examination of gender relations and an original perspective of the conventional story of *The Odyssey*. Atwood shows the systematic discrimination that women experience, calls attention to how their voices are suppressed, and criticizes the patriarchal power systems that have persisted throughout history through the use of Penelope's voice.

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