

POSTMODERN REVERSION OF A CLASSICAL EPIC: A STYLISTIC STUDY ON CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

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Abstract : This paper 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. Drawing near the horizon of reality the mininarratives Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* attempt to showcase the parodic recreation of the epic, where the traditional model is recreated into a modern genre reflecting the contemporary reality. This paper focuses on the stylistic modulations that the novels have adopted to become postmodern fabric. The study hinges on the critical formulations of the postmodern literature in defamiliarizing the traditional model by decoding the antique text as the epic is being recreated. The study challenges the conventional understanding entailing the grandnarratives and focuses on the structural level of subverting, where each adaptations of the epic as a novel is unique to an author's specific construction of the story demonstrating a shared style of replaying old stories in new contexts through modern structural stratum bringing to light the difference between the epic and the novel.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Structural variation, Novel, Mininarratives, Metanarratives, Epic

INTRODUCTION

The Penelopiad and *The Palace of Illusions* are the novelization of the grand epics, *The Odyssey* and *Mahabharata* with a Parodic version of events, structure, style and every aspect of the epic. The novelization of the epic renders a chance of capturing the changes in social, political and intellectual stratagem stressing much on the contemporary reality. This makeover of an epic renders a great chance to explore a brand new world with its modern delegation. Focusing on the changes that the postmodern narrative has brought on the structural level brings to light the scope that both the genres hold.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin in his work *The Dialogic Imagination* says, the novel and the epic “harmoniously reinforce each other” (4). He also comments on the traits of the novel saying, the novel tends

to parody other genres laying bare the conventions of language and form. At the same time, incorporating the epic traits in a novelistic structure the epic becomes “‘re-formulated’, ‘re-accentuated’, ‘re-invented’” (5). Bakhtin points out three characteristics of the novel that make it more appealing. First of all, the novel implies “a stylistic three dimensionality”(11) secondly, “temporal changes”(11) can be easily accentuated into the structure and thirdly, the novel offers a “new zone for re-structuring literary images”(11). Thus, the novel enables the traditional genre with its old canonic nature and characteristics to be perceived in a stylized manner.

Bakhtin further elaborates on five major changes that occur in the novelization of the epic. First change that occurs in the antique genre which the novel imitates “lose their set of standard characteristics and become more flexible” (6). Second change is that the language “renews itself” (7). Thirdly, the elements such as “humor, irony, self-parody” (7) find their way into the traditional form. Fourthly, the novel with its focus on the contemporary reality inserts “openendedness”(7), which is the most predominant and striking feature of the postmodern novel and fifthly, the epic’s focus on the “absolute past”(13) is lost. Bakhtin credits this feature of the novel as “sparks of renovation” (7) which makes the novel brighter and brilliant. In an astounding way all these changes can be traced in the novels *The Penelopiad* and *The Palace of Illusions* and these differences are fairly distinguished through the means of stylistic and linguistic peculiarities which enables both authors Margaret Atwood and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to revisit the past and bring out a re-visioned present.

The Homeric epic and the epic in general begin with the invocation of the muses. *The Odyssey* begins with a plea from the author to the muses so they would help him with the composing of this song or story. Homer in invoking the muses says, “Tell me, Muse, of that man of many resources, who wandered far and wide, after sacking the, holy citadel of Troy . . . tell us these things where you will, Goddesses, Daughter of Zeus”(1-10). This muse invocation is a typical characteristic of epic where Homer relies on the muses to provide him with inspiration and story material. The same happens with the great epic *Mahabharata* where Vyasa, the sage meditates on the omniscient maker Brahma, to inspire him, according to his guidance he asks Ganapathi to jot down the great events but the novelic rendering of both the epics

transgress this epical trait where the protagonist of the novels Penelope in *The Penelopiad* and Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* uses a different method. Penelope depends on her own will and knowledge where she refuses to start her story with the traditional beginning by invoking the muse. Her approach is different from that of Homers's. Atwood skillfully distinguishes the classical norms and contemporary style. Penelope says that this story telling is her own version and its only aim is to justify her existence. As she says, "it's my turn to do a little story making. I owe it to myself . . . so I'll spin a thread of my own" (TP 3). With little difference Divakaruni opts for the same technique, as Draupadi did not invoke the muse to begin, she relies on her own self and Dhai Ma her nurse at times. As Draupadi says, "It was my turn to play storyteller. And so I began" (TPI 13). Thus, both Atwood and Divakaruni bring in their novels a conscious re-presenting of epical traits.

One of the important features of an epic is that it has to be narrated in an ornate, ceremonial and grand style. This is deliberately distanced from the ordinary speech. Homeric epic bounces with a heightened, formal and distant language. The use of dactylic hexameter maintained until the last verse was the most convenient metrical structure, to distance itself from the ordinary style of language. Similarly, *Mahabharata* is one of ancient epics that maintain its status as a foundational text which dates back to 1600 B.C and is considered to be the world's longest poem consisting of 100000 stanzas in verse structured into 18 books. Thus exceeds the length of *The Odyssey* and it also retaliates with high-notch diction that is sparingly used in common speech. An explicit attempt is made to retell the epics in novel form, in which the language often finds its normal pace devoid of elevated and lofty patterns of speech. The narrators in both the novels Penelope and Draupadi trod with the colloquial form of speech where the readers can identify themselves with the narrator or in particular with the character.

The novel stands with the notion that the readers try to identify themselves with the character of fiction, but on the other hand an epic wants and manages to establish a distance between the readers and the characters in the epic. Both the texts *The Penelopiad* and *The Palace of Illusions* highlight a crucial relationship established between the reader and the narrator i.e. Penelope and Draupadi. Penelope comments on her cousin Helen with a more contemporary tone. She says, "I've often wondered whether, if Helen

hadn't been so puffed with vanity . . . her deranged lust . . . couldn't she have led a normal life? I hope you agree with me" (TPI 61). Draupadi also paces with her own convenient way of narration where the readers find their unseen presence throughout the novel. She says, "Who decided that a women's highest purpose was to support me? (Don't you think that they are mad?)"(TPI 26).

The unique commonness that both the novels share is the creative narrative perspective, which is the dominant trait of the postmodern novel. Though epic has only one narrator and in particular, a male narrator whose actions and orations the epic takes its course but the novelization of such epics takes a lapse from its original path and challenges the antique regulation. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood has employed a heterodiegetic narrator indicating that the text is divided into twenty- nine chapters, eighteen of which are narrated by Penelope and in a Parodic counterpart; the other eleven chapters are sung, recited and narrated by the chorus of twelve hanged maids. In *The Palace of Illusions*, as well the female character Draupadi who was not given much importance in the Vyasa's version of epic has taken up the narrator's position.

Divakaruni has challenged traditional notions in her own way by means of the character Draupadi. Draupadi takes the initiative to retell her story because she believes that her role as the narrator would be helpful to give an authentic account of history which would gradually overturn all the previous narratives and fill the blanks and loop-holes in the great epic. Rather than being a passive recipient of action, she flips her role and holds the central position. As one of the critics, Kavitha Nair in her essay comments on Draupadi's narrating certainty as "she does not want either a sanitized version or distorted version of the past but a factual one" (155). Sometimes Dhairya Ma Draupadi's nurse, Dhri her brother also takes up the position of the narrator. Thus, both the novels share the common element 'multiple –narrative technique'.

One of the most significant reversion that these novels have averted is the use of 'hybrid genres'. The epic though grand and profound in nature had used only verse or prose (in rare cases) wholly throughout the epic in narrating process but these novels stand out as an exemplarity scheme that adds varied colours to the traditional opus. In *The Penelopiad* Atwood has skillfully employed all possible genres like Rope-Jumping Rhyme, Popular Tune, Sea Shanty, A Ballad, An Idyll, a Drama, An Anthropology Lecture, also an Elegy where as in *The palace Of Illusions* Divakaruni though does not employ such an

external changes of genres but she has used multiple prose forms like a local dialect of the maids, a common language reflecting the thoughts in Draupadi's mind, a poetic composition occasionally and the pattern of language frequently shifts from one grade to another in due course as the novel proceeds.

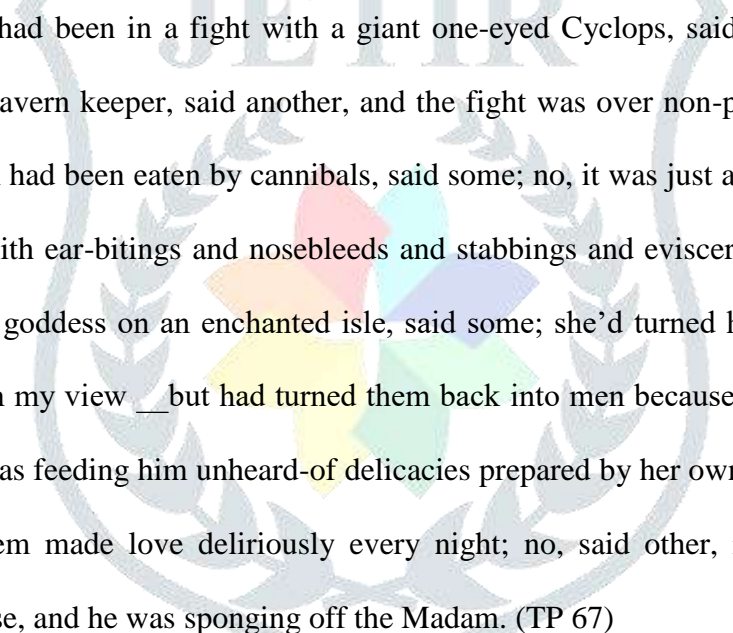
Another important element that Divakaruni has employed in the narrative pattern is the use of 'aside' where the inner thoughts of the characters are given a short glance separated in brackets. In one instance that best illustrates such a technique is when the blind king Dhritarashtra blesses Draupadi saying, "May-you-be-the-mother-of-a-hundred-sons, or May-your-wedding-sindur-forever-shine-on-your-forehead(I knew, of course, that he'd like nothing better than to have the entire pandavas lineage perish)"(TPI 129).

"*En Media Res*" is one of the predominant traits of the epic where the novels subvert this notion. As Atwoodian narration and Divakaruni's version are formulated in such a pattern that the novel starts with birth and moves on the period of childhood and then detailing about their marriage and further explaining, narrating and reminiscing the perfect pattern of life gradually without any shift or change in the sequence. As Penelope suggests, "I will begin with my own birth"(TP 7), "My Marriage was arranged"(TP 19) and Draupadi " I was born of fire"(TPI 1), "I'd thought intermittently of marriage _"(TPI 54). The novels are more like a bildungsroman that chronicles their lives as a process of experiencing life, gaining knowledge about themselves and world.

In an epic, the characters are treated with utmost respect and most of the time they are depicted as flawless but these novels have taken the crude path of subverting the character scheme and sloping down the status enjoyed by the epic characters and mostly the position of the characters placed is often degraded. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope's anger with Helen results in the creation of different portraits of the character, who is known as the most beautiful woman in the world but Penelope picturizes Helen with more evil side added as she says, "Why is it that really beautiful people think everyone else in the world exists merely for their amusement" (TP 27) and even she goes to an extent calling her "Helen the sceptic Bitch" (TP 104).

The epic Hero, be it Odysseus or the Pandavas also experience the same down pushed presence in the novels. Odysseus who is known as the "clever, brave, resourceful and battling supernatural monsters and

beloved of goddesses” (TP 67) gains a different shades in the Parodic retelling of the epic. Atwood and in particular Penelope denies the status of western man that Tennyson portrays him as a man of strong will, thirsting in quest for knowledge as she says, “. . . this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thoughts” (29-31). But Penelope portrays him just as common laymen with error. More importantly his adventures for which he is known for he is engulfed by skepticism as Penelope says, “Many people have believed that his version of events was true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters. Even I believed him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar,” (TP 2). Thus all his adventures had taken a Parodic version and the epic trait is challenged in Atwoodian version of narration. As she says:


 Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another, and the fight was over non-payment of the bill. Some of the men had been eaten by cannibals, said some; no, it was just a brawl of usual kind, said another, with ear-bitings and nosebleeds and stabbings and eviscerations. Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some; she'd turned his men into pigs __not a hard job in my view __but had turned them back into men because she'd fallen in love with him and was feeding him unheard-of delicacies prepared by her own immortal hands, and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said other, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam. (TP 67)

In *The Palace of Illusions* the magical Pandavas, the mighty ones, the offspring of the divine ones, was given a different status. As this change de-thrones them who no longer appear as the perfect supermen as Yudhistira is so much obsessed with his self-righteousness, Arjuna with his yearning desire for honor and fame and all the others are also portrayed with their weakness brought to the forefront.

Both the characters Penelope and Draupadi being complemented as portrayed epic's principal models of feminity with its high virtues like chastity and faithfulness enjoys a different presence in Atwood's and Divakaruni's narrative version. As the very virtues for which they are portrayed and glorified is questioned. In novelic adaptations both Penelope's and Draupadi's glory is tainted a little as the

embodiment of staunch faithful spouse was broken down as Penelope herself says, “I even went so far as to encourage one, then another and to send them secret love messages” (TP 86) and Draupadi says, “I was planning to pack my finest silks and most impressive jewelry and order my sairindhri to design some new hairdos. I wanted to make sure that Bhanumathi (or was I thinking of someone else)” (TPI 178).

According to Graham Allen’s statement, postmodernism and its techniques “is not an empty, playful recording of culture, but a radical questioning of available mode of knowledge within in culture” (190). As the novels questions the available form of representation as an epic’s trait of intervention of supernatural elements like gods and demi-gods. As in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope diminishes the importance given to them and also she did not think highly of her semi-divine status. As she says, “It’s true that I sometimes doubted their existence” (TP 34) Draupadi on the other hand became skeptical about such things. As she says, “I didn’t pay too much attention to the stories, some of which claimed that he was a god, descended from celestial realms to save the faithful. People loved to exaggerate, and there was nothing like a dose of supernatural to spice up the drudgery of facts” (TPI 10).

Atwood and Divakaruni have employed certain unique features to defuse the sublimity of the epic as one of the epic’s traits is the usage of Epic Epithet. As defined in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* epic epithet is “a series of lofty adjectives or phrases that is used to express the characteristics of person in order to exalt them” (“Epic Epithet”) but Atwood’s and Divakaruni’s reformation of epic epithet gives a subverted meaning as in *The Penelopiad*, when describing Telemachus heritage Penelope says, “the great grandson of Autolycus, friend of Hermes”(133) and her mention of Telemachus as a friend of Hermes is the elegant way of saying, he is a cheat and a thief. Draupadi’s fancy names like “offspring of vengeance or the unexpected one” (1) suggests that she is the harbinger of evil events and also she was the least expected and unwelcomed guest

Another feature of an epic is epic simile is one of the major characteristic of an epic, as defined in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* “epic simile is an extended simile often running several lines, used typically in epic poetry to increase the intensity of the heroic stature of the subject and to serve decoration”(“Epic simile”) in contrast Atwood underscores it by the usage of menial and simple comparisons as Penelope was

nick named as 'duck', "they renamed me duck was my new name"(9) and 'water' is also used as simile to define the nature of Naiads

"Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does. (TP 36)

Divakaruni uses the simile of spider and its web to refer to the creation of Brahma, as she says "Brahma draws the universe back into Himself as a spider does its web" (TPI 7).

The concept known as "Spatial and temporal transfer"(Genette 213) pointed out by Genette as a postmodern feature is an contradictory factor to an epic narrative as the classical world of antiquity get transferred to the court of justice in twenty- first century to reconsider the judgment given by Zeus in *The Penelopiad*. The same kind of technique was not followed by Divakaruni but she uses a technique similar to this as Vyasa the divine composer of *Mahabharata* gives her the boon that gives her the power to visualize and hear the incidents happening in the Kurukshetra war. Vyasa says, "I want to offer you a gift- the same that I offered the blind king: a special vision so that you may see the most important parts of the battle from afar" (TPI 253, 54).

As a perfect postmodern narrative, the novels end with 'open- endedness'. Atwood's narration ends with the final words of the spirits of the hanged maids who promises that they will haunt Odysseus and Telemachus till the end and they say, "We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow" (TP 157). In *The Palace of Illusions* Draupadi in the last few minutes of her life dreams of becoming one with Karna her beloved. "I reach with the other hand for karna" (360).

As these novels makes a clear distinction of how the epic features have been parodied. The epic always glorifies it's the national past, a past of super heroes and of the first and the best but the novel is more concerned with the present. The epic has always been about the past, even before the stories were

written down. As a result, the epic deals with an 'inaccessible past' and this is reflected in epic's tone manner and style which is highly contrast to the contemporary appeal of the language and style which the novel mainly focuses on. As the epic's main concern is the "Impersonality" , "commonly held point of view" and "piety of the subject described" (16) but the novel is the impression of personal emotions, feelings and personal points of view where individuality gains a stand point. Finally there is always an "epic distance between the contemporary reality" (13). This distance concerns with the events portrayed, the character sketched, the myth believed, the rituals practiced, the language spoken, style employed and an unencompassed world to which the novel belongs. These differences are fairly been distinguished in the novels by both the author in their own unique way. Both the authors have used the forum of postmodernism to revisit the past and bring out the re-visioned present. As the Parodic refiguring of the antique past into subtle reality, the novels reinforce the creative contrast that outwits the classic tradition of the epic.

Thus, the stylistic variations are structured in such a way that, the concept at which the authors arriving reaches the readers in an effective way more than the epic. The focus shifts from the hero based or the narrative based to reader centered narrative. Postmodern narrative at its effort dissolves the time limits and space boundaries through its stylistic reworking. Grecian Penelope and Vedic Draupadi address the 21st century readers and retell the ancient epic in their perspective. This is made possible only through the language leveling and that stands as a gemstone of the postmodernism.

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