



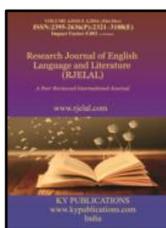
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

## MYTH AND ARCHETYPAL ELEMENTS IN FEMALE EXPERIENCE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING AND THE PENELOPIAD*

R. DHANAPPRIYA<sup>\*1</sup>, Dr. J. UMA SAMUNDEESWARI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar, <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor & Research Advisor  
A.V.V.M Sri Pushpam College(Autonomous), Poondi, Thanjavur  
<sup>\*</sup>meet.lecdhanam@gmail.com



### ABSTRACT

Myth and Mythology have always been among the elements which shape the lives of individuals and the working mechanism of societies. Margaret Atwood uses in her works every possible material that enables one to trace her experiences back to the social, historical, cultural, and natural aspects of her 'identity'. Her familiarity with the Canadian wilderness can be detected in her employment of nature and animal imagery in her poems and novels. Her novel's *The Penelopiad* and *Surfacing* to discover some common and persistent patterns of women writers use when they rewrite myths. Atwood attempts to offer new sites of existence for women so as to enable them to get closer to their authentic "selves".

**Key Words:** Female - myth, archetype, identity, survival, religion.

Myth and Mythology is not simple, innocent stories about old gods and goddesses, but symbols and images which bear political, social, historical and cultural meanings and codes. Feminist thinkers and writers too, have used myths to lay bare the reasons, means, and consequences of these systematic oppression women have been suffering for ages. They have tried to multiply the myths or rewrite them so as to enable women to speak their genuine experience through female characters. The famous Canadian versatile writer Margaret Atwood offers her work thematic diversity, Canadian national identity, relations between Canada and the United States, relation between Canada and Europe, the Canadian wilderness, environmental issues, biotechnology, human rights issues, and feminist issues, a prominent theme throughout her career. She also represents in gender explore the social myths defining femininity representations of women's bodies in art, the social and economic exploitation

of women as well as women's relations with each other and with men.

She frequently uses in her works the mythic elements to tell women's quest stories and the archetypes of the heroine's journey towards self-recognition and rebirth to express in other words, "the hero's quest" and "individuation" in Jungian analogy trying to express the experiences of women who have somehow lost their sense of belonging and their true nature. Identity both as a woman and as a colonized presence is a notion that is repeatedly problematized in her works. Her novels try to rewrite their genuine experience as women and attempt to redefine their identities which have long been misdefined by male mythmakers. *Surfacing* and *The Penelopiad* is closely examined as both texts offer subversive readings of myths and call for pluralistic versions of truth. Meanwhile, their rather different contents enable one to take a closer look at different problems and traumas women suffer the experiences they live through and the solution they come up with. The recurrent myths and

archetypes in both novels are victimhood, survival, nature, identity, origin, parental complications, and the myth of Mother Nature in the former, and Odysseus myth along with Trojan War and Helen in the latter.

*Surfacing* is a story of a nameless protagonist who takes a trip back to her homeland, her past, her memory which proves to be fictional later in the novel. As the protagonist searches for her father and (M)other, she also searches for her childhood, her memories and the point which split her body from her head. Alienated from the world and from her boyfriend and two other friends whom she has taken the trip with, she reconnects to nature and the wilderness with an attempt to get rid of "the Americans" and the language they use. In other points the questioning of God and religion is in the form of problematizing Christianity in *Surfacing*. The nameless protagonist of the novel is on her way to her homeland in Quebec wilderness in search of her father who has been reported missing. In the car with her boyfriend Joe, and her friends Anna and David, a married couple, the protagonist also travels back to her past. Seeing that there is a new road replacing the old one, she contemplates on the signs of a road accident: "A road crucifix with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to me as ever" (*Surfacing* 15). This image of the mysterious alien God prevails throughout the novel as a question. The protagonist relates religion to sex when she tells how she learnt about the former: "I learned about religion the way most children then learned about sex, not in the gutter but in the gravel-and-cement schoolyard" (*Surfacing* 50). The children told her that "there was a dead man in the sky watching everything" she did, and in return she told them where the babies came from (*Surfacing* 51). This portrayal of God as "an old man with a beard in the clouds" is itself contrary to the Christian belief according to Atwood, who states that this figure is not recorded anywhere in the Bible ("Faith"). She believes that this image has been taken from the Greek and Roman sculptures of Zeus.

The protagonist's father does not send her and her brother to Sunday school because of his opinion of Christianity as a distortion; and when he decides she is old enough to see for herself, the

protagonist's experience with the mysterious god in the United Church is not very inciting: "The teacher wore maroon nail-polish and a blue pancake-sized hat clipped to her head by two prongs; she told us a lot about her admirers and their cars. The antagonist's approach to God is manifested through other examples, too: When the protagonist tells about the fish under the water on their fishing trip she states: "I believe in them the way other people believe in God: I can't see them but I know they are there" (*Surfacing* 71). Atwood's identification of Christ with animals and plants and her identification of people, including Christians, as cannibals of Jesus is an attempt to decentre the origin of both religion and rational thinking of the Western mind which proposes that animals and nature be in the servitude of mankind.

Her work *The Penelopiad* is a retelling of Odysseus myth from the perspective of Penelope, Odysseus's wife and Helen's cousin. It retells the story of Penelope, who is left alone to raise her son Telemachus in Odysseus' twenty years of absence: ten years in Troy fighting to get Helen back, and ten years on his way home, full of adventures, dangers and pleasures. The novel voices the real experiences of Penelope behind the official myth: how she managed to rule the palace, how she survived without getting married to one of the one hundred and twenty Suitors and how she suffered as a woman and a mother. *The Penelopiad* is an attack on the society and literature, which through myths subordinate women as virtuous, domestic beings who do not know how to assert them. Employing the twelve maids of Penelope, who are slaughtered by Odysseus and Telemachus for their 'infidelity', as the chorus, Atwood once more problematizes victimhood and patriarchal violence. The novel is also an attack on origin as it offers alternative narratives to a grand myth both by Penelope's and by the chorus's versions of the story. Moreover, Penelope's comments on her experiences from the underworld in her disembodied state and the analogies she makes between the courses of things in ancient times and in today's world enable Atwood to make Penelope tell her alternative story both from the dead man's land and from thousands of years ago to today's audience. Atwood thus tries to

make it clear that, as the maids say in *The Penelopiad*, "truth dear auditors, is seldom certain" (148) and that female experience cannot be voiced by a myth produced by male myth-makers.

The multiplication of the myth not only invalidates the notion of simple truth or origin, but also negates the male account of history or memory. The oppressing and limiting qualities of myth are therefore highlighted by Atwood as Penelope tries to warn today's readers from the underworld. The personal account of Penelope as opposed to the official version of the myth stresses the importance of myths as a medium which organizes individuals' behaviours and roles around it.

Penelope's attitude towards Gods in *The Penelopiad* is quite ironic and subversive. Atwood uses in her novel in which she approaches and comments on mythical events with the twenty-first century sensitivity makes Penelope's attitude quite deconstructive. When Penelope talks about foods and meat especially, she mentions Prometheus's victory over Zeus and remarks: "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" (*The Penelopiad* 39-40). She also states that she doubted their existence earlier when she was alive but could not pronounce it as she was afraid of punishment. However, she can say what is in her mind now as she has the privileged vantage point of being dead. These remarks are of importance because of several reasons. First of all, Penelope draws attention to the fake divinity of gods demonstrating the stupidity of Zeus, who was easily deceived. Then she underlines the fact that the exaggeration of gods' powers is an intentionally practiced campaign to limit the boundaries of men and especially women.

Then she openly states that because she is dead and has seen the otherworld and what was to come later, she can speak her mind without fear of the gods' punishment. At this point, Penelope also transgresses the gender boundaries imposed upon her by the patriarchal society and articulates herself without any censorship. Therefore, the divine powers of gods are not only parodied, but also shown as an element of an agenda in the logo

centric system. Moreover, their non-existence or non-functionality is testified to by Penelope, who is already taking from the underworld where one is supposed to be punished.

Therefore, the divine powers of gods are not only parodied, but also shown as an element of an agenda in the logo centric system. Moreover, their non-existence or no functionality is testified to by Penelope, who is already talking from the underworld where one is supposed to be punished. At this point, Penelope also transgresses the gender boundaries imposed upon her by the patriarchal society and articulates herself with any censorship. Therefore, the divine powers of gods are not only parodied, but also shown as an element of an agenda in the logo centric system.

The gods are not to be trusted for Penelope and she problematizes their reliability throughout the novel in many instances. After Telemachus sails off to look for Odysseus, Eurycleia, who helped him in his design, tells Penelope that he will come back safe and sound as "the gods were just", and Penelope reflects: "I refrained from saying I'd seen scant evidence of that so far" (*The Penelopiad* 123). Likewise, the image in Penelope's mind about gods is quite funny and ironic. She imagines them like a bored ten-year-old child with lots of time and a sick cat to play: "'Which prayer shall we answer today?' they ask one another. 'Let's cast dice! Hope for this one, despair for that one, and while we're at it, let's destroy the life of that woman over there by having sex with her in the form of a crayfish!' I think they pull a lot of their pranks because they're bored" (*The Penelopiad* 135). This attitude ascribed to gods in Olympus as rapists randomly choosing their victims shatters both the concepts of divinity and causality.

Although Atwood lets his Odysseus escape with the maids' blood in his hands by the assistance of the goddess Athena, she makes it clear in the end of the novel that the gods and goddesses are of no help in Hades. The twelve maids have imprinted themselves on Odysseus's consciousness, never giving him rest, always making him want to go away and to be reborn: "Now you can't get rid of us, wherever you go: in your life or your afterlife or any of your other lives... We're here to serve you right. We'll never leave you; we'll stick to you like your

shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row" (*The Penelopiad* 192).

Myths, as other elements that belong to oral or written literature, have been under the control of patriarchy for centuries. Although the initial meaning of "myth" was derived from speech, it was changed to mean an irrational discourse when it was situated opposite of logos. However, this definition of myths does not change the fact that they have executed logo centric processes. Myths have been loaded with symbols, images and codes that represent the social, cultural and political agenda of the culture they inhabit. On the one hand, myths supply researchers with valuable information about how societies lived in the past: what they valued, what they feared, how they celebrated certain events, and/or why they differed from today's civilizations. On the other hand, and most crucially, they represent, in between the lines or when deciphered, how they have been used as a primary medium by the dominant discourse and how they have controlled the behaviours and attitudes of women and men: what we should value, what we should fear, how we should behave in certain circumstances and why we should differ from those in the past.

The purpose of this study has been to explore the common archetypal images and subjects in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and *Surfacing*. Atwood employ myths and archetypal elements in their novels and rewrite the female experience that is usually contrary to what has been written or told by the male myth makers. Emphasizing the restrictions, oppressions, and the hierarchization practiced by the patriarchy on women, they explore the alternatives to be used in rewriting female experience against the logo centralism that has prevailed in the West for centuries. Problematizing the centre and its substitutes, they try to undo the dichotomies that have been used to structure not only women's minds but also their bodies. Atwood had rewritten the female experience which has been restricted to a position either related to a man such as a wife, a mother, a sister, a daughter or defined by men such as a lunatic, a witch, a whore or a hysteric.

Atwood create carry the potential to write new stories out of the old ones. "Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out. They back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes they change key. They speak in new languages, they take on other meanings".

#### REFERENCE

1. Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. New York: Canongate, 2005. Print.
2. Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*. New York : Quality Paperback, 1990. Print.
3. Christ, Carol P. "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision." *Signs* 2.2 (1976): 316-330. JSTOR. Web. 29 April 2010.
4. Doty, William G. *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*. Alabama: Alabama, 2000. Print.
5. Doty, William G. *Myth: A Handbook*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004. Print.
6. Doty, William G. -. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Newyork: Cornell, 1993. Print.
7. Tolan, Fiona. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. New York: Rodopi, 2007.