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Reweaving Memory: Narrative Fragmentation and the Multiplicity of Truth in The Penelopiad

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Narrative Fragmentation, Feminist Narratology, Memory, Multiplicity of Truth, Postmodernism.	Myths have long been commonly accepted as stories of indeterminable origination tale-telling the accounts of events which may have instituted a change in the workings of the universe or in the conditions of social life. A dominant pattern evident in most patricentric mythic cultures of the world is the patronisation of gods and male superheroes with extraordinary strength, sidelining the women in the story to mere figures of ornamentation. The foundational Greek epic, The Odyssey by Homer follows similar prototype in singing the tale of the war-hero Odysseus' tryst on his decades-long adventures in the Trojan war and on the sea back home, while marginalizing Penelope, Odysseus' wife to an epitome for womankind, and her maids as exemplary corrupt women. This discriminating idolization and vocal repression of women characters have found its reflection into the societies for generations, and has thence, been a gap for feminist writers to utilise for the empowerment of women. Margaret Atwood endeavours to dismantle this very monolithic male authority of the Homeric epic by altering the narrative fragmentation by granting women the voices they are denied, and the epistemology of truth. Atwood has presented the argument to destabilize patriarchal modes of storytelling by juxtaposing Penelope's retrospective narrative with the polyphonic choral interludes of her maids, while questioning the very notion of the historical authenticity and singular truth. In disintegrating the ideas of voice, form, and memory, Atwood achieves to reclaim the feminist goal to explore silenced perspectives, trace the cracks in the canonical myth-making, and recondition the feminist narratology as one of agency and multiplicity rather than of insignificant passivity. Thus, this study uses the theories of Postmodernism and feminist historiography to explore Atwood's strategy of "reweaving memory" to foreground the fluidity of "truth" and the ethics of storytelling in the context of gendered mythic retellings.

Introduction:

Published in 2005 as a part of the Canongate Myth Series, *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood has carved itself a distinctive niche within the corpus of feminist revisionist mythology. The novel provides

a fresh feminist take on Homer's *Odyssey* through the voices of marginalised female characters who were otherwise silenced within the classical framework of a patricentric epic. It opens with a strikingly contrasting setup of Penelope, the

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supposedly docile and submissive wife of Odysseus, assuming the role of narrator from afterlife with intermittent recurring chorus from the twelve hanged maids – executed upon Odysseus’ return, adorning the plot and supplying interjecting fractures to complicate Penelope’s narrative. With this duality in the structure, Atwood engages in an act of “reweaving”: revisiting mythic memory to divulge its ideological seems and reassemble it from a feminist perspective.

The avant-garde significance of *The Penelopiad* that places it ahead of its succeeding works of the feminist revisionist mythology lies not only in its feminist reclamation of the myth but in the innovative form of its narratology. The fragmented structure of the novel, alternating between the introspective monologues of Penelope and the polyphonic choir embodies the chaotic postmodernist vogue of storytelling, defying closure, coherence and conclusion. This leads to a text that privileges multiplicity over unity, subjectivity over objectivity, and memory over history. In doing so, Atwood thus, situates her work within a broader lineage of postmodern feminist writers who question the authority of canonical narratives and the politics of representation (Hite, 1989; Hutcheon, 1988).

This paper explores how Margaret Atwood has deployed narrative fragmentation and multiplicity in *The Penelopiad* to interrogate the reliability of memory and reconstruction of truth. Drawing on feminist narratology, memory studies and postmodernist theory, the research paper focuses on the underlying argument of two divergent streams of truth clashing which itself appears as an

act of feminist resistance – an attempt to reclaim agency from the ruins of myth.

Literature Review:

The critical reception of *The Penelopiad* rests intemperately on its dual functionality as both a mythic reimagining and a metafictional commentary on narrative authority. Scholars as Fiona Tolan (2007) and Susanne Becker (2013) have examined Atwood’s engagement with gender and power, noting that her Penelope embodies both complicity and critique within patriarchal power structure. Tolan notes that Atwood’s reworking of Homer “shifts the site of heroism from physical conquest to narrative endurance” (Tolan, 2007, p.186). Similarly, Becker highlights Atwood’s use of irony and parody to subvert classical ideas of femininity and virtue.

On a different note, from the postmodernist narrative perspective, Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “historiographic metafiction” is particularly relevant. Hutcheon (1988) emphasizes on works with a combination of historical fictionality and self-reflexive commentary, and questions the objectivity of history itself. *The Penelopiad* fits the paradigm, containing and lucidly combining both the account and critique of the mythic past, while also foregrounding the instability of narrative truth. The instance Penelope urges – “Now that I’m dead, I know everything” (Atwood, 2005, p. 1), yet goes on to reflect the truth of her statement in the next part, underscores the unreliability of her memory and becomes a metafictional gesture that undercuts her own authority as a narrator.

Atwood also garnered an extensive critical attention for the inclusion of the maid’s chorus,

giving space to a considerable explication. Lister (2009) has interpreted the maid's singing as "a counter-narrative of collective memory", contrasting it with Penelope's individual voice against a communal, performative expression of oppression and trauma. The same multiplicity is reflected in Marianne Hirsch (1997) notion of "Postmemory" – a form of inherited remembrance shaped by belated witnessing and re-narration. The voices of the maid's echoing from myriad theatrical scenarios across time and genre ranging from lullaby to courtroom satire enact the precise form of collective postmemory that challenges both Penelope's retelling as well as Homer's original version. Within the wider framework of feminist narratology, theorists like Susan Lanser (1992), and Robyn Warhol (2012) have investigated narrative voice and perspective encode gendered power relations. The varying tone of Penelope oscillating between irony, confession, and justification reflects towards a distinctly female mode of storytelling – one that resists linearity and totalizing logic. As Wilson (2018) suggests, the fragmentary form of the novel mirrors the fractured historical presence of females.

Theoretical Framework:

To analyse Atwood's narrative strategies in *The Penelopiad*, this scholarship establishes a theoretical framework for the understanding of the work as both a postmodern metafiction and a feminist project with a meld of feminist narratology and postmodern theories to lay the edifice of a text that destabilises inherited narratives, reclaims the deprecated voice, and accentuates the politics of memory and truth.

As defined by Lanser (1992), feminist narratology examines how gender is the driving force behind moulding the shapes of both – the production and reception of narrative forms. It questions the presumed neutrality of traditional narrative structure which reveals how the linear, unified style of storytelling often privileges masculine authority over alternative feminine or otherwise queer experiences. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood has accordingly harnessed the complex interventions of fragmentation, repetition and polyphony as feminist mechanisms to challenge Homeric epic's masculine logic of one-dimensional closure and conquest.

Correspondingly, the postmodernist theory complements the feminist perspective by emphasizing on the instability of truth and plurality of perspectives. As famously defined by Jean-François Lyotard (1984), postmodernism is "incredibility toward metanarratives" – a skepticism towards grand, universal truths. Atwood's reimagination of the *Odyssey* exemplifies this stance. It corrodes the inner linings of the heroic transcendent narrative of Odysseus' quest on the Trojan soil and journey back home and supplants it with Penelope's partial, self-assessing recollection of the events. In this context, memory becomes a lacuna to hold the cornerstone for reconstruction and resistance.

Furthermore, feminist revisionist theorists such as Adrienne Rich (1979), and Hélène Cixous (1976) have outlined the profound necessity of women finding their freedom and authority through penning down their stories, experiences and reclaiming their lost voices in the past historical

context. Margaret Atwood achieves a similar interpretive agency by rewriting her Penelope and her executed maids as active mythic narrators who bring forth a contrapuntal performance to subvert Odysseus as the proponent of the plot. The collective yet disconnected fragments of their voices is what Julia Kristeva (1980) might have termed as a “semiotic chora” – eluding to a space of rhythmic, pre-symbolic expression that disrupts patriarchal discourse. The intersection of these scaffolds indents that this narrative fragmentation might have been Atwood’s dexterous choice, not merely as an aesthetic assertion but as an epistemological statement that truth is plural, contingent and gendered.

Narrative Fragmentation in *The Penelopiad*:

The prominent idea behind constructing *The Penelopiad* as an intricate alternation between Penelope’s first-person, individual narrative and the maid’s chorus might be to disrupt the illusion of narrative coherence compelling the readers to navigate diverse voices, temporalities, and genres. This results in the effect of a literary palimpsest where each layer of the storytelling exposes the traces of multiple layers underneath it.

The reworking becomes an augmentation of Penelope’s retrospection and self-awareness. Dwelling in the underworld, she recounts her life story not only at Ithaca but her derelict childhood with her parents in a tone dipped in irony and melancholy to serve an ending with no fixity. Her alarming statement of “Now that I’m dead, I know everything” in the first chapter grants her a temporal omniscience. Though aware of the past events, she appears to have no power over the

outcome, which nudges towards the inherent futility of human knowledge and the historically imposed limitations on women’s agency. The ensuing consequence is an erratic narration that continually revises itself through the course of the work where Penelope concedes to the constraints of her knowledge, repudiates her earlier statement and ventures a thought on other’s motives. This inward-looking precariousness demonstrates what Patricia Waugh (1984) denotes as the “metafictional consciousness”, where the text eposes its own constructedness.

In contrast to Penelope’s instable introspection, the maid’s ensemble provides a radically different mode of narration. Their segment in the novel appears as songs, lullabies, ballads, sea-shanty, lament, and mock trials, each adopting a dissimilar genre to articulate collective trauma, whilst their voices, multilayered and performative, makes assimilation into Penelope’s linear account implausible. Their opening exclamation, “We are the maids, the ones you killed, /the ones you failed” (Atwood, 2005, p. 5) morphs accusation into haunting, and memory into resistance. The formal fragmentation of *The Penelopiad* thus, encapsulates the multiplicity of truth, where each narrative fragment – Penelope’s monologue, maid’s chorus and the mythic echoes of Homer materialise as threads in a larger tapestry of competing paralleled memories. This, in turn, transmutes the act of “weaving”, long associated with the ever-lamenting Penelope’s domestic virtue as a metaphor for narrative construction itself. And yet, Atwood topples this symbolism to assert that Penelope’s weaving is no longer an emblem of

fidelity and waiting but of endless reinterpretations, a gesture that itself denies finality.

Reweaving Memory and Truth:

Prominently, Atwood has leveraged memory as not an immutable repository of truth, but as a fluid stream watering reconstruction. It is best evident in Penelope's constantly evolving narration that negotiates between personal recollection and mythic representation, the in-between of what she remembers and what she imagines others might have said. Her voice itself transitions into a tool for female reclamation "reweaving" the fragmented, diverse threads of her life into a narrative that resists against the male authoritative edition immortalized by Homer. Through this metaphor of weaving, historically coded as both a domestic and creative labour, Atwood has modified memory into a political act of storytelling. Thus, Penelope's act of recounting develops into an act of authorship, of retrieval of her image from the claws of the patriarchally influenced mythic resonance and rewriting it from beyond the barriers of living.

Subsequently, Atwood signals to inversion of the Homeric *Odyssey* by titling the reworking as *The Penelopiad* to position a peripheral character of Penelope in the centre. Yet unlike Odysseus' cohesive lionhearted journey, the reimagination unfolds the timid Penelope's tale as a mosaic of splintered reminiscences and second-hand accounts. Her narration repeatedly exposes the contradictions between the official version and her lived reality, for instance, recognized in the present reality for her cleverness, Penelope proclaims, "The songs say I was faithful; they never say I was clever" (Atwood, 2005, p. 12). In entwining these

disperse threads, Atwood brings forth the dissonance between the mythic memory that was an implication of male poets, and the experiential truth, rendered by the women who were excluded from authorship.

With an equivalently weighty bearing, the role of the maids in the procedure of reweaving operates as a counter-memory in undermining Penelope's authority. The opulent performance of the maids running throughout the novel, whether in the form of a burlesque, or an anthropological lecture, or a courtroom trial occurs chiefly with the propaganda to interpose Penelope's eloquence and to unveil the gaps in her story. They sardonically impart emphasis to the events that Penelope either omits or misrepresents, while trying to negate the magnitude of her truth with their collective "we" against her entity. By undertaking such a course of action, Atwood thus, dramatizes the politics of memory as a contest between competing iterations. Notably, the interplay between Penelope and the maids enacts what Aleida Assmann (2011) terms as the "cultural memory in dialogue", where the singular and collective unit coexist in tension. By deploying fragmentation and multiplicity of truth, Atwood encourages the readers to prob about whose memory is being preserved and how memory itself shifts to a site of power. Ironically, the maids' allegation, "We did your dirty work for you, Penelope: now we're the dirty girls, the scapegoats, the sacrificed" (Atwood, 2005, p. 147), makes conspicuous the gendered mechanisms of erasure that myth and history perpetuate and a target that Atwood aims to unravel.

Multiplicity of Truth and the Unreliable

Narrator:

In essence, *The Penelopiad* is a viscerally postmodernist project in regard to its interrogation of truth. The novel explicitly clarifies that truth is neither singular nor objective as witnessed in the mythic culture, but it is fabricated from multiplicity of overlapping perspectives. This is evident when the readers notice the disparity between Penelope's and the maids' narrative. While Penelope's retelling of the events seems firsthand and intimate, it is fraught with a disturbing sense of uncertainty that she acknowledges is due to her death and the lapse of time separating the events from the contemporary reality where she says, "It's a wonder I remember anything at all" (Atwood, 2005, p. 23). This same admission transforms her into what Wayne C. Booth (1983) famously termed as the "unreliable narrator", a figure whose authority is undermined by her own subjectivity.

In addition, the use of the current setting of afterlife intensifies this unreliability, where Penelope's access to the knowledge of several centuries, blending myth and reality, hindsight and present mediation collapse the temporal perimeters. Her facetious take on the modern interpretations of her story, tourist visiting her supposed grave, and her virtue being a topic of debate among the scholars centuries later, adds a layer of metafictional lighter tone of irony. In instances like these, Atwood inspires the readers to realise how myths evolve through retellings, manifesting into realities mirroring the cultures that propagate them. As Hutcheon argues, postmodern rewriting is lesser about uncovering the "real" past than about how narratives of the past are constructed and

legitimized.

On the other hand, the maids embody another end of this postmodernist multiplicity where their performances shift the tone and genre from Penelope's, refusing a single interpretive framework. For instance, in the "Anthropological Lecture", they analyse their own execution as if it were some sort of primitive ritual, where their wryly detached utterance though provides an academic objectivity but lacks humanitarian concern and sensibility. This incongruous parody of scholarship impels the readers to acquiesce to the institutionalised forms of truth which often dehumanise and misconstrue the marginalised and degraded section of the society. Concordantly, in the "Court Trial" scene, Atwood astutely supplies the maids an agency to prosecute Odysseus and Penelope in a farcical tribunal. However, the truth is both theatrical and unattainable, a product of performance rather evidence, and a scorching question mark on the gender-normative nature of justice.

Atwood's structural composition itself turns into an annotation on epistemological ambiguity. The alternating voices of Penelope and the maids resisting synthesis leaves the readers in a state of hermeneutic suspension. The racing fragmentation finds alignment in Lyotard's (1984) notion that postmodern discourse privileges "little narratives" over grand, unifying metanarratives. Atwood thus, redefines justice, in allowing the conflicting truths to co-inhabit without resolution.

Moreover, through its strategic unreliable narrative, the novel underscores the ways in which truth-telling is shaped by gendered norms. Accordingly,

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) observes that patriarchal myth-making has positioned women as on the “other” part of truth, a position antithetical to male rationality and authority. However, Atwood overturns this dynamic to recreate a Penelope whose subjectivity turns out to be the very medium through which the Homeric version is demystified. Unexpectedly, her unreliability does not diminish her credibility, it rather, fascinates the readers to register the inherent bias that silenced her in the first place.

The Penelopiad is a gift to the modern readers as both a homage and challenge to the Western epic tradition wherein Atwood’s recreation of *The Odyssey* from women’s perspective brings to forefront the “revisionist mythmaking” that Alicia Ostriker defines as a strategy of feminist poetics, an act of transforming inherited myths to express female resistance and experiences. Atwood has reoriented epic – a traditionally male centric genre knitted around heroism, warfare and adventures to an interior, apparently more private domestic and psychological narrative in substituting Penelope’s weaving to Odysseus’ seafaring, and her perseverance to his conquests.

The dislodging finds penetrating ramifications in narrative authority in the locus where once unified, panoramic consciousness of male epic fragment of voice is given a counter impulse of female chorus. The result is a multi-voiced fiction that privileges dialogue over declaration, process over outcome, and stifled over expressed. Against this backdrop, *The Penelopiad* follows Bakhtin’s (1981) “heteroglossia”, which is specified as coexistence of multiple voices and discourses within a single

work. The multifarious refuting voices tearing the walls of overpowering authority and switching tone and genre to contribute to an ensemble that unmoors the single authority of Homer’s narrator.

In a remarkably exceptional fashion, Atwood situates her re-spinning of *The Odyssey* within a continuum of feminist reappropriations of classical myths alongside works such as Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra* (1983), and Hilda Doolittle’s *Helen in Egypt* (1961). Each of these text foregrounds female consciousness against this contextual framework of male-authored epics, using revision as a form of resistance. In the words of Helen Morales (2007), mythic revisionism “allows women writers to enter the canon not as subjects to be spoken for, but as speaking subjects”, which is copiously evident in the evolution of Atwood’s Penelope as a character who no longer hauls the burden of idolization by subsequent generations as an epitome of chastity and forbearance archived in Homeric verse but a multidimensional humane narrator embracing guilt, desire and flaws conveyed in a tone laced in caustic dialect.

The feminist cause in *The Penelopiad* by an extension examines the female solidarity with the depiction of the maids, their subdued screams, and tragic execution to carry forth a counter-hegemonic chorus that echoes ancient Greek theatre while transcending its convention. Their impertinence in death and insistence on being heard symbolizes communal salvage of agency where the refrain of “We are the maids, the ones you killed” recalibrate as an invocation of diachronic memory and an indictment of patriarchal violence that persist across centuries. And through this polyphonic

structure, Atwood repossesses the epic voice of socially lower-class women (the maids) – by not imitating the grandeur of Homer but by disclosing its omissions where she transmogrify epic linearity into a cyclic storytelling where past is never complete and memory is perpetually questioned and rewritten. Thus, the book becomes both a critique and contribution to literary tradition.

Conclusion:

Margaret Atwood has eminently redefined the art of mythmaking in *The Penelopiad* by revamping the epic of Odysseus into a fragmented exploration of memory, voice and truth through a dual narrative construct consisting of Penelope's and the maids' daunting poignant chorus that denudes the patriarchal foundation of the canonical myth tradition. The fractions of the novel give birth to feminist epistemology that functions on the fundamentality of multiple unstable, and ever-evolving truths that are formulated through the consistent act of remembrance.

In consolidating the reweaving of memory, Atwood challenges the readers to discern the ideological underpinnings of narrative politics where the most crucial aspect is whose voices are conserved, whose are foreclosed and how the act of commemoration and narration itself weaponizes to reassert dominance in an arrangement containing hegemonic Homeric male authorities like Odysseus and Telemachus, a queen governing the kingdom of Ithaca – Penelope, and the slave girls she bought in infancy to take care of and brought up as her most entrusted maids. Interestingly, the multiplicity of truth in *The Penelopiad* reverberates with the multiplicity of women's experiences, mythically

and historically obliterated from the records. And in transgressing the barrier between memory and fiction, Atwood restores to Penelope and her maids the agency to speak, not as a reward for their virtue or guilt but as individual storytellers in their own right, not with altering the conclusion of the novel but leaving it available for future exegeses.

Ultimately, it can be contended that *The Penelopiad* invites the readers to reconsider myths to be in a state of unremitting flux than being an unwavering bequest where far from being disarray, the narrative fragmentation becomes a metaphor for tenacity and potential of women's stories to withstand the storms of time, pertinence and reinterpretation in new forms. And thus, in the exquisite arrangement of the shattered pane of Atwood's narrative psyche, we find the glimpse of robust anticipatory insights and recreations of paralleled calibre.

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