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**SONG OF THE VOICELESS AND PERILS OF THE POWERFUL: A POSTMODERN  
READING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE PENELOPIAD***

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**Abstract:**

*The postmodern age is known for its tolerance towards multiple narratives and contested ideologies. The efforts to demolish the quest for centeredness have successfully been able to incorporate differences and respect minorities in the society. Today, although not in the fullest form, women, who are one among the minorities have been appearing in mainstream avenues. This paper proposes to read the novel *The Penelopiad* by the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood through a Postmodern lens. The Postmodern interpretation of the novel which is a retelling of Greek mythology explores the ways in which the Postmodern theoretical techniques like pastiche, intertextuality, mythological revisiting, minimalism, temporal distortion and metafiction are empowering the female characters in it. Mythological retelling is a bold attempt to question the notions already written. The retelling of canonical works presents the other side of the story before us and in this process, the voiceless gain power over themselves. The plight of women in the novel irrespective of their position in society and the implications constructed by the patriarchy concerning female representation in mythology is foregrounded through the change in perspective. This paper aims to delve into the realm of perception which is the basis of any ideology.*

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism, Retelling, Mythology, canon, etc.*

*The Penelopiad* is a novella by the Canadian writer and literary critic Margaret Atwood and is a work that contributed to the vast arena of mythological retelling of literature. Through *The Penelopiad*, Atwood presents a different rendition of the eighth-century Greek epic poem *The Odyssey* which was originally attributed to Homer, with a new twist in characterisation and narration. The novella also follows the pattern of “parallel novels” that venture to take characters from the public domain. And they are taken to varying degrees with other elements from the pioneering works on which they are based, in order to create new stories (Scott. D). The objective of this research paper is to read the novella *The Penelopiad* from a postmodern point of view and analyse how the postmodern techniques used in the novel itself liberates the distressed characters. In other words, this study is an attempt to understand the capacity of postmodern writing to demolish centredness and canon. A postmodern critical enquiry would create a platform for understanding changes when ideological perspectives are shifted from one domain to another.

In both poststructuralism and postmodernism, the absolute centre is dissolved and does not have any priority. Instead, multiple centres are embraced where hierarchies have the least importance.

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Postmodernism as a movement which inaugurated a novel perspective in most fields has its own social and political contexts; the aftermath of the war and the fragmentation that followed being two of the many reasons. Reading the novella, *The Penelopiad* by paying close attention to each narrative technique of postmodernism employed in the novel opens up a door to understanding the capacity of the postmodern way of narration to present the story from a different angle distorting the dominant ideologies. In such a scenario where the ideologies and perspectives are shifted, the voiceless sing aloud in groups and the powerful become fragile.

The retelling of canonical and well-known tales by revisiting myths is one of the widely used forms of postmodern writing. Myths are universal and timeless stories that are akin to our lives. Such myths are retold over and over from different angles and still speak to the contemporary audience with the same intensity as in past centuries. In Margaret Atwood's retelling, all the familiar ideas about the Greek myth are kept intact and are written with a modern way of visualisation and reading. The retellings bring the other side of the story before the readers and it can be considered as a continuation of the original work on which the new work is based or as an attempt of reaction to the main text by a different author. At the same time, a retelling is an entirely different piece of literature that tends to reciprocate the aspirations and demands of the socio-political situation when it was penned down. The motivating factor to retell a story is mostly the author's disagreement and dissatisfaction with the prewritten work. Every insignificant character becomes significant in their stories and narrating the story from a different angle decentres the role of heroic characters alone. With the advent of the postmodern age, there is no single hero in a story. Instead, there are many heroic characters, and all character's deeds become relevant to the story. A Postmodern narrative amplifies multiple voices and pays attention to the silenced narratives. Retelling is also an effort to bring better justice to the disadvantaged groups in the original story as it offers the suppressed, a platform to express themselves. The retellings dismantle hierarchies in characterisation by revealing the unpopular side of the story.

With a contemporary twist to the ancient story, Margaret Atwood has chosen to give the telling of it to Penelope and her twelve hanged maids. In *The Penelopiad* Atwood gives a new shape to the character Penelope and frees her from the idealised portrayal of the quintessential faithful wife. The author ventures to unravel the mysteries in the life of Penelope as she manages the kingdom of Ithaca during the twenty years of absence of her husband Odysseus as he was wandering in the sea for ten years enduring hardships, evading monsters and sleeping with goddesses on his return after participating in the Trojan War. In addition to weeping and praying for the return of Odysseus, Penelope cleverly deceives the many suitors who are swarming around her palace, eating Odysseus' estate in an attempt to force her to marry one of them. Not only does Penelope lead them on with false promises, but she also weaves a shroud that she unravels at night, delaying her marriage decision until its completion (Atwood, 3). In Atwood's retelling, the inside stories that led to the slaughtering of the twelve maids and the vulnerable life of Penelope are foregrounded.

Change in point of view is a remarkable feature of postmodern narratives. *The Penelopiad* is a story from the point of view of Penelope and not Odysseus, the Greek hero. There is also a shift in narration between the maids and Penelope. Both Penelope and the maids narrate the story simultaneously in the novella. It focuses on the story of Penelope and her significant relation to the twelve maids who were hanged. Atwood has tried to resolve most of the inconsistencies and the hanging of the powerless twelve maids is a remarkable episode in the novella which is only an incident of little importance in Homer's epic poem. When the point of view is changed, the other side of the stories revealed and provides better clarity to several unsaid and hidden aspects of the original work.

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Pastiche is homage to or a parody of past styles and is a remarkable feature of Postmodern writings. It is an element of intertextuality which acknowledges the previous literary works with other works and writing styles. Pastiche literally means to combine or paste together different elements. Pastiche can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society. It can be a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations in postmodernity. It is a kind of a shuffling of generic and grammatical tics (Mambrol). Pastiche arises from that everything has been done before. It celebrates the work and forms it imitates. The chorus of maids in the novella is a tribute to the use of such choruses in Greek drama. In ancient Greek dramas, a chorus is a group of characters who speak in unison at times throughout the play, often providing commentary on the events depicted. In *The Penelopiad*, the twelve maids hanged by Telemachus at Odysseus's command fulfil this role. Atwood combines this ancient chorus model with a more modern one, the chorus line. Atwood notes that structurally, *The Penelopiad* has elements of Greek tragedy. In Greek drama, the central characters' stories are told in quite long monologues, and then the chorus comments on the action. In a macabre twist, the hanged maids' feet twitch, recalling the dancing of the members of a chorus line. (*The Penelopiad*)

Greek tragedy had its beginnings in choral performances, in which a group of men danced and sang dithyrambs or lyric hymns in praise of the god Dionysus. At the end of each chapter, the chorus of the maids who were killed by Odysseus appears. They talk about their fantasies and ambitions in the short play performed by them and the chorus sings together with the maids. It is also through the chorus of the maids that Atwood explains parts of the story related to Odysseus' period of wandering in the sea and the hurdles he overcomes with his wit and intelligence. Atwood lets the maids have their say in *The Penelopiad*.

The use of ballad in a novel is another element of Pastiche. The chorus of the twelve maids sings a ballad called 'Dreamboats' in the novella where they lament upon themselves singing about their cursed life and fate where they explain how they sleep with the noble men who grab hold of them to satisfy their manly desires. At the end of every night, they are in pain and wake up the next day to face the same toil and pain again. The maids are miserable and they are singing about their pity state of helplessness. The maids perform a drama in the novella which is entitled "The Perils of Penelope: A drama". The maids are enacting the characters like Penelope and Eurycea. The Drama presents the dilemma and difficulty of Penelope to make sure if the person who has finally returned after ten years is her husband or some other person in disguise. In the Greek dramas, the chorus usually takes up the role of citizens, which represents public opinion. They also explain some events which are not enacted on the stage. Similarly, Margaret Atwood employed the chorus of the maids to reveal the inner self of the characters in the novel. The twelve maids assert their importance and ask the audience of the drama they perform,

what is that our number, the number of the maids? the number twelve suggests to the educated mind? There are twelve apostles, there are twelve months and what does the word month suggest to the educated mind? Yes? You, sir in the back? Correct! Month comes from the moon, as everyone knows. Oh, it is no coincidence, no coincidence at all, that there were twelve of us, not eleven and not thirteen and not the proverbial eight maids a-milking! (Atwood, 216)

The use of parody and pastiche in the novella is related to the abandonment of the divine pretensions of authorship implicit in the omniscient narratorial stance. *The Penelopiad* is a collage of juxtaposed, incomplete or fragments of stories.

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Minimalism is another notable feature seen in *The Penelopiad*. The author has used a minimal approach in the use of characters and events which are decidedly common and non-exceptional reader involvement often through direct address to the reader and the open acknowledgement of the fictional nature of the events being described. The use of minimal characters in the novella gives presumably equal importance to all the characters. There are no grand narratives and the characters are presented as universal.

Time is an important concern in postmodern fiction. Non-linear narration can be seen in postmodern narratives where the past and present come in an interchanging manner. Temporal Distortion is the use of non-linear timelines and narrative techniques in a story. The mixing of timelines and shifts in the time period is very evidently seen in *The Penelopiad*. The story begins with Penelope talking from the underground from the underworld after she is dead. Then she goes on narrating her childhood, marriage with Odysseus, her hardships and so on. Struggles of both characters and readers with a different understanding of time can also be seen thinking if time can be destroyed, depleted and defeated. The question is, “what is time? Is it a material or a condition?” The story of Penelope, her miserable life and the fate of maids is told from the underworld. Maids come in the form of a play or an elegiac rhyming retorting song. The time period of the courtroom scene where Odysseus is held on a trial is placed in the twenty-first century. The maids, demanding justice in an objective court is an important scene in the novella. The court is working on the case of the murder of the twelve maids in the twenty-first century. Atwood writes the trial scene of Odysseus, as videotaped by the maids. There is a twenty-first-century attorney for the defence of Odysseus. But the maids are talking for their justice, themselves. The judge is making a judgment by listening to the arguments of both parties and he is also referring to the book “*The Odyssey*”, which was written three or four thousand years ago. Queen Penelope is called a witness in the court. The maids were hanged not because they were raped by Odysseus’ enemies or because they slept with them. But they were being raped without permission. Finally, the judge dismisses the case by declaring that he does not wish to be guilty of anachronism. He does not want to be involved in this matter by rightly sentencing justice to something that happened centuries ago. The twenty-first-century characters and the fourth-century characters come face to face in the court in this scene.

The novella also has metafictional elements which is a feature of Postmodern narratives. The readers are addressed, occasionally in the novel where Penelope asks the readers not to follow her example. The characters interacting with the audience is also an attempt to make the fictional world transcend the real world.

This postmodern narrative is an eye opener as its contemporary relevance cannot be neglected. The condition of women even after decades of struggles and empowerment is pathetic as shown in the novella. Penelope is able to open up herself to the audience only from the underworld. She is courageous enough to talk about the sufferings and injustices she has witnessed only after she is dead. She boldly says “who cares about public opinion now” (Atwood 17). The chorus of the maids can be considered a protest against the brutality committed by society against them. The chorus leaves a lasting impression in the mind of the readers as their choir is raging against the double standards of patriarchal society, which seems both ancient and prophetic at the same time. They sing together,

Blame it on the maids!  
Blame it on the slaves!  
The toys of rouges and knaves!  
Let them dangle, let them strangle-  
Blame it on the slaves!  
Blame it on the sluts!

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Those poxy little scuts!  
We have got the dirt on every skirt-  
Blame it on the sluts!  
They all curtsy! (Atwood, 203)

The maids represent the slaves and children who are from impoverished families. They belong to the lower strata of society. They are girls who are forcefully put into the trade of prostitution and do not even have rights over their bodies. Anybody, who wishes could use and deflower them. They are sold, used, traded and discarded when bloomless at will. Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* is an effort to denounce the millennia of injustice and hypocrisy and asks the audience of mythological stories to listen to the often-neglected stories of minor characters as well. Powerful women like Penelope may speak for themselves, but the poor and powerless girls in the background are silenced. The maids of the novella have tried to acknowledge the fact that they are not simply maids who are slaves and drudges but they have a higher function. Atwood shows the weaker aspects of gods and demi-gods who are idealised in every way in an epic work in *The Penelopiad*. The celebrated figures of the Greek epic like Helen of Sparta and Odysseus are not adored here. In the courtroom scene of the novella, the court is dismissing the attorney and his client by providing a harsh and senseless justification when it comes to legislative scrutiny, that the times back then were different and it was common to operate patriarchy. Therefore, the judge is disregarding Penelope's pleas saying the time has changed and he belongs to the contemporary era. This is a jab in contemporary society as women do not win justice even when the times have moved on. The judge also declares that molestation against the maids is a minor incident. The concept of justice becomes a hyperreality here. Postmodern narratives are usually open-ended and give a wide variety of scope for the readers. *The Penelopiad*, as a postmodern narrative, does utmost justice. The novel cannot be read just as a retelling of an ancient myth but as a powerful tale against the order, gender bias and all other totalizing systems of thoughts. The postmodern narrative techniques used in the novella have liberated the female characters in the novellalike Penelope and the twelve maids from the stereotypical roles by exposing their humanness.

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