

GENDER AND NARRATIVE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF *THE PENELOPIAD* BY MARGARET ATWOOD AND
THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS BY CHITRA
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ABSTRACT. This paper attempts to offer a deconstructive analysis/ comparison of two very popular myths in the Indian and Western tradition from the point of view of gender and narratology. The female protagonists in *The Penelopiad* and *The Palace of Illusions* remain largely silent in the face of an overwhelming patriarchal set up in the canonical texts. *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood deconstructs the *Odyssey*, a seminal text of classical literature believed to be written by Homer.¹ With a pen dipped in irony and self-deprecating humour, Atwood deftly exposes Odysseus, a celebrated Greek hero to be anything but that. The novel is written in the first person and captures the dilemmas and struggles of Penelope (wife of Odysseus) as she is left to fend for herself while Odysseus fights the Trojan War. *The Palace of Illusions* by Divakurni is more a re-telling of the tale of Draupadi by Draupadi where she gives her account of her woeful fate. Despite being married to the five brave brothers, the Pandavas, Draupadi describes her painful life of public humiliation. Both Penelope and Draupadi suffered cruelly at the hands of their husbands and despite being queens were virtually powerless. This paper attempts to compare the lives of Draupadi and Penelope and tries to locate points of similarity and points of rupture in their turbulent lives. This is a study of mainly two aspects of the books. The first is a comparison of the narrative structure. The second question pertains to the perception of marriage in the two texts.

KEY WORDS: gender, narrative, patriarchy, deconstruction, *Penelopiad*, *Palace of Illusions*

Introduction

The features that constitute masculinity and femininity have been established over a long period of time by religion and mythology. Sex is the biological difference between a man and a woman but gender is a cultural perception with patriarchy determining what is masculine and what is feminine. Gender bias is palpable in the English language itself. The canonical Roget's Thesaurus lists "womanly" under "weakness", "debility" and "impotence", "womanish" is listed under "cowardice", "spiritless" and "craven."

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(Lowe and Graham 2008:107). Needless to say manliness is associated with heroism, resolution and mastery. Since society is patriarchal, it is the men who have the power to set down codes of social structure, culture and language. In 1746, John Kirkby wrote *Eighty Grammatical Rules* wherein he stated that the male gender is “more comprehensive” than the female gender. In 1850 an Act of Parliament was enacted which stated that “he” should be used for both sexes (Lowe and Graham 2008: 114). Since women were neither educated nor were they Members of Parliament there was no one to counter such discriminatory practices.

Not just language, even religion and philosophy looked down upon women as a necessary evil. Philosophers and priest claimed that men and women had unchangeable innate traits. Since everything was attributed to Gods and Goddesses their arguments were irrefutable. There are many references in Hindu scripture that since the beginning of time women are aberrant and lethal. The most prominent Brahminical ideologue, Manu in his *Dharamshastra* “argues that at the moment of creation itself, women were allotted the habit of lying, sitting around, with an indiscriminate love for ornaments, and qualities such as anger, meanness, treachery and bad conduct” (Geetha 2006:12). The revered philosopher Aristotle regarded women as natural fools who did not have the intelligence to participate in public life. The famous Jataka tales project women as sowers of discord who need to be controlled by their husbands (Chakravarti 1993). The biological woman was projected as being insatiable and so constructions of gender put her in a straitjacket whereby a woman’s hyper sexuality could be monitored and controlled. Through the subsequent ages suppression of women took different forms like sati, dowry, female infanticide, domestic violence etc. The basic tenets remained the same- woman as weak, frail requiring protection and monitoring. In the 20th century, however, the myths of gender propagated by patriarchy are being deconstructed and both *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Penelopiad* are attempts to shift the focus from a male centric view of mythology to a female centric one.

The second aspect of the paper is the narrative technique employed by the two writers: the linear technique of Banerjee versus the layered technique of Atwood. Both the novels challenge history and myth albeit differently. According to Mikhail Bakhtin the novel is polyphonic, *i.e.* there are multiple voices jostling for attention in it. These multiple voices are not just the dialogues but a variety of discourses unobtrusively enter the narrative. This suggests that the text is an unstable entity full of incoherence and instability. Rather than offering a united worldview the text offers a clash of perspectives within a given historical period. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi gives her side of the story as a woman wedded to five husbands. It also has the voice of Karna her silent admirer from the sidelines, but the

primary voice remains that of Draupadi. In *The Penelopiad* however, Atwood portrays the myth of Penelope and gives voice to the twelve maidens who were hanged by Ulysses for being in league with the suitors. For the first time such marginal characters were under the spotlight. Their tone as they speak is defiant, accusatory and ironic.

Literature Review

In “Contemporary Contextualization of Paanchali and Penelope through Chitra Banerjee’s *The Palace of illusions* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*” the writers Monali Bhattacharya and Ekta Srivastava seek to research the contemporary relevance of both these myths. They argue that both these heroines from classical mythology were not voiceless women. Rather they displayed leadership skills and single handedly managed complex affairs of the state. The writers try to find parallels between Draupadi and Penelope with women in the 21st century as well. Like Draupadi (who was dark skinned) even today girls with dark skin are rejected by the general public.

Atwood on the other hand has written *The Penelopiad* from the 21st century perspective where the voiceless have been given voices, the disempowered have been empowered and women can finally tell “her story”. She has been for the most part deserted by her husband Odysseus. She is a single mother raising her son Telemachus. She is also tormented by society at large to attach herself to some man who can offer her protection. This could be the story of any 21st century woman – deserted, single mother and forced to seek male protection. Whether ancient Greece or contemporary world the problems that women face remain largely the same. Any single woman married or otherwise is pursued by men even though their advances have been rebuffed. Both Penelope and Draupadi (even though she has five husbands) are pursued by suitors and Keechak respectively. Both women have to ward off rapists and molesters even though they were wives of powerful heroes.

Discussion

The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood is a re-telling of the classical myth of Penelope. The title is a derivative of the Olympiad – a tournament of competitive sport. In the case of *Penelopiad* the sport is war and the consequences of the war. The novel is written from a post death perspective in the 21st century in the first person narrative by Penelope. Penelope reminisces about her childhood which was far from ideal. Her father tries to drown her but being the daughter of a Naiad (nymphs in classical mythology that give life to rivers, lakes and other water bodies) that was a bad idea as water was her element and Penelope is rescued by ducks. After this unpleasant epi-

sode the father-daughter relationship remains frosty for the rest of her life. At the age of 15 a contest was organised to select Penelope's husband. Odysseus won it by deception. This is the first instance of stripping him of his heroism. Apparently the other suitors were served drugged wine and Odysseus drank a wine that gave him extra strength thus ensuring his victory. So as per Penelope, Odysseus was not as brave as claimed to be. He was clever, wily and would not hesitate to deceive to further his interest. She is married off to Odysseus amid much pomp and splendour when Odysseus springs another surprise on the family – he wishes to take Penelope with him to Ithaca- instead of staying in Sparta. Atwood portrays it as a shift from a matrilineal society (where the groom stays in the house of his wife) to a patrilineal society (where the bride goes to her husband's home along with all the gifts given to her by her father). In this way, Odysseus is portrayed as someone who ushered the first instance of patriarchy in the Mediterranean region. Thus, Penelope left Sparta for Ithaca to begin a new life far away from her comfort zone. Her married life came with the usual challenges of a stony mother in law, a caustic nurse and a rather stand offish father in law. But with Odysseus by her side, Penelope is quite happy in her new home. She gives birth to a boy, Telemachus, much to the delight of the family. And just when she was beginning to get comfortable, disaster struck. Helen, her beautiful cousin eloped with Paris – the Prince of Troy – and this naturally enraged her husband Menelaus. Menelaus then gathered all his forces in order to restore his honour and bring back Helen. Odysseus initially resists going in for war but “which of us can resist the temptation of being thought indispensable” (Atwood 2005:80) thinks Penelope to herself. Once he left, Odysseus returned after twenty years. The Trojan War lasted ten years and thereafter Odysseus took another ten years to return home. News about Odysseus comes sporadically but most of the times Penelope doesn't know whether he's alive or dead. In the meantime she has a large number of suitors who camp in her palace hoping that she would choose one of them. It is when the suitors make their appearance that Penelope goes through the most difficult phase of her life.

Atwood now adds another hitherto ignored aspect of the myth of Penelope – her twelve maids. These maids were slaves or children of slaves who served Penelope. Alone in the palace Penelope had to run all the estates virtually single handed. Her mother in law died, Odysseus's nurse was sidelined and her father in law abandoned affairs of the state went into the countryside. This left Penelope with no support system and herein stepped the twelve maids. They were her confidantes, her support and her eyes and ears in the midst of the suitors. When Odysseus returns after twenty years he sentences the maids to death accusing them of being in league with the suitors. They were all hanged as Penelope watched helplessly unable to

come to their defense. In the backdrop of such dark circumstances, Odysseus and Penelope were reunited. Lord Alfred Tennyson's eponymous poem that celebrates Ulysses as a hero thirsting for adventure despite his age refers to Penelope as "matched by an aged wife", which is precisely what Penelope is by the end of this parallel novel. She is tired of waiting, of warding off suitors and also suffers immeasurable guilt at not being able to save her twelve maids. It doesn't end well for her. On the other hand it ends quite satisfactorily for Odysseus and Telemachus, as both the men reclaim their rightful inheritance and rule over the people of Ithaca. In *The Odyssey* Penelope hardly has a voice. In *The Penelopiad*, she voices her concerns and innermost sentiments one by one demolishing the myth surrounding her chastity and steadfastness.

Atwood uses a range of very clever narrative techniques: deconstructive, ironic, poetry, music, a lecture on Anthropology set in the 21st century and also a chorus. The narrative technique is as sweeping as the story itself. The story of Penelope spans 2500 years and the narrative technique used in the text also spans 2500 years. Penelope is portrayed as clever, insightful and intelligent as opposed to Odysseus who is projected as wily, devious, unreliable and a "master disguiser" (Atwood 2005: 98).

If we consider Chitra Banerjee Divakurni's *Palace of Illusions* which describes Draupadi's trials and tribulations, we can see that Draupadi too like Penelope was insightful, clever and resourceful. In the epic *Mahabharata*, she is projected as the victim of patriarchy, a woman stripped of her dignity in front of the king and all the elders in the court. Like Penelope, Draupadi or Panchali also has a mythical birth story, she emerges out of a sacrificial fire after her brother. From the moment of her birth she is destined to be the cause of a great war which will destroy the great Kauravas. Like Penelope, a contest is arranged to marry her to the most suitable man. But unlike Penelope, Draupadi already has softness for Karna, the illegitimate son of Kunti and therefore the step brother of the Pandavas. At the crucial moment, however, she questions Karna's lowly descent, and Karna is not allowed to participate. This rash act is never satisfactorily explained in the novel. Eventually one of the great Pandava brothers Arjun wins her. Draupadi is a prize catch as her father is a powerful king. He takes her to his mother who says (without looking at her) that whatever Arjun has got should be shared equally between the five brothers. A stunned silence follows as a mother's wish cannot be left unfulfilled. After a lot of debate and discussion it is decided that Draupadi would be the wife of all the five brothers one year at a time. It is later revealed that this was Kunti's ruse to keep the brothers united as Draupadi was so beautiful that had she been only Arjun's wife there would have been resentment among the other four brothers:

I finally began to see what the wily Kunti had in mind when she insisted that I was to be married to all of them, and though they never made my heart beat wildly, the way I had hoped as a girl, I committed myself totally to the welfare of the Pandavas. (Divakurni 2009:152)

So, to keep the brothers united Kunti very cleverly and intentionally ensured that she would be equally shared by all the five brothers. All of them live happily in a grand palace, the palace of illusions; it was a magical place which had transparent walls, corridors lit only with gems, all the rooms had scented fountains. There was marble that looked like pools and pools that looked like marble, so that many times its inmates would trip and slip. But it was a grand, beautiful luxurious palace. It must be said that Divakurni's *Palace of Illusions* is situated on a grander scale. While Penelope scales down Odysseus in a mock-epic manner, Draupadi portrays her husbands as heroes albeit flawed ones. Draupadi lives in this beautiful palace but the finding resonance with the name it is an illusion. However she is the mistress of the palace and enjoys her independence here. She says "... in this place I was the mistress. Where my husband's had once relied on her, they now depended on me... The Palace Of Illusions was my domain" (Divakurni 2005:50).

She soon discovers that happiness is also an illusion. It was the same palace that caused her undoing. Duryodhan, arch enemy of the Pandavas (also their cousin) pays them a visit and is a victim of the illusions in the palace. He slips in a pool while Draupadi laughs and passes a snide remark on being the blind son of a blind father (his father Dhritrashtra being blind). This unleashes a fury that engulfs and eradicates the palace and everything that it stood for – power, wealth, luxury and happiness. Duryodhan, maddened with anger and envy invites his cousin, the eldest of the Pandavas to a game of dice. Dice was Yudhistir's weakness and as he lost the desire to win back all that he had lost spurred him on and on. Eventually he lost everything including Draupadi. She was dragged into the court and publicly humiliated, called a slave woman and the final insult was when Duryodhan asked her to sit on his naked thigh as she was his possession now. Duryodhan's brother Dushasan tries to strip her of her clothes but she begins to pray to Krishna who comes to her aid by draping her in a never ending sari. Thus the absent Krishna saves her when an entire court full of so called wise statesmen and her "heroic" husbands could not. Later it is decided that since Yudhistir had lost himself, he could not bet Draupadi and so she cannot be treated/considered as Duryodhan's slave.

Again why was this point not brought up at the time of her ignominy is not satisfactorily explained. Why did everyone have to wait till a woman no less than a queen is thoroughly humiliated to the point of being stripped

when such a simple legal point could have prevented her dishonour. This is not an ordinary woman: she is a queen, a wife to the five mighty Pandavas, a woman of divine birth and a woman who claims Krishna to be her friend. Yet mysteriously no one raised this elementary legal point and save her as she was being stripped. It was Krishna who from far away protected her honour. The whole court was quiet as Duryodhan unleashed his fury on a hapless woman. It was at that moment that Draupadi cursed the destruction of the entire Kaurava clan. This episode results in their expulsion from Hastinapur and Indraprastha (the city of the Palace of Illusions). Eventually after their exile when Duryodhan refuses to give the Pandavas their rightful inheritance, the war at Kurukshetra is announced where brother fought against brother, teacher fought against student and grandfather fought against his grandchildren. As with all wars, there were no victors, everyone perished including the children of the Kaurava and Pandava clan. Eventually the Pandavas walk towards the Himalayas to die. Draupadi is the first one to fall by the wayside to certain death but none of the Pandavas came to comfort her and even as she was dying she remembered the only man she had ever loved. “Karna would have never abandoned me thus. He would have stayed back and held my hand until we both perished. He would have happily given up heaven for my sake” she says (Divakurni 2005: 347).

In her final hours Draupadi remembers her life as it flashes by. She remembers her mother in law, her husbands, Krishna but most of all she remembers Karna. It is her love for Karna and Karna’s love for her, silent and secretive, the radiance of which permeated through every pore of her being.

In terms of technique *The Palace of Illusions* is a linear narrative from beginning to end without recourse to any other genre. It is a retelling of the story of Draupadi not from the perspective of the 21st century but from an ancient perspective. The line of thought is Draupadi’s alone. There are no other voices that clamour for attention. *The Penelopiad* on the other hand has the voice of the maids which haunt Penelope as she betrayed them. When Penelope meets them in heaven they all sing together in an accusatory tone:

We had no voice
 We had no name
 We had no choice
 We had one face
 One face the same. (Atwood 2005: 195).

The maids torment her in Hades where she comes face to face with them on numerous occasions. “The Chorus Line: An Anthropology Lecture” is delivered collectively by the maids. “The Chorus Line: As Videotaped by the

Maids” is also delivered by the twelve maids. The chorus of the Maids is homage to the use of the Chorus in Greek Tragedy, in which lowly characters comment on the main characters and the main action. It is also a tribute to the satyr play that usually accompanied tragedies, in which comic actor made fun of them. Penelope narrates her ancient story in the 21st century while she is in Hades but Odysseus, the eternal adventurer has been reborn many times:

He’s been a French General, he’s been a Mongolian invader, he’s been a tycoon in America, he’s been a headhunter in Borneo. He’s been a film star, an advertising man. It’s always ended badly, with a suicide or an accident or a death in battle or an assassination, and then he’s back here again. (Atwood 2005: 190)

Atwood’s narrative technique is far more complex incorporating several genres both contemporary and ancient- from the chorus to an academic lecture.

The structure of the Penelopiad... owes something to the scrapbook or sampler, and as such has numerous digressions. The interruptions of the Maids represent many forms, from ballad to Tennysonian idyll... the eighteenth century playlet, the Gravesian lecture. (Atwood 2007: vii)

The reader moves back and forth from ancient to modern times as for instance when Odysseus wins the race (by using a performance enhancing drug) and wins Penelope’s hand, she makes a caustic comment: “I understand that this sort of thing has become a tradition, and is still practised in the world of the living when it comes to athletic competitions” (Atwood 2005: 36).

It makes the text richer and more engaging. Like Penelope who was kept on her toes by her suitors, the changing narrative style keeps the reader on his/her toes. Atwood adds self-deprecatory humour and sharp irony to portray Penelope’s life. She is in sync with modern day life and the goings on in the 21st century. She knows the politics, society and even fashion that hold sway in contemporary times. Divakurni’s descriptions of Draupadi’s life on the other hand are quasi- philosophical and bereft of humour. It is a sullen tale told with delicacy, tenderness and love. The only character with a sense of humour and a sparkle in the eye is the effervescent Krishna- Draupadi’s friend, philosopher and guide. It is in his presence that Draupadi can be herself – playful, jovial and truly happy.

The second aspect that both the novels challenge is the idea of marriage. Marriage is considered to be a sacred bond between a man and a woman. Across cultures and religions this bond is sacrosanct. However both the novels expose it to be a relationship fostered by tradition. *The Mahabharata*

and the *Odyssey* have created certain stereotypes of gender, exalting the sanctity of marriage:

Mahabharata is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous tellings and re-tellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since. (Broadbeck and Black 2007: 11)

Throughout history, Draupadi is portrayed as an enigmatic woman, her experience of being the wife to five husbands, shocking even by today's standards, was never really explored. In most narratives she is the victim of patriarchy who was forced to marry all the five brothers lest they fight among themselves for her. What Draupadi feels about her peculiar position was a matter of conjecture. In any case she dared not refuse the decision of her mother in law, Kunti, who in one masterstroke ensured that Draupadi would be bound to the Pandavas forever. For the first time in *The Palace of Illusions* do we get a detailed analysis of her intimate life within this unusual arrangement. Initially she is appalled at the very thought of taking five husbands but eventually she has to give in to the wishes of her marital family. She is to be the wife of each of the Pandava for one year during which time the other brothers could not even look at her. She is a good wife and gives birth to five sons with each of the five Pandava brothers. But her relationship with her mother in law was fraught with difficulties:

I had entered a household full of mysteries, secrets that no one articulated. I'd have to use all my resources to try and decipher them. But one thing I knew already: from the moment she saw me yesterday, my mother in law regarded me as her adversary. (Divakurni 2009:105)

This was going to be a difficult marriage from the start, a power game with both the women jockeying for power. Out of the five Pandavas it was Bheem who truly loved her. Arjun, who had won her in the swayamvara was dismayed at this rather sudden turn of events and neglected her completely. Perhaps his neglect was defence mechanism to come to terms with his disappointment.

Since Draupadi can be married to only one Pandava brother for one year, they all took other wives as well. This she considered an affront to her vanity. "I didn't win all my battles. My husbands took other wives: Hidimba, Kali, Devika, Balandhara, Chitrangda, Ulupi, Karunamati... How naive I'd been to think I could have prevented it" (Divakurni 2009: 151).

Like most royal marriages, Draupadi's marriage was a political one. Though she is a dutiful wife, Draupadi has to real passion for any of the brothers. Her one great passion is Karna. Despite being married to the five

greatest warriors of all time, they are not able to stir her soul. The marriage served a purpose in the larger scheme of history, but provided no comfort or solace to Draupadi. As she lies dying, it is Karna, with whom she barely exchanged a few words in her lifetime, whom she remembers and not the Pandavas. Karna in turn too loves Draupadi. He confesses his love for her to Bheeshma:

The long line of her neck... as she raised her chin. Her beautiful, parted lips. How her breast rose and fell with passion. All this time, I told myself I hated her for humiliating me worse than anyone has done. That I wanted revenge. But I was fooling myself... the twelve years she was in the forest, I, too slept on the ground, thinking of her discomfort. How many times I started to go to her, to beg her, to beg her to come away with me, to be my queen. (Divavakurni 2009:276)

It is a sad, silent, secret love, but by no means one sided. Draupadi is also equally attracted to him despite being the wife of the glorious Pandavas. The Pandavas can take the wives they want to but Draupadi dare not even breathe about her love for Karna. It remains concealed till her death. A woman falling in love outside of her marriage threatened the social order (it still does) whereas a man who falls in love with or lusts after other women outside marriage is merely frowned upon and considered a minor aberration. Patriarchy normalises this difference by reiterating certain expectations and behavioural patterns for both the sexes. Nivedita Menon writes:

The whole point of nude make up, clearly is to spend hours painting your face in order to make it look like you had not touched it all... The maintaining of social order is rather like that. It requires the faithful performance of prescribed rituals over and over again throughout one's lifetime. Complex networks of cultural reproduction are dedicated to this sole purpose. But the ultimate goal of all this unceasing activity is to produce the effect of untouched naturalness. (Menon 2012: vii)

This was true even at the time of the *Mahabharata*, hundreds of years ago. Patriarchy was given a theoretical framework only much later but one can see it in all the great epics including the *Ramayana*. *The Mahabharata* has always been a story of brave men, warriors, sages and kings. Women ironically, are projected as being the cause of the wars and destruction of great empires. Divakurni challenges this notion. She projects these so called brave men as being mere mortals subject to flaws and gives us a glimpse of Draupadi's intimate self with finesse and sensitivity.

Margaret Atwood portrays marriage with a more critical perspective in *The Penelopiad*. She exposes marriage as a kind of a contest where the bride

is the prize. Atwood analyses marriage from the lens of irony, in a mock epic style:

My marriage was arranged. That's the way things were done then: where there were weddings, there were arrangements. I don't mean such things as bridal outfits, flowers, banquets and music, though we had those too. Everyone has those, even now. The arrangements I mean were more devious than that. (Atwood 2005: 23)

Marriage among the royalty was a matter of pure economics. Penelope, post death, realises the politics of the institution. Like most marriages, hers too is a marriage of convenience. Penelope is conscious of the fact that all that the suitors are interested in is the wealth that she would bring along. Marriage is not about passion or love. It is and has always been about economics and convenience:

Marriages then are not generally founded upon love... and this disassociation is in no way accidental. It is implied in the very nature of the institution, the aim of which is to make the economic and sexual union of man and woman serve the interests of society, not assure their personal happiness. (Beauvoir 1997:453)

Simone de Beauvoir's iconic text *The Second Sex* presents cogent arguments with respect to the marriage. This definition fits the marriage of Penelope and Odysseus to a T. Marriage was the only means whereby a woman could integrate herself in society. Like all young girls Penelope too was part scared part excited about marriage. She is also painfully conscious about her looks. The comparison is with her gorgeous cousin Helen. All the suitors who have come seek Penelope's hand gawk unashamedly at Helen. Penelope is sidelined at her own wedding. But by the end of the ceremony she was too tired to enjoy the festivities. Finally she says: "And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat. A package of meat in a wrapping of gold, mind you. A sort of a gilded blood pudding" (Atwood 2005: 39). The simile is crude but appropriate. It is a depiction of women as objects to be consumed and devoured. The woman was a commodity to be used and the marriage as an economic transaction.

Atwood insinuates marital rape while describing the consummation of the marriage:

I would be torn apart as the earth is by the plough, and how painful and humiliating that would be... the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctified rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock-killing. There was supposed to be blood. (Atwood 2005: 44)

Divakurni's Draupadi however makes no such insinuation about the Pandavas. Theirs was a marriage perhaps too preoccupied with larger questions of honour, duty and the Great War to be sullied by the demands of the flesh. Draupadi makes only one reference to Bheem leaving marks on her body. There is an unusual silence with respect to her intimate life with the Pandavas.

Penelope's life changes when Odysseus goes to fight the Trojan War. All the duties of running a large estate fall upon her. She has always been a princess and nothing prepared her for that kind of work. To make matters worse there were rumours of Odysseus's infidelity. Like the Pandavas Odysseus was unfaithful to Penelope, but like Draupadi Penelope was expected to remain chaste and steadfast while waiting for her husband to return. Added to the problem of running her estate is the problem of suitors. She had many suitors who came and camped in her own home and forced Penelope to provide food, clothing and shelter to them. Penelope managed the household and the estates with considerable success without any guidance from her family. But the suitors came and scrounged on her.

First came five, then ten, then fifty – the more there were the more were attracted, each fearing to miss out on the perpetual feasting and the marriage lottery. They were like vultures when they spot a dead cow: first one drops, then another, until finally every vulture for miles around is tearing up the carcass. (Atwood 2005: 103)

Penelope's palace was in shambles what with the suitors demanding an answer, her son Telemachus grown and asking after his father and the furtive games played by the maids. It was finally Odysseus who came and set this house in order. He hanged the maids, killed the other suitors and established decorum in the house. Eventually it is Odysseus and Telemachus who take everything from Penelope. Without even the slightest note of gratitude, Odysseus reclaims his inheritance and becomes the King of Ithaca. Penelope, on the other hand is marginalised unceremoniously while the great Odysseus is hailed as a hero. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is congratulated for having a wife like Penelope:

Shrewd Odysseus!... You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarus' daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope. (Atwood 2005: ix)

Penelope the constant, Penelope the flawless, Penelope who waited for her husband- the myth preserves Penelope like this. However, part by part At-
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wood deconstructs the myth of Penelope. In the myth Penelope is shown as a chaste and patient woman who waits endlessly for her husband, while Odysseus beds every nymph and siren he can get his hands on:

Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation- almost the compulsion-to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, the singers, the yarn spinners. Don't follow my example; I want to scream in your ears. (Atwood 2005:02)

Conclusions

The Odyssey and *The Mahabharata* continue to fascinate us because of the heroism of their key protagonists. But in both these texts the heroines remain passive and mute as also being repositories of family honour. Margaret Atwood has turned the dull, patient and chaste Penelope into a witty, charming and artful heroine. Similarly Divakurni's Draupadi is fierce and voices her love for a sixth man despite being married to five men at the same time. Modern deconstructive interpretations reconstruct suppressed voices of heroines from history and mythology. In modern feminist interpretations of such women, the heroines talk, argue and question the injustice that society metes out to them. The present study reveals that on close scrutiny of the texts both Penelope and Draupadi emerge as strong and resilient survivors against all odds. They are not whimpering, helpless women at the mercy of men.

Myths are eternal stories that reflect and shape our understanding of the world. They bare our desires, fears and longings. They also remind us what it means to be human. However, written by men, naturally mythology was also androcentric. Both Draupadi and Penelope, women celebrated for their chastity, remained silent throughout history. Both the books under consideration have revealed their innermost desires and portrayed them as flawed human beings, as opposed to the flawless women that they were supposed to have been. They are not depicted as acquiescent women; rather they challenge patriarchal assumptions about chastity and constancy. In their characteristic styles, Divakurni and Atwood have given a voice to the voiceless to give us a better understanding of these enigmatic women from mythology.

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