

Rewriting Greek and Indian Myth: The Evolution of Mythical Women in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Kavita Kané's *Sita's Sister*

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Abstract

*This article studies Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Kavita Kané's *Sita's Sister* (2014) and examines the contemporary retellings of Greek and Indian myths by a deliberately posing female as its central notion. The study examines the traditional constructions of femininity which are rooted in chastity, fidelity, sacrifice, and silence, and rewrites it by the characters, Penelope and Urmila. By negotiating canonical epics, *The Odyssey* and *The Ramayana*, the article understands the patriarchal frameworks that shaped women's identities and confined them to subordinate roles within mythological narratives. The article studies fate, duty, art, and childhood conditioning, along with parental presence, matrimony, and political agency, to trace the evolution of mythical women from passive figures to assertive, reflective individuals. Margaret Atwood and Kavita Kané's uses satire, introspection, and resistance to dismantle traditional perspectives and offer alternative ideologies on woman.*

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Introduction:

According to Judith Lorber, 'gender' refers to the socially constructed ideas of what it means to be 'man' or 'woman' in this society (Adams et al. 203). Most individuals find it challenging to accept that gender is a construct that is repeatedly formed and reconstructed via social interactions and that it determines the structure and complexity of that social life.

Contemporary retellings have been set on the goal of decentring the traditional myths of gender and their roles. The marginalised narratives of characters are put in the limelight nowadays, and the genre has gained popularity for its satirical undertones. The old Greek and Indian myths are revisited and refurbished into a questioning and thought-provoking discourse. The authors try to highlight the unjust ways of treatment and how disempowering the traditional customs were towards women and slaves. A notable aspect of this genre is the authors' subtle criticism of current power politics and their effects on society. The intention is to convey the social issues through similar universal instances in the myths and folk tales across the globe.

Comparison of similar myths that belong to two entirely different cultures brings out the desired universal theme. Both Greece and India possess a wealth of literature and mythology that closely aligns with their extinct or existing religions. The numerous numbers of gods and goddesses in both cultures and the abundant mythical tales present in the two cultures call for a comparative study. The great epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have almost equivalent stories to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Mythical women from Ahalya to Alcmene share many similar experiences, but what makes the two works distinguishable and indistinguishable contributes much to the comparative study.

The *Ramayana* and its fame are quite noteworthy, and it is a highly regarded work in world literature. The antagonist Ravan abducted the female protagonist Sita, who was renowned for her loyalty, unwavering love, patience, and chastity. Almost all celebrated women in myths have one or several of these characteristics. Similarly, Helen of Troy, famed for her beauty that launched a thousand ships towards Ilium, is remembered for her infidelity, charm, and the destruction caused by her allure and unfaithfulness. However, their fame was boundless due to the highly valued attributes of femininity that were constructed by the patriarchal forces of their time. Greek and Indian societies established guidelines for men and women, outlining their responsibilities towards their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and fellow men. The concept of chastity and fidelity is rooted in the cultural norms that led to the creation of mythological women who epitomised those qualities. Those who failed to uphold these values were taught a lesson through characters that did not respect decorum.

This article is intended to examine the rewriting of Greek and Indian myths through contemporary retellings and to analyse the evolution of mythical women in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Kavita Kané's *Sita's Sister*. Margaret Atwood and Kavita Kané intend to unveil their female characters from the restrictive societal norms that pertain to femininity at certain instances and unmask their real qualities as a fellow human being. The authors are known to challenge the traditional conventions and are widely regarded for female-orientated novels. Penelope and Urmila might belong to different cultures but the challenges they were put through strongly establish a connection between their stories. Though the two works hold certain common factors revolving around the life of the protagonists, the choices and the decisions made distinguish the women from each other. The research article attempts to bring out congruent and conflicting elements in Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Kané's *Sita's Sister* (2014) from their original versions and trace the evolution of the heroines in these contemporary works.

Original Myth:

Penelope, the princess of Sparta and daughter of King Icarius, was married off to the clever Odysseus in a contest. She was the cousin of the infamous Helen of Troy, who was regarded as the "quintessential faithful wife" and known for her "intelligence and constancy" (Atwood xiii). She waits for twenty years for her husband to return home, meanwhile holding up the suitors with her cunning strategy of weaving a shroud to delay choosing another man. Homer describes this strategy as: "So by day she'd weave at her great and growing web- by night, by the light of torches set beside her, she would unravel all she'd done. Three whole years she deceived us blind seduced us with this scheme. . ." (541). She reunites with him at a crucial timing only to lose him again. Odysseus, who was known for his adventures, deserted her on a life journey and left her with their son as the next ruler.

Urmila, the princess of Mithila and daughter of King Janak, married Lakshman, one of the princes of Ayodhya. She was Sita's younger sister, who is yet another character of Indian myth known for her forbearance and sacrifice. Vālmīkī describes her as such, in his epic: "And Urmilā, the next to me, Graced with all gifts, most fair to see, My sire with Raghu's house allied, And gave her to be Lakshman's bride" (803). She was said to have slept during the exile of her husband to compensate for his sleepless nights in the forest. She woke up the moment her husband returned. Her patience was rewarded with Lakshman's early death for disobeying a royal decree. Urmila remained in Ayodhya until she and Sita's children grew old enough to take her life to unite with her beloved.

These two classical epics, dating back to the ninth to seventh centuries BCE, greatly influenced the construction of gender roles through their portrayal of women and the customs of the time. Women of those times were expected to give birth and manage their internal affairs. They were protected from the outside world and were subject to strict rules that applied to royal women. Certain myths state that the women left alone are either being seduced or abducted. "Beauty provoketh thieves

sooner than gold,” and Sita was abducted by Ravan and Helen seduced by the advances of Paris (Shakespeare 103). Lakshman believed that notion that forests are never safe, especially for women, and he leaves Urmila behind, as they already had one woman to protect.

The idea of femininity has been ingrained in the people, and women were depicted as submissive characters with strong willpower to guard their chastity. Even in dire situations and in a fit of emotions, a woman is expected not to slip out of her dignity. Any characters who deviate from this assigned role were created with despair and destruction as the end. For example, Lady Macbeth and Helen, who diverged from their assigned roles as women, end up tragically expressing the universal idea of suffering for greed and infidelity, respectively. The slight break from the dominant ideology often threatened the dominant culture practitioners, and thus characters in oral as well as written tradition were designed with the audience and the society in mind. Meanwhile, the characters that strove to stay within the assigned role were glorified and praised. For example, Penelope and Urmila were celebrated for their unwavering loyalty and patience, but seldom are the characters’ sufferings discussed.

Parallelism in the Retelling:

Fate and Duty: According to Homer: “And fate? No one alive has ever escaped it, neither brave man nor coward, I tell you – it’s born with us the day that we are born” (582-84). The concepts of fate and duty are the parallel factors that contribute to the gender roles in the selected works. Fate allowed men to seek knowledge in new places and use it for greater deeds, and duty pushed men to prioritise honour before personal convictions. Odysseus and Lakshman were free to leave their wives for nobler causes, but the duties of women pertain to men. Penelope and Urmila were forced to stay behind in the palace for the remaining family. Urmila remembered her mother’s words: “And above all, my dearest daughter, look after Sita and your cousins” (Kané 89).

Court and Art: “... here is no high or low art; there is only art, and it comes in many forms” (Gurney 12). Penelope and Urmila mastered art forms that were ignored as mere hobbies. Atwood’s Penelope was as shrewd as Odysseus to strategize the weaving plot to surveil the suitors. Urmila deviated from her sisters in choosing painting and reading as her foremost hobbies over cooking. Both of the artworks practiced by the female characters required patience and meticulous effort. They were often looked down on for the expression of their talent. Urmila’s quick wit and knowledge in Vedas and Upanishads convinced the orthodox court of Ayodhya to accept women in state affairs. Penelope remained a powerless but wealthy puppet until Odysseus left for Troy, but she was a quick learner and managed to do a better job than the previous king, Laertes. Penelope regards the act of listening to and valuing men’s stories as “an underrated talent in women” (Atwood 38).

Childhood Conditioning: Penelope and Urmila grew up with cousin and sisters respectively. The former did not share a good relationship with Helen, who was the

spotlight in everything and everywhere. The female objectification began in childhood when they presented Helen as an elegant swan and Penelope as the silent duck. She often felt insecure about her appearance and being regarded as the second-best option for men. Odysseus tried for Helen's hand in marriage like most of the Greek men and settled for Penelope, but Helen's presence in her married life is felt when Odysseus utters "Helen hasn't borne a son yet" as she gives birth to his son Telemachus (Atwood 52). Urmila loved her adoptive elder sister Sita as much as her parents, but her mother, Queen Sunaina, reveals later that she had been harsh with her own daughter to comfort the motherlessness of the other three. Urmila chose to marry Lakshman, knowing full well that he would prioritize Ram over her. At the spur of the moment, she slips her thoughts, "I have always known what secondary is—I have grown up with it" (Kané 73). The characters were used to be in a subsidiary position since childhood, branded as clever and mature.

Polarities in the Retelling:

Parental Presence: Urmila, though reprimanded for her outspoken and fierce attitude, had a lovely childhood. The kingdom of Mithila respected the rights of women, and the princesses were allowed to seek knowledge of their wish. Kane showcased the ideal sisterhood through the four sisters, and Urmila stood up for them in any situation. Penelope, unlike Urmila, had a troubling childhood filled with constant fear of death and exposure to hatred. Believing an oracle that she would be the cause of his demise, her father attempted to toss her into the sea more than once. Fortunately, her mother, a naiad (water nymph), frequently intervened to save her. However, she hardly received maternal affection; her mother, as she frequently recounted, was an evasive individual who abhorred the idea of motherhood and child rearing. She humorously reveals, "If my father hadn't had me thrown into the sea, she might have dropped me in herself, in a fit of absent-mindedness or irritation," while narrating her childhood experiences (Atwood 10). Thus, Atwood and Kané share different opinions on motherhood and parenthood in their works.

Matrimony and Politics: Penelope had a political arranged marriage based on a huge dowry, and Odysseus conspired with Penelope's uncle to win the contest for her hand. She was pleased that Odysseus respected her space and made her feel like a friend at the beginning stages of their marriage. But she later understood that he was constant in his cunningness and cruel when he was crossed even the slightest. He once warned her to be careful of her fidelity, or else "...he would have to chop me into little pieces with his sword..." (Atwood 59). Urmila was given the right to choose her husband, and her love for Lakshman made her marry him. Their personalities suited each other, as they were both fierce in expressing their opinions and stood up for their siblings. They respected each other's commitment to their families and had a strong understanding of each other. Penelope held a minuscule amount of power in the court of Odysseus. She remained silent throughout her life and never once revealed her thoughts on her circumstances of being left alone, being scorned by her own son because of the unruly suitors and the death of the

maids. All she could do was narrate her story aeons after her death, from the underworld of Hades, which Roland Barthes states as “speaking corpses” (Barthes 133). But Urmila took her chance to reprove the elders who only valued the duties of men towards men, ignoring the women to whom they hold as much equal responsibility. She was known to be the harsh critic of Ram for pressuring Sita to the test of purity and voiced her opinions on almost every injustice.

Evolution of Mythical Women:

From the silent, sacrificial princesses, the characters of Urmila and Penelope were transformed into fierce and satirical princesses, respectively. Kane creates an interpolative episode where women of the court accompany Bharat to bring back Ram. The event showcases the voices of every woman in the myths throughout the world, it was deliberately added to decentre the notions on duty and honour. She was infuriated by men making choices for the lives of women and states, “...is there no dharma of the husband for his wife? No dharma of the son for his mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brothers?” (Kané 219). She faced the wrath of the elders that day but that did not stop her from speaking the truth. Penelope could not state her sufferings in her life, so Atwood chooses a narrative after death. From the meek, submissive Penelope of the myth, she created a shrewd and sarcastic Penelope. She was not the all accepting wife who ignores her husband’s affairs and lies. Penelope was well aware of his lies throughout her life. She grew up untrusting of others since her father tried to kill her and that attitude made her survive among the greedy and cunning men like his husband. Atwood shocks by stating: “The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing”, meaning their marriage was shrouded with lie, hatred and disappointments which the grand narrative failed to notice (Atwood 138).

Conclusion:

It could be stated that a cultural patriarchy prevents women from expressing their opinions and achieving liberation from the position they are expected of, which is why the stories of Penelope and Urmila only served to illuminate the truth about mythology through the genre of retelling. Atwood and Kane strived in creating mythical protagonists that revealed the social problems of the past and present by improvising and redefining the classic gender roles. The authors place Penelope and Urmila at the centre to challenge the archetypal divides, such as those between hero and helpmate, action and endurance, and speech and silence, which are prevalent throughout traditional myths. These retellings also critique the idea of predetermined fate by proving how it is influenced by society and its expectations. The authors describe the idea of ‘waiting’ in a new light, something like a tool of resistance rather than as a mere submission towards patriarchal norms. Thus, the novels *The Penelopiad* and *Sita’s Sister* stand as representative works for marginal voices and reimagined narratives. The works collectively show that retelling is not an act of defiance but an act of reclamation of voices of the mythical women.

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