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Gender and the Chronotope: a Feminist Reading of the Historical
Chronotope in Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad (2005)

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to examine the historical chronotope in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* from a feminist point of view. Amid the escalating postmodern concerns in re-examining history, feminist revisionism started to foreground the academic spheres as a result of the active role that second wave feminists play in seeking historical justice for women's representation. Through following analytical and descriptive methods, this article aims at unveiling the pivotal role of feminist writers such as Margaret Atwood in rewriting history and claiming women's voice in a world characterized by masculine supremacy. Towards this end, this article relies on views of J.F Lyotard and Linda Hutcheon about historical metafiction and Metanarratives in order to examine how Margaret Atwood has deconstructed the image of females in Greek mythology through offering a different reading of Homer's *The Odyssey*, allowing the story to be recounted from a feminine point of view.

Key Words: Historical Chronotope; Historiographic metafiction; Feminism; Metanarratives; The Penelopiad.

Introduction:

What characterizes the current era is the rejection of absolute truths and canonic representations of cultures, creeds and genders. Starting from the 1960's, the urge to revive the feminist struggle has extended to include the position of women in history and how they are represented throughout various historical records that are mostly recounted by men. Among the widely read stories of the past, as far as the Western culture is concerned, are the ones derived from the Greek mythology including *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad* and *Metamorphoses*. The literary productions stemming from the Classical Antiquity especially the Greek civilization keep on influencing and inspiring the modern and post-modern writers in different ways since they provide a glance at how these societies were and how they dealt with different subjects that would be of a significant interest at present. Since the focus of this research is the female's representation in history, it is important to highlight how women were represented in these stories. Mostly, women were pictured as helpless, passive and susceptible creatures that are in dire need of men's presence and guidance.

Nevertheless, this conception about women was challenged by a number of feminist writers who defied this concept and offered an alternative version of these stories adhering to the French philosopher and theorist Jean-François

Lyotard, well known for his daring views about history as he defines the postmodern by saying: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹ A period characterized by doubting the official historical records, allowing a space for them to be recounted from subjective points of views using fiction. Margaret Atwood, a Canadian laureate and a literary hallmark, is known for her dedicative feminist leaning that aims at sustaining the position of women and calling for their rights to be self-represented and voiced. In her novella *The Penelopiad*, she impugns the way female characters were portrayed in Homer’s *The Odyssey* and offers another reading of the recounted events by allowing more textual space for women to speak for themselves. The process of analyzing the rewriting of the Greek myth of *The Odyssey* in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* is going to be studied according to Mikhail Bakhtin’s views on the literary chronotope, specifically the historical one in order to uncover the influence of masculine historical discourse that is being revised and re-scripted from a feminine point of view. The current study also draws on Linda Hutcheon’s Historiographic metafiction, a term into which falls Atwood’s novel *The Penelopiad*.

From the outspoken to the subtle, mythological tales are the fruits of the human imagination. They constitute archetypical conceptions about life’s problems at their core.² In this regard, Karen Armstrong contends that: “myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives, they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human”³ As a feminist writer, Margaret Atwood have always been bold enough to bring to the fore the sufferings of women throughout history. In most of her writings that vary between science fiction, fairy tales and historical novels, she intends to empower women through allowing them textual spaces to utter their experiences and denounce the limitations that are socially dictated on them. Likewise, what makes the works of Atwood recognizable and different is her impulse towards picturing females occupying strong positions.

It is a well known fact, that Atwood herself does not accept most of feminist ideologies as she refuses extremism and promotes for equal opportunities for both genders. As far as her historical fiction is concerned, Atwood’s passion with writing fairy tales has yielded a kind of revision to some stories that stem from the Greek mythology. This latter is characterized by different heroic stories that exalt male’s power and chauvinism at the expense of the female’s voice. In her novella, *The Penelopiad*, Atwood presents to the readers Homer’s *The Odyssey* from a feminine perspective. She offers a historical revision of *The Odyssey* by shifting the narrative from Odysseus to Penelope, putting into question its accuracy and truth. The novella details the story of Penelope and her twelve hung maids that were silenced in the original myth of *The Odyssey*. As a character and a mythological symbol, Penelope has drawn the attention of novelists and scholars to use her as the epitome of a faithful and clever woman.

Nevertheless, Atwood's adaptation of the character does not aim to deal with these traits in her personality but to deal with her feminist leaning which is manifested through her compassion with the twelve hanged maids in order to grant them a historical justice. In the introduction Penelope says: "I've always been haunted by hanged maids" (xv), and that's how Penelope is in *The Penelopiad* (xv)⁴. In addition to this, Penelope as a female character shows that she is not satisfied with the way she is being represented in stories and how her image is ascribed in history; she says: "how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself. What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself, she sounds guilty"⁵

The story of the twelve maids and the narrative authority that is given to Penelope confirms that Atwood's prime purpose of rewriting *The Odyssey* is not to defend or/and voice one single female but rather to report a collective feminine experience by highlighting the fact that all females regardless to their position in society share a common challenge which is to have the right to be self-represented. In this regard, Richards states that the novella "[rejects] the feminist re-writing practice of 'recovering' a single female voice as if it can be made to speak for the experiences of all women"⁶. Furthermore, scholar Alicia Ostriker contends that revisionist myths such as *The Penelopiad* are considered as: "acts of feminist anti-authoritarianism against the patriarchal praxis of reifying texts"⁷ that submits to Atwood's efforts to "present various forms of dominance practiced against females. One traditional form of imposing men's control over women is a forced sexual relationship held against the women's will"⁸ exactly like in the case of the twelve maids who were forced to sleep with the suitors of Penelope.

The relationship between literature and history is undeniable. The focal grounds of different bodies of literature have always been mediating between reality and imagination. If history represents records of the past exactly the way they are reported through official testimonies, then literature offers different readings of history that the dominant discourse may not give space to. It reflects history with all its complexities and nuances in order to grant it a subjective tendency. This, in fact, submits to the postmodern turn that aims at breaking away with traditions especially those popularized by modernism, allowing feelings of anxiety and alienation to be put forward. Since postmodernists promote for the meaninglessness and absurdity of the human life, they tend to portray life, individual experiences and history from one single perspective that would represent a mélange of truths. They use language in a way that replicates the postmodern condition including the impact of the past on the present.

Amid the sensitive line that exists between literature and history, both of them were regarded branches of the same tree of learning, a tree that engages in interpreting experiences that aim at raising awareness about the past and elevating man. However, the two branches took different trajectories as history started to become politicized and subject to dominance. J.F Lyotard describes the postmodern condition as the incredulity toward metanarrativity, Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon has coined the term Historiographic metafiction that expresses the admixture of history and literature. She agrees with Lyotard in the sense that she finds the postmodern novel has “started to be intensively self-reflexive and yet paradoxically (...) lay claim to historical events and personages”⁹. For her, there must be a clear distinction between a fact and event. “A fact” according to her is discourse-defined while “an event” is not. She clarifies that historiographic metafiction “denies that the past “real” existed; it only conditions our mode of knowledge of that past... can know it only through its traces, its relics”

¹⁰ . She highlights the tight relationship between history and fiction as both rely on imagination in order to arrive at a coherent conception about past events.

records started and ended in the past. Historians use their imagination just like writers use their thoughts in order to provide readers with vivid pictures about the worlds of the past. She elucidates the interconnection between history and fiction within the context of postmodernism as follows:

The process of critically examining and analyzing the records and survivals of the past is... historical method. The imaginative reconstruction of that process is called historiography”. “Imaginative reconstruction” or intellectual systematizing- whichever model suits you best- is the focus of the postmodern rethinking of the problems of how we can and do come to have knowledge of the past. It is the writing of history that, as Paul Ricoeur has shown us, is actually “constitutive of the historical mode of understanding”. It is historiography’s explanatory and narrative employments of past events that construct what we consider historical facts.¹¹

efforts to illuminate the firm relationship between history and fiction, she refuses to equate historiographic metafiction to the historical novel. She suggests that the postmodern novel is a “complex genre because, as theorists have pointed out, history plays a great number of distinctly different roles, at different levels of generality, in its various manifestations”¹² in which protagonists “are anything but proper types...the peripheral figures of fictional history”¹³ for the sake of offering plurality of truths that acknowledges its ontology. On the other hand the historical novel that “incorporates and assimilates these data in order to lend a feeling of verifiability (or an air of dense specificity and particularity) to the fictional world”¹⁴. It submits to the ontology of the past but at the same time it collects, arranges and narrates events with their chronological order.

Atwood's tendency to engage in historical novels and myth retelling is heavily based on her attempts to create a fair feminine representation in tales that have been long told from a male-centered perspective. Since what problematizes the female's character in fiction as in reality is the amount of the unjust limitations that are imposed on their gender. According to Simone De Beauvoir, gender is a social construct. The attributed roles to males and females are given based on their bodies; that is why we find that in *The Penelopiad* what worries the central character Penelope is the body stigmatization that women suffer from. As Atwood tends to challenge and question the original story told by Odysseus, Penelope fears that she may not be understood : "[she] can't make [her] self-understood, not in your world, the world of bodies, of tongues and fingers; and most of the time [she has] no listeners, not on your side of the river"¹⁵ The narrator here is trying to drag the attention of the readers that females live in constant fear of the restrictions that confine their voices because of their gender. She also focuses on the story of the maids that is being told in chorus lines in an attempt to hint at the fragments left out in Homer's version and that Penelope uses to mend the cracks of history as Nunes Ruan postulates:

By choosing to write a novel, Atwood is able to expose the conventionality of not only the epic, but also of the other genres used by the maids in their chorus line. The novel, unlike the epic, allows the story to be fragmented, a fact which creates the uncertainty of who might be telling the whole story in *The Penelopiad*: Penelope herself or the maids?¹⁶

Fragmentation is a postmodern technique that is often used within the context of Historiographic metafiction in order to hint at the unreliability of the official histories provided by one single point of view. Atwood has relied on telling the story of the maids in the form of chorus lines to confirm that historical records are full of cracks and fissures that need to be completed by stories of the unheard or the silenced in order to give a certain degree of credibility to stories.

3. Bakhtin's Literary Chronotope: a reflection on the historical Chronotope in *The Penelopiad*

The interplay of time and space in literary texts has always been a pivotal concern among scholars. Several attempts were made in order to figure out how these two intrinsic notions tend to operate within literary texts especially through the narrative. One of the brilliant scholars who were concerned with the interplay of time and space in novels is the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin whose works bore fruit in his discovery of the chronotope which can be utilized as an analytical tool to attain a speculative apprehension of the human action

and attitude from an ethical perspective. Originally, the term chronotope is the combination of two words derived from Greek Cronos (time) and topos (space) and their infusion to create an understandable whole that investigates temporal as well as spatial indicators in literature. In fact, the chronotope, as a concept, looks into the interrelationship of time and space. For long, these two concepts have been studied separately from one another; it is only thanks to Bakhtin's work that they started to be seen as inseparable and complementary entities.

In his essay *Forms of Time and the Chronotope*, Bakhtin suggests that time and space are interlinked within the chronology of events forming an "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships"¹⁷. He further claims that the emotional experience of fictional texts operates on both levels of time well and space in order to create an expressive mirroring of the recounted events in any given fictional work. For Bakhtin, the significance of the chronotope lies in its ability to help mediate the 'image' of the character by reflecting its experience at specific moments and locations to create a meaning. He poetically describes the interrelationship between space and time that he labels as the chronotope by saying:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time as it were thickens, takes on flesh, [and] becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.¹⁸

The chronotope for Bakhtin is immensely crucial for attributing a meaning to literary texts. Its significance is seen through the realistic dimension it adds to the events of the story. Albeit there is not a cutting edge definition for the chronotope provided by Bakhtin, many scholars attempted to unveil this ambiguity by trying to provide definitions and interpretations to the term. Basically, the term Chronotope was borrowed by Bakhtin in order to describe the continuum of space and time within literary texts that is established on the basis of altered spatial and temporal traits as well as narrative potentials that resolve which events can happen and how.

As for the historical aspect of the term, Bakhtin's careful categorization of the chronotope serves as a substantial and accurate means of literary analysis that helps to read the text within and outside its spatio-temporal context. It engages in figuring out the different strata of meaning expressed in the novel through the lens of space and time incorporated with their historical and cultural

backdrops. Bakhtin's primordial purpose was to read history through discourse which is what lies behind his desire to analyze and trace back the development of the novel ever since the Greek writings. His commitment to explore the novel as an effective literary genre is due to the ability of the novelist to allow textual spaces for each character to express their points of views in a polyphonic manner. Unlike other genres such as poetry, novels can vividly portray place/space and time in a way that makes them valid to be read in any epoch and any place as he claims that it is in "a maximal contact with the present" and "its multi-linguaged consciousness"¹⁹

Projecting Bakhtin's historical chronotope on the novel entails clarifying the spatial markers along with their temporal references in order to achieve a full understanding of the historical chronotopes that exist in the novel. To start with, there is the chronotope of Ithaca during the Trojan War when Penelope was forced to marry one of her suitors but because of her faithfulness to Odysseus, she refuses to. This story is recounted from Penelope's perspective in a whole different time and place because the story is set in the underworld (the world of the dead) and the timing is the 21st century. Another example of the historical chronotope in the novel is the chronotope of the underworld, wherein the dead ironically are presented alive. There is an option for the characters to get back to life with all their memories of the past are whipped but Penelope and the twelve maids remain fearful and indecisive about taking this step. Nevertheless, Helen drinks from the "waters of forgetfulness" and experiences the modern life and tries to convince Penelope to do the same..

Conclusion

Like many of Atwood novels that project her feminist inclinations, *The Penelopiad* offers an account for females who range from lower social strata. She tends to disrupt the binary of time and space in her adoptive narrative of ancient Greek myths namely *The Odyssey* in order to grant a tribune for women who have been long silenced and objectified in favor of their male counterparts. Besides her use of parody, Atwood presents the story of the maids in fragments. Fragmentation is a postmodernist technique related to the representation of post-modernism as an era that is characterized by the loss of connectedness. The need for fragmentation stems from the sense of chaos and meaninglessness of the current times. Nevertheless, Atwood's use of fragmentation responds to her efforts as a postmodernist writer to deconstruct dominant discourses and imbed the occluded stories that were discarded.

Thus, this paper offers an analytical study of Atwood's *The Penelopiad* which is considered as a Historiographic metafiction. Through this novella, Atwood aims at carrying on her feminist march against women's detention and relegation to marginal spaces that is clearly noticeable throughout history and mythology. This study relied on Bakhtin's views of the literary chronotope in general and the historical chronotope specifically in order to highlight the unreliability of historical records and to confirm J.F Lyotard's conception about the postmodern epoch that is characterized by "incredulity toward metanarrativity" which accepts revisions of history as long as there is a possibility to mend its cracks.

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