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The Penelopiad : A Postmodern Fiction

Saman Khalid^a, Irshad Ahmad Tabassum^b

^a Govt. College for Women, Gulberg, Lahore, Pakistan

^b Govt. Postgraduate College Khanpur Rahim Yar Khan

Abstract

Postmodernism is commonly described as incredulity towards metanarratives. A metanarrative is an abstract idea that is thought to be a comprehensive explanation of historical experience or knowledge. It claims to arrive at a single universal truth. But postmodernism undercuts this holistic stance by establishing alternative possibilities for construction of truth. The word “parody” is still tainted with eighteenth century notion of wit and ridicule but coming out of such period limited definitions, parody in postmodern texts can mean witty ridicule as well as intertextuality or ironic quotation. The article analyses Margaret Atwood’s novella *The Penelopiad*, exploring the postmodern conventions of historiographic metafiction and parody. Employing her tongue-in-cheek humour and featuring two centres of consciousness, Atwood subverts the Homeric omniscient narrator. Resurrecting the mysteriously veiled figure of Penelope, Odysseus’s wife, who is known for her nobility and constancy, Atwood gives Penelope the narrative voice, telling a widely different tale from the Homeric version.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *The Penelopiad*; postmodernism; metanarrative

Introduction

Myths are timeless, larger than life stories that naturalize gender roles through their fixed representations of men and women. One such Greek myth, *Odyssey*, is the story of noble and constant Penelope, wife of Odysseus “known to the world / for every kind of craft” (Homer 1996: 139). In Homer’s myth, while Odysseus, the

wanderer, has the talent to deceive and is a persuasive speaker, Penelope is presented as a loyal and trustworthy wife, who keeps the suitors at bay while pretending to weave a shroud for her father-in-law. Margaret Atwood resurrects the long-suffering, mysteriously veiled figure and narrates her tale of woe in a witty and invigorating style that makes us chuckle.

Postmodernism is most succinctly described as “incredulity towards meta-narratives” by Jean Francois Lyotard which means disbelief or rejection of any holistic or totalizing view. The dominant attitude in postmodernism is scepticism. A postmodern narrative is sceptic of any moral or political judgments because it undermines the validity of any one privileged position or any single truth. No longer relying upon the validity of meta-narratives, it demands alternative possibilities for the construction of truth. Whereas Homer’s tale was recited by an omniscient narrator, Atwood features two centres of consciousness (Penelope and the maids) which not only refute or endorse each other’s viewpoints but delineate the opinion of two classes of the society: the royalty and the beggar-maids. Atwood’s story openly subverts the consensual and conventional patriarchal thinking prevalent in the times of Homer. But even in Homer, Penelope is not a monolithic figure. She is enigmatic till the very end. She is enduring and patient yet an object of suitor’s desire and also of her son’s suspicions. Although firm in her decision not to remarry, she does feel flattered by the suitor’s attentions. When Athena instructs her “to display herself to the suitors, fan their hearts/inflame them more” (1996: 308), she betrays her own longing which lies beneath that calm, unruffled veneer of loyalty to her husband. Although “wary and reserved” (1996: 14), Penelope like Odysseus is a woman of many “twists and turns”, as is revealed by Atwood’s short fiction. In this paper, we analyse *The Penelopiad* as a metafictional historiography and a postmodern parody.

Analysis and Discussion

Traditional realism was based on mimesis of an objective truth that was mirrored by language but poststructuralists like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida reject the possibility of a mimetic reflection of life through art because for them life is as much of a linguistic construct as art itself. For Derrida nothing is outside “text”, challenging therefore the separation of literary and historical. Literature and history share many commonalities. They derive their authenticity from appearing as truth, both of them are linguistic constructs, also they are intertextual alluding to the texts of the past. These common boundaries are the characteristics of metafictional historiography. Metafiction is a text that self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artifact and questions the relationship between reality and fiction. Also in a metafiction, a story or stories are nested within a framing narrative. *The*

Penelopiad is a narrative which voices the stories of the fall of Troy, of Odysseus's wanderings, of Greek gods and goddesses as well as the twelve unjustly executed maids. Linda Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* describes historiographic metafiction as "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages [I]t always works within conventions in order to subvert them" (1988: 5). Homer's epic is an august, inimitable and cultural vision of life which is fixed in form. Atwood though working within conventions of Homeric tradition, e. g. she does not alter the motivations, preferences and idiosyncrasies of any character, she follows the storyline diligently, yet she subverts the conventions in three ways: spatially: the story is narrated by Penelope's spirit thousands of years later, the narrative angle is given to Penelope and the twelve maids, the novella is almost in the form of "asides" in which the characters unselfconsciously express their inner feelings in an imaginative space outside cultural constraints. The tale is narrated in hindsight from the vantage point of being removed from the situation and therefore able to give a supposedly objective and disinterested version.

The very first sentence evokes Atwood's characteristic black humour: "Now that I am dead, I know everything" (2005:1). Penelope is an archetype of a faithful wife, she patiently endures the hardships after her husband leaves for Troy, but this image proves to be inadequate for Atwood. In fact in one of her "Circe/Mud" Poems in 1974, Atwood has already introduced her: "She is up to something, she's weaving histories, they are never right, she has to do them over, she is weaving her version . . . the one you will believe in" (1976:218).

Canonical texts present women as symbols and Penelope has been developed in "an edifying legend" (2005: 2), but Atwood's Penelope begs the women of the world not to follow her example in considerateness or constancy. Her official version, she feels, is a "stick to beat women with" (2005, 2). For Atwood, *Odyssey* is the text where women's oppression can be deciphered and, therefore, should be challenged. A postmodern narrative valorises the marginal, and critiques the social arrangements of power, questioning the universality and objectivity of the master narrative. Penelope was never given an opportunity to narrate her own story, neither were the maids. In the master narrative Penelope appears to be blameless and is therefore rewarded for her patience but the maids are guilty and therefore punished. Atwood's rendering has problematized these reward/punishment binaries making Penelope (even in her own version) to a great extent responsible for maid's hanging. "It was my fault!" (2005: 160). But what could she do? She couldn't have acted other than that guarded, wise and careful person that she was. "Dead is dead, I told myself. I'll say my prayers and perform sacrifices for their

souls. But I'll have to do it in secret, or Odysseus will suspect me as well" (2005: 160). Penelope draws her power from being the wife of Odysseus. She cannot displease him. Her survival depends upon her version of fidelity to her husband. Odysseus has the official version on his side and is granted the platform to proclaim his greatness and guiltlessness but Penelope and the maids are not given any political stance. The master discourse tells us that the maids are licentious, lascivious and wayward. They are the "dirty girls". What do these dirty girls have to say in their defence? This is the blind spot in Homer's *Odyssey*, a big gap which Atwood's version fills with its sardonic, tongue-in-cheek humour. In Homer, Odysseus is "that great man whose fame resounds through Hellas right to the depth of Argos!" (1996: 14) and a man whose "heart [is] set on his wife and his return" (1996: 3). But the wife who remains silent before speaks out now in Atwood's text about her husband's "slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness-- his unscrupulousness" (2005: 3) and admits that she turned a blind eye and kept her mouth shut because she "wanted happy endings in those days" (2005: 3); happy endings at the cost of "biting off her tongue" (2005: 160). Penelope seemed resolute and loyal because she did not get the chance to voice her grievances; her real self was excluded from the grand narrative. But can we criticize the original version as mendacious and untrue? Antithetical to the historical facts, the postmodern metafictional historiography concerns itself with the "multiplicity and dispersion of truth" (Hutcheon, 1988a: 108). Hutcheon tells us that the long tradition from Aristotle makes fiction superior to history which is the mode of writing, limited to the representation of the contingent and the particular and historiographic metafiction attempts to de-marginalise the literary through confrontation with the historical (Hutcheon, 1988a: 113). Instead of truths and falsehoods, authenticity and inauthenticity, postmodernism treats truths as plural. Representing past means opening it up to Derrida's "différance" (deferral of meaning) and preventing it from being conclusive and final. Penelope's famous tears "which flowed and soaked her cheeks/as the heavy snow melts down from the high mountain ridges" (1996: 325) are not shed in the loving memory of her dead husband but "excessive weeping — is a handicap of the Naiad born" (2005: 10). In Atwood's version, Penelope was able to put on a calm facade in most trying moments of her life not because she was noble and wise but because her childhood (a father who wanted to kill her at birth and a mother who "preferred swimming in a river to the care of small children") (2005: 11) taught her that she had no choice but to be self-reliant. It was her resilience and her survival instinct, not the virtue of constancy that led her to deal with guile, cunning and cautiousness with the suitors. The traits that we feel came naturally with Penelope's womanhood were only culturally imposed. Homer's Penelope was only a metaphysical attraction of a female, a distilled essence of femininity who was so lifelike that she seemed a simulacrum of a living woman. The coherence and continuity in character is only a

mask given by the invisible narrator. Atwood's Penelope confesses that she "like a lot of goody goody girls ... was always secretly attracted to men ..." (2005: 16). In *The Penelopiad* then, the binary division between fact and fiction no longer holds. Historiographic metafiction both "installs and blurs the line between fiction and history" and there is "simultaneous and overt assertion and crossing of boundaries" in a way which is intensely self-conscious (Hutcheon, 1988a:113).

Luckas felt that historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates. The protagonist therefore should be a type, a synthesis of the general and the particular, of "all the humanly and socially essential determinants" (Hutcheon, 1988a: 113). Hutcheon surmising from Luckas definition states that protagonist of historiographic metafiction are anything but types. In fact they are the marginal, ex-centrics and peripheral figures in history. In Homer's *Odyssey* the decisive and authoritative roles were assigned to men like Odysseus and Telemachus, whereas the women although as compared to *Iliad* have been assigned important even powerful roles in the form of goddesses, Calypso or Circe or the old and influential maid Eurycleia, nevertheless have only been handmaidens to the genius and tactfulness of Odysseus. Hutcheon also tells us that in historiographic metafiction, types have little function except "something to be ironically undercut" (1988a: 113). Since *Penelopiad* is the parody of the Homeric version, characters apart from Penelope are caricatures. Telemachus is the spoilt brat, defying Penelope's parental authority because he holds her responsible for suitors siphoning off their wealth, a petulant, gluttonous teenager "wolfing down" food and wine, calling his mother "the women" (Atwood, 2005: 128). In Homeric version, Telemachus curtly and ungraciously dismisses his mother at many occasions: "Go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks/the distaff and the loom, and keep the women/working hard as well" (1996: 413).

Telemachus holds the reins of power in the house of Odysseus. In fact Athena's job in the epic is to inspire him into taking command of the situation. To display his superiority and authority, his attitude is that of a rude adolescent raised up by women. But to mellow down his harshness, Athena also imbues him with the handsomeness of a god (1996: 19) and a calm good sense (1996: 23). The ideology of Homer's times comprised separate spheres for men and women and Telemachus's brusqueness can be understood in these totalitarian terms: "As for giving orders/men will see to that--" (1996: 15). Atwood's portrait however has no such redeeming features. Telemachus is a surly, petulant son, who swayed by his newly discovered manhood, is resentful of his mother's concern for his safety. Though she rails at her son, Penelope is no fool; she knows she cannot order around a son who is as old as the suitors. Her "Is-this-all-the-thanks-I-get speech" (2005: 128) is met by Telemachus's "folded arms and rolled-up eyes" (2005: 129).

A wittily conceived Helen is a distressing presence throughout Penelope's life. Penelope carries on an intensely jealous rivalry with Helen even in the gloomy halls of Hades. Helen, even as a spectral being enjoys "divine beauty" (2005: 154) and treats Penelope with "affable condescension" (2005: 153). Penelope in her turn is witty, curt and rather ungracious.

According to Gregson, postmodernism is a "conception of practices, discourses and textual play ... depth is replaced by surface or multiple surfaces ... Sense of real is lost, replaced by multiplying of signs and representations--We are surrounded by representations rather than truth" (Gregson, 2004: 43). Atwood's novella is a mosaic consisting of poetry, burlesque, ballads, sea shanties and deliberately naive but up-to-date, fashionable idiom supposedly chronicled by Penelope. The departures from Penelope's story are choric interludes, sung and performed by the maids and tell their hopeless life-stories with a lively rhythm. Despite being sad and resentful, the maids sing with a youthful vivacity and cheerfulness, holding fate, Odysseus, Telemachus and in the end Penelope responsible for their execution. In Penelope's version she has been using her maids as spies to keep herself informed of suitor's strategies. But the maids know better: "While you your famous loom claimed to be threading/ In fact you were at work within the bedding!" (2005: 149). Since Odysseus: "... was pleasuring every nymph and beauty/ Did he think I'd do nothing but my duty?" (2005: 149).

The maids believe that Penelope consorted with Eurycleia to have them persecuted so that the secret about her sexual escapades with the suitors' remains concealed. While Odysseus can recount his adventures through the epic genre and Penelope is the protagonist of Atwood's short fiction, the maid's point-of-view merely gets attention obliquely through the chorus songs which are interspersed throughout Atwood's novella. Ballads and slave songs are not legitimate or legitimizing narratives. Folk genres do not carry the cultural legitimization of epic or poetry. They are not taken as seriously and are not considered to be conveyers of universal or cultural truths. Nobody pays any importance to the stories they tell. By highlighting the delegitimized status of the maid's stories, Atwood underscores the constructed nature of so-called authentic interpretations, thus privileging the multiple points-of view over an overtly controlling narrator. These "multiple surfaces" and discourses replace the "sense of real" or "depth" which gives a verisimilitude of truth. "Historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past but its textualised accessibility to us today" (Hutcheon, 1988a: 114). These "textualized" surfaces display different, individualized truths for everyone. A stable narrative voice is dispersed into different sections, each section telling its own story. Atwood tells us that according to Robert Graves *The Greek Myths* (2005: Notes) some deny that Penelope remained faithful to Odysseus. She

either slept with Amphinomous or slept with all of the suitors one by one and gave birth to monstrous god Pan. Even Penelope does not know, which rumors she should believe: “Some said Odysseus has been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops---; no it was only a one-eyed tavern-keeper--- [a goddess] had fallen in love with him and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam” (2005: 83, 84) Like a typical postmodern parodic version, depth is replaced by a multiplicity of surfaces, presenting a pastiche of the sacred and the mundane. This lack of depth is commented upon by one of the reviewers: “Unfortunately, she does not grasp this thorny nettle but chooses instead to blow, feather-light dandelions. -- Much of the story’s rich material has been dumped at the back of the book” (Caroline: 2005). The same commentator also talks about the “self-conscious jokiness of Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, the voice of the embarrassed modern in the presence of something acknowledged as profound”. But Atwood and her protagonist are anything but embarrassed in the face of this powerful Homeric structure. Atwood is downright daring, boisterous, wittily desecrating the gods and the goddesses. The “studied off-handed narration is wholly unconvincing” (Caroline: 2005), no doubt but it is supposed to be as flimsy and implausible as the original Homeric epic. This parodic interplay confirms as well as subverts the original conventions; it does not eclipse history but only transforms it, introducing a problematized inscribing of characters’ subjectivity, shattering the unity of their constructed selves and also the notion of author as the original source of fixed meaning in the text.

Linda Hutcheon in her book, *The Politics of Postmodernism* writes that the word ‘Parody’ is still tainted with the eighteenth century notions of wit and ridicule but we should not be restricted to such period-limited definitions of parody. She asserts that in the twentieth century, parody has a wide range of forms and intents ranging from witty ridicule to the playfully ludic to the seriously respectful (Hutcheon, 2002: 90). For Hutcheon, ironic quotation, appropriation or intertextuality is another name for parody. She defines postmodern parody as a “contesting revision or re-reading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of representations of history. This paradoxical conviction of the remoteness of the past and the need to deal with it in the present has been called the ‘allegorical impulse’ of postmodernism--- I would simply call it parody” (Hutcheon 2002: 91).

Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* is a parody according to both old and new paradigms. The notions of intertextuality and polyphony have become an integral part of any postmodern text. Intertextuality does not mean only the influence of writers on each other. Unlike the tendency of structural semiotics to treat the text as a closed-off, distinct entity, Julia Kristeva refers to texts in terms of two axes: a horizontal axis,

connecting the author and the reader of the text and a vertical axis connecting one text to the other texts (1980: 69). Every text is under the influence of several other texts which imposes a “universe” on it; it is only through the network of shared codes and conventions between these two axes that any meaning is produced. In Atwood’s version, soon after murdering the suitors and the maids, Odysseus left again. He had been told by Teiresias’s spirit to purify himself from the blood of the suitors to pacify sea-god Poseidon. In Homeric version, although Odysseus is “driven time and again off course” (1996: 3), he has only one goal and that is to go back to Ithaca to his wife and son, but in later versions like Tennyson’s “I cannot rest from travel; I will drink/ Life to the lees”, he is figured as a restless spirit, “always roaming with a hungry heart” and drinking “delight of battle with my peers” than the domesticated man Homer portrays him to be. In Dante too he is the embodiment of wanderlust, restlessness and an adventurer. In Virgil’s *Aenied*, he is constantly referred to as “cruel Odysseus”. While the Greeks admired his cunning and deceit, these qualities did not recommend themselves to the Romans who possessed a rigid sense of honour (Wikipedia: Odysseus). Atwood’s *Penelopiad* in its ironic parody presents this double vision of a cultural hero. It is a reworking of culture and history which creates yet another meaning through shared historical conventions. Hutcheon quoting Gass writes: “Traditionally, stories were stolen as Chaucer stole his; or they were felt to be common property of a culture or community— these notable happenings, imagined or real, lay outside language— in a condition of pure occurrence” (1988a: 144). This intertextual parody appropriates these “occurrences” and establishes its connection with the tradition as well as marks its difference from it. “To parody is not to destroy the past [but] to enshrine the past and to question it” (Hutcheon, 1988a: 126). In Atwood’s reworking of the myth, we can trace echoes of other mythical and literary structures. In descriptions of the underworld we find subtle allusions to Dante’s purgatory and hell, and the “mental torture” (Atwood, 2005: 16) hints at Sartre’s *No Exit*. “... magicians messing around in the dark arts and risking your soul” brings to mind Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus*.

Parody plays an important role in women’s’ fiction as it deconstructs the male-dominated cultural norms. Linda Hutcheon, in the *Canadian Postmodern* asserts that it is a way of investigating the position of women within tradition, as a way of discovering possible positions outside that tradition (Hutcheon, 1988b: 110) Feminist works like *Cassandra* by Christa Wolf, underscores the interplay of tradition and innovation. Female character, Cassandra, who was given indistinct, silent role in Homeric saga was elevated to the status of a mystic in Aeschylus but a mystic whose prophecy no-one would believe. Wolf’s Cassandra is an alternate reading of sexist or traditional forms of artistic expression. Wolf challenges the marginalization of female characters in literature, authored by great masters like Homer or Aeschylus and turns Cassandra into an active speaking subject,

compared to her passive and ineffectual object-position in conventional literature. Parody is often called the ironic form of intertextuality. In *Cassandra*, Wolf rejects the notion of Trojan War as the outcome of Helen's elopement and offers political and economic reasons for it which makes much more sense. Penelope alludes to this interpretation to "take some of the wind out of [Helen's] sails" (Atwood, 2005: 187), who takes pride in the fact that thousands of men have died for her.

Atwood's parodic short fiction is suffused with humour which is evoked through the manner of telling the story rather than the subject matter. Penelope's manner of narrating the story is apparently naive. She is grave, lucid and laconic and uses understatement and underemphasis. Challenging the sexist social practices of ancient Greece which ironically coincides with the status of women in twenty first century as a commodity used for its exchange value, Atwood satirically images women as a "package of meat" and in case of a rich heiress that meat is presented in a "wrapping of gold, mind you. A sort of gilded blood pudding" (2005: 39). Atwood uses such culinary imagery heavily in her fiction; e.g., in *Cat's Eye*, women are compared with uncooked chicken. In almost all of her novels, women are seen as a property, as vendible, replaceable objects. Penelope's method of story-telling involves self-deprecation which points to the baseness of extra-textual society but elicits laughter anyway: "What did the suitors have to say about me, among themselves? First prize, a week in Penelope's bed, second prize, two weeks in Penelope's beds When is the old bitch going to make up her mind? (2005:105).

Atwood creates parodic humour by combining the paradoxical elements: hyperbole and understatement, mythical and real and by exaggerating them to great lengths which are implausible but generates laughter nevertheless. One such scene is the Odysseus's trial at the end which takes place some three thousand years after the Trojan War. Apart from the judge and the attorney, all the characters are in their Hellenic robes, furies in their full bloom with serpent hair and dog faces, twelve maids with their "twitching feet", Penelope with her weeping- all in the twenty first century court of justice. Like the rest of the novel, this scene too has a light, comical, fairy-tale atmosphere, but even after three thousand years of enlightenment and progress, the maids are dismissed as "pure symbols" (2005: 168) who are not "allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished [Odysseus's] career" (2005: 182). Atwood here closes the gap between the past and the present, re-writes its age-old and powerful allusions and illusions, opens it to scrutiny and subverts it through irony. The uniqueness and originality of Homer's version is weakened and questioned. Through her postmodern parody Atwood asserts that semiotically transferred historical knowledge is as arbitrary and capricious as time itself. By referring to various mythical sources like Robert Graves and Christa Wolf, she denies the validity of

historical truths and discovers truth only in the multiple voices of texts and intertexts.

While reading through the magical life-story of the Spartan queen, there is a deliberate suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. Occasion for disbelief is primarily made possible through defamiliarising experience, writing in a playful whimsical mode situated outside the sphere of logical realism. Penelope is a daughter of a Naiad, a sea-nymph whose favourite past-time is “swimming around like a porpoise” (2005: 143) and telling jokes with the dolphins, yet Penelope’s life is fraught with the woes and disadvantages of ordinary humans like having to deal with a stiff, “prune-mouthed” mother-in-law and a spoilt brat of a son. This amalgam of the mundane and the ethereal evokes a comic cleavage through its incongruity and improbability. Atwood also demystifies Odysseus’s male machismo of strength and virility through poking fun at his “barrel chest and short legs” and “manners of a small-town big short” (2005: 30-31). Parody at once valorises and undermines the conventions and values that it parodies. It is therefore “an authorized transgression”, which can be “seen as both conservative and revolutionary— an apt mode of criticism for postmodernism, itself paradoxical in its conservative installing and then radical contesting of conventions” (1988a:129).

In *Robber Bride*, Atwood tells us: “History was once a substantial edifice... it once had a meaningful structure” (Atwood, 1993: 462). The scepticism of the twentieth century has given way to pluralistic micro-histories in place of macro-history and to “herstories” rather than a monolithic history.

The true story lies among the other stories, a mess of colors like jumbled clothing thrown off or away. . . . The true story is vicious and multiple and untrue after all... (Atwood, 1987: 58)

In the postmodern world, history is a construct: “Pick any strand and snip, and history comes unraveled” (Atwood, 1993:3) and this is what Atwood has done in *The Penelopiad*.

Conclusion

Unlike the traditional metanarratives, the modern and postmodern literature is self-reflexive in nature, i. e. the writer is very much conscious of its status as a literary artifice which involves its “literary past as well as *social present*” (Hutcheon, 1988b: 1). Atwood as a women-cantered fiction-writer is very much conscious of her concerns as a postmodernist writer and a social historian. She particularly questions gender stereotyping in *The Penelopiad* and subverts the standard ‘truths’

around the story of Odysseus and Penelope. She comically undercuts the grandeur of Hellenic times by bringing the characters down to the level of ordinary human beings with their foibles and shortcomings. Atwood pursues the story from the point-of-view of Penelope and twelve hanged maids. Always intrigued by the facts that led to the hanging of the maids and also by the question what was Penelope upto, Atwood gives Homer's grand story her own version of truth. Instead of Odysseus, it is Penelope the constant and faithful wife who becomes a convincing liar, a disguise artist and saves her skin through mere inventiveness. But even she is shown as a flesh and blood entity who is far from being a perfect figure, being intensely jealous of Helen, hating her son for his rudeness yet concerned for his safety, enduring the pain of a lonely life but not ungrudgingly, leading the suitors on with her false promises yet allured by the promise of sexual fulfilment and also recognizing her status of an old maid. Atwood by applying the basic tenets of metafictional historiography and parody points out the many inconsistencies in the older version and resists generalization about both men and women. For Atwood truth is always multiple and sometimes 'untrue'; it inheres in the micro-histories and 'herstories' rather than the official versions. The novella is an important step in understanding the role that history and culture plays in setting the patterns for heterosexual relationships. In Atwood we find no essentialist definitions of 'woman'. "As for Woman, capital W, we got stuck with that for centuries; Eternal Woman. But really, 'Woman' is sum and total of women. It doesn't exist apart from that, except as an abstracted idea". (Atwood, 1992: 108). So feminism, like the metafictional historiography rejects the essentialist stereotyping and is based on pluralized readings of the text.

Parody, also called 'Intertextuality' is an important device in woman's fiction. Linda Hutcheon describes postmodern parody as: "[It] seeks a feminine literary space while still acknowledging (however grudgingly) the power of the (male/'universal') space in which it cannot avoid, to some extent, operating" (Hutcheon, 1988b: 110). In the present discussion, the male space is the Homeric narrative and female space of irony and intertextuality is the Atwoodian variant which although is a form of protest but within the perimeters set by the older construction. Subverting the standard version, *The Penelopiad* reveals the hidden gender-stereotyping in the older narrative, deconstructing the narratives of patriarchal culture and thus challenging the very basis of meta-narratives of male ideology.

[Saman Khalid is currently pursuing her PhD at the Govt. College University, Lahore; whereas Irshad Ahmad Tabassum has recently graduated with a PhD from the University of Management Technology, Lahore.]

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