



**A Comparative Literary Study of Kabita Sinha’s “Eve Speaks to God” and
Margaret Atwood’s “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing”**

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Abstract

The research paper explores Kabita Sinha’s (1931-1999) poem, “Eve Speaks to God” in relation to Margaret Atwood’s (b. 1939-) “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing” in the context of feminist revisionist writing. The paper attempts a textual analysis, authorial analysis and an analysis of thematic affinities or parallels. It attempts an analysis at the textual level thereby indicating the thematic affinities or parallels as both the poems are dramatic monologues where the speakers are mythical figures namely Eve in the former poem and Helen of Troy in the latter poem. The poems become feminist narratives as the myths are retold from a feminist point of view thereby subverting the original myths which have been created by patriarchy and the discourses do a service to patriarchy by furthering its interests in the form of exposing women to oppression, relegating them to the margins and defining their existence in relation to the existence of men. The characters of Eve and Helen of Troy are rebel figures. They are portrayed in contrast to Eve and Helen of Troy in the original myths. They were contrarily portrayed in those myths as victim figures. The paper also attempts to study the role of the poets and their subjective positions in relation to these poems.

Introduction

The comparative study of Kabita Sinha’s (1931-1999) “Eve Speaks to God” from *Kabita Parameshwari* (1976) meaning poetry goddess and Margaret Atwood’s (b.1939-) “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing” from the anthology of poems namely *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) compares and contrasts the texts from two different cultures namely the Indian culture and the Canadian culture. The two texts are compared to each other as both are grounded in the feminist ideological framework despite the fact that they belong to different cultures. The focus of both the texts is on the oppression unleashed by patriarchy on women,



the ideological position of the two female protagonists in the poems and their discourse to counter this hegemonic monolith, that is, patriarchy. The two female protagonists have been

exposed to different kinds of patriarchal oppression but their response is the same as both Eve and Helen realize their individuality and establish their identities in a context dominated by patriarchy. The comparison of the two texts indicates the fact that the nature of oppression caused by patriarchy may be different in various cultures but the oppression is nevertheless there and the response to counter the varied patriarchal oppression has some kind of affinity.

“Eve Speaks to God” and “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing” as ‘Dramatic Monologues’

A monologue is said to be a lengthy speech by a single person. A dramatic monologue is a type of a lyric poem that was perfected by Robert Browning (1812-1889). In a dramatic monologue, a single person who is not the poet utters the entire poem in a specific situation at a critical moment. The speaker in a dramatic monologue addresses and interacts with one or more than one implied listener/s. The reader knows about the auditor’s presence or about their opinions from clues in the discourse of the single speaker. The main principle governing the poet’s choice and organization of the lyric speaker’s monologue is to reveal to the reader the lyric speaker’s temperament and character in an interesting way. (Abrams 48)

Kabita Sinha’s “Eve Speaks to God” and Margaret Atwood’s “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing” are dramatic monologues as the lyric speakers in both the poems are mythical female characters such as Eve from the *Hebrew Bible* and Helen of Troy from Homer’s *The Illiad*. In the poem “Eve Speaks to God”, Eve speaks to the implied listener God in the poem when she is evicted from the Garden of Eden along with Adam after tasting the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. She speaks as a gendered subaltern who rebels against the patriarchal hegemony and challenges the authoritarian, patriarchal God. Eve is shown to be a rebellious figure who openly acknowledges her superiority over the ‘meek’ Adam. She is shown to be an intelligent woman curious enough to investigate, take



risks and to know rather than living in blissful ignorance. She takes pride in her act of defiance, that is, the eating of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge.

In the poem “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing”, Helen of Troy speaks to an unidentified and sympathetic implied listener in a twentieth century ‘avatar’ of a bar dancer

who is a victim of objectification by men and dares to object to this kind of objectification thereby turning a situation of degradation into assertions of power and control. The dramatic monologues in “Eve Speaks to God” and “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing” elucidate the characters of Eve and Helen in the poems. In this poem, Helen of Troy is shown to be a rebel figure who has herself chosen the profession of becoming a bar dancer. Although she is a victim of objectification she strongly tries to resist the attempts to objectify her and to reduce her to components by looking at her admirers as objects who are to be viewed with contempt. Thus, mutual objectification is her ploy to subvert her own objectification. She is shown to be rising above such attempts and boasting of her divine lineage. She has a sense of superiority and pride in herself and her sexuality.

“Eve Speaks to God” and “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing” as ‘Feminist Revisionist Writing’

‘Feminist Revisionist Writing’ refers to a kind of writing that belongs to the domain of feminist literature informed by feminist literary criticism or by feminist politics. It focusses on revising the myths in multiple ways such as retelling the myths from the perspective of the female characters thereby recreating the story in a way that attempts to change the treatment that is meted out to women in the text as inactive objects. The narrator is a woman who satirizes the flawed view of women in the original text. The idea of revisionist mythmaking challenges the gender stereotypes embodied in the myth and attacks the social and the literary conventions supporting them thereby making the ‘other’ the primary subject. The attempt is to explore and transform self and the culture thereby subverting and transforming the life and the literature that the women poets inherit.



The character of Eve as portrayed in the “Book of Genesis” in the *Hebrew Bible* is that of the first woman created by God from the rib of Adam. Eve succumbs to Satan’s temptation when Satan visits her in the guise of a serpent and makes her eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. She tempts Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and shares it with him thereby transgressing God’s dictates to do otherwise resulting in their expulsion from the Garden of Eden after being cursed by God. Thus, Eve and the womankind that has descended from her

are perceived as sinners. She and her descendants are sentenced to a life of sorrow, travails during childbirth and have to submit to the authority of their husbands and be under their power. In the poem “Eve Speaks to God”, the myth associated with Eve is retold from the perception of Eve in which Eve is defiant and takes pride in her rebellion against God. The refrain “I was first” (Sinha 18) further emphasizes her sense of pride in the act of defiance and in foregrounding her superiority over meek Adam in taking the first step towards rebellion.

Similarly, Helen of Troy, a character from Homer’s (8th Century BC) *The Iliad* (8th Century BC), was the daughter of Zeus and Leda. She is considered to be the most beautiful woman in this world. She had been married to King Menelaus and became the Queen of Laconia. She had been abducted by Paris, Prince of Troy, which resulted in the Trojan War. In the myth related to Helen of Troy, she has not been given any agency. She is a voiceless icon whose decisions are taken by her male counterparts either King Menelaus, her husband, or Prince Paris, her lover. She is shown to be a victim of objectification because of her beauty and attractiveness. In the poem “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing”, the myth related to Helen of Troy is retold from the perception of the 20th century Helen in which she is shown to have agency because she has herself chosen the profession of a bar dancer. She is not a mere victim of objectification as she looks on the men who objectify her as objects to be viewed with contempt and in turn objectifies them – “rows of heads and upturned eyes” (Atwood 146)



The character of Eve in the *Hebrew Bible* is presented in the female role, that is, a biological construct and in the feminine role, that is, a social construct which imposes patterns of sexuality and behaviour through cultural and social norms. In this case, she has to submit to the authority of God and abstain from eating the forbidden fruit. The myth reinforces her female and feminine roles by chastising her for her deviance from these set roles by expelling her from the Garden of Eden. On the other hand, Eve in the poem “Eve Speaks to God” is presented in the female and the feminist roles, that is, an ideological construct which dissents against patriarchy and sexism as well as resists against them. In the poem, Eve is etched in a

feminist role as she displays her individuality by breaking free from patriarchy that is represented by God. The golden shackles refer to the materialistic pleasures offered by a male-dominated culture which keep women in bondage and do not allow them to realize their own selves. Thus, she states:

I was first
to break
the golden shackles
of luxurious
pleasure. (Sinha 19)

The character of Helen of Troy from *The Iliad* like the character of Eve from the *Hebrew Bible* is presented in the female and the feminine roles, the former being a biological construct and the latter being a social construct. She is depicted as a beautiful and attractive woman but a voiceless icon. She is objectified both by her husband King Menelaus and by her lover Paris. In the poem “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing”, the character of Helen of Troy is presented in the female and the feminist roles as the 20th century Helen like Eve in “Eve Speaks to God”. Helen is a female who is portrayed in the feminist role as she is proud of her sexuality. She flaunts and sells it unabashedly. She exercises her agency in choosing her profession as a bar dancer although she had been discouraged by other women



from doing so as it is not a respectable profession for women and involves exploitation. She states:

The world is full of women
who'd tell me I should be ashamed of myself
if they had the chance. Quit dancing.
Get some self-respect
and a day job Right.
And minimum wage,
and varicose veins, just standing
in one place for eight hours
behind a glass counter
bundled up to the neck, instead of
naked as a meat sandwich.
Selling gloves, or something.
Instead of what I do sell.

You have to have talent
to peddle a thing so nebulous
and without material form.
Exploited, they'd say. Yes, any way
you cut it, but I've a choice
of how, and I'll take the money. (Atwood 145)

Her agency is highlighted not only in the choice of her profession but also in the way it becomes her weapon to wield power over men and capitalize on their weakness thereby subverting the male dominance over women.

Both the characters of Eve as in "Eve Speaks to God" and of Helen as in "Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing" who are not hapless victims but rebels in their own right subvert the "Essentialism" (Moi 209) which may be historical and/or social, that is, the belief in a given female nature to be meek, obedient towards patriarchal authority, dependent on their male counterparts, commodities or beautiful objects made to satiate the lust of the males. These characters through their feminist identities are instrumental in undercutting the "Biologism" (Moi 209), that is, the belief that such an essence is biologically given to women. They prove



femininity, that is, a patriarchal construct not only in terms of essences but also in terms of positionality as marginality because femininity prevents women from realizing their individuality and makes them accept the dehumanization that goes on through their commodification and objectification.

The French feminist Hélène Cixous in her essay “Where is she?” in *La Jeune née* talks of binary oppositions such as activity/passivity, head/emotions, intelligible/sensitive etcetera which are imbricated in the patriarchal value system and correspond to the underlying opposition, that is, man/woman. The underlying opposition foregrounds the feminine side as the negative, powerless instance. “The biological opposition male/female, in other words is used to construct a series of negative ‘feminine’ values which then are imposed on and confused with the ‘female’” (Moi 211).

The characters of Eve and Helen in the two poems deconstruct the binary oppositions which are heavily informed by a patriarchal value system in projecting the ‘feminine’ or the

‘female’ side as negative and powerless. The character of Eve in the poem is shown to be active rather than passive as she defies God’s authoritarian injunction regarding the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. She is the first one to eat it and is instrumental in bringing the knowledge of good and evil to the mankind. She is proud of her defiance and readily accepts the banishment from the Garden of Eden as life there was luxurious but meaningless whereas life on Earth is a combination of sorrow and joy, good and evil, which makes life on Earth meaningful and exceptional in contrast to life in the Garden of Eden. Eve remarks:

I first knew sorrow and pleasure,
good and evil,
made life
so uncommon. (Sinha 19)

She shows a feminist preference for a painful but real living outside the golden cage of patriarchy as it seems to provide material pleasure but restricts a woman’s individuality. She is portrayed as bold and courageous enough to make a difficult choice.



The character of Eve also deconstructs the head/emotions and/or intelligible/sensitive binary oppositions by highlighting the fact that she was the first one to gain knowledge which empowered her to understand that the gilded cage presented to the womankind is nevertheless a cage. Thus, she remarks that:

I learned
that human life
was greater
than paradise.
I was first
to know. (Sinha 20)

The character of Helen deconstructs activity/passivity, head/emotions, intelligible/sensitive binary oppositions as she turns a situation of degradation into assertions of power and control as she chooses the profession of a bar dancer which give her agency as a subject because she is the one who sells her sexuality, determines the way in which she has to sell it and even takes money for it. She is shown to objectify her “beery worshippers” (Atwood 146) contemptuously who objectify her instead. She refers to them as “the rows of heads and

upturned eyes” (Atwood 146) thereby subverting the male gaze that she has been subjected to:

The rest of them would like to watch me
and feel nothing. Reduce me to components
as in a clock factory or abattoir. (Atwood 147)

Helen foregrounds her superior identity that exhibits her pride in her own self and her sexuality through her boast that she comes from “the province of the gods” (Atwood 146). This shows her superiority over those men on whom she looks condescendingly because they view her as something to be consumed.

‘Gynocriticism’ under feminism focusses on developing a female framework for dealing with works written by women in all its aspects of production, motivation, analysis and interpretation and in all the literary forms. The role of Kabita Sinha in the context of the



poem “Eve Speaks to God” is one that the voice of the woman poet who is exiled as she does not blindly surrender to patriarchal strictures. But she is exultant rather than regretful about her exile. It may also refer to the exile of women poets from the exalted position of recognition equivalent to that of the male poets. According to the biography of the poet it could have been her own experience because she had not been accorded the same recognition as her male contemporaries. Kabita Sinha’s protest and her anger against patriarchal prescriptions contributed to a certain extent to her marginalisation in the patriarchal milieu of the Bengali literature of her times (*Literary Vistas* 17). Thus, the subject position of the poet is that of a feminist who is a rebel focussing on the issues of women’s identity in the contemporary scenario.

The subjective position of Margaret Atwood is that of a white feminist who considers female-male relationships through the female perspective with a feminist slant. She dissents against commodification and objectification of women through the protagonist in the poem, that is, Helen. The poem presents Helen as having the consciousness of an intelligent, self-aware modern woman in search of an autonomous identity. Thus, Helen of Troy is seen in the poem to be talking of her divine lineage that she is the daughter of Zeus and Leda thereby establishing her superior identity which is an integral part of her individuality. The poet does

talk of exploitation, suffering, politics of sex and destructiveness but there is no pessimism in her poem. Moreover, she shows her female protagonist Helen in the poem to be moving from victimization to self-actualisation through the subversion of patriarchal dominance by using her body.

Conclusion

The two poems namely “Eve Speaks to God” and “Helen of Troy does Countertop Dancing” have thematic as well as ideological affinities. Both the poems are dramatic monologues talking about the female protagonist’s rebellion and search for a liberated identity. The two female protagonists such as Eve and Helen in these poems are presented in the feminist roles



who through their dramatic monologues talk of their rebellion against patriarchy. The poems are examples of feminist revisionist mythologies or writings and as a result of intertextuality the mythical characters from the original myths have been presented in a new avatar portraying the modern day concerns of the poets who have recreated them as per their feminist ideology as liberated women characters who debunk the age old biases, prejudices, oppression and stereotyping done by patriarchy. Thus, both the poems are set in a feminist ideological framework. The poems also give a glimpse of the poets' subject positions in the contemporary times.

Works Cited

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