

Listening the Unheeded: Women Appropriating and Re telling Myths of Maddened Cassandra and Murderous Medea

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One cannot help but notice the increasing engagement of contemporary or near contemporary women writers with Classical myths in their works. The first part of the paper explores the possible reasons behind this phenomenon. Myths are a fertile site in order to analyze the manner in which women have been perceived rather constructed and designed by patriarchy as silent, inferior, mad passive non entities, like Cassandra, or active monstrous creatures, like Medea, in the past. These myths are not dead but still continue to bind women in different guises thus, women writers explore how these mythic figures and stories have relevance for the present times too. The second part of the paper unravels the complex ways in which women writers engage with myths thereby propelling us to reconsider our conventional definitions and understanding of the term 'myth'. Myths no longer seem sacrosanct as women writers become "resisting readers" (J. Fetterley) who seek to appropriate, revise and re tell/ re write these "grand" patriarchal narratives from the feminist/ 'womanist' points of view. In doing so they radically "novelize" the myths by making them "dialogic" in nature by inserting polyphonic voices and accounts that intend to disrupt the hierarchy of the Greek male narratives, including those of Homer and Aeschylus.

Cassandra, daughter of the Trojan King Priam, had the gift of prophesy but was cursed by Apollo that no one would believe her once she refused to submit to him sexually. She was disbelieved, silenced, incarcerated, termed "mad," raped by various agents of patriarchy as recounted in the several versions of the Greek myth, especially in Homeric and Aeschylus's accounts. She is allowed to tell her narrative in Christa Woolf's *Kassandra*. Furthermore, she becomes symptomatic of the frustrations of the nineteenth century English woman in Florence Nightingale's autobiography *Cassandra* and is later deployed by America poet Lousie Bogan to underscore her plight and sense of alienation as a woman poet, who like Cassandra, is marginalized/ignored in the patriarchal set up. As opposed to Cassandra who is presented as a "pitiable" victim, Medusa is denigrated and castigated in the Greek myths as an evil witch, a vengeful lover and a murderous mother. She is reinvented in Christa Woolf's *Medea* which gives "counter version" of classical male representations of Medusa.

Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) who has been enshrined in the public memory as the "haloed lady with the lamp" and upheld as an ideal loving nurse, surprisingly,

named her autobiographical essay *Cassandra* (1852), thereby, deploying the image of a highly beautiful but deranged woman, shrieking and shouting through the streets of Troy significant prophecies about the impending doom and destruction that will obliterate the entire Trojan race. However, she disbelieved, incarcerated and declared mad by her family, countrymen and her enemies alike. Nightingale appropriates the figure Cassandra in order to underscore not only how women have been oppressed by patriarchy in the past but more disturbingly, Cassandra also becomes symbolic of plight of women in the Victorian society.

Victorian society despite being ruled by a female monarch created a dichotomy between the public domain of power and politics that was occupied by man who was considered to be 'rational', strong and active and the woman who was considered to be emotional, weak and passive and who was associated with the private domain of domesticity and motherhood. In patriarchal Victorian society, women were accorded the status of "property" that was bartered by the father to the husband. A woman had no identity, freedom of choice and free will as she was denied political rights (especially the right to vote), right to property and even that of her own body. One of the primary causes of women's degraded state was their lack of economic independence. Despite having education, women suffered on two counts. Firstly, they had no vocational training. Secondly, there were no respectable job options available for them. They could earn money only as a prostitute, school teacher, governess or a factory worker. None of the job options were respectable and/or well paid. In the absence of a suitable vocation, women were forced to be ideal and waste their time and abilities in beautifying the body, doing needlework, painting, singing, playing, making plans to charm/ entice an eligible bachelor, discussing balls and parties and making innumerable social visits without any attention to intellectual development or creation of identity. This is the kind of life that Nightingale came to despise. In one of her letters to Mary Clarke she expressed her frustration with such a futile life : "what is my business in this world and what have I done this fortnight?"

In such a scenario, Nightingale deploys the figure of Cassandra to underscore the constricting and demeaning condition of women in 19th century British society. Cassandra is a seer. She is endowed with power to prognosticate. However, in the patriarchal society she is rendered powerless as she is cursed by Apollo that no one would believe in her prophecies. Thus, Nightingale argues that 19th century women, like Cassandra, have the desire, will and moral agency to act and work, however they have been rendered useless by this "forced idleness." Nightingale, then, deploys the myth of Cassandra to register her protest against the sexual politics and powerlessness of women in the Victorian society. Nightingale uses the tragic end of Cassandra who was first disbelieved, then termed mad and locked up, and finally killed to talk about

the butchering of women's identity, talent and time in Victorian age. Absence of suitable training, work or vocation resulted in women subjugation and marginalization as they lacked control over their lives and identities.

This image of woman who has knowledge but is termed mad and is turned into an outcast also seems symbolic of Nightingale herself as she felt like an isolated, lonely, aberrant woman who demanded something that was not allowed by the oppressive patriarchal society. In her private notes, Nightingale expresses her longing for a "profession that would deploy "all her faculties": "I craved for some regular occupation...for something worth doing instead of fretting my time away on useless trifles." Furthermore, Cassandra has knowledge but is ignored by everyone and is eventually denounced and locked up as crazy for she dares to speak against her father, brother Paris, and predicts the fall of Troy. Nightingale devoted her time and energies in setting up a training school for nurses, thereby creating nursing a respectable profession for women.

While Nightingale deploys Cassandra in order to bring to the fore the plight of 19th century women, later women poets like Louise Bogan, engage with Cassandra to introspect about the alienation of the female poet from the social world dominated by codes of domesticity and a professional scenario governed by male authors. However, unlike Nightingale, where Cassandra figures primarily as a victim, Bogan renegotiates the old myth in order to revise the old model, thereby reconfiguring the myth of Cassandra to explore the liberatory, and empowering possibilities inherent in the myth.

Twentieth century American poet, Louise Bogan (1897-1970) has been hailed by some as belonging to the small group of poets named the "reactionary generation." Bogan's own troubled experience with the breakdown of her parent's marriage due to her mother's adulterous behaviour, separation from her husband, and later bouts of extreme depression that bordered on madness for which she was institutionalized, led to a sense of loneliness. All this is pertinent for her deployment of the figure of Cassandra in her short verse of the same name. The Greek female prophet Cassandra, who is disbelieved and isolated by the patriarchal society including her family members and enemies, is deployed by Bogan as symbolizing her own position (read alienation) as a woman poet hailing from the Irish working class/lower middle class background in a patriarchal set up that idealizes the "angel in the house" (Patimore).

Bogan's sense of isolation that arose due to her personal experiences and class position become magnified due to her status as a woman poet as she feels unable to relate with other women who are immersed in domesticity. Bogan, who wishes to pursue a career in writing, finds herself a misfit as she says, "to me, one silly task is like another"

("Cassandra" 1). Furthermore, Cassandra's voice, that was 'unheeded' both by her family, countrymen and enemies, is deployed by Bogan to talk about her own poetic voice that is neglected by her male contemporaries. Her works were largely neglected by literary scholars till feminists like Elizabeth Frank in the 80's recovered such lost voices¹. She suffers from what Gilbert and Gubar term "anxiety of authorship"². Bogan seems to be grappling with a literary tradition that is overwhelmingly masculine and marked by the absence of female literary godmothers. Apollo, who cursed her after she refused to gratify his "lust," cursed her such that no one would believe her prophecies represents the patriarchal world that suppress women's voices (2).

By voicing the anger and frustration of Cassandra, Bogan seeks to impart agency to Cassandra who develops a voice, which though is unheeded despite the "shrieking" (7), nevertheless, seeks to "bare the shambling tricks of lust and pride" of the patriarchal world. Cassandra's "song" which by extension is that of the woman poet, is configured as the "wings" that will liberate her from the constricting socio-political patriarchal setup that disbelieves her prophecies and pushes her into the quagmire of self doubt, loneliness and derangement. Unlike the 5th century male writer Aeschylus, Bogan chooses to focus not on Cassandra's prognostications but on the "act of speech" (Upton) or rather the potential of the voice that seeks to disrupt/ "tear" the present order (4). Furthermore, Cassandra's "song which tears through" her "breast" at once associates this rebellious voice with the female body as opposed to the discourse of rationality that is prioritized by men. Moreover, "madness that chooses out my voice again" (5) read in Bakhtin's terms becomes an empowering force rather than a debilitating one," Cassandra's "madness," thus, serves to challenge and then disrupt the official hierarchy of the normative/ rational masculine point of view.

Having said this it is significant to note that Cassandra's madness is more complex than this as it lacks the "gay parody of official reason" which Bakhtin argues is the hallmark of the "carnival grotesque." Conversely, like the "Romantic grotesque" as

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- 1 Elizabeth Frank wrote a biography of Lousie Bogan named Louise Bogan: A Portrait that not only brought Bogan's work to the limelight after years of neglect but also won Pulitzer Prize in 1986.
 - 2 The woman writer, Gilbert and Gubar argue, " she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her. Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority... they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her sense of self – that is, of subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity" ... The "female writer's battle for self creation involves her in a revisionary process...not against her (male) predecessor's reading of the word but against his reading of *her*."

analysed by Bakhtin (and later Foucault) it leads to Cassandra's isolation. Engagement with issues of madness, laughter, body and sexuality are further complicated in the work of German author Christa Wolf. Wolf seems to be conscious of a third emergent strain of discourse on madness where madness seems to be a 'logical'/ 'natural' response to the world that is mad. Patricia Waugh argues that there is "a dangerous tendency in the various postmodern critiques of reason, which circulated in the 1980s, to regard alterity as a sublime space outside law, recoverable through madness, hysteria, or some metaphorised return to the body" (Waugh 350).

It is interesting to note that a woman author of German origin chooses to re-engage with the myth of Cassandra. Gamble's statement, "in the wreckage of old myths and moral values, the subversive writer is free to play" (45), provides a clue to Wolf's engagement with the myth. Cassandra, who is only mentioned three times in Homer, twice as the most beautiful of Priam's daughters (II 13.365) ,and later when Agamemnon speaks of her death, becomes the central character in Wolf's text. Furthermore, in the Classical myths, Cassandra has primarily been presented from the male writers' point of view. In Wolf's radical revision and rewriting of the old classical myth from the woman's point of view, the mad outcast regains her lost voice and agency in the monologue which comprises the entire novella delivered three hours before her death. Wolf's Cassandra propels one to revise one's understanding of myths as being 'eternal,' 'unchanging' or true. Wolf makes one sensitive to how myths are not written in stone but "the relationship between the radical writer and myth... is necessarily...contentious because ...myths have to be argued with, dismantled through the act of writing"(Carter 38). Wolf seeks to dismantle the master's house (male narratives) by deploying the same myths that are used to naturalize women's subordination, oppression and violence against them in a patriarchal society in multifarious ways.

Firstly, Wolf deploys Cassandra to problematize, question and even negate the male conception of grand ideas like heroism, honour, warfare and nationalism that are venerated in the Classical texts of Homer and Aeschylus in her complex treatment of "heroes" like Agamemnon, Achilles, her father Priam and brother Paris. Cassandra denounces Achilles who has been hailed as one of the greatest heroes of the Classical world as "Achilles the brute" who wrecked havoc not only in the war but also due to his love of boys like Troilus whom he murders in a complex moment of violence, vengeance and extreme lust. He is further denounced for his inhuman treatment of Hector's dead body and his gory act of gratifying his lust for the dead Amazon Penthesileia. Wolf radically counters Homer's version of Achilles's "love" for Brisie, Calcha's daughter whom he won as an exploit of war³. Cassandra, however, talks about the plight and psychological death of the young Greek girl who was madly in

love with Cassandra's boyish, young brother, Troilus who was unarmed when murdered by Achilles. In her representation of Achilles, Wolf seems to be attacking the very foundations of this code of virility/ heroism that is venerated by the male Greek tradition.

Furthermore, Wolf counters Aeschylus's representation of Cassandra, especially her opinion of Agamemnon whose death she prognosticates and seems to lament as it fills her with dread. Like Achilles, Agamemnon, the "great king" is severely criticized as "imbecile" "empty headed ninny" (41) and a selfish weakling who sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia. In a radical departure from Aeschylus's *Orestes*, where Cassandra denounces Clytemnestra as a "lionesses" and a murderess, she seems to understand and uphold her decision to murder Agamemnon who killed their daughter and brought home a concubine. She says "in different times nothing would have prevented us from calling each other sister" (40).

Secondly, Wolf further problematizes one's perception of myths as being sacrosanct as they are stories about Gods and heroes. In her retelling of the old myth, Wolf exposes the politics behind how myths are 'created', popularized and enshrined in popular imagination by the dominant discourse in order to attain political motives. Cassandra gives a counter version exposing the truth of the "divine" parentage of great heroes, of Achilles in particular. In her counter version, Cassandra exposes how "prophesies" were not always divinely ordained but controlled by those in power to serve the socio-political, economic interests of the dominant group.

Furthermore, in her 'alternative mythology', Wolf gives voice to those experiences (of women) that have been throttled/silenced/obfuscated by the dominant discourse (racial, sexual and/or political/rational). She traces a pattern of violence physical, social, psychological- against women. Wolf seems to have appropriated Cassandra's myth, in order to question this pattern of violence. Apart from giving a detailed insight into her own life, Cassandra analyses the different women characters in order to throw light on the constricting and oppressive condition of women in a patriarchal society. She shows how beautiful women like Polyxena were used as bait by her brother and state in order to kill Achilles. She shows how patriarchy cuts across both the warring clans where a father, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia in order to win a war. She shows how her father barter her as a wife to another king in exchange for political help during the war. Her rape by Ajax serves to highlight how the female

3 "He (Achilles) possesses Briseis as a gift of honour and yet he loves her as his wife" (Homer, *Illiad*). Wolf debunks this view completely presenting him as the "brute" let loose.

body becomes symbolic of national and familial honour and is desecrated not only to gratify male lust, but also to hurt the male honour of the 'Other' (whose wife/daughter is being raped). Furthermore, Wolf's critique of the atrocities that are committed on women become stringent when she shows the plight of women like Brisies and Cassandra who are turned into slaves/concubines and are objectified by being "awarded" to the 'heroes' of the war.

Wolf in her "counter version" gives voice to a woman who has been unheeded, disbelieved and termed mad by society. Cassandra's critique of the male dominated familial, political and social structure comes about in her discussion of the manner in which she was declared mad, later experienced madness, and was incarcerated by her father/king. She was first punished for rejecting the sexual advances of the male God Apollo who took away her confidence in her predictions. In *Aeschylus*, Cassandra is made to refer to her decision to spurn Apollo as a "sin". Wolf, however, does not make Cassandra do so. Rather she complicates her character by delving into her psyche in order to explore how her quest for knowledge and desire for power propelled her to compete with her sister Polyxena in the struggle to be the one who would be chosen to be the prophetess. Secondly, Cassandra is punished by her father/king and the state machinery and incarcerated like an animal when she decided to raise her voice against her father/ruler and the Trojan political structure that was waging a war against the Greeks for no solid political/social reason. She rebels against the authoritarian/tyrannical political setup that was deploying all sorts of false prophesies, propagating myths about the so-called 'greatness' of the king and the infallibility of the state, and using women to win the war. Cassandra, thus, with her prognostications announcing the fall of Troy becomes symbolic of the women who warn about the dire consequences of war but are ignored and silenced.

Unlike Homer or Aeschylus, Wolf is able to impart agency to Cassandra whose "shrieking" "voice" is not seen as symbolic of her degraded/deranged mind but something which is liberating and sets her free: "the voice...forced its way out of me...it floated above me, free"(59). The voice despite the fact that it is embedded in the male structures as it is disbelieved, is endowed with the capacity to rent through the strictures that bind her. Furthermore, her madness, along with her laughter has transformative possibilities as Helene Cixous argues that woman's laughter is intrinsically linked with the breakdown of patriarchal hegemony. Out of the story of Cassandra's oppression, Wolf is able to present an alternative, liberating narrative. Cassandra emerges as a victim of patriarchy; but she is also a victim endowed surprisingly with the virtues of dignity and defiance.

Thus, one can conclude by saying that by “revisionist mythmaking” women writers and artists are able to transform women protagonists who were earlier marginalized as silent objects in Classical patriarchal accounts into active subjects as they gain voice and agency.

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