

Patriarchal Designs on Women: Mother Goddess or *Femme Fatale*

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Literature and society have often depicted women to be gentle, soft and caring and women were often expected to fit into these traditionally accepted roles. The nursery rhyme and other literature which said that girls were made of 'sugar and spice and all that is nice' and boys were made of 'frogs and snails and puppy dogs tails' only reinforced this idea. But life has never been quite so simple and charming. From time immemorial there has been a darker even deadlier side to women and a cursory glance of literature across various cultures have highlighted this aspect.

Feminist critics have questioned the role traditionally assigned to women and have tried to re-read and re-interpret some of the stories in myth and religion. Freudian interpretation has provided some insight into those stories which for the most part put the blame squarely on women for bringing evil and sorrow into the world, as in the story of Pandora or Eve in the Book of Genesis. Feminists have convincingly argued that the converse is true and it is really man who is to be blamed for the Original Sin.

While women have generally been depicted as helpless and powerless, termed as the weaker sex, there have been many instances where women have taken on prominent roles and changed the course of history. Euripides' *Medea* written in 431- BC is one such instance. *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus who predates Euripides deals with the assassination of the title character by his wife Clytemnestra. The characters of Delilah and Lady Macbeth are also legendary. These stories do not end here. In our own time we find instances of the *Femme Fatale* or the Iron Lady, endorsing thereby, that women need not subscribe to the male design of being cast into a mould that will keep them eternally servile but they have the power to take things into their hands and shape and fashion the world to make it more comfortable for them to live in.

Kate Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* uses evidence from anthropology, religion and literary myth to attest to the politically expedient character of patriarchal convictions about women. As both the primitive and civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture in regard to the female were also of male design. The image of women as we know it, is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from the fear of the 'otherness' of woman. Yet, this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which the female is 'other' or alien. The function of the male's sexual antipathy seems to provide a means of control over a subordinate group and a rationale which justifies the inferior station of those in a lower order, "explaining" the oppression of their lives.¹

The feeling that woman's sexual functions are impure is both worldwide and persistent. One sees evidence of it everywhere in literature, in myth, in primitive civilized life. It is striking how the notion persists today. Primitive people explain the phenomenon of the female's genitals in terms of a wound, sometimes reasoning that she was visited by a bird or snake and mutilated into her present condition. Once she was wounded, now she bleeds. Contemporary slang for the female genital is 'gash'. The Freudian description of the female genitals is in terms of a 'castrated' condition. Conversely, the psychoanalytic term for the generalized adolescent tone of men's house culture is 'phallic state'. As 'Citadels of virility', they reinforce the most salient power-oriented characteristics of patriarchy.²

Woman as nature is seen as both good and bad, creative and cannibalistic, untamed, responsible for multiple horrors and uncontrolled desires and passions. She also possessed lethal potential and had the power to castrate male victims with her eyes. The two leading myths of Western culture are the classical tale of Pandora's box and the Biblical story of the Fall.

Pandora appears to be a discredited version of a Mediterranean fertility goddess, for in Hesiod's *Theogony* she wears a wreath of flowers and a sculptured diadem in which are carved all the creatures of land and sea.

Hesiod ascribes to her the introduction of sexuality which marks the end of the golden age when “the races of men had been living on earth free from all evils, free from laborious work, and free from all wearing sickness.” Pandora was the origin of “the damnable race of women – a plague which men must live with”. The introduction of what are seen to be the evils of the male human condition came through the introduction of the female and what is said to be her unique product, sexuality.³

In Hesiod’s tale, Pandora is created by Zeus to avenge the gods and punish Prometheus for stealing fire from them. When Pandora opens her box out of curiosity, all the ills of the worlds are released. When the lid falls shut, only hope remains at the bottom of the box. In this account, Pandora is a femme fatale whose beauty, charms and seductiveness ultimately bring about man’s downfall; and here, her box represents nothing other than the female body, the threats and allures of her sexuality. In a Freudian reading then, the box as an image of concealment as well as mystery, generates a metaphoric relation to the female genitals, which, unlike the phallus, remain hidden and invisible and conceals a secret dangerous to man. Her box in this sense does not so much contain gifts to mankind, but is Gift to him, hope remaining trapped in the box, and unavailable to mankind.⁴

Patriarchy has God on its side. One of its most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality. The Pandora myth is one of two important archetypes which condemns the female through her sexuality and explains her position as her well-deserved punishment for the primal sin under whose unfortunate consequences the race yet labours.

The Biblical story of the Fall also runs along similar lines. To blame the evils and sorrows of life – loss of Eden and the rest – on sexuality, would all too logically implicate the male, and such implication is hardly the purpose of the story, designed as it is expressly in order to blame all this world’s discomfort on the female. Therefore it is the female who is tempted first and ‘beguiled’ by the male, transformed into something

else, a snake. Thus Adam has beaten the rap of sexual guilt. Yet, the transparency of the serpent's universal phallic value shows how uneasy the mythic mind can be about its shifts. Accordingly, in her inferiority and vulnerability the woman takes and eats, simple carnal thing that she is, affected by flattery even in a reptile. Only after this does the male fall, and with him, humanity – for the fable has made him the racial type, whereas Eve is a mere sexual type and, according to tradition, either expendable or replaceable. ⁵

The story of *Medea* (431 BC) by Euripides is a tragedy of revenge, of epic proportions that undermines the androcentric view of the universe and suggests a gynocentric alternative. The play opens with the Nurse reproaching Jason for dishonouring Medea. She says:

But now there's hatred everywhere. Love is diseased.
For, deserting his own children and my mistress,
Jason has taken a royal wife to his bed,
The daughter of the ruler of this land, Creon.
And poor Medea is slighted, and cries aloud on the
Vows they made to each other, the right hands clasped
In eternal promise. She calls upon the gods to witness
What sort of return Jason has made to her love.⁶

Medea, daughter of the King Aetes of Colchis, a sorceress, had assisted Jason, leader of the Argonauts, to win the dragon-guarded treasure of the Golden Fleece. King Aetes agreed to let Jason have the Golden Fleece provided he could accomplish three difficult tasks. He had to yoke two fire breathing bulls and plough the Field of Ares. He then had to sow the field with dragon's teeth and kill the army of warriors which grew from the teeth. Finally he had to kill the dragon which never slept, which guarded the fleece. Medea who had fallen in love with Jason helped him in all this. The King was not happy and attempted to kill Jason. In a desperate attempt to flee the King, Medea chops her brother's body and throws it into the sea. The father is forced to stop by to pick up the pieces and give his son a decent burial. Jason and Medea escape in the meanwhile in his ship, the Argo. The two are married and

Medea bears Jason two sons. Soon Jason abandons her for a more favourable match, never suspecting the terrible revenge she will take.

Unlike other Greek tragedies, the focus is on Medea, a woman who takes centre stage. She directs the course of action in the play. Her overwhelming physical presence matches her control over the tragic plot. She is not a helpless creature left to the mercy of an inconstant husband and an ungrateful man, but acts as its author. She will outline to the audience the events they are about to witness and in doing so she creates a new tragic genre which brings glory to women and divests Jason of his heroic success.

The chorus of Corinthian women commiserate with her. They castigate Jason for his breach of their marriage oath. They understand her grief as she shrieks and cries out, upon the man who betrayed both her bed and her marriage. Wronged, she calls on the gods and appeals to the justice of Zeus and to the oath that was sworn, that brought her away to the opposite shore.

She decides to call on Jason to come once more into her sight and she uses soft words to convince him to try and get permission for their children to remain in the country with him. She sends the children with gifts in their hands to carry to the bride so as not to be banished – a finely woven dress and a golden diadem to be worn on her wedding day. If the bride accepts the gifts and wears them, she and all who touch her, will die in agony for both the dress and diadem are poisoned. After that she plans to murder her own children in vengeance for the loss of married love, for she believes that it would be the best way to wound her husband. She will not let anyone take her for granted or let anyone believe that she is weak, or feeble-spirited, a stay-at-home, but rather just the opposite.

Things come to pass, just as she had planned and is comforted to hear the report from the Messenger. The bride cannot resist the temptation to dress herself in the gorgeous robe and put the golden crown around her curly locks. She is enamoured of the present and admires herself in the mirror. Soon the poison takes effect.

For a twofold pain was moving up against her.
The wreath of gold that was resting around her head
Let forth a fearful stream of all-devouring fire,
And the finely woven dress your children gave to her,
Was fastening on the unhappy girl's fine flesh.
She leapt up from the chair, and all on fire she ran,
Shaking her hair now this way and now that, trying
To hurl the diadem away; but fixedly
The gold preserved its grip, and when she shook her hair,
Then more and twice as fiercely the fire blazed out.
Till, beaten by her fate, she fell down to the ground.⁷

Her father, King Creon hurries in to save her, but the moment he touches her, he too is gripped by the poison and dies. Medea soon rushes with a sword to kill her own children. When Jason comes looking for them, he sees Medea above the house in a chariot drawn by dragons. She has the dead bodies of the children with her. While Jason imagines that by killing the children she will bring down curses on herself, Medea is confident that she will atone for the blood guilt by bearing them to Hera's temple and establishing a holy feast and sacrifice each year for them. Being both a murderer and ritual agent of the event, she escapes the fate of Clytemnestra.⁸

The story of *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus deals with central figure of Clytemnestra, husband of Agamemnon. After the long Trojan war which lasts ten years, Agamemnon returns home with a Trojan princess Cassandra, as his concubine and slave, who has the gift of prophecy. Cassandra cries out loud that there is a curse on the house of Agamemnon and she can see death and destruction in that house.

Home cursed of God! Bear witness unto me,
Ye visioned woes within-
The blood-stained hands of them that smite their kin-
The strangling noose, and, spattered o'er
With human blood, the reeking floor! ⁹ (1090- 1093)

Although Clytemnestra welcomes them, she has planned with her lover Aegisthus to kill her husband. She justifies this action to punish her husband for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia, to God Artemis, for a favourable wind, before they set sail for Troy. Agamemnon is killed in his bath and Cassandra too is axed to her death. Unlike Medea who escapes punishment, Clytemnestra is in turn killed by her son Orestes to avenge his father's death.

Delilah was a woman who used her personal charm to lure a man to his spiritual and physical destruction, and she stands out as one of the lowest, meanest women of the Bible—the female Judas of the Old Testament. Modern re-reading of this story convinces us that Samson was as much to blame for his misfortune as was this philistine woman.

Shakespeare's figure of Lady Macbeth who prompts her husband to murder King Duncan only highlights the terrible potential that women have within them. In fact when she makes her soliloquy she acknowledges that Macbeth's nature, in fact is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness'. We note that in Macbeth's letter to his wife there is no criminal intention to speed up the process and make the witches prophecy come true. He seems to be willing to bide his time. It is Lady Macbeth who is impatient and prods Macbeth onwards to commit the crime. She says:

Come you spirits,
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood
Stop up the access and passage to remorse
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and ill! Come to my woman's breast
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers.¹⁰

(*Macbeth* I, v, 41-49)

Unfortunately, after the murder of King Duncan she is side lined and suffers greatly. She sleep walks and is constantly seen 'washing her

hands', in an attempt to wash away her guilt. In Act Five she says, 'Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, Oh, Oh!'

A woman can be termed an 'Iron Lady' without being cruel and barbaric as described in the examples above. In our own time, the term Iron Lady has been used to describe a lady who is the Head of Government. It was a term coined for the first lady Prime Minister of UK, Baroness Margaret Thatcher by Captain Yuri Gavrillov in 1976 in the Soviet newspaper *Red Star*, for her staunch opposition to the Soviet Union and Socialism. She was the longest reigning PM with three victories in a row. Among her many triumphs, one that stands out is when Argentina's military junta invaded Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982, Thatcher sent troops and ships to recapture the islands. Two months later on 14 June, Argentina surrendered. ¹¹

The term 'Thatcherism' is used to describe the tough economic medicine she administered to a country sickened by inflation, budget deficits and industrial unrest. Thatcher fought the power of trade unions, cut direct taxes, and privatized numerous nationalized industries. Her policies aimed at transforming the British economy to a more market oriented economy. She emphasized the need for less government intervention in the economy. "She stressed the importance of enterprise culture, the culture of taking risks, investing, and wealth maximizing"¹²

The other figures that come to mind are that of Golda Meir who was the first woman Prime Minister of Israel (1969-1974), in fact the term Iron Lady was first applied to her. In our country too we had Indira Gandhi. These and many others are names of women who ruled with an Iron Hand. So while we still read reports of how women are oppressed, there is hope yet, not only left in Pandora's proverbial box but in these women who dared to be different and who will endure as iconic figures of courage and determination.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Millett, Kate "Theory of Sexual Politics", Elaine Showalter, ed. *Women's Liberation and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971) 314
- 2 Millett, 314.
- 3 Millett, 319.
- 4 Millett, 319.
- 5 Millett, 321
- 6 Euripides, *Medea*. Trans. Rex Warner (New York: Dover, 1993)1
- 7 Euripides, 38.
- 8 Hopman, Marianne, 'Revenge and Mythopoiesis in Euripides' *Medea* Transactions of the American Philological Association. Project Muse, Scholarly Journals Online, Northwestern University. 138 (2008) 155-183. <http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~mih961/documents/HopmanRevengeandMythopoiesis.pdf>
- 9 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (458 B.C.E), Translated by E. D. A. Morshead <http://classics.mit.edu/Aeschylus/agamemnon.html>
- 10 Shakespeare, William, *Macbeth*. The Arden Shakespeare, Ed. Kenneth Muir (Surrey: Thomas Nelson, 1999)
- 11 "Eco pill was a hit but spelled her doom", Times of India , 9 April 2013. Millett, Kate "Theory of Sexual Politics", Elaine Showalter, ed. *Women's Liberation and literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971) 314
- 12 Changhyn.k (October 2005) definition of Thatcherism [online].