

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN GRAECO-ROMAN SOCIETY

The prevalent theme found within several literary masterpieces in Greek and Roman literature is the representation and status of women, which is both narrowly defined and rigid in nature. There is a tendency to depict women as weak, irrational and inferior beings, and a world of possibilities for them is in fact a world of limitations. They are represented as being dependent on men who exert their male authority and rule, imposing patriarchal restrictions that confine women within submissive and marginalized positions.

There was already controversy regarding the role of women since ancient times. The famed Greek philosopher Plato recognized women's remarkable nature and wisdom; he believed that they are capable of participating in diverse matters as well as contributing to the enrichment of society. Plato's student Aristotle did not share this view. He viewed women in a negative light, seeing them as being mutilated or incomplete man, and claiming that they lacked vital heat and intellect. This perspective and the path of female subordination would become ever-present in patriarchal societies and especially in the society and culture of the Mediterranean.

By examining the subordinate role and the position of women in Mediterranean society and its literary texts, I would like to emphasize a human drama-tragedy that is created by female protagonists in literature as they challenge restrictions by expressing their own wishes and choices despite the oppressive environment. The personal experiences of women in the selected texts will provide an internal view of the external historical reality, revealing the political, religious, and social circumstances that restrained and dominated women's life.

For centuries, dominating men were controlling, punishing and abusing women in Mediterranean society. The specific morality and unwritten laws during that time required an intensive standard of female inferiority, innocence, modesty, obedience and suffering. Women were represented as being in need of a strong and harsh guidance, which was always exercised by an older dominating male figure, such as father, an older brother, or husband. Male dominance was cemented, since men unlike women, men were considered to be rational and capable adults. The revelation of women's unimportance and the confirmation of men's powerful and dominating role were endless-

ly made apparent everyday life of Mediterranean society.

There is a continuous stereotypical gender representation in the context of society and literary texts. Women are primarily portrayed according to their traditional roles and are typically placed within a domestic setting. This reality is affirmed by the tendency to depict females as the housewife and homemaker, mother or girlfriend, thus perpetuating certain dominant representational stereotypes. Women's role and their personal autonomy were never equal to that of men, and consequently they tried to oppose this enforced inferiority.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope demonstrates the enforced restricted position by being exclusively known as the wife of Odysseus and mother of Telemachos. She is not considered in terms of her own individuality, but her identity is instead dependent on the relation to her husband and son. Consequently, her significance is confined to the role of the faithful wife and loving mother while her activities are limited correspondingly. Penelope is compelled to stay within her domestic setting and to remain faithful while patiently awaiting her husband's twenty-year return. She is considered to be the heart of the *oikos*, and it is her responsibility to maintain a harmonious marriage and household. However, not only is Penelope constricted to this obligation through virtue and moral, she is even physically enclosed in this role by the overpowering palace on Ithaca.

Penelope's familial role is confirmed by Agamemnon's opinion as he considers her to be the loyal wife and the key to the family unit. He expresses this to Odysseus, whom he finds fortunate in having "...a wife endowed with great virtue/How good was proved the heart of blameless Penelope" (Homer 11. 193-194). Penelope is the faithful wife who respects her husband and the institution of marriage, always remembering her eternal "philos"- her husband, friend, and love, Odysseus. Penelope's virtuous nature is captured by her contrast to Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra who was responsible for his murder. Unlike Penelope, Clytemnestra is an adulteress, and her disloyalty and disrespect towards her husband is characteristic of women who cannot be trusted. Clytemnestra differs greatly from Penelope, as is demonstrated by the statement: "Not so did the daughter of Tyndareos fashion her evil/deeds, when she killed her wedded lord...to make evil the reputation of womankind, even for one whose acts are virtuous." (Homer 11. 199-202) Although Penelope is seen as a loyal wife, the figure of Clytemnestra creates the impression that women contain potential for evil and mistrust. The juxtaposition of Penelope and Clytemnestra creates the contrast between extreme goodness and extreme evil, revealing the distinction between the virtuous and dishonorable wife, since the former maintains the family unit, while the latter destroys it.

The prevalent characterization that conforms to a traditional per-

spective is further interconnected to the depiction of women as domestic and domesticated creatures in Greek and Roman society, which replicates the normative or ideal social order of the nuclear family. As a result, female characters are made to suffer both socially and individually if they dare to transcend the fixed gender roles. These two interwoven notions are exhibited in Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. Since women in Greco-Roman worlds were responsible for upholding family values, it was Antigone's traditional and domestic obligation to conduct Polynices' burial rites. Laudably, Antigone reveals her perpetual devotion to family values by appealing to "the great unwritten, unshakable traditions" (Sophocles, 374) that uphold her allegiance as *philia* and by unceasingly acknowledging her familial duty and respect for her *oikos* when firmly stating "I will bury him myself" (Sophocles, 363). However, Graeco-Roman societies expected women to be docile and submissive like Antigone's sister Ismene and encouraged them to act according to their fixed social placement. Therefore, Ismene obediently bowed to Creon's edict forbidding Polynices' burial and attempted to dissuade Antigone from her act of rebellion since she knew the harsh consequences and suffering that awaited a woman who dared to surpass her predetermined role. Although Ismene respected Creon's rule, Antigone adhered to her domestic duty yet suffered in the end. Her suffering was caused by her defiance to the established social position as dictated by Creon's rule and by her transcendence of this societal role through her manifestation of manly courage. This courage is represented by Antigone's firmness, determination, and devotion to her beliefs; treasuring *physis* or 'natural laws' and following divine law, she remains fearless in the face of authority and punishment.

The representation of women as highly emotional and unstable beings who are prone to losing self-control, versus male dominance and rational control over the life-world is a notion further reinforced by the texts in which females are depicted as being illogical and irrational while males are depicted as possessing both logic and rationality. This restrictive qualification is represented in Euripides' *Medea* by the protagonist herself. Following the divorce, Medea undergoes an emotional transformation that is classified by a progression from suicidal despair to sadistic fury. Her instability and impulsiveness are captured by her destructive reaction to Jason's betrayal that includes a series of murders and even the horrific murder of her own children.

Medea's irrationality is embedded in the pleasure she derives from watching Jason suffer the loss of their children, one that outweighs her own remorse at killing them. This is revealed by her exclamation, "How did they die? You will delight me twice as much again if you say they died in agony." (Euripides, 98, 1134-35) This unfavourable portrayal creates the binary opposition to the depiction of men as exhibited by

Euripides' characterization of Jason. Instead of being represented as an emotional, irrational, and destructive Barbarian, he epitomizes the quality of an admirable Greek, rationality.

The irrationality of a woman is also reflected by Clytaemnestra and her revenge in Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon*. Clytaemnestra is vengeful, planning to kill Agamemnon upon his return. The desire to kill him is driven by her anger for having sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia ten years earlier when he was leaving for battle. This was done in order to appease Artemis' anger, as the goddess sent contrary sailing winds in order to prevent Agamemnon and his companions from arriving at Troy. In order to ensure success, Agamemnon, :“With no thought more than as if a beast had died, when his ranged pasture swarmed with the deep fleece of flocks, he slaughtered like a victim his own child (51).” Considering the fact that Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter, and then proceeded to return home with the concubine Cassandra, it can be seen why wrath and fury were fueled to an even greater level within Cassandra. Deciding to take matters into her own hands, and acting like a man, she challenged the established patriarchal order and acted upon her own free will. She fought for justice on her own terms.

She murders her husband and the slave girl, Cassandra, practically rejoicing in the details of the murder scene. This is exhibited by her description of the episode, “Thus he went down, and the life struggled out of him, and as he died he spattered me with the dark red and violent driven rain of bitter savoured blood to make me glad,” (1. 1387-1391). Clytaemnestra attempts to justify and reason her husband's murder as being the will of gods, but the pleasure she appears to have derived from this action does not coincide with it being an action inspired by divine sanction alone. Driven by hatred, Clytaemnestra committed the murders without considering the consequences, thus executing them with no feelings of guilt or remorse.

What is beyond any reason is that after murdering her husband, Clytaemnestra also proceeds to murder the slave girl, Cassandra, whom Agamemnon had taken against her will as his mistress during his journeys. There is no reasonable explanation for the murder of this innocent girl who had no say in what Agamemnon chose to do with her. Aegisthus, Clytaemnestra's lover, is in fact the mastermind behind Agamemnon's murder. Although he does not commit the act of murder itself, he has great hatred for Agamemnon as a result of his father, Atreus, feeding his brothers to his father, Thyestes (56-57). Aegisthus' reasoning behind his decision to murder is misguided in that Agamemnon holds no responsibility whatsoever for the horrid decision that his father decided to commit against his brother in the past. The queen's motives are compounded when Agamemnon returns with his concubine, Cassandra. The capabilities of a resentful woman are clear as

Clytaemnestra is presented as cunning, manipulative and dangerous. She is deceitful as she addresses him and the people of Argos by first announcing her love for him, while in her mind, it is only part of an elaborate scheme for his murder, "I take no shame to speak aloud before you all the love I bear my husband," (I. 856-857). When Clytaemnestra is found standing over the two dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, she explains that she has been dissembling, waiting, and plotting her revenge. Clytaemnestra seems to enjoy describing the details of the murder "Thus he went down, and the life struggled out of him, and as he died he spattered me with the dark red and violent driven rain of bitter savoured blood to make me glad," (I. 1387-1391). Once again the spiteful nature of a wronged woman is seen to put revenge above all else. The Chorus is shocked by her words and behaviour, "We stand here stunned. How can you speak this way, with mouth so arrogant, to vaunt above your fallen lord?" (I. 1399-1400). Clytaemnestra's pride, lack of remorse, and thirst for revenge detract from her argument that Iphigenia's death demanded her husband's "by my Child's justice driven to fulfillment, by her Wrath and Fury, to whom I sacrificed this man," (I. 1432-1433). Clytaemnestra tries reasoning that her husband's murder was the will of gods, but judging from the pleasure she derived, she did not act out of divine sanction alone. Furthermore, there are the prophecies of Cassandra that foreshadow the murders, "We two must die, yet die not vengeless by the gods," (I.1277-1279). Clytaemnestra's brutal actions and reasoning were inspired by a mind clouded by hate and pride. They were committed without consideration for the consequences of her actions; by murdering her husband and his concubine Cassandra she had furthered the curse on the house of Atreus, and showed her "male" actions in the hands of woman.

Agamemnon's arrogant behaviour leads to his downfall and is partially a reason for his eventual murder. Saying that his will is everything and has to be exercised and shown without soft thoughts and deeds, he triggers Clytaemnestra's brutal reactions. His *hubris* or excessive pride cost him his life.

Linked to this emotional and irrational representation is the portrayal of women in Roman literature as disabled and dysfunctional beings. Dido, a figure of both passion and volatility, captures this rigid depiction in Virgil's *Aeneid* since love for her is practically a madness or disease. When in love, Dido is not familiarized with measure; instead, she is acquainted with extremes, loving her Aeneas madly, passionately, irrationally, and obsessively. She is not just in love; she is consumed and overpowered by this insane and violent force. Even Virgil's language depicts how love's power is like a sickness and a preoccupation beyond her control "Flames devoured her soft heart's flesh; the wound

in her breast was wordless, but alive." (Virgil, IV, 66-7) Almost bordering on insanity following Aeneas' rejection and betrayal since she is incompatible with his Roman destiny, Dido madly finds herself writhing between fierce love and bitter anger, a fury that erupts into a savage and deranged emotion. This is confirmed by the statement "Filled with madness and prisoner of her pain, she was determined to die." (Virgil, IV, 474-5) Although she is originally depicted as being sane and possessing rationality by being the leader of her nation, love renders her dysfunctional to the extent that she never resurfaces to her dignified state and ends her misery by suicide.

Literature at times is a reflection of existing social roles, ideals, and ideologically normative power relations. Mirroring the values and beliefs of the Mediterranean society, it becomes a literary recreation of the existing and surrounding social reality. The female protagonists of the selected masterpieces capture this notion, as they are portrayed according to the values of the Graeco-Roman society.

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