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The Epic Wait: A Comparative Study of Culture and Women in Classical Literature

MS. LAVANAYA SINGH
M.A. English
Department of English (North Campus)
University of Delhi, India

Abstract: Classical literature and mythology function as cultural narratives that serve as ideological sites of discourse, shaping and reinforcing dominant power structures and hegemonic cultural norms. One such gendered cultural norm which emerges as a recurring motif in literature is the trope of the Epic Wait, wherein the female protagonist is relegated to endure a fatalistic epic wait that serves as a testament to her chastity, loyalty, and moral virtue in the narrative. This paper undertakes a feminist and counter-hegemonic analysis of this women-in-wait trope in Indian and European classical literature, with a particular focus on Homer's *The Odyssey* (8th century BCE) and Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* (5th century CE). It seeks to critically deconstruct the seemingly neutral act of waiting by unmasking it as a gendered role that ascribes passivity to femininity. Building upon Roland Barthes' conception of myths in *Mythologies* as a cultural system that naturalises ideology, this paper traces the origins of the waiting woman trope in literature and argues against the enduring, deeply gendered legacy of the Epic Wait that continues in the contemporary cultural landscape. Employing a comparative framework, this study highlights convergences and divergences in female representation and in the narrative construction of waiting across Indian and European literary traditions. Additionally, this paper attempts to redefine waiting as an active form of emotional labour and resistance against masculine temporality. It aims for a reclamation of the voices of hitherto silenced waiting women from literature and mythology.

Keywords: *Classical Literature, Mythology, Cultural Norms, Epic Wait, Comparative Study*

Introduction

Classical literature and mythology have long functioned as major sites of discourse, shaping and reflecting dominant societal and traditional norms. Both serve as spaces for ideas and ideologies to be shaped, reshaped, communicated and represented through cultural narratives. This paper undertakes the task of critically examining these narratives and dominant representations through a feminist and counter-hegemonic lens. It argues against the naturalisation of a hegemonic cultural ideology through literary narratives and is a critical assessment of the waiting woman trope recurrent in classical literature and mythology. This paper maps an alternate historiography of the waiting game, centralising the experience of the classical heroines' Epic Wait while critically detailing its gendered cultural legacy in the contemporary world.

In keeping with the tradition of ancient Greece, where women's roles were confined to the Oikos (private/household sphere) and were systematically excluded from the Polis (public sphere), the literature of the period sought to shackle the woman and entrap her in the space of domesticity under the guise of filial and familial duties. The female protagonists in dominant literary representations of the period were made to play second fiddle to the husband or the male protagonist. A literary survey of major classical texts and mythological pieces of the period brings to the forefront an overused sexist trope, which is of the “Epic Wait” or the waiting woman.

The Epic Wait

The Epic Wait is a narrative device usually defined as a prolonged period of intense waiting endured by the female protagonist in classical and mythological literature across the world. This Epic Wait remodels the epic heroine of the narrative into the role of the passive and helpless waiting woman. In the canonical classical European literary text *The Odyssey* (8th century BCE) by Homer, Penelope’s role is reduced to that of the waiting woman who is made to wait upon her “heroic husband” and fulfill her marital duties. While the narrative revolves around the man and his heroic shenanigans, his heroic feud with the gods, and his heroic return home, the female characters in the work are used as mere tools to advance the narrative. The subplot and role of the waiting woman is akin to a prop which lends support to the primary storyline with the hero at its center. In *The Odyssey*, the female characters function symbolically to represent cliched feelings, emotions, and ideas usually associated with the Oikos and women's role in it. The notion of a prolonged period of waiting might denote a passive labour but in truth is nothing less than an emotional and laborious heroic feat, worthy of being regarded as the Epic Wait. Unlike the “hero's heroic quest” which is acknowledged and overpraised in the literary and cultural sphere, the heroine’s wait remains unacknowledged and underappreciated. The Epic Wait’s influence does not remain limited to a narrative scale but extends far beyond it into the cultural and social sphere.

A counter-hegemonic reading of *The Odyssey* showcases how Penelope's role in the narrative is often overlooked and underrepresented in spite of the fact that she is left to fend for herself and take care of domestic affairs all while warding off her suitors and keeping herself chaste, as per the customary dictates on marital duties. Her role is not just constricted to the Oikos but extends to the Polis with her trying to save Ithaca's throne by using her cunning tactics and wit. She disguises her political ambitions and motives under the guise of weaving, an activity predominantly associated with women. However, the hero always seems to take the limelight away, making her a secondary character in the story, left to guard the hero's throne in his absence. Rather than taking control of the kingdom and over the throne, she is left with nothing but the means to wait at her disposal. As the queen of Ithaca, Penelope undergoes a political erasure of identity and authority. She is subsequently narratively marginalised and ultimately forgotten from the cultural imagination. What remains in the wake of it, is the hero Odysseus remembered for his bravado and valour.

Fig. 1. Henri Matisse, *Femme à la fenêtre* (Woman at the window), 1920. Oil on canvas. Le Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Nandini Varma in her widely circulated essay on "The Waiting Woman in Literature" critiques the recurring motif of the waiting woman in dominant representations. She argues:

> When Henri Matisse drew the painting *Waiting*, he seems to have positioned the women waiting at the window exactly against two types of masculinities seen through literature for the longest time: first the speculative man, perhaps a renaissance hero like Hamlet standing at the window, contemplating, second the active man, more commonly seen, perhaps Odysseus and his sons in literature fighting wars outside. A woman fits neither of the frames. A woman waits inside the house behind the window for the man. But this painting is a shallow representation of the waiting-women much like what's been written in literature for years from the time of the Odyssey, because a woman's anxiety in the wait, as well as her labour inside the house in the duration that she is said to be waiting, is absent from it. (Varma)

Fig. 2. Henri Matisse, *Girl by a Window*, 1921. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The painting Verma mistakenly refers to as *Waiting* in her article could be more accurately titled the *Femme à la fenêtre* (1920) or *Girl by a Window (1921)*. A discerning observer wouldn't take long to notice the eyes of the women in Fig.1 and 2 which are absorbed into the view outside the window. They both look with a rapt expression in their eyes upon the world exterior to them as if they are lying in wait for somebody or longing to cross the lines of the window and slip out. One could easily interpret this as a yearning not for the hero rather to be like the hero whose return she is expected to be awaiting. The interior of the house seems to be the only thing separating them from the realm of possibility and the outside world in the pictures yet their positionality as women stationed only to wait at the window cannot be ignored. The folded hands in Fig.1 and the hand upon the chin in Fig. 2 seem to imply their discontentment and frustration with the never-ending wait, the passage of time and their own passive role in it all. The waiting woman finds no relief, transformed into a stock character, she finds herself being depicted as secondary and passive regardless of her labour.

Waiting and weaving define and give meaning to Penelope's identity and existence in the epic. The act of weaving and unweaving itself becomes resistance against masculine temporality. It is a ruse that allows her to preserve herself against the cruel imposition of masculine time. "She wove at her great loom, but every night / she set up torches and pulled the work apart" (Homer 2.140–41). The fatalistic wait for her husband and her futile weaving of Laertes' shroud consumes her entire being. The three men in her life, namely Telemachus, Laertes, and Odysseus orchestrate her actions even in death and from afar. One can't help but see an image of Arachne being evoked by Penelope who too seems cursed to weave for an endless eternity or at least till the end of her fatal wait.

While the "man of the house" or the patriarch indulges in more active pursuits, the women of the house bear the weight of the wait. Through resilience in the face of adversity and endurance against time, the waiting woman inculcates within herself these faculties which are usually attributed to men and deemed of no use to women. Consequently, one finds the invisibilization of the heroic abilities of the women-in-wait. The etymology of the word wait seems to suggest its origins as an active and hostile activity usually standing to mean to watch out, be on guard, or lie in wait. One can only wonder how a term that seems to be associated with knights and guards (who are viewed as the epitome of masculinity and active agency) came to be seen as a passive, feminine, and gendered activity.

Another major work of classical Indian literature that treads the same path by allocating the female protagonist the task of the epical wait is Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* (5th century CE) where Shakuntala's love, perseverance and faith is tested by her wait for King Dushyanta's memories to return. She indulges in the fatalistic wait for the hero's love, longing for his memories to return. She is systematically devoid of her rightful claim to the throne as queen and her son as the heir apparent. Her derecognition and humiliation in King Dushyanta's court and her ultimate wait essentially serves to center Dushyanta in the plot scheme. Śārṅgarava's declaration to Dushyanta, "Leave her or take her

as you will; a husband has power, for good or ill, over a woman's life" (Kalidasa 60) is a poignant reminder of the fate of the waiting woman when she is rejected by the one she awaited. It also marks a moment in the text where Shakuntala comes to terms with the futility of her wait.

In a similar vein, Sita from *Ramayana* is compelled to passively await her husband to come and be her saviour. A common occurrence in these dominant narratives is the typecasting of the female characters as the damsels in distress waiting for the hero to come save them from the clutches of the fatalistic wait. A counter-hegemonic reading of these texts reveals a bias against female characters with them being assigned marginal roles, being used solely as a device for action in the plot, and being allocated the peripheral space while the man occupies the center of the narrative. The hero progresses, moves forward, and grows while the waiting woman remains entrapped in a perpetual purgatorial wait. The Epic Wait paralyses the waiting woman leaving her stunted physically, mentally, and emotionally. It drains her of her agency to think and act for her own sake, instead prodding her into having her life revolve around the man of the story and becoming dependent upon his whims and favour for her life.

Waiting as a plot device used against women in the narrative allows the men to evade formal and familial duties leaving the women to shoulder the burden of culture and community. An unfortunate parallel that a reader observes in both texts is the fact that while both the Kings Dushyanta and Odysseus conveniently evade paternal responsibilities on the grounds of war and memory loss, the female protagonists Penelope and Shakuntala are left alone to shoulder domestic responsibilities and rear their children Telemachus and Bharata respectively. The waiting woman trope manifests in various forms with varying names as in the conception of the notion of the "angel in the house" by Coventry Patmore which paints the idea of the ideal woman. In this context, it can be argued that the persona of the ideal woman stays consistent through the years and continues even in the 21st century, to the one who waits.

The micro-politics of waiting surface from the depths of the flowy prose of both these classical texts. It nudges the readers to interrogate themselves as to why one roots for Odysseus' return home to his wife and throne or why one hopes for the curse upon King Dushyanta to be dispelled and for him to recognise Shakuntala as his wife and Bharata as his legitimate heir? The answer to this does not lie in an innocent wish for a happy ending. Contrary to that, it stems from a more complex wellspring of thoughts and emotions. Culturally and politically, one is conditioned to empathise with and idolise the waiting woman who is to be rewarded with a reconciliation with the male protagonist, who is the sole entity that can lead her to her life's fulfillment. It is critically unthinkable to even imagine an alternate ending where the hero doesn't make it home or the waiting wife moves on with her life. The fatal consequences reserved for the woman who negates the wait are preached and portrayed through the Greek myth which details the tragic fate of Clytemnestra; a woman killed by her son for not waiting upon her husband, murdering him on his return home, and taking on a new lover.

One cannot talk about the waiting woman trope without giving due attention to the role of Ladies-in-waiting; women who wait upon women. The obligations of the role of ladies-in-waiting outwardly may seem to be passive in nature and one that is not of much significance yet they used to play a very active role in politics and high society, wielding considerable influence over court politics and the royalty. It is astounding to note that a woman commanding such sway over considerable political, economic, and social decisions would be viewed merely as a personal servant in the literal sense only for the name ascribed to her role and responsibility. It is also of note that the wait loses its credibility if it is not for a man and the idea of women who wait upon women seems almost transgressive. For the wait to be credible and be rewarded, it must be attuned to the norms and rooted in a patriarchal cultural tradition.

Mythology as Ideology

Mythology sustains cultural and historical narratives with the process of myth-making. What goes into this process of myth-making is ideological and hegemonic that subsumes the actual cultural and historical under it. Every thread spun to weave this fabric of myth is supplied by a dominant ideological stance. The unravelling of the layers of a myth leaves residues of the ideology that went into its making. Roland Barthes in his seminal work *Mythologies* views myths as, "a second-order semiological system" that "transforms history into nature" (Barthes 113–14). One can easily construe upon this to interpret ideology as infiltrator in myths which are a semiological system that hide within their folds this dominant cultural and ideological sign. This infiltrator through cultural narratives effortlessly embeds and naturalises itself as a historical legacy within due course of time.

One witnesses the roots of waiting entrenched in the soil of history, proliferating through the branches of myths and flourishing into an ideologically firm and naturalised tree. Thus, mythologies essentially function as a cultural system that naturalizes ideology. In this context, waiting as a vocation is transmuted into a passive-feminine trait and relegated to the realm of women. The Epic Wait of Shakuntala, Penelope, Sita, and Draupadi takes on an ideological current and naturalises itself through myths within contemporary culture and society. The cultural and ideological current of the Epic Wait flows within the micro acts of waiting that women are naturally expected to endure in today's world. The micro acts of waiting for public space, social recognition, and eating pervade the lives of women across the world. The dominant power structures of society construct an archetypal image of the idealised woman; a woman who waits. Any woman who strays from the norm of the fatalistic wait and gives in is labelled as immoral or promiscuous.

Waiting becomes a litmus test for a woman's moral character, revealing her values and principles. The waiting game is patriarchal in nature and is played by the rules created by patriarchal structures. However, the archaic idea of the waiting woman also gets subverted in narratives like

Sophocles's *Antigone* (441 BCE), where waiting becomes an act of agency, autonomy and resistance. Antigone commits suicide instead of awaiting a tragic death at the hands of fate for her actions. Another instance of waiting for divine intervention rather than humanely is Draupadi's wait and plea for help during the disrobing incident in the Kaurava Sabha. However, the wait here is not on man or the circumstances to turn in her favour rather it is a wait for divine intervention. The passive wait takes on the form of an active resistance against social and patriarchal forces which seek to control and subjugate women. Women have been playing the waiting game for long in literature but waiting as a symbol takes on different meanings with the passage of time. The waiting game created exclusively for women becomes a point of convergence for both Indian and European classical literature. Another point of convergence is the failure to pass the Bechdel test, by most of these classical canonical texts. This mythical failure translates to a systematic cultural and social failure.

The mythologically produced waiting game endures through social silence, constraints, and passivity. An unacknowledged silent labour that normalises itself through mythological narratives in the form of cultural heritage. A comparative analysis of the waiting game within the context of Indian and European classical literature yields numerous similarities and differences. It can be easily discerned that the waiting game in the Indian context is inherently tied to religion and religious beliefs. Waiting takes on the form of worship, introspection and a moment for contemplation. On the other hand, the waiting game in the European context is more action oriented and dramatic. A point of divergence in this waiting game is the portrayal of female characters within two very different yet similar contexts. The heroine and the female characters depicted within the framework of Indian classical literature are shown to be pious, devoted, virtuous and submissive to a great extent whereas European classical literature presents its heroines as cunning, intense and resourceful but bound by societal constraints. One would assume the piousness and devotion of the Indian heroine to be rewarded sooner than the intensity and resourcefulness of the European heroine yet the epics under consideration flip the script with an extension of the Indian heroine's wait while the latter finds fulfillment positively. However, the transformation that the wait brings about cannot be disregarded.

Mythological construction of the Epic Wait and its reinforcement in contemporary culture seeks to manufacture the unquestioning waiting woman in all her glory. It culturally operates on a world scale to produce pure Penelopes and sanctified Sitas and Shakuntalas. Waiting in a culturally patriarchal and hegemonic society veils the ideology behind the act under the guise of myths to make it seem more palatable in the name of tradition and history. In reference to this, Diana Mata-Codesal in her essay on "Gendered (Im)mobility: Rooted Women and Waiting Penelopes" argues that "such prevailing gender expectations explain why the image of Penelope (from Homer's Odyssey) is popularly attached in Mexico to women who stay put in transnational families, as mothers and wives of migrants."

Conclusion

A critical assessment of the roots of dominant cultural and gendered norms brings to the surface their deeply entrenched connection with mythology, literature and representation. Whether it is the east or the west, these norms remain more or less the same with slight variations in every place. One of these very inherently sexist and stereotypical cultural norms is the one of waiting. An Indian variation or a more evolved form of this norm still exists in domestic households where women are expected to wait for the husband or the patriarch to dine first, before having their meal. The waiting game in the modern context disguises itself under the cloak of tradition, cultural values and beliefs. The Epic Wait curates a long line of Penelopes, Shakuntalas, Draupadis, and Sitas waiting for narrative and cultural justice in the modern context. The waiting woman ceases to be a historically or mythologically positioned figure rather, she becomes a moral archetype with the institutionalisation of ritualised waiting.

In conclusion, the neutral act of waiting is transformed by societal power dynamics, stereotyped into a feminine trait and eventually becomes a gendered role. Waiting, as a patriarchal legacy, perpetuates and institutionalises unequal power dynamics. The concept of waiting as an activity has really evolved over the years with its original meaning signifying an active and hostile activity, it now carries connotations of passivity and inactivity. Furthermore, it can be stressed that dominant representations found in classical literature and mythology are very much accountable for the creation and continuity of these gendered norms in the contemporary world. Ultimately, this paper enacts a reclamation of the voices of the hitherto silenced waiting women in history and mythology.

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