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Creat-Eve: A Feminist Critique of the Genesis Tale

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Ever since feminism indulged in the politics of mythmaking, the world has woken up to the possibility of rectifying value systems and liberating women from imposed stereotypes by generating counter narratives to the existing myths, fairy tales and fables. This project of revisionist re-reading, re-evaluates the patriarchal fantasies and ideologies embodied in the seemingly harmless tales, thereby ensuring gender-justice. In other words, the objective is to lend a voice to the Great Silence culture has imposed on the 'second sex'. Such re-reading is not static but open-ended, enabling multiple versions to be created. And hence, the Sītās, Draupadīs, Eves and Medusas have now begun posing unsettling questions. Eve is a name that has become synonymous with sin, seduction and transgression. The serpent and the forbidden fruit spelt doom for not just Eve, but the entire female race which struggled owing to their identification with Eve. The solution, therefore, is to rework that identity itself and view the Genesis story from Eve's perspective.

Among the pluralistic endeavours of feminism and feminist theory, the one most passionately pursued is the enterprise of revisionist re-reading. Of the many texts that need to be redeemed from their misogynistic stance, the lore of ancient mythology receives foremost attention. Myths, fairy tales and fables are time-honoured embodiments of cultural and religious identity which are bequeathed to posterity. On the surface, these are harmless narratives of epic struggles, legendary heroes, infallible deities, and their combat with the forces of evil. However, underlying the tales is a paradigm of behavioural conventions that is ingrained into the listener's psyche. It goes a long way in conditioning men and women to conform to cultural constructs which are passed off as 'ideal'.

Mythology thus plays a decisive role in perpetuating the so-called "gender ideology", sculpting social attitudes and offering the blue print of social organization through the representation of male and female sexuality. These gender roles are so deep-seated in culture that they appear quite 'natural' and hence have evaded questioning for aeons. After all, one does not just stand up and counter scriptures, for it is the 'Word of God'. But, ever since feminism set off on the road towards iconoclasm, things have never been the same.

With the realization that these fictions *engendering* facts coerce women into types 'performing' male-constructed gender roles, it becomes necessary to ask how and why they are constructed. Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental work *The Second Sex* exposes them as part of the male strategy of "Other"-ing the woman (139). Such cultural traditions or rather, 'constructs' can be appropriated and used creatively by the women's movement through the enterprise of re-reading. Here, women assume mythmaking roles and construct the other side of well-known plots, thereby breaking the silence imposed on female characters. In her theoretical essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" Adrienne Rich explains the objective of this re-visionist project:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (90)

Feminist re-reading of myths transforms the reader from a passive receiver of events to an active interpreter whose probing of familiar tales uncovers the hidden hegemonic designs.

Origin myths are used to validate and charter contemporary social and natural order and women's position in society is thought to derive from how they originated and behaved in mythic times. The paradigm of the social relationship between men and women in the West is rooted in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, which has underpinned mankind's perception of sex, gender, and morality thereby establishing the 'hierarchy' of the sexes.

The Judaeo-Christian creation myth narrated in the Biblical story of Genesis 1-3 claims that God created man in his own likeness, and was given the divine sanction to dominate and subdue the earth. God is male and his most important creation is also male. The story emphasizes the primacy of man and the centrality of his place in the universe, while women are assigned a mere subordinate role. According to the Old Testament, women are an afterthought. God, concerned about the lack of a fitting companion for Adam – “an help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18) – fashions Eve out of Adam's body. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* considers it as a “peremptory instance of the male's expropriation of the life force through a god who created the world without benefit of female assistance” (52).

The myth of the creation of Adam and Eve is narrated from different perspectives in Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:23. The first details how God “created man in his [own] image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The term “man” in this instance is collective, generic and inclusive as indicated in Genesis 5:2 which states that “Male and female he created them; and he blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created.” Hence, this may be interpreted to mean that both men and women were created together, equally and at the same time and the pair was given joint responsibility and leave to rule “over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:26).

Contrary to this non-subordinating view of woman, the account given in Genesis 2 and 3 claims that God first formed man out of the dust, breathed life into his nostrils and set him down in the Garden of Eden. Since there was no “helpmeet” to be found for Adam, God caused him to fall into a deep sleep, and meanwhile took one of Adam's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then God made a woman from the rib and brought her to the man. The man said, “This [is] now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Genesis 2:23). The idea of woman being an imperfect man or an incidental being as pronounced by St Thomas is symbolized by this act of fashioning Eve from a supernumerary bone of Adam. It is this dismissal of the woman as an insignificant and subservient being that Simone de Beauvoir vehemently indicts:

Not even her birth was independent; God did not spontaneously choose to create her as an end in herself and in order to be worshipped directly by her in return for it. She was destined by Him for man; it was to rescue Adam from loneliness that He gave her to him, in her mate was her origin and her purpose; she was his complement on the order of the inessential. Thus she appeared in the guise of a privileged prey... she was a conscious being, but naturally submissive. (141)

Women for centuries have been instructed to be “helpmeet” for her husband, a distorted contraction of the noun “help” and the adverb “meet”, the latter being Shakespearean English for “corresponding to” or “suitable”. The meaning “suitable” is synonym for “face to face” which evidently denotes equality and adequacy.

What happens after is even more ‘damning’. The woman, whom Adam subsequently names Eve, disobeys God’s commandment and succumbs to temptation instigating their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. According to Kate Millet the Genesis story explores “the loss of primeval simplicity, the arrival of death, and the first conscious experience of knowledge”, all revolving around sex (53). The moment Adam and Eve taste the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, they become aware and ashamed of their nakedness. Millet firmly argues that the narrative explains the invention of sexual intercourse and the castigation of the female as the sole bearer of this sexual guilt. The fabled serpent is unmistakably linked with both the female and male sex by way of its sinuous, curvaceous body and its phallic form respectively. In the Bible, “knowing” is synonymous with sexuality and it is the inferior, vulnerable Eve who is tempted first and beguiled by the serpent/penis and eats the fruit. In doing so, she sets in motion the vicious cycle of evil and sorrow and compounds her sin by luring Adam to partake of the fruit.

And as the myth records the original sexual adventure, Adam was seduced by woman, who was seduced by a penis. ‘The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the fruit and I did eat’ is the first man’s defense. Seduced by the phallic snake, Eve is convicted for Adam’s participation in sex. (Millet 53)

When the ‘seductress’ transgresses the decree of the male God with her sexuality, the consequences are the ousting of mankind from the fantasy world of Eden and the birth of Original Sin. While Adam is cursed to labour and toil, Eve is punished with an eternally inferior status: “In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire [shall be] to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16). Thereafter, the concepts of woman, sex and sin become inextricably linked in Western patriarchal thought and the Genesis story becomes the justification for women’s second-grade citizenship and exclusion from authority.

Eve, the mother of all humanity, is blamed for man’s fall and has therefore come to epitomize everything about a woman that man should guard against. Regardless of all her accomplishments, no woman can escape being identified with Eve, since she shares Eve’s ignominy of original sin. This perception serves as the ultimate weapon against women who attempt to challenge male hegemony and correct gender-based inequalities between the sexes.

However, with the rise of feminism in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the Bible has been reinterpreted to promote the idea that women are in every way the equals of men, each

created in the image of God. Feminist Biblical scholars regard Genesis 1 as a counter text to the Genesis 2 story of God having created Eve merely to serve man.

An explication of the same tale from the hitherto unexplored perspective of Eve, the 'sinner', reveals the other side of the story. A pertinent advocacy of Eve's action in the Garden of Eden has been put forth by the seventeenth century British poet Aemilia Lanyer in her poem "Eve's Apology in the Defense of Women" in which Pontius Pilate's wife, while begging him to spare Jesus' life, questions the shoddy treatment women have been meted out over the centuries. Lanyer, in the persona of Pilate's wife, asserts:

Our mother Eve, who tasted of the tree,
Giving to Adam what she held most dear,
Was simply good, and had no power to see
The after-coming harm did not appear. (19-22)

Lanyer avers that Eve was deceived by cunning and she did not maliciously intent to hurt Adam. In contrast, Adam's sin was greater because even though he possessed free will, he did not refuse to eat the fruit. Lanyer portrays Eve as the scapegoat blamed for Adam's own choice. In addition to this, Pilate's wife implies that Adam fell for a less logical reason as well.

If Eve did err, it was for knowledge sake;
The fruit being fair persuaded him to fall:
No subtle Serpent's falsehood did betray him; (53-55)

He was not lured by an intellectual quest for knowledge like Eve, but by the beauty of the apple and of Eve herself. Is it not ironical that his male progenies now consider women as intellectually inferior? Pilate's wife argues for the exoneration of women from the centuries-old charge on the grounds that:

Your fault being greater, why should you disdain
Our being your equals, free from tyranny? (85-86)

Lanyer's poem, is not only a defense of Eve alone, but of all women in general.

In her essay "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread", Phyllis Trible, a renowned feminist biblical scholar, holds that far from being a secondary or dependent being, an afterthought, Eve is in fact the "culmination" of all creation. It has long been argued that since Adam was created first and Eve second, it establishes hierarchy. But Adam's superiority ignores the fact that animals were created before him. Since Adam is superior to animals, then the hierarchy of creation should be reversed, and that makes Eve God's ultimate creation. Trible also argues that Adam and Eve were equals at the time of their creation and it is only after disobedience that inequality interferes. In others words, equality between the sexes was the original divine plan which needs to be restored.

Despite all the ingenious efforts by feminists in particular, it has proved remarkably difficult to correct popular belief and redefine Eve in more positive terms due to the constant reinforcement of her negative image in the West over the centuries. In actuality, Eve is the first ever rebel in human history who has been misrepresented as a sinner.

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