


Chapter 7

Portrayal of Helen of Troy in the Select Poems of Sappho and Wislawa Szymborska: Shattering the Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

The Greek society was highly patriarchal; it was a masculine world where war was glorified. Helen of Troy is one of the most imperative characters in both ancient and modern literature. For centuries she has been portrayed as the woman whose beauty sparked the Trojan War. But there are writers whose characterization of Helen and description of her beauty differ from the stereotypical mainstream narrative. This chapter investigates how the mythical character of Helen has been explored by such female writers, through poems of Sappho and Wislawa Szymborska. In Sappho's "Fragment 16," the readers observe how she refashions the character of Helen and projects her as a "hero" because she had followed her heart. She only mentions her beauty and does not describe her in an elevated way. But Szymborska is more effective in describing the consequences of her unsurpassed beauty that becomes her weapon. In the poem "A Moment in Troy," Szymborska criticizes the internalization of patriarchal values. She manipulates patriarchy by using a patriarchal narrative to empower women.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist critics and thinkers bring to light that gender disparity exists not only in the society but also in terms of literature since time immemorial. In the same way, feminist activists have also unearthed and brought forward literary texts from the past that have seeds of feminism, break gender stereotypes, and empower women. The Greek civilization is believed to be the earliest European civilization. The Greek society was highly patriarchal; it was a masculine world where war was glorified. The mythical character of Helen has inspired poets and artists for centuries as the woman whose beauty sparked the Trojan War, but there are writers whose characterization of Helen and description of her beauty differ from the stereotypical mainstream narrative. Sappho and Wislawa Szymborska are two such female writers who had used the mythic character of Helen in their works to comment on the contemporary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Helen of Troy is one of the most imperative characters in both ancient and modern literature. In the earliest mythological accounts, Helen's ancestry is stated as the daughter of Zeus and the goddess Nemesis. However, according to the most common origin story in Greek mythology, Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda; her putative father was Tyndareus – the King of Sparta. According to the myth, Zeus disguised himself as a swan and raped Leda. The Spartan queen then produced two eggs. From one egg Helen and her brother Pollux came out, while from the other emerged Clytemnestra and Castor. Helen was regarded as the most beautiful woman in the world, thus many men sought her in marriage. Menelaus was chosen to be Helen's husband and her twin sister Clytemnestra married Menelaus' brother King Agamemnon of Mycenae, who was one of the most powerful Greek rulers. Though Menelaus was valiant and prosperous, Helen's love for him would prove tenuous. Paris, a prince of Troy, travelled to Sparta on the advice of goddess Aphrodite. She had promised him the most beautiful woman in the world after he proclaimed her the fairest goddess over Hera and Athena. When Paris saw Helen, he at once knew that Aphrodite had kept her promise. When Menelaus was away in Crete, Paris went back to Troy with Helen. Some stories say Helen went willingly, seduced by Paris' charms. Others claim that she was abducted by Paris, who had defied the ancient laws of hospitality. When Menelaus discovers that Helen is gone, he and his brother Agamemnon along with the suitors of Helen who had sworn to support him if necessary set sail for Troy to wage a war against the Trojans. Their arrival at Troy marked the beginning of the Trojan War, thus Helen becomes "the face that

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