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## **Retelling by the Stolen Head - Allegory of Reconstruction**

### **Stone Blind by Natalie Haynes**

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#### **Abstract:**

Allegory explores the significance of a text and transcends beyond meaning. Any text can be read allegorically and interpreted in various manners having varied meanings. The purpose of allegory is to keep the literary text(s) or narrative(s) relevant. Adhering to the purpose of allegory, allegorical interpretation of any narrative encourages re-reading of narratives, which paves the way for retelling.

Retellings of old texts are not a new phenomenon. Retellings (re)tell the already told stories transcending beyond the old meanings and significance.

The novel *Stone Blind* by Natalie Haynes (2022) retells the myth of the infamously famous Medusa. The novel is an allegory of the reconstruction of the figure of Medusa by Gorgoneion. *Stone Blind* renegotiates or reconstructs the relationship between Medusa's experience and her

representation. The novel's literary reconstruction of Medusa's character attempts to recapture Medusa's experience through representation.

**Keywords: Myth, retelling, agency, power dynamics, curse, victimization and monster.**

I left behind the mortal body that had made me weak and vulnerable and I escaped into what, exactly? A new life? Please, this isn't life.

It's death. You can't have forgotten how Medusa was sliced in two by this man, this hero. Now she is dead and mourned and loved by

her sisters and I am, well, I am this: the stolen head. The hidden trophy. (*Stone Blind* 301)

“Allegory”, according to C. S. Lewis, “in some sense, belongs not to medieval man but to man, or even to mind, in general” (qtd. in *The Age of Allegory*). Allegory functions 'to make' (literary) documents apposite (Bloomfield). “Allegory in this sense” Bloomfield asserts “is seeing of significance of a literary work beyond its meaning” (*Allegory as Interpretation*). The aforementioned significance or allegory has a purpose. The purpose can be moral, social, political or religious.

Adhering to the purpose of allegory, allegorical interpretation of any narrative encourages re-reading of narratives (myths, stories texts, etc.), which further paves the way for retelling. Retellings of old texts are not a new phenomenon. Retellings (re)tell the already told stories transcending beyond the old meanings and significance. Retellings create, understand and disseminate new allegories of the time.

The novel, ‘Stone Blind’ by Natalie Haynes, published in 2022 retells the myth of the infamously famous Medusa. ‘Stone Blind’ is an allegory of the reconstruction of the figure of Medusa by Gorgoneion.

Reconstruction rejects the old construction. It constructs something new out of the old construction. The question of how to 'reconstruct' is a profound and essential one. It alludes to the hiatus between reconstruction and old construction. The gap between construction and reconstruction is bridged by deconstruction. Deconstruction does not 'destruct'. It 'undo' or 'dismantle' the constructed. To reconstruct something, that something is deconstructed first.

The novel *Stone Blind* reconstructs the relationship between Medusa's experience and her representation. Literary reconstruction of Medusa's character in the novel attempts to capture Medusa's experience through representation, transcending her into a renewed figure- truthfully. The novel *Stone Blind* begins with the voice of Gorgoneion, an agency denied to Medusa in the myth. The Gorgoneion questions the incidents, analyzes them and expresses its feelings and thoughts.

### **Medusa – A Mythical Figure**

Medusa's story is not new. It follows the typical formula of Greek myths in which there is a female nemesis outmanoeuvred by a handsome hero favoured by divine powers.

The mythical journey of Medusa begins with her being abandoned (a mortal child of immortals) by her parents, Ceto and Phorcys, following acceptance by her Gorgon sisters, Sthenno and Euryale, making a family. She is then raped by Poseidon, a sea god, in the temple of Athena. Consequently, enraged Athena curses Medusa for defiling her temple. The curse of Athena turns her beautiful golden hair into snakes and anyone who locks a look into her eyes turns into stone. Later, Perseus decapitates her with the help of gods (Athena and Hermes) to save his mother from the unwanted marriage with Polydectes. Eventually, Gorgoneion (the severed head of Medusa) is placed on Athene's aegis.

## **Retelling Medusa- Down the Ages**

The myth of Medusa has been retold by many down the ages, beginning with Hesiod's 'Theogony'. Hesiod presented Perseus as a heroic character and the Gorgon sisters as monsters. Pindar as well represented the myth in a way that spoke for Perseus. Ovid in his 'Metamorphoses' presents Perseus as a heroic character. He saves Andromeda by turning the sea monster into stone using Medusa's decapitated head. In his version, the scene depicting the rape of Medusa is included. Dante Gabriel Rossetti raises the question of the right to equal knowledge between a man and a woman in his 'Aspecta Medusa'. In the poem, Andromeda wants to see Medusa's decapitated head and gain the knowledge that is hidden from her by Perseus. Perseus warns her of the potential dangers of the hidden knowledge. Edith Sitwell's 'Medusa Love Song' depicts Medusa as an innocent girl who is unaware of the ways of the world. Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Medusa' presents Medusa as a woman who has been wronged. Duffy gives space to the feelings of jealousy, anger and pain which results in the destructive nature of Medusa.

Analyzing Medusa's representation down the ages, one observes the varied representations of Medusa. It is significant that in the earlier representations (primarily by men), she is showcased as a monster. Those representations denied her the agency to present her perspective on her life. On the other hand, the women writers or the later representations gave agency and empowered the figure of Medusa by writing about her as an individual and not as an object created to create a heroic man.

## **Undoing the Hero: (Un)heroic Reconstruction**

Perseus is a demi-god born of the intimate relationship between Zeus and Danae. Danae was imprisoned by her father, Acrisius, because of a prophecy according to which Danae's son would

be the reason for his death. During Danae's imprisonment, Zeus "rained in through the gap" (68). Agitated by her father, Danae establishes a sexual relationship with him. Perseus is the outcome of that relationship. Danae and Perseus are imprisoned in an even smaller cell than before by Acrisius when he receives the news of the birth of his grandson. Zeus saves both Danae and Perseus. Danae and Perseus reach an island and there they start living with a fisherman named Dictys, a former prince, who was sent into exile by his brother, Polydectes, the king of Seriphos. Polydectes arrives at the island and offers to marry Danae. To stop Polydectes, Perseus accepts his challenge to bring the head of a Gorgon to him. In his pursuit to save his mother, he chops off the head of sleeping Medusa.

Reading the above description of events as merely description, one mistakes Perseus as a hero. Renegotiating with the myth, the novel interrogates the reason behind the acceptance of the challenge immediately by Perseus. Why did he not try to reason with Polydectes about beheading someone? If he did not decapitate Medusa on his own but instead received assistance from the gods, how can he take pleasure in her death and celebrate his victory? Instead of going to his mother as soon as possible, why did he choose to test and play with his newfound power? How can he enjoy stoning people, misusing Medusa's sliced head as a weapon? Adopting an interrogation approach, 'Stone Blind' destroys the narrative which represents Perseus as a hero and reconstructs it anew.

The novel presents Perseus not through the eyes of the killer or the said hero, but through the experience of Medusa, the killed, Gorgoneion, the outcome of his thoughtless decapitation, and Athene.

“The narrative's most informed and interesting point of view, entitled Gorgoneion,” Danny Pucknell writes “is told from the point of view of Medusa's disembodied head. Playing brilliantly with the established narrative, it offers the reader the chance to see Perseus from Medusa's point of view.” Additionally, while reading Haynes's retelling, one realizes how Perseus is aided by gods on every step he takes in his heroic journey of decapitating one of Gorgon's heads.

In his heroic journey, Perseus is guided and supported by Athene and Hermes. They assist him with Graiai, the three sisters, who have only one eye and one mouth which they use one by one sharing among themselves. The Graiai informs him where will he find the nymphs who will further help him. After getting the information from them, Perseus throws their shared eyes and mouth into the sea. When, in the myth, Perseus is congratulated for his clever act, in the novel, we find Gorgoneion questioning, “when you've finished congratulating Perseus for his quick tricks, you might spare a moment to think about how the Graiai lived after he was gone. Blind and hungry” (Haynes 157).

The nymphs help Perseus equipping him with the winged shoes of Hermes for covering long distances in no time, the hat of Hades bestowing invisibility, the sword of Hesperides for beheading and a silver kibisis to carry Gorgoneion. Despite having everything required to behead Medusa, Athene also helps him strike the sword.

Haynes in her Pandora's Box states, “Perseus is a hero favoured by the gods, but he is also an insufficient hero, one who needs copious divine assistance to complete his quest. He is not being presented as a giant-slayer, a monster-killer. The ingenuity we might see in an image of Odysseus blinding the Cyclops or the strength of Heracles killing the Hydra is missing” (Haynes 96-97).

In 'Stone Blind,' Haynes reconstructs the identity of Perseus. He comes across as a monster who dismembers Medusa, the victim. As the novel begins, on the opening page, Gorgoneion asserts, "I see the men... Call themselves heroes.... Enough to know that hero isn't the one who's kind or brave or loyal. Sometimes- not always, but sometimes- he is monstrous."

After decapitating Medusa, Perseus becomes a vengeful monster. He uses Gorgoneion as a weapon to punish those who make him angry for huge or minor reasons. He punishes a shepherd who refuses to shelter him, Titan Atlas who refuses to shelter him in his palace, a giant sea creature, the priests and finally all guests present at his and Andromeda's wedding. He turns them all into stone.

### **Reconstruction of Divine Power: Orchestra of Injustice**

The divine power, worshipped by mortals, emblem of justice and embodiment of goodness, comes across as an orchestra of injustice in the novel.

Zeus rapes his first wife, Metis and belittles his present wife, Hera. Poseidon rapes Medusa because of this an innocent girl's life alters. Medusa becomes the embodiment of victimhood.

The novel also narrates the injustice that befell Athene. She is disliked by other gods for being a strong, intelligent and opinionated woman. She is also sexually assaulted by Hephaestus, the blacksmith god, who forcefully ejaculates on her thighs.

Rape is one of the many attacks against women. When a woman is raped, she is not viewed from the standpoint of the victim. Society acts and reacts against the rape victim based on deeply ingrained stereotypes and prejudices. According to David Gurham, "when people look at the issue of rape, what they 'see' is not a clear view of the relevant facts and evidence, but rather a montage



of images composed of their own deeply ingrained prejudices, stereotypes, and false beliefs reflected back to them..." (qtd. in Beverly 113).

Furthermore, instead of saving and standing with Medusa, Athene inflicts a curse on her. Athene further helps Perseus to decapitate Medusa. Athene comes across as parochial, jealous and pompous. By the end of the novel, it is observed that the victim and the victimizer are bound together and, there is role reversal. The relationship between the victim and the victimizer comments on the nature of power: power without having the power to control power is a weakness.

### **Allegory of Image-making: Reclaiming Voice, Rethinking Monster and Reconstructing Medusa**

The Gorgon sisters, Sthenno, Euryale and Medusa for a long time are represented as monsters. The construction of their image is that of monsters with enormous tusks, snakes as their hair, big wings and scales. The myth that created their image endorses the monstrosity of the sisters by their different appearances and encourages hatred for them. The mortals were scared of them because of the 'stories' that they had 'heard' about them, even when the Gorgon sisters never inflicted personal harm on others.

The narrative of Stone Blind tries to rethink the monster by reclaiming the voice of often 'silenced' monsters and 'reconstructing' their being- Euryale and Sthenno as humane, and Medusa as a victim, not a victimizer. Haynes reconstructs the image of declared monsters by smooth 'code switch'. She narrates the story of the Gorgon sisters not from the perspective of Perseus, but multiple vantage points. Among the multiple voices, the voice of Gorgoneion deconstructs the old image and works towards reconstructing the centuries-old damaged image of the three sisters.

Among the three Gorgon sisters, Medusa was the only mortal one. Phorcys and Ceto abandoned Medusa. The novel speculates the act of abandoning an infant is monstrous. Moreover, the novel also denounces the monstrous treatment towards Sthenno and Euryale, who nurture Medusa as their child and present them as humane.

Ovid describes Medusa as a beautiful girl having long golden hair. Later she is raped by Poseidon and cursed by Athene. The curse of Athene turned her beautiful hair into snakes and her gaze petrifying. “Medusa”, according to Tuba Pekol and Gillian Alban, “is both a symbol of the victim and the victimizer, depending on one's perspective” (104). Medusa was a victim of “socially constructed ideas” of socially accepted patriarchal norms (104). The patriarchal mindset for centuries has represented Medusa as “demonized” or “dehumanized” (104). It is because of the patriarchal mindset that Medusa has been represented “as a most deadly and gruesome universal woman character” (104).

Others have always represented Medusa through their perspectives. In the novel, she achieves agency to narrate her story both as Medusa and after being dismembered by Perseus as the Gorgoneion. Even the snake, Herpeta, speaks of what it saw (third person point of view) from the head of Medusa. The novel's opening, from the standpoint of the Gorgoneion, asserts: “Who is she? She is what happens when someone cannot be saved. This particular monster is assaulted, abused and vilified” (Haynes 3).

The novel humanly presents the pain of Medusa- the pain of snakes growing on her skull, her gaze turning things, insects and later humans and other creatures into stone. In one of many conversations between the Gorgon sisters, Euryale questions the action of Athene. She also expresses anger against the age-old practice of punishing a female for everything. She informs

how Athene is “vengeful and cruel, always blaming women for what men do to them. She has always been like this” (138). After the curse, to save others from her gaze, Medusa confines herself in her cave and blindfolds her eyes. It is Perseus who (mis)uses her decapitated head as a weapon.

Gorgoneion, the sliced head, explains that she can stop being used as a weapon in the hands of Perseus by closing her eyes or not locking her gaze with anyone. However, after being disembodied, she does not “feel like saving mortals anymore” and instead feels “like becoming the monster he made” (304). Additionally, Gorgoneion speculates about the act of her disembodiment by Perseus to save his mother and wonders what kind of mother would enjoy and celebrate the killing of a sleeping girl. Further, she declares that “the act of imagination makes me more human than him (294).”

### **Medusa's Cave, an Allegory**

Medusa's cave was the place where she lived, grew up, and was lovingly cared for by her sisters. It was her home where she felt protected and at peace. However, the cave, once her safe place turns into a metaphor for horror. The cave of Medusa holds the embedded allegory of isolation, transformation, injustice, horror, victimization and reconstruction.

It is in the cave where Medusa imprisons herself after being raped. Her isolation in the cave isn't merely physical but emotional as well. Inside the cave, Medusa is alone with her pain and anger. Inside the cave, in the darkness, no one can reach her because she hides there from others. With the assistance of her sister Euryale, Medusa comes out from the darkness of the cave into the light. Medusa's journey from darkness to light draws one's attention towards Plato's allegory of the cave. Similarly, in Plato's allegory of the cave, as well, the person who reaches the light first assists

others to reach the light. The journey from darkness to light suggests the importance and strength of camaraderie.

It is inside the cave where the curse of Athene transforms Medusa, her hair into snakes and her gaze petrifying, because of which she is declared a monster. A person who isolates himself or herself and does not speak and stand for oneself gives power to others to narrate his/her story. The novel gives voice to Medusa, even inside the cave, and empowers her with the agency of narration. Medusa, as a narrator, narrates the horror of transformation and decapitation, speaking out against the injustice inflicted upon her. Her narration, both as Medusa and Gorgoneion, commiserates with her character.

The cave becomes the site of a reconstruction of Medusa's image from a monster to that of a victim. It allegorizes her transformation, suffering and redemption.

### **Allegory of Stone and Blindness**

The curse (dis)abled Medusa due to which whoever looked eyes with her turned into stone. This powerful gaze establishes her as a monster.

The metamorphosis into stone due to Medusa's petrifying gaze, on one hand, alludes to the inability or the blindness of people who fail to recognize and empathize with Medusa's pain. On the other hand, it also suggests Medusa's resilience and resistance against injustice.

The transformation into stone insinuates covert truths: the truths that can only be unveiled by rejecting blindness towards a propagated narrative.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, the novel retells the experience of Medusa and reconstructs her figure by granting her agency. It also deconstructs the figure of Perseus and questions the injustice perpetrated by the gods. Stone Blind invests in reclaiming the silenced voices, rethinks the monster and reconstructs the image of Medusa.

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