
The Feminine Identity in the Domestic Coding of Beowulf

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Authors' contributions

This is a collaborative work between both authors. Author DPH worked out the manuscript on the Beowulf. Author SCP reviewed and revised the stylistic features of this paper. Author DPH had provided the thought and author SCP had paved the way of stylistic renderings of that thought. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The Anglo-Saxon epic poem, Beowulf, has received many views and reviews on various perspectives. Feministic or anti-feministic terrain is not unsought through this piece of work. This article aims to note on the binary opposition of the two female characters, Wealtheow, the wife of Hrothgar and Grendel's mother. Both the characters are weighed with the balance of an Anglo-Saxon code, namely 'Domestic Code' proposed by Molter and the fate of them is decided upon that balance. An important thing to be noted in this article is that the female characters are viewed from a societal perspective, but not on the basis of their physique. Grendel's mother exercises the social norms expected from the descendant of Cain. She is not distinctively appeared as a child bearing mother as is not done to Wealtheow as a queen of distinction. No question of survival can be traced here. They work as a programmed machine. But the matter of concern is that the programming of Grendel's mother loses appropriateness with the consideration of values nourished by the society of Beowulf.

Keywords: Femininity; domestic code; Anglo-Saxon; identity; appropriateness; Beowulf.

1. INTRODUCTION

Beowulf, a unanimous Anglo-Saxon epic poem, tells the story of a brave nation and the value of bravery. The heroic deeds are highly applauded and the heroes are abundantly bestowed with precious ornaments as the tokens of brave accomplishments. A hero becomes the king and serves the nation as a protector. It is not worth living without giving proof to the people in the event of any apparent danger of the nation. The nation claims protector, a brave hero. But the poem, Beowulf, sustains the thought of scarcity of that valorous issues which can continue their predecessors. The poem, Beowulf, is set in Geats Land, the place ruled by the king Beowulf, Danes Land, the place ruled by the king Hrothgar and the untrodden area ruled by Grendel and his mother [1]. These three grand families, due to their significance for the construction of the plot of Beowulf, are traced identical at a certain point. The reproductive activities are barely profuse. The hero, Beowulf, was the foster child of the queen of Geats Land; the old Beowulf could not gift any progeny for the future leading of the kingdom; the king Hrothgar had no worthy of offspring to serve the nation against the blow from Grendel as well as Grendel's mother. Thus, Hrothgar reacts to the arrival of Beowulf to Danes as if he found his lost son once again who would serve them in his old age. Hrothgar says: 'Now Holy God has, /in His goodness, guided him here/to the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel./ This is my hope and for his heroism/I will recompense him with a rich treasure' [2]. Grendel's mother was out of sorts upon losing her sole son Grendel.

These grand families were doleful as they were not ordained with the progenies though they were traced as urgency contextually. But the text has no references why such barrenness prevailed. This problem has out of text consolation if the history of Anglo-Saxon fertility aridness or pregnancy complication is considered. The Anglo-Saxon society lacked the influence of iron. Maybe, their natural world did not provide the Anglo-Saxon race with iron. This scarcity of iron made the women more vulnerable in the pregnancy period and miscarriage was a common feature in that society:

Daily life was far from easy for people in Anglo-Saxon England. Women especially had a high mortality rate because of the dangers of

pregnancies, miscarriages and childbirth - lack of iron has also been suggested to as one reason. Examination of skeletal remains has revealed that common ailments included earache, toothache, headache, shingles, wounds, burns, and pain in the joints. Another source of information on this subject are manuscripts offering medical advice, some remedies deal specifically with female matters, often mixing common sense and superstition [3].

Christine Fell [3] has also referred to a piece of practical advice that the Anglo-Saxon women had to abide by as:

A Pregnant woman ought to be fully warned against eating anything too salt or too sweet, and against drinking strong alcohol: also against pork and fatty foods; also against drinking to the point of drunkenness, also against travelling; also against too much riding on horseback lest the child is born before the right time (14-25).

2. HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

This historical evidence provides the thought that the child bearing was momentous and issues were rarity. That's why; the epic poem, Beowulf, frees itself from the politics of the womb [4]. No woman gets extra eulogy or slur in connection with the bearing of the child, with the pregnancy. A woman is not represented here being weak for child bearing or being an important instrument for reproduction. This can be evaluated in multifold ways. Woman has been historically sought for being reproductive tool. This is a feminine dimension which has claimed a woman to be recognized even in a society of heroes as they are the production house of heroes. But the poem, Beowulf, has not bestowed any eulogy to women regarding to their capability of bearing heroes or this poem has successively suppressed this valued identity of female. History claims that the bearing of offspring was a laborious activity for the Anglo-Saxon society due to the lack of proper pregnancy diet and abundances of miscarriage and women mortality rate, and this phenomena of the Anglo-Saxon period might have plunged the poet of Beowulf not to add this dimension of a woman in addressing the female folk all through the poem. Thus, women get forgetfulness as revered or tortured one due to their reproductive power.

But the identity of a female being a mother is evidenced in the poem, *Beowulf*, if the mother of Grendel is to be noted with concern. The mother of Grendel has even claimed significant space all through the progression of the poem as she is represented one of the three anti-heroes of the poem. Molter [5] has observed that the characters presented in the *Beowulf* follow three basic codes; i.e. (i) hospitality code, (ii) warrior code and (iii) domestic code (p. 2) and the third code (domestic code) has made the boundaries for the female what they have to follow and how they have to behave within the four walls being the entertainers and weavers. Beauvoir [6] has posited that the femininity characterization imposed on the female characters in the *Beowulf* created them 'other' who were beyond the matter of discussion and this otherness created a boundary around them which they could not cross. According to Molter [5], the mother of Grendel broke this societal boundary as she was incapable to become 'other' of Anglo-Saxon domestic code. Her identity as a mother of Grendel could not surpass her identity as the progeny of Cain (Cursed Biblical figure who is damned to have killed his brother), the revengeful outcast. Molter [5] has also revealed that:

Hrothgar calls Grendel's Mother a marauder "from some other world . . . [who], as far as anyone ever can discern, looks like a woman," so her appearance of humanity and femininity are acknowledged, although it is clear that Hrothgar is apprehensive to recognize her as either human or feminine (1349-51) (p. 3).

Thus the society did not recognize the 'marauder' as a mother. And that made all the actions of the mother upon the killing of her son just cruelty of cursed heart. She is neither prized for her being mother; rather, her femininity is under doubt.

3. POLITICS OF POWER

In the *Old man and the Sea*, [7] the old man draws the attention because of his intense interest and relentlessly utmost effort to renew the fight because of his dream of a lion. The old man depends on nature for the cause of survival and his fight against that nature because of the cause of survival. The fight is giving pang. But he chooses the sea because it and only it can bestow the fodder to mitigate the very primary cause of living. He needs to survive and there is no other good option before the old man and so he sails in. But the shark delays the old man to reach his goal though he seems not to know how

to compromise. That is why, he fights and is never retarded. The old man is alone He needs to survive. Santiago admirably throughout his respective journeys endures the pain of holding a fishing wire for four days before conquering the marlin. "He compares his aged body to that of a turtle that has been cut up and butchered" (P. 3). He is bored and lonely but always optimistic as there is no other way except feeling optimistic which provides him with the feeding for the better tomorrow. He considers a physical position that is "only somewhat less intolerable" as "almost comfortable" (p. 31-32). Through his pain, Santiago continues to fight the merlin, telling it, on his third day at sea, "I'll stay with you until I am dead" (p, 38). Santiago's willingness to continue fighting the merlin until it dies is a true token of the man's endurance. Furthermore, the constant cold of the new world is detrimental to the man's health and leaves him nearly choking to death in desperate coughing fits. Santiago also admits his physical weakness thus: "age is my alarm clock." the old man said." Why do old men wake so early? Is it to have one longer day?" (p, 251). But Santiago waits until he naturally succumbs to his affliction, rather than taking his own life. Thus, the old man perseveres through harsh conditions and intense stress because of the cause for the better future laden with the glory after succeeding in winning the battle to be alive.

Here Santiago in the *Old man and the Sea* faces an existential crisis. He is no one to feed. Here lies the big gap in the treatment of activities for both Santiago and the mother of Grendel. Grendel's mother is famed with a son, a defamed creature of the generation of Cain. They live at a certain place out of human reach and they are the kings as well as subordinates in their estate. Grendel is killed through the dual against the hero, *Beowulf*. The action of Grendel's mother could have been justified likely that of Santiago. But the Anglo-Saxon narrative could not view a feminine identity with the light out of Anglo-Saxon feminine code, domestic code.

4. THE SOCIETAL SPACE

Fell [3] has delineated the activities and the way of perception on the women by the society where it has emphasized on the social gradation rather than the gradation depending on the sex. This would naturally depend greatly on her social class as well as regional and periodic differences. The word wif', wife, woman' might be connected with weaving, which implies that cloth-making was associated with women. In wills, the

male line was called 'weapnedhealf', 'weapon half' or sperehealf 'spear half' and the female line was wifhealf 'wife half or spinelhealf', spindle half. It would then seem that men were traditionally warriors or hunters, while women were cloth-makers and embroiderers (p. 210). Furthermore, the feminine occupational suffix stere was used to form words such as seamster, spinster and webster, all connected with cloth-making (p. 214).

As the Anglo-Saxons were the intruders, it was very much probable of not having the women folk in their groups in the time of trespass to a new found land. The human history informs that it is observed the new intruder groups capture the women and try to marry them for living. Thus, a gap remains between the woman (possessed) and the male (intruders) who have won the land and came to be the deciders of the fate of the new snatched land. During this time, the woman folk gets little recognition socially as they have little economic power [8]. Thus; they are grounded with the minor activities and spaces. The female presented in the Beowulf are certainly from the native origins. They have little gait in the literature of that period. We get them as the service providers in the time of providing food and entertaining the guests: 'Wealththeow came in,/Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies./Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted/The men in the hall, then handed the cup/First to Hrothgar, their homeland's guardian,/Urging him to drink deep and enjoy it/...../Offering the goblet to all ranks,/Treating the household and the assembled troop,/Until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand./With measured words she welcomed the Geat [2: 612-25].

Casey [9] is in the belief that the status of women cannot be judged with modern perspectives, but from the perspective of those who lived in that age. She retorted that the duty ordained to the women was regarded not insignificant at that perspective that posits the idea that women had to be ordained with that code of conduct which graded a woman as counted even in the midst of the retinue of knights:

Although history may have portrayed women as inferior, in fact, the protection given to women as wives, mothers and widows shows that they were not always on the fringes of society, but were active and successful participants in their world. Women were normally in control of running the

household, including the servants. Part of their duties included buying supplies needed for the house, for many noblewomen were in charge of feeding large numbers of their husband's retinue of knight. There were often guests who asked for room and board while they were traveling, and women were expected to be gracious and generous hosts. It was also common for the king to visit several of his vassals (partly as a way to reduce his own expenditure for his household), and on this visit it was expected that the whole entourage would be sumptuously fed and housed at the expense of the host (p. 104).

The imposition of femininity on the Anglo-Saxon women thus gets social address in spite of physical or bodily adornment. They are made 'other' and they are ordained with the specific roles which have been exposed through Wealththeow, the wife of Hrothgar which designates that they are to assist the king with fulfilling the 'hospitality code' [5] of serving the guests with wine, providing relish and proper entertainment to the invited guests in the mead halls during banquet.

5. CONCLUSION

Wealththeow and Grendel's mother are two female characters who have space to be discussed. The first one has been made an entertainer who needs to be prepared for the social gatherings. And the second one has been delineated having prowess to avenge against the enemies who were liable to kill her son Grendel. But the mother was not revered due to her lack of observing social code of conduct. In lieu of having the identity of a woman who needs to play domestic roles within societal boundary has rather been transformed as a warrior, marauder, and non-dignified female. So, Wealththeow remains alive while the Anglo-Saxon hero, Beowulf, is gifted with barges of gold owing to his success in killing Grendel's mother that helps the Anglo-Saxon culture to solidify that any deviance from domestic societal norms characterizes a woman as unfeminine, outcast and outlanders [10] who are gifted with slurs and death.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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