



Polyphonic Voices And Feminist Narrative Resistance In Natalie Haynes' A Thousand Ships

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the way *A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes reinvigorates the classical epic by rearranging the conventional narrative structure of the epic, into a polyphonic narration that prefaces the voices and experiences of women during the Trojan War. Beyond feminist readings as themes, this paper will state that the formal structuring of the novel, its disjointed narration, multi-voicedness, and lack of a single authoritative voice is a form of feminist narrative resistance. Basing the argument on the idea of polyphony by Bakhtin as well as feminist narratology and the critique of memory, the article indicates that Haynes disrupts the monologic power of the epic tradition and substitutes the heroic linearity with the testimony of women.

It is broken down into two sections: the analysis of the polyphonic structure of the novel as a structural problem of the hierarchy of epics; the analysis of how this narrative plurality can be transformed into an ethical witnessing that builds history with the memory, mourning and survival, instead of glory. By putting women in the limelight rather than as peripheral characters, *A Thousand Ships* comes out as a counter-epic that disrupts the work of mythmaking by men, and re-negotiates the sense of narrative power. The argument that is eventually presented in the article is that polyphony in the novel is not a stylistic device only but a political and epistemological intervention in the war, history and voice representation.

Introduction

The classical epic has continued to play a significant role in being one of the most powerful narrative modes in Western literary history, creating cultural memory as a narration of war, heroism, and national origin. The epic traditionally assumes one voice of narration, a chronological order, and the exaltation of heroic success in war. In this context women are often shown not as the storytellers, subjects of history but as abstractions, as a prize, a mourner, or someone to get things going. Their stories, especially those related to loss, displacement and survival are peripheral to the heroic story that is marked by the epic tradition. Because of

this, the epic form has traditionally supported a genderized hierarchical system of narration in which men perform and women are described, voices meditated or silenced by the greater ideology of heroic history.

Contemporary writers have been returning to classical myths and epics, however, in revisionist forms that challenge the inherited narrative hierarchies of these older narratives during the past decades. Feminist retellings, specifically, have become an important literary phenomenon, both in their attempt to recover the voices of female marginalities, and in their challenge to the ideological premises of canon writings. These are not just texts that add women into already known narratives, they also rethink the power of the so-called original narratives by rewriting the patterns according to which history is recounted. It is against this wide backdrop that *A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes fits in a unique spot. The Trojan War is recounted in the novel not as narrated by the great feats of the legendary heroes who fought but by the voices of women on both sides of the war- the queens, the prisoners, the mothers, the goddesses, and the survivors and thus the emphasis of the storytelling in the novel is shifted to the human cost of war.

Whereas a critical analysis of *A Thousand Ships* has often focused on its feminist concerns, its reclaiming of forgotten mythological characters, and its challenge to patriarchal narrative, little literature has explored the meaning-making of the narrative itself in the novel. The multiplicity of narrators, the episodic form of the text, and the denial of an authoritative point of view in the text all encourage a narratological reading in which form is prefigured as the locus of ideological practice. Instead of strict presentation of alternative material, the novel reinvents the operations of telling stories and narrative voice is re-established as a territory of power, memory, and authority. This paper thus considers the novel in terms of polyphony and maintains that the plurality of the narrative is approached not just stylistically but also politically.

Polyphony, in its broadest sense, referring to the presence of a number of voices which act as independent subjects in one piece of writing, is an effective way of seeing the narrative approach of the novel. Unlike the monologic power of traditional epics, in which the central voice is the organizer and interpreter of the events, *A Thousand Ships* spreads the narrative power over a diversity of voices that are separate and irresolvable. Each voice, the voice of Hecabe lamenting the downfall of Troy, the voice of Penelope, trying to maintain a precarious balance in Ithaca, the voice of Calliope, who ponders about the nature of an epic storytelling, is a part of a larger story, that cannot be ordered by levels. Not just is this multiplicity a response to the fragmented experience of war but it also serves to challenge the idea that history can be understood as being encompassed within a single, coherent narrative. The novel reveals the shortcomings of epic totalization by prefiguring different forms of memory through foregrounding incomplete truths instead of an extensive heroic form of memory.

The main idea in this reworking of narrative power is that of feminist narrative resistance. A particularly important issue that has been highlighted by feminist criticism has been voice and power, in which the act of telling stories could serve as an agency of the subject who has traditionally been marginalized in dominant discourse. The women narrating their experiences in *A Thousand Ships* make story telling a form of witnessing and keep their memory alive that would otherwise be swept away by heroic myth. They prophesy sorrow, exile, imprisonment, and perseverance, giving the Trojan War its secondary meaning instead of its primary one of triumph. Through this, the novel places memory not as simple recollection but as a subject that acts as resistance and challenges the patriarchal logic of the epic that places emphasis on the morally valuable human beings in the afterlife as opposed to those who emerge victorious.

The focus on aftermath in the novel is another aspect that makes the novel closer to what can be described as a counter-epic. In contrast to the classical epic, which is usually accompanied by a triumph or heroic immortality, *A thousand Ships* favors susceptibility, defeat, and survival to continuity. The epicness of the story is not based on the deeds of the battlefield, but on the emotional and historical burden of the characters.

By dissecting and unifying the text in its fragmented form and collective vision, the text is reconstituting to the same effect as epic scale through endurance and memory being transmitted as forms of heroism that are different to martial prowess. Tracing the Trojan War in this way, the novel does not simply retell it; It reinvents the very criteria of the determination of the epic significance.

The present article suggests that *A Thousand Ships* uses the polyphonic narration as the technique of feminism which undermines the monologic power of the epic tradition and recreates the history by means of the feminine memory. The analysis of the allocations of the voices of the narrative, the disjointed time flow in the novel, and the focus on witnessing and remembering, the study shows how representational narrative decisions contribute to the formation of the political meaning. Instead of defining feminist content and narrative form as two distinct issues, the analysis prefigures the interdependence of those, demonstrating how the structural novelty helps the text to break the established patterns of mythology.

Methodologically, the article uses a narratological approach based on the feminist theory, where voice, point of view, and the structuring of the narrative play an important role in shaping the novel critique of the epic authority. Polyphony, narrative plurality and memory are some of the concepts that offer the analytical tools with which the text can be analyzed and a reading of how formal experimentation is placed in broad debates relating to gender, history and representation. This strategy brings into focus the manner in which narration as such is a location of contested ideologies and in which narrative forms may either strengthen or destabilize the dominant cultural discourses..

The discussion takes place in two phases. The first chapter examines the polyphonic form of the novel, and discussing the ways in which the multiplicity of voices in the novel confounds the hierarchical form of the classical epic. The second chapter will discuss the ways in which this narrative plurality actually serves as feminist resistance, as reconstructing storytelling into an ethical witnessing of the story and a counter-epic reconstruction of it. The conclusion draws some conclusions about implications of these findings on the interpretation of contemporary feminist mythography, the changing relation between narrative form and political critique.

Placing *A Thousand Ships* at the crossroads of narratology and feminist literary studies, this article aims at proving that the meaning of the novel is not only in the voices it gives but also the manner in which it gives them. Its polyphonic shape is a reprocessing of the possibilities of the epic narrative that the recovery of the marginalized voices would not only demand new lenses but also new forms of narrative that could support them.

Chapter 1 Polyphonic Narrative Structure in *A Thousand Ships*

In this chapter, the formal narrative structure of *A Thousand Ships* is explored on the premise that an example of polyphony, or multiple autonomous voices, is used in the novel because the classical tradition of the epic requires a monologue. The chapter, with the help of a narratological approach based on Bakhtinian theory and feminist narratology, proves that narrative multiplicity is a form of structural intervention, which destabilizes the hierarchy of the epic and transforms the historical and war image.

1.1 Polyphony as Narrative Method

The main element in the formal innovation of the novel is its polyphonic form. Instead of trying to structure the text around one hero or about an omniscient narrator, the text is structured as a constellation of voices which encompasses queens, captives, mothers, goddesses, and survivors of the Trojan War. Hecabe, Penelope, Andromache, Creusa, Calliope, Briseis and Chryseis all present different narratives that are predetermined by loss, displacement, and survival. Their stories do not serve a central interpretive authority; On the contrary, the voices preserve their own autonomy of emotions and epistemic legitimacy.

This multiplicity is very much in line with the conception of polyphony as portrayed by Mikhail Bakhtin where different consciousness exist in relation to each other but do not subsume into one ideological viewpoint. Voices are dialogic in a polyphonic text, where meaning is created at the point of juxtaposition, and not hierarchy. This design of the narrative reflects the model because Haynes gives the testimony of every woman to be independent and to be part of a larger story of the war. The outcome is a narrative field where authority is distributed, not centralized and where the reader has to negotiate between conflicting views as opposed to being guided by a narrative voice.

Feminist narratology also throws more light on the political connotations of this structure. According to the arguments of such scholars as Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol, narrative voice cannot be discussed outside of the sphere of power and representation. The novel alters the role of storytelling as a place of power renegotiation by giving the characters mostly marginalized in the epic discourse a voice of their own, their narrative agency. The polyphonic approach thus serves as a formally effective approach but also as a feminist intervention, which reinstates the role of women as historical subjects, as opposed to as historical objects.

1.2 Fragmentation and the Disruption of Epic Linearity

Intimately related to polyphonic design of the novel is its fragmented narrative structure. Classical epics are characterized by a generally linear set of events, which lead to heroic closure, as well as strengthening the feeling of historical coherent and inevitability. Conversely, *A Thousand Ships* is episodic in nature and crosses both temporal and space lines and travels between the memories of the pre-war times, the wartime experiences as well as the aftermaths of the war. This non-linear structure is an opposition to the teleological desire of epic narrative, in lieu of a mosaic of partial and even contradictory attitudes.

Fragmentation plays a very important ideological role. The narrative breaks chronological flow to preempt the experience of war not as a heroic myth but as an experience. Any chance of an integrated narrative flow is interrupted by moments of lament, captivity and displacement, as the disjunctive quality of historical trauma is highlighted. The reader does not read about the Trojan War as a logical chain of achievements and losses but rather as a chain of personal experiences influenced by loss and survival.

Theoretically, this structural fragmentation is a problem of what Roland Barthes would term the mythic propensity to naturalize history into a story. The presentation of history as fragmented and contingent in the novel unravels the manmade quality of the epic narrative and challenges its assertiveness in totality. The disjointed shape thereby becomes an epistemological mode of critique, which implies that no single story is capable of describing the intricacy of the collective sufferings.

1.3 Absence of a Singular Authoritative Narrator

The other feature of the narrative structure of the novel is the lack of an omniscient or authoritative narrator. Classical epics tend to depend on the voice of the guide—perhaps invoking the wisdom of the gods—to arrange things and give them interpretation coherence. A narrative authority is, however, wanting in Haynes. The Muse of epic poetry, even Calliope, fails to serve an equalizing purpose, but is rather a pair of glasses to herself on the weaknesses of epic narrative and the insufficiency of heroic tales to capture the experiences of women..

This active denial of narrative centrality creates a textual space where power is distributed, uncertain and opposed. All the narrators present a partial and not conclusive viewpoint thus compelling the reader to construct meaning through the play of voices. The fact that there is no one interpretative framework is in line with the scattered existence of power in the narrative in which no one has the power to determine the meaning of the war.

This distribution of narrative power is also echoed in Michel Foucault view of power as being relational, diffuse and non centralized. The novel lacks any explicit theorization of power, however, the logic of authority, exercised in the work of story telling, has the following form: the authority is constructed as a result of interaction, not command. In this regard, the text weakens hierarchical frame of the epic narration, and in its place, it introduces a dialogic paradigm, which promotes the plurality over the unity.

1.4 Polyphony as Structural Resistance

Combined, multiple voices, disjointed structure, and lack of central narrator do unveil polyphony as a kind of structural resistance in the novel. The text is not only a version of alternative perspectives based on a traditional narrative structure, but it alters the conditions of storytelling. The reader is invited to play with history as a highly disputed arena in which meaning is neither imposed domineering authority but rather achieved in a form of dialogue.

This formal resistance is already in place before and facilitates the thematic criticism of patriarchal mythmaking of the novel. The text breaks the narrative structures that perpetuate heroic ideology and opens up the space to other ways of historical representations. Polyphony is, therefore, a formal and political tactic, and it illustrates how narrative form can question the hegemonic cultural narratives both at the form and the content of the narrative.

Chapter 2 Feminist Narrative Resistance and Counter-Epic Storytelling

2.1 Introduction: From Polyphony to Resistance

Chapter 2 will prove why such a form is significant politically and epistemologically. The narrative strategy of Natalie Haynes is not just a diversification of the perspective; it reinvents the process of telling the story as a feminist protest. The foregrounding of women voices, which were marginalized voices in classical epic, makes Haynes turn narrative into a place of power, memory and history being renegotiated.

In this chapter, the author presents the argument that the polyphony of the novel is a counter-epic, which takes the place of the heroic teleology by ethical witnessing. Rather than telling the story of conquest, glory and masculine immortality, the writing focuses on survival, grief, and memory. This chapter shows the way storytelling as such is reclaimed as an agency and a form of reconstructing historical consciousness through feminist narratology, trauma theory, and subaltern studies.

2.2 Narrative Voice as Feminist Resistance

The reclamation of voice is the core of the project by Haynes. Classical epic tradition dictates that women are talked about and not given the opportunity to talk. Their identities are either created in male desire, political quid pro quo, or morality warning fable. In *A Thousand Ships*, speech is a resistance – an unwillingness to continue being narrative objects.

Hecabe, Andromache, and Briseis are characters that express their experiences of captivity, mourning and displacement using their own linguistic codes. Their voices are not only testimonial but interpretive actions, of re-furbishing the war with the standpoints of embodied suffering. Thus, the text conforms to the feminist narratology statement that narrative authority cannot be separated with the relations of power. Women telling their own stories break the epistemic systems that once made them silent.

The idea of *écriture féminine* by Helene Cixous is especially enlightening in this case. According to Cixous, writing by women disrupts phallogocentric discourse as it favors multiplicity and embodiment as well as emotional intensity. The same principle is reflected in the narrative voices of Haynes: they are close, introspective, and frequently non-linear, anticipating the affect as a valid form of knowledge.

Equally, the interrogation underway in the subaltern speech by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak echoes with the project of the novel. Although Spivak is known to pose the problem whether the subaltern can speak in the discourse of the dominant, Haynes text envision a literary room where these voices not only speak but even the construct of the narrative. Storytelling is thereby an epistemic reclamation performance and the silence is made narrative.

2.3 Ethical Witnessing and the Politics of Memory

A Thousand Ships is placed in the post-war period unlike the traditional epics where a hero is crowned at the end of the narrative. The story emphasis is no longer on the heroism of the battlefield but on the emotional and social remains of the battlefield. The result of this repositioning is what can be called an ethics of witnessing in which narration is a moral implication of suffering.

The Trojan women are not mere victims, they are witnesses with their memories whose histories heroic accounts wipe out. Their accounts highlight the human casualties of war, including family loss, displacement, enslavement, and thus, redefine the concept of war as a disaster rather than a fig of glory

The studies of trauma and memory give a viable way of analyzing this mode of narration. Paul Ricoeurs work about memory and history implies that the narration acts as the middle between individual memory and the rest of the community. Memory is a preservation and resistance in the novel by Haynes: through recollections of violence, the narrators reject the cultural amnesia that frequently attends heroic myth-making.

Additionally, the episodic nature of the novel is reminiscent of the brokenness of traumatic memory. The text does not give a unified historical account, but provides incomplete, personal memories. This disintegration confirms the ethical necessity to consider the plurality of experiences instead of introducing a unitarist truth in history.

By these approaches, Haynes makes narrative a place of moral responsibility, in which the remembering is a kind of justice..

2.4 Collective Female Memory vs Heroic History

The radical intervention that is one of the most inventive in the novel is the construction of collective female memory. Rather than focusing on individual heroism, the text focuses on collective experiences of death and life. This group vision puts into question the ideological underpinnings of epic tradition based on the individual heroic character as a mode of organizing historical significance.

Whenever male heroes are introduced in the story, they tend to be perceived by women. Not his martial prowess but the ruination that he leaves behind is what is remembered about Achilles; Odysseus becomes a figure of absence and consequence and not cunning success. Here, the idea of heroism becomes unintelligible, as it loses the source of its narrative, namely, unquestioned admiration.

The concept of a myth as an ideological construction developed by Roland Barthes is useful in this case. Heroic stories are cultural myths that naturalize power structure. Haynes reveals the artificiality of these myths by repelling the Trojan War in the margins. The stories of the women make one see the discrepancy between heroic ideology and the real life, where heroism is conditional on selective narration.

The existence of this collective memory also forms the other historiography. Rather than progressive march towards triumph, history is built as a circuit of emotions and interpersonal experiences. What is created is a pluralized historical consciousness, that which cannot be closed, which cannot be reinterpreted.

2.5 A Thousand Ships as a Counter-Epic

These narrative strategies, combined, make *A Thousand Ships* a counter-epic text, which, on the one hand, works in tandem with the epic conventions, and, on the other, subverts them. Although it is based on the mythological structure of the Trojan War, it does not adhere to the characteristics of the genre, namely centralized heroism, line of progression, and an uplifting mood.

To begin with, the novel does not follow epic closure. Classical epics usually result in the recovery of order or heroic exaltation. Instead, Haynes leaves with the sense of incomplete sorrow and futures and highlights the persistence of trauma over the triumph.

Second, the text substitutes triumph by mourning. It results in emotional resonance and the switching of the interest in the reader to pity rather than admiration. This transformation is in line with the feminist ethics, where the emphasis is put on relationality and care rather than domination.

Lastly, the novel reinvents the power of narration. It breaks the hierarchical model of the epic storytelling since it spreads the voice among different narrators. The authority is not monadic, and this is more democratic in terms of historical representation.

These interventions contribute to *A Thousand Ships* making not only an argument with the epic tradition, but reinventing what storytelling can accomplish: it is a means of ethic remembering, political dissection, and fantastical re-creation of the world.

Conclusion

This paper has held that *A Thousand Ships* is a reinterpretation of the epic not only by inverting the point of view but also by radically altering the narrative structure. Through foregrounding polyphony as a formal principle and a political maneuver, the novel destroys the monologic power on which the classical epic tradition has been built throughout history. Instead of offering a single heroic story, it creates a textual space where several voices of women co-exist, engage and challenge the definitions of war, history and memory. In this formal restructuring, the novel shows that recovery of the unacknowledged views not only needs new stories but also new narrative formations that can support plurality.

Chapter 1 has already determined that the polyphonic structure of the novel upsets the hierarchy of the epic by spreading the narrative authority among a collection of independent voices. The lack of unified guiding consciousness and the episodic narrative disrupted the teleological reasoning of heroic narrative showing the historicity as contingent, subjective, contentious. Polyphony in this regard serves as a structural challenge of the very form of the epic, the ideological suppositions found in the unity and integrity of narrative.

It is based on this that Chapter 2 continued by looking at how this narrative multiplicity is a form of feminist resistance. The novel makes narration a moral form of witnessing by allowing women to tell their own stories of loss, confinement and survival. In this context, memory as a major narrative power is seen to retain pasts that originate heroic mythmaking efforts to obliterate. The focus on female witnessing as a cluster of women shifts the Trojan War into being a tale of conquest and into a topography of human aftermath, and thus deconstructs the cultural reasoning that puts heroism and domination synonymous.

All these analyses prove that the formal innovations of the novel and feminist politics cannot be separated. Polyphony is not simply a question of aesthetics but also an epistemological intervention that contributes to the redefining of the way of representing history. The text encourages the readers to interrelate with the past as a web of opinions instead of the fixed narrative by substituting a single power with dialogic multiplicity.

This change has a wider ramification to the comprehension of the modern feminist mythography that is more often interested in questioning the narrative structures that construct cultural memory.

Further, the fact that the novel is presented as a counter-epic highlights how the genre itself is changing in terms of possibilities. Although it is connected to the mythological context of the Trojan War, it does not believe in the triumphalist ethos with which the epic narratives are usually told. As an alternative, it has provided a narrative ethics that is based on empathy, remembrance, and relationality. It is the endurance, care, and the power to witness that redefines heroism with not being a martial success but a martial endurance. This redefinition is dangerous to the readers as it makes them rethink about the values which construct collective memory and development of the literary canon.

This research is important because it emphasizes the importance of narrative form as a location of ideological critique. There are three dimensions on which the analysis reveals that literary texts are not mere reflections of cultural power relations but are also involved in their re-creation: voice, structure, and authority. The novel is one of the examples of the power of formal experimentation to create new forms of historical perception, showing the ways in which the work of narration can be turned against the hegemonic accounts of the past and envision other possible forms of knowledge.

This article has in foregrounding the interaction between narratology and the feminist theory attempted to illustrate the long-term significance of the novel in its ability to rethink the very concept of narrative authority. It not only disrupts the traditional markings of the history of death, but also supports the corrective energy of the literary form as an agent of cultural critique and regeneration, as it enables the marginalized voices to influence the carvings of history.

Finally, the change of epic tradition, as *A Thousand Ships* explains, is not only fulfilled by radically retelling well-known myths in newly perceived ways but also by dramatically reconsidering the very structures of narration. The multiphonic form, focus on the memory, and adherence to moral witnessing altogether restructure the interaction of narrative, power, and history. That way, the novel is a very interesting experiment in how modern literature can approach canonic forms at the same time challenging their Ideological underpinnings.

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