Villainizing Women in Mythology

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Abstract

Throughout mythology and history, women who stood up for themselves are villainised. People expect women to either be a victim or subjugated but whenever they break societal stereotypes, they are considered evil. This paper will talk about the two famous mythological characters who have been considered monsters when they actually were the victims of their stories. This paper will broadly explore the tales of Gorgon Medusa and Lilith from Jewish folklore, that were unheard of until recently only to cast these women as monsters. Medusa has been considered in Greek mythology as a monster with a snake-haired head. Only in Ovid's Metamorphoses the story was presented through her perspective which made people sympathize with her and got to know the real story behind the curse. In particular, the paper has used Medusa's account specifically from Ovid's Metamorphoses to argue that she was indeed a victim in her story and suffered wrong at the hands of others. In this regard, Lilith is only mentioned once in the Catholic Bible as a "Night Owl" but Jewish folklore has given accounts on her origin and life. My paper has particularly taken accounts from the genesis of "The Alphabet of Ben Sirah" and it attempts to write the Badoni 2 truth from her lens. This paper will justify how the women who boldly defy the rules are associated with evilness and vilified by the society. They are outcast, unwelcomed and considered evils only to justify the notions of patriarchal society.

Keywords: mythology, societal stereotypes, vilification, monsters, greek mythology, gorgon medusa, jewish folklore, lilith, women's perspective, patriarchal society, feminists, badoni 3.

Introduction

The characters Medusa and Lilith are important in the real world as it shows how the women were subjugated under the notions of patriarchal society. They are both bold and confident and an inspiration to modern women. They perpetuate the idea of standing up for ourselves as women as men pay no heed to their problems. I have written this paper to spread the idea that women's voices are never heard, instead they are villainised for speaking up for themselves. The two characters were doomed to be monsters and people even feared coming near them. They were stuck in a world where people hated them without knowing their stories. They were criticized and even called with names that were so disrespectful for a woman. From this study, it can be concluded that women were harassed by men even in mythology and got punished for it. Their lives were ruined and they were considered monsters by the patriarchy dominated society only to prove that women who break the patriarchal notions are evil.

Materials and Methods

I read a lot of research papers from resources like JSTOR and ResearchGate and jotted the important points. I researched the history of Medusa and Lilith through Wikipedia and the various books available. The main text I referred to was the Ovid's "*Metamorphoses*" and "*The Alphabet of Ben Sira*" a genesis where the story was given through the character's lenses. Ovid's "*Metamorphoses*" gives the story through Medusa's lenses and "*The Alphabet of Ben Sira*", a mythological text tells the origins of Lilith and her tales. I read different arguments on the characters. The mythological texts were very helpful and they give a brief history of the Badoni 4 characters. I searched a lot of sources on the internet where there were lots of stories regarding the character. The characters

are very controversial as they were considered as an evil figure. I narrowed down my research and excluded the later part of their story where they were monsters. They were brutally criticized throughout history so the sources I chose were very selective. There were more sources on their monster sides rather than the victim one. So, I added the relevant part to my study.

Findings and Results

I found through my findings on the topic that the characters were brutally mocked by the men but they were equally cherished by the Feminists. Feminists see Lilith and Medusa as their icon for struggles as they were wrong at the hands of others. Many platforms have taken their name and image to glorify their defiance. Especially Lilith is cherished for standing up for herself and seen as the first independent women in history. I found from my paper that women are disregarded and disrespected in a male-dominated society. Like the characters of Medusa and Lilith were justified as monsters so that people can glorify the vigor of men. Women are deliberately villainous or made to believe it so that people can glorify the man of the society. Women are expected to be obedient and there are certain figures in holy books to justify it like the character of Eve. Medusa was cursed by the the goddess she worshipped and Lilith was turned as a monster by the injustice she faced. Both the characters were victims of their tragic story. However, history has shown them as an evil figure to hide the truth.

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Villainizing Women in Mythology

Throughout history and across cultures, mythology has served as a rich history of storytelling, often reflecting societal norms, fears, and desires. Within these narratives, women have frequently been cast in roles that perpetuate stereotypes, perpetuate fears, and reinforce patriarchal structures. The portrayal of women as villains in mythology is a compelling aspect as it involves exploration, shedding light on the intersection of gender, power, and perception. As we know women who speak up for themselves and choose their own destiny are always considered villains due to the fact that they break away from the normal societal constraints of the patriarchal society. The mythological world shows how women were seen and

treated. They were either treated as the object of men's desire or considered as a monstress for causing chaos and war. Nothing truly speaks about the fact that they turned those women as monsters. My thesis will particularly shed light on the two prominent figures emblematic of this vilification i.e. Medusa from Greek mythology and Lilith from Jewish folklore. By delving into their stories and examining the broader patterns of female villainization in mythology, we gain insight into the ways in which societal attitudes towards women have been shaped and perpetuated through these miserable tales.

There are many tales of Greek mythology where medusa is mentioned. Medusa is best known for having hair made of snakes and for her ability to turn anyone she looked at to stone, to petrify. Multiple works by ancient sources, such as Homer, the eighth-century B.C. poet Hesiod, and the fifth-century B.C. lyric poet Pindar, provide a wide-ranging and diverse picture of the Badoni 6 fabled creature. According to Hesiod's Theogony, she was one of three Gorgon sisters born to Keto and Phorkys, primordial sea gods; Medusa was mortal, while the others, Stheno and Euryale, were immortal. The best known myth describes her fateful encounter with the Greek hero Perseus. The first century B.C. is when the snake-haired Medusa first became popular. The mortal Medusa is portrayed by the Roman writer Ovid as a lovely young woman who is lured by Poseidon at an Athena shrine. The goddess became enraged at such a disrespectful event and turned Medusa's hair into snakes as a form of punishment. Although these tales seem fantastical to us now, they were quasi-historical to the ancient Greeks. Stories from Homer and Hesiod, together with myths, were seen as remnants of a vanished heroic era in which men and women engaged with gods, heroes, and the paranormal. Stories from this era were retold in every media; Greek records show a world full of monsters and heroes in prose, poetry, and artwork. The stories of medusa are clearly depicted in the Greek tales but Lilith's identity is only perceived as a demoness. The figure of Lilith, originating from Sumerian mythology as a succubus, has undergone various interpretations and representations throughout history, particularly in Jewish folklore and midrash. It's true that the earliest Jewish stories of Lilith can be found in the Alphabet of Ben Sirah, where she is

depicted as Adam's first wife before Eve. However, prior to the introduction of this text, Lilith was predominantly viewed as a demoness rather than as a counterpart to Eve. The difference in perception surrounding Lilith has led to diverse representations of her character in literature and art. Some theological scholars acknowledge her as the "first Eve," emphasizing her equality with Adam and her defiance against obedience. On the other hand, there are those who continue to perceive Lilith solely as a demoness, emphasizing her rebellious and malevolent nature.

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In Greek mythology, Medusa, also called Gorgo or the Gorgon, was one of the three Gorgons. Medusa is generally described as a woman with living snakes in place of hair; her appearance was so hideous that anyone who looked upon her was turned to stone. Medusa was one of the Gorgon sisters, she was originally a golden-haired, fair maiden, beautiful and kind-natured. Medusa devoted herself to a life of celibacy in the name of her goddess, Athena. Medusa was a priestess to the goddess Athena, the virgin goddess of wisdom and battle. One requirement to be a priestess for Athena is that the young women should be a virgin and give their life to the goddess. One day, Poseidon (or Neptune), the God of the Sea and rival to Athena, saw Medusa and was mesmerized. But Medusa being a loyal priestess to the Goddess rejected him. So he decided to humiliate Athena by raping the priestess on the steps of Athena's temple. Poseidon vanished and left Medusa vulnerable and weak. When Medusa reached out to Athena for help she cursed her for breaking her vows and turned her beautiful hair into snakes with the power to turn people into stone just by her gaze. Medusa with time became a monstress as people feared her due to her powers and men actually used to compete to get her head to prove their vigor as a warrior. She was beheaded by Perseus who slayed her throat and gifted it to Athena to use as a shield. Even after leading a tragic life she couldn't die a peaceful death. It was said that she was stuck between the earth and underworld which is why she could neither go to the underworld nor lead a peaceful life on earth. Her story is a cautionary tale, reinforcing the notion of female beauty as both powerful and dangerous, capable of urging jealousy and inviting punishment.

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Lilith's name is only mentioned once in the christian bible only as a demoness, she is quite popular in jewish tradition. Lilith is Adam's first wife, they were both made from the dust of earth and lived in the garden of eden. Although Lilith fled the garden, leaving him when he was being dominant and was trying to overpower her. After she left him, Adam complained to the god and then god sent 3 angels to retrieve her. Lilith was in a cave bearing children and refused to go back as she believed that they are made from the same dust so how come Adam has more autonomy in their marriage. The angel threatened her that they will kill 100 of her children everyday till she returns and even did so. Lilith tried to return but saw that Adam found another mate or we could say that God made another mate for him who will be more obedient. Out of revenge she stole Adam's seed and bore demons. She turned to a demoness herself by disobeying with god and is vengeful as she kills children and takes advantage of men at night. She is also considered as the first independent woman who retaliated against the oppressive society. In the Renaissance, Michelangelo portrayed Lilith as a half-woman, half-serpent, coiled around the Tree of Knowledge. Later, her beauty would captivate the English poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. "Her enchanted hair," he wrote, "was the first gold.". Irish novelist James Joyce cast her as the "patron of abortions. Modern feminists celebrate her bold struggle for independence from Adam. Her name appears as the title of a Jewish women's magazine and a national literacy program. An annual music festival that donates its profits to women's shelters and breast cancer research institutes is called the Lilith Fair. On the contrary Eve was made from Adam's rib and was supposed to be his assistant and companion. She represents the subjugation and passive stereotype that has historically been placed upon women, as seen by her submission to Adam and God. The subordination of women and the upholding of patriarchal power structures are Badoni 9 rationalized by Eve's obedience to Adam's commands and her part in the fall from grace. People have glorified the obedient nature of women and the accounts of religious

text and histories have only supported these patriarchal notions.

It's essential to recall that despite being victims themselves, Medusa and Lilith were consistently perceived as monstrous figures. Delving deeper into their narratives reveals that both were cursed for speaking out against injustice and endured mistreatment at the hands of men. Medusa, a devotee of Athena, faced the wrath of the goddess herself, who, instead of aiding her, chose to silence her and transform her into a monster out of jealousy for her beauty. Some myths suggest Athena's action was to shield Medusa from men, yet living in fear and isolation hardly constitute desirable traits. Men sought to prove their valor by hunting for Medusa's head, while she received no aid from Athena and ultimately met a tragic fate, being sexually assaulted and then beheaded by a man who presented it to Athena. Despite her unjust circumstances, mythology has predominantly depicted Medusa solely as a terrifying creature with a head of snakes. Similarly Lilith faced punishment for defying Adam's wishes, advocating for gender equality as she believed both men and women originated from the same soil. However, her voice was swiftly silenced, leading to her transformation into a demoness as a consequence of the injustices she endured. Regrettably, history has predominantly remembered her as a demoness who hunts children at night and lure men but none paid attention to the truth of her story. She is known to be the first independent woman who bravely asserted her own voice, challenging patriarchal norms. Yet, throughout history, solidly established patriarchal ideologies have consistently sought to suppress women's voices. Any woman who dared to speak out was often Badoni 10 considered as an outcast or a villain, perpetuating the cycle of silencing and marginalization. Both Medusa and Lilith were punished harshly for actions or circumstances beyond their control. Medusa's punishment stemmed from being the victim of sexual assault, while Lilith's defiance was a result of her refusal to submit to an unequal partnership. Rather than addressing the injustices committed against them, their stories were twisted to portray them as monstrous figures, reinforcing patriarchal narratives that vilify independent and assertive women.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Medusa and Lilith as monsters serves to perpetuate societal fears and prejudices against women who challenge traditional gender roles. Medusa's transformation into a Gorgon and Lilith's demonization as a succubus reflect anxieties about female sexuality and autonomy. By casting them as monsters, society can rationalize their mistreatment and suppress female agency, reinforcing existing power structures that prioritize male dominance.

Conclusion

The narratives of Gorgon Medusa and Lilith epitomize the systemic vilification of women who challenge societal norms. While initially portrayed as monstrous figures, closer examination reveals them as victims of patriarchal constructs, their stories manipulated to justify gendered oppression. By deconstructing these myths, we confront ingrained stereotypes and advocate for gender equity, recognizing the inherent complexity and resilience of women. Through reclaiming these narratives, we pave the path for a more inclusive society, where women are empowered to defy conventions without fear of retribution. Thus, their stories serve as powerful catalysts for societal introspection, urging us to champion diversity, autonomy, and equality for all.

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In conclusion, Medusa and Lilith were unjustly accused of being monsters when they were, in fact, victims of their stories. Their vilification serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of perpetuating stereotypes and demonizing those who dare to challenge societal norms. By reexamining their stories, we can uncover the underlying injustices and advocate for a more equitable and inclusive understanding of gender roles in mythology and society.

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