



Mulbriety of the Women in Kelly Barnhill's “Girl Who Drank The Moon” Reinterpreting Feminist Agency Through Myth, Magic and Power

Ms. Reshma Begam N, Student MA English and Dr. V. Jaisre, Professor and Research Supervisor
Department of English
Vels Institute Of Science Technology and Advanced Studies
Pallavaram
Chennai

Abstract

Kelly Barnhill's, “The Girl Who Drank the Moon” (2016) offers a fresh perspective on what magical realism is, centering its world around four women: Xan, the witch who is oxymoronically kind-hearted, Adara, the confined mother, Luna, ‘enmagicked’ with the power of moon and Ethyne, the embodiment of courage. Barnhill's mastery in handling the muliebriety of these characters interweave them throughout the entire work. This article navigates the paradigm of muliebriety utilising the archetypes pertaining to these four women, while investigating how the feminine character is forged while navigating through the tresses of fear, loss, myth, memory and experience. Building on the feminist theories given by the likes of Simone de Beauvoir, Sandra Gilbert, Hélène Cixous, Susan Gubar, this study posits that every female character present in the novel has a unique appeal of gendered identity and together they form a complex, zealous, resilient and parental arch of womanhood. The novel, on its entirety focuses on the adaptability and conviction that's unique to muliebriety, as it tries to shatter that narrative of equating muliebriety to frailty.

Keywords: *muliebriety, Barnhill, myth, trauma, womanhood, feminist literary criticism, women's identity, The Girl Who Drank the Moon, Xan, Luna, Adara, Protectorate, faith, love*

Introduction

Since time immemorial, women have been portrayed within the confines of limiting boxes. If they are witches, they ought to be evil, had they been mothers, they are either shown to be sacrificial or distraught. Barnhill aims to rewrite these stereotypes, breaking women out of these boxes. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the work “The Madwoman in The Attic” (1979), challenged the notion of portraying women as either monsters and angels with no substantial middle ground. Kelly Barnhill’s “The Girl Who Drank The Moon” (2016), a New York Times acknowledged best seller and the 2017 Newbery Medal winner, sought to wrench out the age old archetypes, designing its woman in a novel manner.

Barnhill takes the readers on a subtle roller-coaster. She places them in a strict protectorate village and an enchanted forest but writes the witch Xan, the mother Adara and the children Luna in a tone that significantly deviates from the conventional definitions of a woman. These women, along with the bold Ethyne, bring out a nuanced layer of femininity, which is quite unexplored. Muliebrity, derived from the Latin word Mulbrites encompasses femininity as a whole. This makes Barnhill's work a masterpiece in mulbriety. She attributes the witch with kindness, the mother with agency and enmagicks the child. She empowers Ethyne, instead of breaking her will post her parents’ death. She frames a powerful network of femininity, rewriting sour stereotypes.

Xan as the representative of femininity rewritten

Barnhill destigmatises the witch title given to Xan right in the beginning with a warm approach and straightforwardness: “Yes. There is a witch in the woods. There has always been a witch” (1). For over five hundred years, Xan, living in the forest has established a symbiotic relationship with the Protectorate. When they leave their infants at the edge of the woods on the ‘Day Of Sacrifice’, Xan rescues the little ones, feeds them starlight, and places them with loving families in the free cities.

Xan, with her infinite power could have controlled the village. Her defiance in not doing so breaks her character away from the traditional malevolence attributed to witches. Her character justifies what Helene Cixous(1976) in her foundational essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” calls *écriture féminine*: a uniquely feminine way of writing that is unconventional, breaking rigid stereotypes. Karen J Warren's (2000) Ecofeminist Framework heavily supports Xan's decision to co- exist with nature rather than dominate it with wild powers.

Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" (1949) argues that the patriarchy has historically constructed women as "The Other". She asserts that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). Xan is invisible to the Protectorate and is in a way alienated from the society. Ironically, it is this isolation that helps her maintain her agency, while navigating several of her identities without any compromise.

Adara As The Revamped Mother Figure

While Xan navigates the banishing in the form of isolated freedom, Adara navigates it in literal confinement. Her conviction and rooted beliefs lead her to be labelled as a "lunacy" of the society by the Protectorate leader, Ghrenland. Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman In The Attic* (1979) sings sharply here about the way women are punished and alienated for deviating from the collective opinion. Adara's penchant repetition of "She is here" earns her imprisonment which correlates with Patricia Hill's (2000) views that explicitly state the women are penalised more often than not for deviating from the set standard. Adara surviving this admonition is a curt call that Barnhill places to the society, questioning the other Ness imposed on women who refuse to conform.

The Subdued Abilities and The Found Family Of Luna

When the baby was offered to the witch Xan on the Day of sacrifice, the kind-hearted Xan took the baby girl with her, and she accidentally fed her moonlight. "Luna, she said. Your name will be Luna. And I will be your grandmother. And we will be a family" (27)

From this incident, she became "Enmagicked", so Xan decided to raise Luna and Xan, Luna, Glerk (swamp monster) and Fyrian (an enormous dragon), the four of them became a family while the two creatures became the guardians of Luna. In this novel, Luna, unaware of her abilities, will end up swallowing the moon whenever she's happy and the light ebbed and flowed through her. To protect her from her innocence, Xan bolted Luna's magic until she turned the age of thirteen because her powers were too big of a responsibility to be played with. It inherently became an unavoidable act of censorship.

Carol Iligan, in the book "In a Different Voice" (1982) describes the overwhelming emotions that a girl is faced with upon reaching adolescence. It more often than not, leads to young girls shrinking their own world owing to personal feelings or conflict and pressure. Luna was a witchcraft embodiment, and her own magical power was sealed with love. As an embodiment of powerful witchcraft, Luna, more than anyone else, felt fragmented upon reaching her adolescence as the potential of who she truly is, interfered with her desire to retain the familiarity provided by her found family. According to the above statement, we can take the view

Of Mother born: Motherhood as experience and institution by Adrienne Rich(1976). The author speaks about the invisible train of thought among women, like daughter, mother and grandmother and for Luna and Adara, there is an impalpable thread between them. Barnhill shows the connection between the mother and daughter as an unnamed love, even though the mother is labelled mad, and the daughter was in the woods.

Humanity And Gospel Truth Framing The Character Of Ethyne

As a daughter of the Protectorate, wife of a former council member, Antain, Ethyne lives within the boundaries of the community, representing women existing in the realm of familiarity. In spite of not having strayed from the book's version of the mundane, she carries her own scar: her brother was given away on The Day Of Sacrifice. That trauma made her carry on in quiet rebellion against the ritual.

As she gives birth to her own child, that rebellion turns into conviction. Fearing that she'd also lose her child to the sacrifice, she makes plans along with her husband to negotiate with Xan, not in an authoritative manner but from a place of desperation. Simon De Beauvoir (1949) states that women had always been seen as an extension of the men in their lives, sans any agency of their own. Yet Ethyne is portrayed to be courageous in ways that exceed the framework of her being a wife. She raises the issue and articulates it in such an eloquent manner that it convinces Antain to speak on her behalf at the council. Her spirit and actions are not dependent on her husband, rather they instigate his righteous behaviour.

Barnhill's Kaleidoscope Of Mulbriety

Barnhill, in "The Girl Who Drank The Moon", made it her mission to free women from the one-dimensional confines. She liberated them, writing them true to their truths and didn't add artificial layers of conventional embellishments. The label witch didn't stop from being the nurturing maternal figure. Adara's confinement wasn't a cry for help but a quiet penance, forging the emotional bond that she shared with her daughter. Luna wasn't portrayed to be a helpless little girl, who needed constant shielding. She had normalcy in her own terms and when the time came, she was ready enough to save the entire Protectorate from a volcano, without any conflict whatsoever. Ethyne becomes the touchstone for women all over, trying to walk away the shadow of their given identities and reclaim their agency with conviction. Her selling point of inspiration was that she managed to work through the system, rather than away from it.

Bell hooks, in *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), argues that a woman's individuality becomes transformative when she is surrounded by warriors and fellow queens, struggling through the same battles as she is. This ideology of Bell Hooks is shown to dismantle the outdated visions of

the Protectorate. Four women, with different frameworks of minds, different reasons for joining the battle, unite under a common cause and manage to shine towards victory, using their mulbriety as weapons rather than crutches.

Conclusion

Reading *The Girl Who Drank The Moon* through the lens of mulbriety makes us understand that womanhood, in its true essence, is not a weakness but a force of nature, resilient in the face of adversity . The Protectorate falls, not in response to a heroic upheaval but to the consistent efforts of women refusing to get acclimatised to toxic familiarity. The witch never confined within the label given to her, the mother never cowered under assumed frailty, the child, with infinite potential, chose right over and over again while the wife, partnered with her husband rather than be dictated by his actions.

Together, these four figures dismantle the architectures of fear that the Protectorate's leaders constructed. Further scholarship might productively explore the intersections of race and class within the novel, the underexplored dimensions of male characters such as Antain, Glerk, and Fyrian, and the novel's positioning within the broader tradition of feminist fantasy literature. What Barnhill's work demonstrates unambiguously is that, the feminine experience even, when rooted in grief, confinement, and unknowing belongs within the canon of feminist literature and that muliebriety, in all its forms, is a construction of positive transformation, never a weakness.

Works Cited

- Barnhill, Kelly. *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. Piccadilly Press, 2016.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP, 1979.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard UP, 1982.
- hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W. W. Norton, 1976.
- Warren, Karen J. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.