

In the Beginning Is the Unnaming: A Feminist Perspective

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In “She Unnames Them,” Ursula K. Le Guin offers a fresh perspective on the Book of Genesis. Through the short story, Le Guin challenges the patriarchal foundation laid in the well-known biblical story of the Creation and the Fall of Adam and Eve. The unnamings of animals confronts the subordinate image of women and the inequality of power between the two sexes that prevail in classics like the *Odyssey* and the Qur’an. It is obvious that the two ancient works take on a stock image of women as being inferior to men. Le Guin’s story challenges such a perception.

In many classics, women are depicted as the embodiment of temptation. In the Book of Genesis, Eve is tempted by the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit, which she in turn gives to Adam.¹ When God sits in judgment, Eve bears the blame for Adam’s wrongdoing and for the fall of humanity ever since. Another religious text, the Qur’an, also marks the female as the source of temptation. Muslim women are to wear a *hijab* so as not to show their figure and to cover their arms and even face, though the extent varies from

1 Gen. 3:4–6.

country to country, depending on how they interpret texts like the following in the Qur'an:

O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them (when they go out or are among men). That is better in order that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not annoyed. . . ²

The word *hijab* takes the root of *hajaba*, meaning to hide or conceal. The reason for women to observe the *hijab* is to avoid them from arousing men's sexual desires.

The image of woman as a seductress is more explicit in *The Odyssey*. The nymph Calypso tries to entice Odysseus away from his homecoming with her beauty and the offer of immortality. The sorceress Circe resorts to sharing her bed with Odysseus when her magic fails. In the epic, sex is not a successful bewitchment for Odysseus, but the perception of woman as seductress leads to another stereotypical portrayal of the feminine personality. In *The Odyssey*, the male characters tend to take women as fickle-minded, and Agamemnon's death haunts the whole of *The Odyssey* and subsequently sets Odysseus into testing the fidelity of his wife Penelope. Despite her perseverance in honoring the marriage bed, Penelope's dream about her pleasure in watching the geese can be interpreted as her vanity being gratified by courtship. While this may be understood in the modern light as a fair portrayal of feminine sexuality, female characters in *The Odyssey* also represent the stereotype known in the

2 33:59.

Chinese proverb as “A woman’s beauty is a man’s ruin.” Penelope’s delay in giving an answer to the suitors indirectly causes the suitors to devour Odysseus’ stock. Clytemnestra’s affair ends in her husband Agamemnon being murdered; Helen’s abduction by Paris leads to the outbreak of the Trojan War.

Apart from being depicted in a negative light, women are assigned inferior roles in the classics. According to the second story of Creation in Genesis,³ woman is inferior to man right at the beginning. Adam was made first, out of dust of the ground⁴ whereas Eve was made from Adam’s rib⁵ when no suitable help to Adam was found among animals. The origin of humankind and the eating of the forbidden fruit have been taken as the basis for women’s submission to men in subsequent patriarchal societies. Cullen Murphy, author of *The World According to Eve*, thinks that “expulsion from the Garden of Eden has been used to explain and justify the subordination of woman to man and to fix responsibility for humanity’s fallen state firmly on the shoulders of woman.”⁶ Despite its intention to protect females by laying down rules concerning divorce and widow,⁷ the Qur’an holds the basic principle that men have a higher status and that women can enjoy similar but not equal rights: “Women shall with justice have the rights similar to

3 2:4–3:24.

4 2:7.

5 2:21.

6 Murphy, Cullen. *The World According to Eve: Women and the Bible in Ancient Times and Our Own*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998. 20 April 2009. <<http://www.andrewgillihan.com/unnames.htm>>.

7 According to the teaching of the Qur’an, husbands can’t take things given to wives upon divorce and have to provide divorced wives with fairness. The husbands may change their minds and not to divorce within four months but they are not to retain the wives to harm them. Public courtship of widows is not forbidden, and widows are to be given a year of maintenance.

those exercised against them, although men have a status above women.”⁸ Polygamy is a “divinely ordained right” of every man and one can have sex with his wife whenever he pleases: “Women are your fields: go, then, into your fields whence you please.”⁹

Women’s role as a helper or subsidiary as depicted in religious texts is manifested as domesticity in *The Odyssey*. Females are responsible for domestic chores regardless of social status. Helen as a queen also bathes Odysseus and rubs him down with olive oil to show hospitality. The gifts Alcandre gives to Helen are golden spindles and a silver basket with gold-rimmed wheels. Valuable as they are, such gifts are related to household chores. Women’s role of performing household chores is taken for granted by men. For instance, Telemachus talks to Penelope in a masterful tone when she comes out to see the suitors, and orders her to return to her bedroom and mind her weaving. This expectation of female domesticity is also found in “She Unnames Them,” where Adam’s response to Eve’s farewell—which Adam does not get at all—goes, “O.K., fine, dear. When’s dinner?” This implies his habitual inattentiveness to Eve and his expectation of complete subservience from Eve.

“She Unnames Them” is a reversed version of the story in Genesis. The female persona in the story challenges the power of dominion given to men through naming. It is mentioned in Genesis 1:26 that human beings were made and granted the power to rule over the earth and all the creatures. However, the second version of the Creation story in Genesis 2 shows that Eve is created after no suitable helper for Adam is found among the animals.

8 2:228.

9 2:223.

The inferior status of woman is revealed not only in the sequence and way in which various creatures were made, but also in the use of language. Language has the function of categorizing and labeling. Adam and Eve both can use language as communication, but it is Adam who has the privilege to name the other creatures.¹⁰ The power of naming is a sign of a higher status, and it almost commands compliance. Since dominance is linked with naming, Le Guin gives the female persona a larger say—a large part of the story is narrated through her voice.

Language as a symbol of superiority creates a hierarchy, a barrier between human beings and animals, and between animals and other animals. To Eve, names have “stood between [her] and [animals] like a clear barrier.” This barrier is formed by men’s definition and classification. By unnamming the animals, Eve relieves the burden of being labeled and stereotyped. The concept that name is a personal choice and used by others rather than reflecting one’s own nature is echoed in Shakespeare’s famous line in *Romeo and Juliet*:

What’s in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other word would smell as sweet.

By unnamming all the animals and giving back her own name to Adam, Eve breaks down the hierarchy and returns the animals and herself to a classless society. She feels closer to the animals, who suffer the same fear and discontent as she does. The differentiation between “hunter” and “the hunted,” “eater”

10 Gen. 2:19.

and “the food” due to names vanishes; this is a comparison to the abandonment of names providing equal ground for males and females.

“She Unnames Them” rejects the expected female role of domesticity, which is built on the blame laid on Eve for the fallen humanity. “She Unnames Them” does not highlight Eve’s responsibility for expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The author only reveals the setting by Eve’s line, “I hope the garden key turns up.” Adam’s negligence of Eve is on the contrary vividly described. Adam is inattentive to Eve and focuses on his work, and “without looking,” he responds with a question about dinner time. “She Unnames Them” is a feminist version of the story of Creation because it challenges the patriarchal values and expresses the female dissatisfaction of being ignored.

By the time of 1985, the year Le Guin wrote this short story, the patriarchal mindset no longer fit. The “she” in Le Guin’s story evokes resonance in me. For more than a decade, I studied in a girls’ school, and the school’s annual Fun Fair reinforced the idea that females are not inferior to males. To make the Fun Fair a success, girls were engaged in painting banners, building up the class store with bamboo sticks and delivering boxes of gifts to the store. We took pride in our ability to do manual work which is thought to be boys’ privilege. To me, feminism means demonstrating the potentials and abilities of the female sex and fighting for equal chances to perform.

Presently, the dividing line between the two genders in the work setting is blurring. Scientific evidence has showed that gender differences are not as significant as individual differences. It is time we cast off gender stereotypes presented in the classics and discover each individual’s talent and role in society, be they male or female.