

The Power of The Blade in A Thousand Ships

Angelica Bergamini

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Introduction

But this is the women's war, just as much as it is the men's, and the poet will look upon their pain – the pain of the women who have always been relegated to the edges of the story, victims of men, survivors of men, slaves of men ... They have waited long enough for their turn. (Haynes 2019: 176)

In *A Thousand Ships*, Natalie Haynes retells the stories of the Trojan War from the perspective of the women involved. The literary source includes Euripides *Trojan Women*, Omer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and Ovid's *Heroides*, to mention a few. For the writing of the book the writer was inspired by a documentary she saw at the Cannes Film Festival about restorative justice in Rwanda. Reflecting on the women who had survived the war and now had to live next door to men who had abused them and killed their families drove the writer to think about what justice is for the survivors.¹

Women whose lives are touched by wars, but their voices are never heard. Why is their story never told?

In the book Haynes gives voice to characters that hardly exist in ancient literature. Among them are queens, wives, and daughters whose lives are in the hands of a *hierarchy of domination*, order characteristic of *androcratic* social system (from Greek root *andros*, "man", and *kratos* "ruled") social system, as demonstrated by Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade*.

The Power of the Blade: The Killer is a Hero

[...] Is Oenone less of a hero than Menelaus? He loses his wife, so he stirs up an army to bring her back to him, costing countless lives and creating countless widows, orphans,

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/24/959638472/the-trojan-women-and-many-more-speak-up-in-a-thousand-ships>.

and slaves. Oenone loses her husband, and she raises their son. Which of those is the more heroic act? (Haynes 2019 :177)

Books on the Trojan War focus on men – considered the heroes – and never on women who survive (or do not survive) and who are equally heroic. In the legend, the city of Troy was besieged for ten years and eventually conquered by the Greek army led by Agamemnon, King of Mycenae. We are at the end of the Bronze Age around 1200 BCE, and the Greek civilization by this time is a society built on ranking instead of linking: a male dominator/female-dominated model, the rank order we find in male-patriarchal cultures.

As Riane Eisler illustrates in her Cultural Transformation theory, a dominator culture practices fear and force to maintain a strong understanding of power and authority within a hierarchical structure. “The Iron Age is dominated by a mythology of war where cruelty became a virtue and barbarism a way of life. War was regarded as natural and right, the royal road for a man to follow if he were to serve his gods, his king, and his country” (Haynes 2019: 177). A shift from the Minoan to Mycenae culture has produced a severe change from a “*love for life*” where women were the central subject in arts and crafts and were present in the public sphere, to an increasing concern for death and the idealization of male violence, which has led to a new hero-worship (Eisler 1987: 36).

That hero is Achilles, who represents the deadly power of the *Blade* - a power that takes rather than gives life. He is the product of a culture governed by ideas about honor and power that glorifies the technology of destruction and praises a hero that in reality is a killer. The words of Briseis - who is a prize of war and the reason for the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon – summarizes the dangerous vision of a dominator system that justifies the “heroic violence:” “Is that the only measure of greatness? Killing so many that you have lost count?” (Haynes 2019: 93).

A society that celebrates the *Blade* produces the perception of "us" and "others," which brings conflict and fosters the division between winners and losers with endless conquest, migration, and war. Because the “heroes” have killed fathers and husbands, Hecabe (wife of Priam the King of Troy) and the surviving Trojan women await on the shore to be separated and taken away since women in an androcentric society would become the possessions of the male winner, thus “metamorphosing from people into property” (Haynes 2019: 93).

Goddesses and Women in a Dominator Religion

In *A Thousand Ships*, the Olympian pantheon and the behavior of the immortal, powerful, and yet impulsive deities who rule the world of humans are a mirror of the society described in the book: “A mythological pantheon is fluid [...] Deities are really time-and-space- conditioned; they are shaped from inherited ideas, inherited traditional imageries [...]” (Campbell 2013: 107). Divinities change and get recombined in new guises as society changes.

In the novel, the Goddess is no longer supreme; her powers have been departmentalised, differentiating her into various Goddesses. Reduced to the subordinate role, she can be the consort of a more powerful male god or born from her father's head, one example of the patriarchal culture assimilating the Goddess. Hera becomes a jealous, rancorous wife; Aphrodite, the frivolous winner of a beauty contest; Athena becomes the masculinised daughter of intellect, born through the forehead of Zeus as though she were solely the product of his creative mind. It is a “dominator religion in which Zeus establishes his supremacy through acts of cruelty, raping Goddess and mortal women” (Eisler 1997 :177). and where the divinity of Aphrodite has been sacrificed to what Eric Neumann describes as the patriarchal sexualisation of the Feminine: “With the development of the patriarchate,

the Great Goddess has become the Goddess of Love, and the power of the Feminine has been reduced to the power of sexuality” (Eisler 1997: 177).

A religion in which a god reigns above man and justifies man's ruling over women, children, and nature expresses a dominator paradigm with stereotypical gender roles where the male half of humanity controls the female, reducing women to male property. It is the product of a society overwhelmingly focused on power, control, and conquest in which Helen is the property for which Menelaus of Sparta launched the war against Troy. That supreme god is the result of a civilization driven by dominator power and the ever-present fear of being attacked. Such a powerful god would unite his people in a common cause of defense and invasion while dominating and denying the female principles.

Matricide is not a Crime

The Indo-European warrior people, whose mythology marked one's identity through the patrilineal line, created a clash with what was previously common, which related primarily to the mother. In the Greek tradition, this collision climaxes in the Greek drama *Oresteia*, a trilogy written by Aeschylus in the 5th century BCE. In *A Thousand Ships*, we read about the beginning of the cycle of deaths told in the *Oresteia* in the chapters dedicated to Iphigenia (daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon) and Clytemnestra (wife of Agamemnon Queen of Mycenae). Agamemnon kills their daughter as a sacrifice to Artemis so he can continue the war in Troy. As soon as he returns home after the conquest of Troy, he gets killed by his wife, Clytemnestra, who avenges her daughter.

Through Cassandra's vision we learn of what will eventually happen to the Queen, who will then be killed by their son Orestes wishing to avenge his father. Nevertheless, in the Greek world of this time, is he guilty of the killing of his mother? During the trial of Orestes, Apollo declares that children are not related to the mother, as Athena sustains with the example of her birth from her father's head and not from a woman's womb. Therefore, if Orestes is not the son of his mother, he has not shed kindred blood. In doing this the gods (and most importantly Athena, the descendant of the Goddess) support the patriarchal System, cleaning Orestes of the guilt of matricide. It is a clash between matriarchal and patriarchal cultures, which, accordingly to Eisler, justifies the shift from partnership to dominator norms. When Clytemnestra kills her husband, she acts within the norms of a matrilineal society, thus, she is responsible for avenging the shedding of kindred blood. Her act of revenge is an act of justice. However, after what happens to her, with even the Goddess of Athens supporting the new male power, will women ever get the chance to gain justice?

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