

“Pitying Her as a Woman Weak by Nature”: Excerpts of Women in ‘Digenes Akrites’

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the archetypal representation of the Damsel in Distress and the Medieval hero in the epic poem Digenes Akrites. By delving into the characteristics and roles of these archetypes within the poem's context, the paper seeks to uncover their significance and portrayal in medieval literature. The paper aims to illuminate the timeless appeal and enduring relevance of these archetypal characters, engaging the reader through a close analysis of key scenes and interactions involving the Damsel in Distress and the heroic figure of Digenes Akrites. Furthermore, the paper endeavours to shed light on the broader implications of their representations in relation to themes of valour, honour, and love prevalent in medieval literature.

Keywords: Digenes Akrites, Archetypal Criticism, Byzantine Literature, Damsel in Distress, Medieval Hero.

1. INTRODUCTION

From the 7th to 12th centuries, a series of wars unfolded between Arab dynasties and the Byzantine Empire. The Arabs succeeded in ruling over significant parts of the Christian Byzantine Empire, but their attempt to conquer Constantinople, the capital of Byzantine, was thwarted. The 12th-century romantic epic poem, Digenes Akrites¹, provides a vivid narrative of these conflicts, telling the story of two generations through the lifelong journey of the hero, Basil (Digenes Akrites).

This paper sets out to conduct a thorough feminist analysis of the female characters in Digenes Akrites, a renowned epic poem that has received extensive scholarly attention. Despite the wealth of existing research on this literary masterpiece, the specific roles, agency, and portrayals of women within the poem have often been relegated to the sidelines. By employing a range of feminist theoretical frameworks, such as intersectionality, gender performativity, and the male gaze, this paper aims to bring to light the intricate and nuanced significance of the female characters. Through this meticulous analysis, the paper aspires to contribute to the broader scholarly understanding of this timeless work from a feminist perspective, offering fresh insights and perspectives. Double discrimination worsens during wartime, and gender-based violence against women contributes to the gruesome condition of women.

Mass Suicide:

*‘There yesterday we killed some lovely ladies,
Because they would not do the things we told them’
They urged their horses, went off to the ditch;
And many slain they found, bathed in their blood,
Of whom some had no hands, no heads nor feet,
Some had no limbs at all, and their guts out,
Not to be known by anyone at all.’ⁱⁱ*

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The stanza speaks of the event when Basil's father, an Arab Emir named Mousour, abducted a Byzantine general's daughter named Eirene. When her brothers realized that their sister had been abducted by the Arabs, on seeing their mother's plight, two of them went in pursuit of getting her back. They arrived at the Arabs Army camp, where they were asked to look into a ditch that was full of corpses of women and find their sister among those corpses. Violence against women occurs extensively during times of conflict and war. During the wars between Byzantine and Arabs, it was a common practice to sleep with captive women along with their wivesⁱⁱⁱ. Eustathios of Thessaloniki's description of cruelty and gruesomeness of violence against women is similar to the massacre of Byzantine women by the Arabs:

"Mothers' wombs being ripped open, the sword brought the fetus to birth, and before its time, the sun glimpsed the small thing, then the darkness of Hades took it, and it died before fully living. This is savage and incomparable to other madness."^{iv}

There are various accounts of women getting abducted during wars and used as a sex slave, for example, Robert of Clari. The women unwilling to surrender are prone to face unspeakable physical and mental torture. Such vivid descriptions of the pit of dismembered body parts and bloodied bodies of women force the reader to imagine the gruesomeness of the horrific ditch where completely mutilated bodies with their intestines out of their stomachs. The worst part is that these women had no names, no identification; they were lying there like a heap of some object. Their brothers' remarks on the pile and mournful exclamation that barbarians cut up their sister and of lawless Arab men for unjustly killing their sister. The words 'lawless' and 'unjustly' are used for Muslim war policy, and the pile of women symbolizes the purity of Byzantine women and their choice for death rather than surrendering to Arab men's carnal desires. A similar practice of self-killing can be seen in the northwest regions of India by Hindu women, which were called Jauhar.^v To avoid abduction, enslavement, and rape by Muslims, adult and young women would self-immolate themselves. The history of Jauhars occurred during the wars between Hindu Rajput and Mughal armies. Just like Byzantine women chose to jump in the ditch and kill themselves, Rajput women sometimes, along with their children, killed themselves by burning in a ditch of fire. As spoken by Mahatma Gandhi on account of saving a woman's honor: *"It is physically impossible to violate a woman against her will. The outrage occurs only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength. If she cannot meet the assailant's physical might, her purity will give her the strength to die before he succeeds in violating her, for example, Sita."*^{vi} *When a woman is assaulted, her primary duty is self-protection. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength and if need be, die in the effort."*^{vii}

In these statements, Mahatma Gandhi himself advocates that it is better to die for protection than to get enslaved or captivated by assaulters.

Eirene:

The daughter of Andronikos, or Aaron, and his wife Anna, was abducted by the Emir Mousour. When she was born, it was a prediction that she would marry an Emir (Arab), and he would convert to Christianity.

*A woman though has conquered me most lovely,
Whose beauties burn me and whose tears consume;
Her sighs enflame; I know not what to do.
For her sake but to know for sure I tried you ;
She never ceases ever weeps for you.
Now wholly I confess and speak the truth :
If you deign have me as your sister's husband,
For the sweet beauty of your own dear sister"*^{viii}.

The Emir told Eirene's brothers that he intended to marry her. Upon hearing this, they agreed to the wedding. They were overjoyed to hear they had found a perfect bridegroom for their sister. *"How that a noble girl with her sweet beauties Had broken up the famed armies of Syria."*^{ix} According to them, Eirene's beauty and chastity won the heart of a barbaric Arab Emir. It was commonly perceived during the medieval period that women's strength did not come from their weapons but from their beauty and its effect on men. In the entire scene, Eirene was not asked if she wanted to marry or not; nonetheless, she did not protest the decision and surrendered herself to her alleged abductor and accepted him as her husband. Women

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lacked equality and did not have the right to have personal freedom or choice, their fathers were the head of the family with the supreme control over them, in the absence of a father, brothers took the place and ruled over in the highly patriarchal system. Even by the end of Roman Empire, father's authority stayed after a woman was married off, they had the right to end the marriage.^x Some the fragments of these customs lasted till the Byzantine Empire which are visible in the epic poem.

Coming back to the character of Eirene, her indifferent behavior towards the Emir shows symptoms of Stockholm syndrome in Stockholm syndrome, or "trauma bonding," is a phenomenon in which a person being held hostage in some dangerous situation forms bonds to their captor or abuser in order to survive.^{xi} She not only married the Emir without showing any resistance but also "After their union the girl conceived, And brought forth Digenes Basil Akrites; So much the more the Emir's passion grew."^{xii}

*There is a secret I would dare to tell,
But I fear, dearest, lest it please you not.
Now is the time come I must learn for sure
If that your love for me is unadulterate.'*
*She when she heard these words her heart was stung,
And deeply sighing spoke such words as these :*
*'My sweetest husband, master and defender,
When have I heard you speak and not please me ?
What circumstance shall part me from your love ?
Even if I must die I will not deny you.
For circumstance can test affection.'*^{xiii}

Eirene's words to her husband show the gender-based oppression and patriarchy during the Byzantine Empire. Women had inferior positions in society and were considered physically and mentally weaker than men; the father's authority over their daughter and husband's authority over their wife justified according to the Byzantine laws.^{xiv} The pronouns to her husband, such as master and defender, prove that women's only duties were to provide a comfortable resort for husbands, nurture babies, cook, weave, and conduct domestic work.^{xv}

Anna:

*O children dear, have pity on your mother,
Her soul in wretchedness and soon to die.'*
*Be mindful of the love you bear your sister.
Hasten to free your sister, and your mother,
Her from captivity, and me from death.
We would give all existence for her sake.
Prefer not life to your sister's account ;
Have mercy, children mine, on your own sister;
Go out in haste to her deliverance ;
Else you shall see me dead, mother for child ;
And shall receive your father's curse, and mine,
If this you do not as I have proposed.'*^{xvi}

After Eirene's abduction by the Emir, her mother, Anna, grieved for her daughter, and her being "a virgin" is mentioned to annote her chastity and her being without malice. In the letter to Anna's sons, she wrote about how miserable she is, and if they did not bring their sister back, their parent's curse would fall upon them. The condition of the mother is no less than a damsel in distress as she is dependent upon her sons to save her from the miserable condition because of Eirene's abduction.

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*A warring falcon too that chased a dove ;
And following it as he brought the chase to end^{xvii}*

In the context of patriarchy, the symbol of the falcon in Christianity has been associated with hierarchical power structures and the dominance of male authority. Throughout history, the falcon has been used to symbolize strength, control, and dominance, reflecting the patriarchal values that have influenced Christian theology and social structures. The falcon's depiction as a mighty bird of prey has been interpreted as a metaphor for exercising authority and control over others, aligning with traditional patriarchal interpretations of leadership and governance within religious institutions. This symbolism has been critiqued by feminist theologians and scholars who question the perpetuation of male-dominated power dynamics and the marginalization of women within Christian traditions. The symbol of falcon is used for the Emir while meek and passive dove is Eirene. The symbol of the dove is associated with various aspects of feminism. In Christian tradition, the dove is often linked to the concept of peace, gentleness, and nurturing, which are qualities that have been traditionally associated with femininity and with femininity comes inferior powers than men.

The daughter of Haplorrabdes:

*For to my parents I dare not return,
I am ashamed of neighbours, and companions.
Where to find my traitor I know not at all.
I beg you give a knife into my hands,
And I will kill myself for folly done.^{xviii}*

The quoted stanza depicts a sense of vulnerability and helplessness, with the speaker pleading for mercy and expressing distress at being left alone. From a feminist perspective during the Byzantine Empire, these lines reflect the challenges and struggles faced by women during that time. The plea for mercy and the sense of being left to be devoured by beasts symbolize the lack of agency and protection that women often experience in a male-dominated society. The physical exhaustion and injury described in the lines also indicate the toll that societal expectations and constraints took on women's lives. Even though Digenes helps the general's daughter to meet her beloved, who left her and ran away with her fortune, in exchange, he is driven by passion and eventually rapes her. Here, the only repercussion of Digenes's adultery is that he feels guilty for doing an unlawful deed.

On the other hand, if a woman is caught in the act of adultery, her husband or her father is allowed to kill the adulterers according to the Roman law Lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis.^{xix} *Haplorrabdes's daughter is also afraid to face her parents and is willing to kill herself since she is aware if she returns to her parents, they may kill her for the 'dishonour' she has brought to the family by eloping with her father's captive man. The evidence of honour killing can be found throughout history in various cultures. Roman Empire was male-dominated, and their laws were biased towards men; men had complete authority over their wives, daughters, and sons by the law. Honor killing was highly justified by the Ancient Roman Law that 'women who were found guilty of adultery could be killed by their husbands.'*^{xx}

Maximo:

*"You thrice accurst old man," she answered him,
"So me and my people you troubled for one man,
To whom I will cross alone, boasting with God's help
I will bring back his head, not needing you?"
So saying in her rage she rushed to cross.
But I called to her, "Cross not, Maximo:
It is the lot of men to come to women,
So I will come to you, as it is right."^{xxi}*

Between the deadly duel of Digenes and Maximo, Digenes kept his gynocentric ideology of women that they could not fight and were inferior to men. However, she was no usual passive maiden; she chose her fate and made her own decisions.

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She kept herself for the man who could conquer (win) her. Maximo's character is different from the other female characters in the poem. She was a renowned warrior of the Amazon. After getting defeated by Digenes, she exclaims:

*“Have mercy on me, lord, I have sorely erred;
Rather let us make friends, if you disdain not.
I am a virgin still by none seduced.
You alone have conquered, you shall win me all;
And have me helpmate too against your foes.”^{xxii}*

It is crucial to understand the concept of virginity during the Byzantine Empire, and its obsession with women's morally correctness and honor. With the disappointment of a birth of a woman, to the burden of securing her dowry for marriage and special precautions to save her virginity. There were societal expectations for women to remain chaste until marriage, and the loss of virginity outside of wedlock was often stigmatized. The concept of virginity was closely tied to notions of honor and family prestige, and women were expected to uphold these ideals.^{xxiii} Like the other characters female characters who were always under the surveillance of guards and accompanied by their maids, Maximo stands out and fights alone. In Byzantines Empire, women could only leave the house if they had company of other maids, and could only go for religious ceremonies or feasts and while they walked, their eyes had to be lowered.^{xxiv} Earlier, Maximo broke the norms of byzantine women but on account of Maximo's rape or losing virginity, her femininity is exposed. *“The killing cannot be excused: Maximo has reverted to a female role by offering her virginity to Digenes; she is no longer an asexual warrior.”^{xxv}*

*“But it cannot be for me to make you wife.
I have a lawful wife noble and fair,
Whose love I will never bear to set aside...”^{xxvi}*

However, Digenes claimed to have secretly killed Maximo.^{xxvii}

Evdokia (The Girl):

*“Serpent, give up your plan : I am not deceived.
Who loves me has been watching; now he sleeps”
(For to herself she said, He is a serpent;
I never saw before such visage here)—
“If he wakes up and finds you, he shall hurt you.”^{xxviii}*

After studying all the female characters in the epic poem, except for Maximo, each woman's narrative follows common attributes in which the female character is placed in a helpless position, often requiring a male hero to rescue her. Anna, Eirene, the daughter of Haplorrabdes, and even Maximo needed to be saved only once. Still, in the case of Evdokia (the girl), she was constantly put in such situation multiple times. In the sixth book, Digenes rescued her from a snake, a monster with three fire-breathing heads, a lion, and three horsemen with a humongous army.

*That you may live henceforth afraid of none.
Widowhood I know you will not be able to bear ;
But after my death take another husband ;
Youth will compel you certainly to this.
See that you stray not after wealth or fame,
But to a brave boy, courageous and noble,
And as before you shall reign on earth, my soul.”^{xxix}*

Women's legal and social status was generally inferior to men's, and they were subject to numerous restrictions and limitations. Women had limited rights in inheritance, property ownership, and political participation. They were often confined to traditional gender roles, such as managing the household, raising children, and supporting their husbands. Additionally, women's public and social interactions were often regulated by societal norms, and they were expected to

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adhere to strict codes of conduct and modesty. While some women held positions of influence and power, the overall condition of women in Byzantine society was often characterized by inequality and limited autonomy. While widowhood was a complex and challenging experience for women during the Byzantine Empire. Upon the death of their husbands, widows often faced social and economic hardships, as they were left without the protection and support of a male provider. In addition to mourning the loss of their spouses, widows had to navigate the legal and financial implications of their new status. Basil feared the same fate for Evdokia (The Girl) and wanted her to remarry so that she might not have to go through the miseries like many other widows of the time. Many widows struggled to retain control over their late husbands' estates and faced the risk of losing their property to male relatives or creditors. Furthermore, societal expectations regarding widowhood often limited women's freedom and autonomy, constraining their opportunities for remarriage and relegating them to marginalized roles within the community. The miseries of widowhood in the Byzantine Empire reflect the broader challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and women's experiences during this period.

2. CONCLUSION

“Cross not, Maximo : It is the lot of men to come to women, So I will come to you, as it is right.”^{xxx} According to the theory of dominant gender ideology, women are portrayed passive and meek and the men are expected to act and initiate. The entire epic poem, *Digenes Akrites* revolves around the dominant gender ideology and presents its female characters as archetypal damsels in distress. From a mass suicide of women, to each female character of the epic follow the similar attributes for instance a distressful situation and reliance upon men to be rescued. The women who died jumped off the ditch and Maximo are the women who chose to act against the choice of men and faced a brutal death. *Digenes Akritas* provided a nuanced insight into the societal norms and values prevalent during the Byzantine Empire. Readers gain a comprehensive understanding of the traditional gender roles and the complexities of gender dynamics.

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