

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Agency, identity, and the rewriting of Medusa

Review of 'I, Medusa' (Random House, 2025) by Ayana Gray

JONAH KENT RICHARDS

One of the most interesting adaptations that I have read recently is the 2025 novel *I, Medusa* by African American novelist Ayana Gray. According to Greek mythology, Medusa was a priestess of the goddess Athena who was raped by the sea god Poseidon and transformed into a gorgon by the goddess as a punishment for losing her chastity. Medusa was later beheaded in her sleep by the mortal hero Perseus. In her novel, Gray tells Medusa's origin story. Gray not only reimagines Medusa as a Black woman, but she turns the character from antagonist to the heroine of her own story. In a story about a snake-haired woman whose gaze turns men into stone, Gray asks, is it really the gorgon who is the monster or rather the god and goddess who transformed her into one?

While Gray's novel preserves the characters and plot of the original Medusa myths, she chooses to portray Medusa and her family as resembling people of African descent. It is a fascinating choice because Gray explicitly states that Medusa is still the mortal daughter

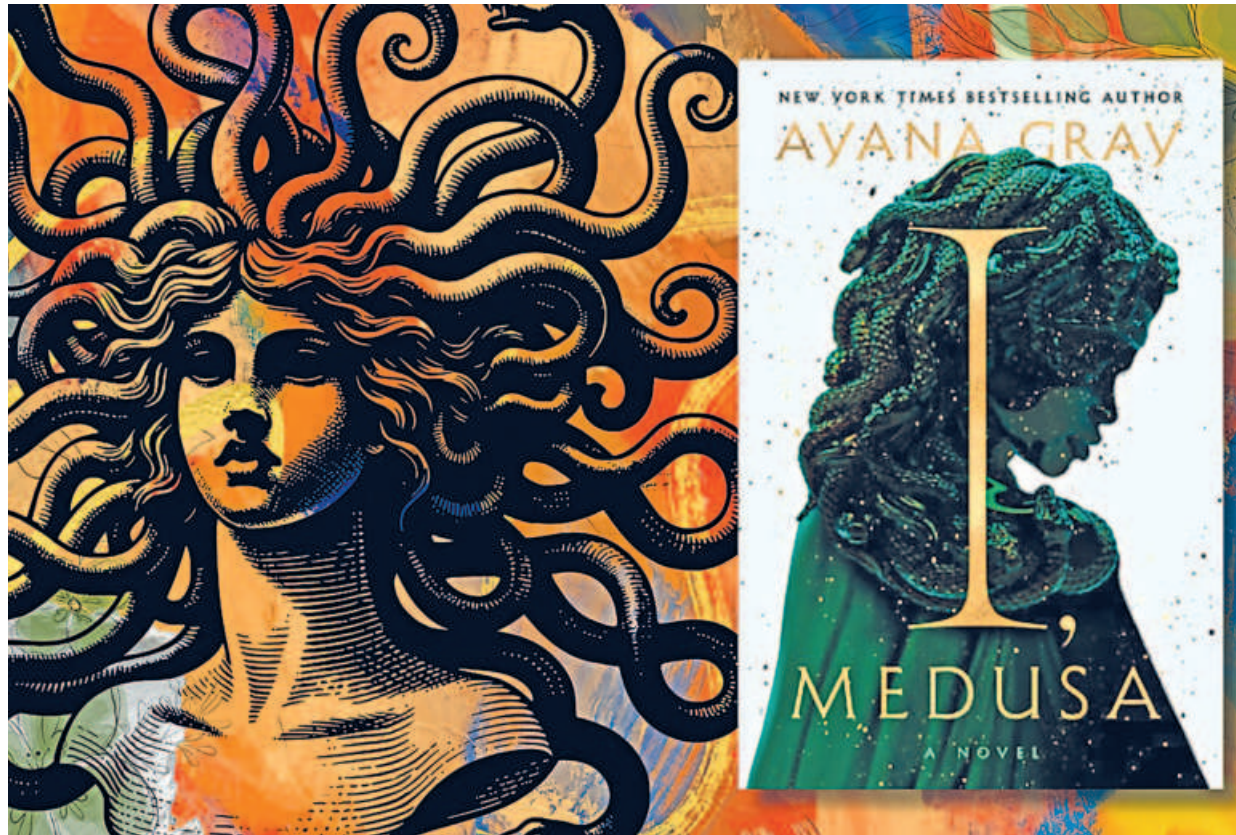


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Gray's novel represents a powerful retelling of the Medusa that not only reimagines her as a woman of colour, but also as the tragic heroine of her own story. I imagine that some of those readers who avoid Greco-Roman mythology because they can't see themselves in the stories or because they dislike the problematic portrayal of many of the women might very well be drawn to Gray's adaptation.

of the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto, but they all share the same brown skin and Afro-textured hair. Gray places particular emphasis on Medusa's locs (dreadlocks). Medusa describes her locs as her "pride" and her "dearest physical possessions". For Medusa and her sisters, Stheno and Euryale, the act of braiding and washing each other's locs were cherished family bonding moments. During Medusa's initiation to become one of Athena's

priestesses, Medusa presents her hair braiding as her craft. Gray's portrayal of Medusa's love of her locs can be read as a celebration of the hairstyle as a centuries-old African symbol of beauty and cultural tradition.

It is not a coincidence that when Athena declares that Medusa has used her beauty for blasphemy and wickedness—and that she will have beauty no longer—the goddess chooses to target her hair. In a transformation scene reminiscent of a Hollywood horror movie, Medusa falls to the floor in pain as her locs fall out and are replaced by long black snakes. Medusa describes how "[t]hey writhe against one another, tangling like so many grotesque locs". When Medusa's best friend Euryale tries to help her, she accidentally turns him into stone with her gaze. In one powerful move, Athena took the physical feature that Medusa believed to be her most beautiful and turned it into something monstrous. Indeed, Medusa says that Athena has

turned her into a monster.

However, Gray makes it clear that despite Medusa's new appearance, it is Poseidon and Athena who are the monsters. After being transformed into gorgons themselves for condemning Athena's actions against their sister, Stheno and Euryale ask Medusa about what happened between her and Poseidon, and they reassure her that she did nothing wrong. They remind Medusa that Poseidon was thousands of years older than her and he was able to use his position as king of the sea court, as well as the fact that Medusa was drunk with Olympian wine, to manipulate her. The sisters remind her that even though Medusa initially welcomed Poseidon's advances, she had the right to change her mind at any point.

It is this support from her sisters that allows Medusa to recover her sense of agency and self worth. Stheno reminds Medusa that her body belongs to herself and that she will learn to

control her new powers. However, Stheno warns Medusa that her snake-locs, and the rest of the world, won't respect her unless she makes them. Inspired by her sister, Medusa pulls out one of her snake-locs, killing it in the process. The action subdues the rest of the snake-locs into submitting themselves to her will. Once Medusa has regained control of her snake-locs, she comes to accept them and even sees the beauty in them. Gray makes it quite clear that Medusa isn't a victim, but a survivor.

Medusa's journey comes to a head with her reunion with Athena. Despite the goddess's anger, Athena can't help but express her admiration over how strong, powerful, and feared Medusa has become since her transformation. Athena even offers Medusa a chance to return to her service as her enforcer against injustice. While a small part of Medusa is tempted by the offer, she realises that the offer would come at the cost of her newly gained

freedom. She understands that the goddess had cursed her not out of sense that Medusa had betrayed her, or that Poseidon had violated her, but because Athena had believed Medusa had belonged to her and that Poseidon had used her "tool" without her permission. Medusa refuses to ever let Athena or anyone else use her again. As a young girl, Medusa's mother Ceto once told her that the worst monsters didn't bother hiding themselves in the dark. By the end of the scene, Gray shows that the true monster of the story wasn't the mortal girl turned into a gorgon, but the goddess who tried to possess that mortal girl and then cursed her out of jealous rage when another god tried to exploit her as well.

If I had to critique anything about the novel, it would be that I wanted to learn more about Medusa's mother Ceto. The sea goddess is a complex and tragic character in her own right. Once a powerful sea goddess, she was forced to submit to the Olympians and is trapped in an abusive marriage with Phorcys. She self-medicates her depression with alcohol and she sometimes physically abuses her daughters Stheno and Euryale. But in her own way, she loves Medusa and tries to protect her daughter from Athena against whom she holds a long bloody grudge. Despite their complicated relationship, Medusa sees herself in her mother. I would have loved for the mother and daughter to develop more fully. If not for them to reconcile then at least for them to get a chance to better understand each other.

I strongly recommend *I, Medusa*. Gray's novel represents a powerful retelling of the Medusa that not only reimagines her as a woman of colour, but also as the tragic heroine of her own story. I imagine that some of those readers who avoid Greco-Roman mythology because they can't see themselves in the stories or because they dislike the problematic portrayal of many of the women might very well be drawn to Gray's adaptation.

Jonah Kent Richards is a Shakespeare screen adaptation scholar, an English teacher, and contributor for Star Books and Literature.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Fara Dabhoiwala's history misses the one thing that truly matters

Review of 'What Is Free Speech?: The History of a Dangerous Idea' (Belknap Press, 2025) by Fara Dabhoiwala

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That censorship is not only malign but also stupid and, in the long run, futile, is a lesson that every tinpot dictator and overzealous bureaucrat has to learn afresh. But the opposite assumption, that the absence of censorship automatically creates a healthy marketplace of ideas, Fara Dabhoiwala says, is also an insidious illusion. His new history of free speech, *What Is Free Speech?: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, argues that free speech is not a natural state of being but a deeply artificial concept, shaped from its inception by imbalances of power, including the silencing of women to the brutalities of empire. Dabhoiwala posits that to celebrate liberty of expression without asking whose liberty and at whose expense is to engage in a form of willful historical amnesia.

To make this case, Dabhoiwala embarks on a panoramic, if occasionally anachronistic, sweep of the last half-millennium, a narrative journey that begins by reminding the reader of the elemental, almost magical, power ascribed to speech in 'pre-Enlightenment' societies, where a blasphemy or a slander was not merely an offense but a tangible disruption of the cosmic and social order. He then details how this holistic worldview was chipped away, first by the grudging necessities of religious toleration, and then shattered by the invention of political free speech in 18th-century England, a doctrine he argues was less a philosophical breakthrough than a journalistic racket, born of stock-market panic and partisan fury, whose inherently racialized and gendered conception of liberty was then exported, with all its hypocrisies intact, to the slave-holding colonies of America.

The book's central, unstated syllogism seems to be this: the origin of free speech

is tainted by hypocrisy, greed, and power; therefore, the ideal of free speech is itself a tainted instrument. One might as well argue that because the American Constitution was drafted by slaveholders, its (belated) guarantees of equality are worthless. What Dabhoiwala misses, in his anger about the slave trade and the British Empire, is the simple, double-edged fact that a principle can transcend its flawed creators. For those of us living in the post-colonial world, the fact that Mill, the bureaucrat, was a hypocrite is beside the point regarding free expression; what matters is that *On Liberty*, the text, provided the language our own anti-colonial forebears used to demand rights of free expression.

Dabhoiwala's most glaring failure is his inability to grapple with the real 'danger' in the book's subtitle. It is true that he mentions many instances of violence wrought upon individuals for their expression, but his tone is more urgent and sincere when he frets about the social harm of ridiculing holiest beliefs, a

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fine-sounding phrase that, in the real world, translates directly into a justification for blasphemy laws, the legal architecture of theocratic thuggery. Salman Rushdie makes a cameo appearance in Dabhoiwala's long, rambling, only to be dismissed as a free speech absolutist. The 30-year campaign of extremist violence which nearly succeeded in murdering him while this book was being written, is not even mentioned. A fine history of free speech, indeed!

Ironically, for a book that so strenuously critiques Anglo-American exceptionalism, Dabhoiwala's narrative is hopelessly Anglo-centric, advertised as a "remarkable global history", yet culminating in a final, furious charge against the modern American First Amendment. The inclusion of a valuable chapter on British India and a perfunctory detour through Scandinavia does not make a

history global. By focusing his ultimate concern so intently on how the American ideal protects "Nazis, antisemites, (and) racists," Dabhoiwala frames the central problem of free speech as one of excessive private license. This focus entirely ignores that in most of the world, including here in Bangladesh, the primary threat to expression comes from the coercive power of the state.

More dangerously, Dabhoiwala's thesis validates the language of the oppressors. His reasonable-sounding insistence on regulating speech to "prevent harm," treating it as an "action like any other," provides the precise justification for repressive legal architectures, from the colonial-era sedition laws he details to contemporary DSA and now Cyber Security Act in our country. He exposes how past limitations were arbitrarily drawn to silence women, slaves, and colonial

subjects. Yet he fails to see the flaw in his own prescription, simply assuming his preferred regulations against 'hate speech' or 'group libel' are the logical and correct ones.

This merely substitutes one set of arbitrary boundaries for another, and more importantly, it begs the crucial question: who, precisely, gets to decide what constitutes harm? In a post-colonial nation like ours, this is a central mechanism of state control. When the state invokes 'communal harmony' to silence reporting on minority rights, or 'national security' to jail cartoonists, or 'wounding religious sentiments' to crush dissent, it is using the same logic of "harm prevention" that Dabhoiwala champions. Giving this power to the state is not the solution; it is, and always has been, the core of the problem.

Ultimately, Dabhoiwala's book is a treatise that, while meticulously documenting the hypocrisies of the past, offers aid and comfort to the tyrants of the present. By elevating the subjective claim of harm over the necessity of liberty, he provides a high-minded alibi for the censor's pen and the state's baton. This is the oldest argument in the book of tyranny, the very same one used against Socrates, who was, after all, judicially murdered for harming the youth and offending the gods.

The distinction between word and deed that Dabhoiwala finds so flimsy is, in fact, the load-bearing wall of an open society. The right to free speech is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear. Dabhoiwala, in his anxiety over the content of the speech, seems to have forgotten the one thing that truly matters: the inalienable right to have it, free from the arbitrary and silencing verdict of "who decides".

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