



Humanizing Circe, the Witch of Aiaia: A Novel that Projects the Repercussions of Patriarchal Supremacy

A feministic reading of the novel Circe by Madeline Miller

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Abstract— Patriarchy or the social construct that reckons men as the 'absolute authority' has remained an amplified substratum of our societies for time immemorial. This noxious tendency has been glorified and siphoned into normality, relinquishing the power of women in the long run. *Circe* is a novel by Madeline Miller that tells the story of a Greek mythological character named Circe, the Witch of Aiaia. Circe was born into the family of God Helio but was deemed unworthy from her very birth. Being born powerless and unattractive had kept her in darkness for ages. She gets violated throughout her life until she accidentally discovers her power of witchcraft. This power left her with another magnitude of subjugation and brutality. This research attempts to read and analyze the novel *Circe* on the grounds of feminism. This paper will explore the presence of patriarchy and its impact on the female characters in the novel. This paper will also venture to identify the patriarchal supremacy that had remained rooted in Greek mythology. *Circe* was not born a monster but framed into that construct will be divulged through this research.

Keyword— Greek Mythology, patriarchy, subjugation, marginalization, violence.

I. INTRODUCTION

For eons, patriarchy has remained a major force in our society. The male-dominant mentality has caused immense harm to female values, segregating and labeling them as the weaker section. They were marginalized, satisfying the male superiority that is intertwined with the patriarchal culture. This culture had dictated certain gender roles, mainstreaming hetero-normative society, and clearly discarding the needs of women. Patriarchal culture had always been interpreted as a tool for exploiting women. Violence, sexual harassment, rape, etc. are the byproduct of that frame of mind.

Simone De Beauvoir, a French critic, and feminist, openly made a huge statement on the construct of gender identity stating “One is not born but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir 293). She is one of the few critics who went in search of the correlation between gender and sex with the intention to give women a better insight into themselves. De Beauvoir saw the construct of the female

gender as the byproduct of a patriarchal society. She concluded that sex and gender didn't hold any connection as the former is a biological aspect and the latter is a byproduct of social and cultural factors; “No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.” (De Beauvoir 293)

When we peep into the long history of humanity, society had always catered to male supremacy; “those who made and complied the laws, being men, favored their own sex, and the Juris consults have turned the laws into principles” (qtd.in De Beauvoir 11), placing women in an inferior position which was “willed in heaven and profitable on earth.” (11)

Greek civilization, being one the oldest had stood as a soaring example of a patriarchal society in the history of mankind. This can be traced back to one of the oldest

Greek poems, "Theogony" by Hesiod portraying the story of Pandora. Hesiod in this poem has described women as execrable spirits; "the damnable race of woman, a plague which men must live with" (qtd. in Millet). Semonides, another Greek philosopher in his poem "Women" used beast metaphors to portray women. Such misogynistic interpretation is common in Greek classics. Classical literature, dominated by male writers had always depicted women as inferior beings, projecting male impressions on the female characters, and presenting them as ignorant and worthless to society. They never considered Intelligence, knowledge, or skills as a trait for their female characters. Even though the emergence of female writers had put an end to such baseless representations of women, revisiting the classical work and rewriting the narrative took time to take momentum. Simone De Beauvoir was one of the few who took initiative in revising the classical works written by men. Lately, many contemporary female authors had approached the classical text from a feministic perspective. This included Greek texts as well because even the renowned Greek philosopher Plato had presented women in his work "Republic" as inferior to men; "as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (qtd.in Smith). Such superior philosophers who had cinched the foundation of a structured society had presented women as inferior thus setting stereotypical gender roles.

Mythology had remained the base of many classical texts as myths behold the power to peruse the values and ideologies of society. Myths have also been carried across generations and have the potential to influence the mentality of the current living. Mythology influences the literature of that culture. Lately, the modern literature that had voiced the narrative of women had in turn influenced mythology, adding another dimension to it. The patriarchal and anthropocentric vision of the world had been deconstructed and restructured by many female authors including Margret Atwood, Angela Carter, etc.

Madeline Miller, a contemporary American author who had specialized in Latin and Ancient Greek, had adapted many classical tales to the modern audience. "Circe" is a phenomenal masterpiece written by Miller, exploring the character Circe who is least probed in Greek mythology. She was mutilated and dehumanized by the Greek gods, who are the representation of toxic masculinity. Circe was born into the family of Helio, the sun God. Despite being born into the community of gods, she neither possessed any power like her father Helio nor held the alluring nature of her mother Perse, an ocean nymph. Considered unappealing and powerless, she had a lonely childhood until she turned to the companionship of humans who are lesser beings. She even fell in love with a human

fisherman Glaucos but was terrified of his mortality. In her desperate attempt to make him immortal, she finds a way to transform him into his 'true form' (divinity) finally revealing her true power of witchcraft.

Parade of Patriarchy in the Novel *Circe*

Ancient Greek has a history of oppressing and secluding women. Women were objectified throughout and were considered nothing better than brood mares. Greek myth being an epitome of male supremacy had remained an idol for such practices. Greek male gods have always treated goddesses or lesser women terribly and adversely. Many instances from the myth such as the story of Medusa, Lamia, and Electra, etc. can substantiate this statement.

The novel *Circe* by Madeline Miller depicts the story of Circe, who had been a victim of patriarchy herself. The first instance of male dominance can be seen at the beginning of the novel. Circe was born powerless and unattractive. Beauty and power are inevitable necessities for being a God, and this led to her downfall from her very birth. Her father, who saw her as a burden, negated her. Her mother, being a victim of patriarchy, could not protect her daughter. Circe's birth petrified her mother. She feared losing the favor of her husband Helio for giving birth to such an imbecile child. Perse here is the prey to male chauvinism. She didn't possess a mind of her own and rather acted in desperation to fit into the system. She was one among many wives of Helio and knew her husband could easily discard her if she couldn't satisfy her role of pleasing him sexually and bearing his pride. This fear forced her to act in a manner that gratifies the Male God.

At the beginning of the novel, Circe assumed her identity as a Nymph, born out of a mere Nymph Perse:

"When I was born, the name for what I was did not exist. They called me Nymph, assuming I would be like my mother and aunts and thousand cousins Least of the lesser goddesses, our power were so modest they could scarcely ensure our eternities. We spoke to fish and nurtured flowers, coaxed drops from the clouds or salt from the waves. That word, Nymph, paced out the length and breadth of our future. In our language, it means not just goddess, but bride." (9)

The etymology of the word 'Nymph' can be traced back to the Greek word *nýmphē*, which means 'young wife or bride'. In Greek mythology, nymphs are a community of inferior female divinities. They held a place, in-between goddesses and commoners. Even though they didn't possess any significant power, their external beauty held the attention. Circe was born to an ocean nymph and was assumed to be the same. Their only job was to speak with fish and nurture the flowers. This very instance stands as an example of patriarchal culture because nymphs, being a

community of women, were only given minor jobs. They never held many opportunities to explore their capability. Greek Mythology had clearly structured the power game favoring the Male gods. They enjoy dictating power, especially to women. These Gods decide their duties and responsibilities for them. The very kingdom itself is designed in a manner that denies the basic right of women. Women were hindered to the wall of their homes and were expected to take care of the household chores. Here the communities of Nymphs are marginalized. Despite reducing them to such trivial jobs, they were also treated as sex objects. Perse is a fine example of this:

“My mother knew he was coming. Frails she was, but crafty, with a mind like a spike-toothed eel. She saw where the path to power lay for such as her, arrayed in his glory, she laughed at him. Lie with you? Why should I?” “My father, of course, might have taken what he wanted. But Helios flattered himself that all women went eager to his bed, slave girls and 26 divinities alike. His altars smoked with the proof, offerings from big bellied mothers and happy by-blows.” (10)

“While he drank his wine, he played draughts. No one was allowed to play with him. Him placed the stone counters, spun the boards, and placed them again. My mother drenched her voice in honey. “Will you not come to bed, my love?” She turned before him slowly, showing the lushness of her figure as if she were roasting on a spit. Most often he would leave his game then but sometimes he did not, and those were my favorite times, for my mother would go, slamming the myrrh-wood door behind her.” (12)

“Its marriage,” she said to him, “or nothing. And if it is marriage, be sure: you may have what girls you like in the field, but you will bring none home, for only I will hold sway in your halls.”(10)

In the novel, Circe mentions instances where Perse tries desperately to please her father. She tries to dress entrancingly to grab the attention of Helio. Helio rejects her, claiming that he has the power to bed any woman he pleases. This scene illustrates the depiction of women as sex slaves. Women are stigmatized into roles of servants to men. This stigma stereotyped women as an inferior beings. Here Helio held a view that the body of a woman is his property. In Greek mythology, there are many cases where gods overpowered women and raped them to their whims and fancies. The story of Queen Leda vindicates this point. Likewise, in the novel, Circe explains the stories that she had heard about the nymphs being raped and abused by the male divinities:

I had heard by the stories whispered among my cousins, of what they might do to nymphs they caught alone. The rapes and ravishments, the abuses. I found it hard to

believe. They looked weak as mushroom gills. They kept their faces carefully down, away from all those divinities. (32)

Circe herself had experienced such a violation. Her uncles grope her against her will; ‘My uncles’ eyes used to crawl over me as I poured their wine. Their hands found their way to my flesh. A pinch, a stroke, a hand slipping under the sleeve of my dress’ (161). She later gets raped by a captain. He asks about her husband and later he enquires about the presence of other male figures in her life. When he realized she was alone, unwed, and unprotected, he mutilated her violently:

“Mistress?” It was the leader again. “When will your husband be home? We would toast such fine hospitality.” I laughed. “Oh, I do not have a husband.” He smiled back. “Of course,” he said. “You are too young to be married. Then it is your father we must thank.” It was full dark outside, and the room glowed warm and bright. “My father lives far away,” I said. I waited for them to ask who he was. A lamplighter that would be a good jest. I smiled to myself. “Then perhaps there is some other host we should thank? An uncle, a brother?” “If you would thank your host,” I said, “thank me. This house is mine alone.”(157)

“Is there—” The man threw me back against the wall. My head hit the uneven stone and the room sparked. I opened my mouth to cry out the spell, but he jammed his arm against my windpipe and the sound was choked off. I could not speak. I could not breathe. I fought him, but he was stronger than I had thought he would be, or maybe I was weaker. The sudden weight of him shocked me, the greasy push of his skin on mine. My mind was still scrambled, disbelieving. With his right hand, he tore my clothes, a practiced gesture. With his left, he kept his weight against my throat. I had said there was no one on the island, but he had learned not to take chances. Or perhaps he just didn’t like screaming. (158)

This quotation from the novels thoroughly explains the mentality of men; they see women as properties who can’t protect themselves without the dominant presence of a man. A woman without a man is considered liable for violations. Men had used violence as a way of dominating women for ages. Despite the physical assault, other forms of violence also manifested throughout the novel. Helio verbally berates Circe in the story, calling her the worst of his child and a liability:

He had taken it all. “You dare to contradict me? You who cannot light a single flame, or call one of drop water? Worst of my children, faded and broken, whom I cannot pay a husband to take. Since you were born, I pitied you and allowed you license, yet you grew disobedient and proud. Will you make me hate you more?”(58)

Male dominance can be dotted again in the novel when Circe goes to her father after she feels guilty for turning Scylla into a monster using Pharmaka Plant. Circe gets betrayed by the love of her life Glaucos, a fisherman. Circe turned this mere human into God because of her love for him. But once he becomes a God, he abandons Circe for a beautiful nymph Scylla. This treachery infuriates Circe, and she transmogrified Scylla into a monster. Circe soon regrets her action and approaches her father for understanding and protection but in turn, gets subdued. Power, being the privilege of the male gods, can yet be proved with this instance from the novel where Zeus and Helio decide to exile Circe to a deserted island after she turned Scylla into a monster. The Gods completely negated the circumstance behind her action or the psychological disturbance she experienced. Zeus and Helio make an autocratic decision to exile her without allowing her or Scylla to speak for themselves. Their decision to exile her to an abandoned island of Aiaia is yet another form of marginalization. The below quotation from the novel explains this:

“For two nights, my father was closeted with my uncles. I lingered outside the mahogany doors but could not hear nothing. Not even a murmur. When they emerged, their faces were set and grim. My father strode to his chariot. His purple cloak glowed dark as wine, and on his head shone his great crown of golden rays. He did not look back as he leapt into the sky and turned the horses towards Olympus.” (64)

Here, the power game held by Zeus and Helio clearly states the gendered politics. Women were considered incapable of being a part of the backroom. Only men were considered capable of decisions making. This prejudice had handed them the power to punish people, especially women, according to their interests. The below quotation from the novel explains that the decision was taken by Zeus and Helio, without even the presence of women involved in the case:

“The room brightened, and my father came. On his face was a look like hammered bronze. Our eyes followed him as he strode to the dais at the room’s front. The rays from his crown speared every shadow. He stared out over us. “I have spoken to Zeus,” he said. “We found our way to an agreement”. (65- 66)

Scylla, on the other hand, is another victim of male supremacy. When Circe transforms Scylla into a sea monster, Glaucos easily discards her in a blink of an eye for other beautiful women just as he did to Circe:

I waited. I still hoped Glaucos would think of me. I would have married him in a moment. But I found myself hoping for another thing too, which I would not have believed the day before: that he would weep all the salt in

his veins for Scylla’s return, holding fast to her as his one, true love. “I understand,” Glaucos said. “It is a shame, but as you say there are others.”(55)

Women are considered entities to be used and renounced by men according to their muse. Even a lesser god-like Glaucos, who was transformed from a human into divinity, held much more power than women who were born divine. The above citation clearly justifies the objectification of women and their subjugation as a result of patriarchal culture.

Women never had the power to decide for themselves. In the story, Circe falls in love with a fisherman named Glaucos. She wanted to marry him but knew her father would deny her. Medea, the niece of Circe, escapes her father Aeetas, to marry the love of her life, Jason. When Aeetas realized Medea possessed power, he discouraged her from practicing her magic. She didn't have a choice but to run away with the love of her life. These women didn't even have a right to love someone. They were seen as political propositions to be dealt with by their fathers and later by their husbands. They were not allowed to think or feel for themselves. Men had the privilege of choosing and expressing their sexual desire, whereas women were held as possessions. They very denied expressing their love, interest, or sexual desires.

There are many such instances throughout the novel that can justify the presence of patriarchal culture. Patriarchy being the stronghold of Greek Mythology had placed women in the inferior strata. The caste system pertaining to the Greek culture had placed Gods such as Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades at the top of the structure, giving them the privilege to violate and dominate women. Not just ‘The big three’ but all the male figures mentioned in the novel held an upper hand over women. The impact of this patriarchal system manifests throughout the novel in the forms of isolation, marginalization, subjugation, violence, rape etc.

Repercussions of Patriarchy on the Female Characters in the Novel

Circe was forced into the construct of a monster by the virile entities in her life. She was exposed to ceaseless injustice that compelled her to metamorphose into the ‘Witch of Aiaia’ that intimidated the world. Her first heinous act of power was the result of the betrayal from her lover, Glaucos. Circe began her witchcraft due to her desperation to transform her human lover into a God, imagining a true end for their story. But once he was transformed into a God, he discarded her for Scylla, a prettier nymph:

“Do you mean to marry Scylla?” I watched the light sweep across his face. “Is she not the most perfect creature you have ever seen? Her ankles are so small and

delicate, like the sweetest doe in the forest. The river-gods are enraged that she favors me, and I hear even Apollo is jealous.” (50)

Women were invariably objectified and validated only for their external beauty. Women were belittled into the role of pleasing the sexual instinct of men. When Circe realized she was rejected because of her appearance, she decided to bring out the internal ugliness of Scylla using her witchcraft. She transformed Scylla into a sea monster; “Father,” I said, “it was I who made Scylla a monster.” (57). This action declared her a threat to both mortals and immortals. Circe was exiled for this action to an abandoned island of Aiaia so “she can do no more harm” (66). When Helio realized that all his children were witches, he set his least favored daughter Circe as an example of the consequences of witchcraft. They framed her as a monster to be kept at bay. Her sister Pasiphae was married off to a son of Zeus, Minos, as a political alliance. They believed once married, her husband will put Pasiphae in place; “will be sure she is held to her proper place”. (66)

This example of Circe and Pasiphae exposes two dimensions of patriarchy. Gods did not impede her brothers, Perses and Aetes, despite possessing witchcraft. No attempts were made to control their power, presumably because they were men. Pasiphae was married off, intending to be kept in place by her husband Minos. Pasiphae was well aware of her reality after her marriage to Minos; “Minos does not want a queen, only a simpering jelly he keeps in a jar and breeds to death” (125).

This inflicted an urge in Pasiphae to yield her power to protect her from the hand of her husband. She used her poison to control Minos and even gave birth to the Minotaur, a man-eating monster, as a sign of power. It was Pasiphae who advised Circe to take control of her power; “The only thing that makes them listen is power” (24)

The mythology portrayed Circe as a witch who turned men into swine. The reason behind her action was never explored. The novel had given a narrative to her action. She transformed men into swine to save herself from their hands. She transmuted the captain because he raped her brutally. The very act of violence had brought out the power in her that later men feared. She was forced to use her magic to protect herself. Later in the novel, she started turning all men who threatened her into swine as an act of power:

His eyes were muddy and uncomprehending. “What—” He did not finish. His rib cage cracked and began to bulge. I heard the sound of flesh rupturing wetly, the pops of breaking bone. His nose ballooned from his face, and his legs shriveled like a fly sucked by a spider. He fell to all fours. He screamed, and his men screamed with him. It went

on for a long time. As it turned out, I did kill pigs that night after all. (159)

In another instance, in the novel, Circe cut off Trygon’s poison tale to protect her son Telegonus to protect him from Athena. Circe does such a heinous act to protect her son, who later left her for his own selfish need. She is yet again abandoned by a man she valued. It was for and because of men, Circe embraced her power. Every mentioned occasion from the novel corroborates that Circe chose violence to protect her existence and not to harm innocents.

CONCLUSION

Patriarchal culture had been the ground framework of Greek mythology. Efforts were only made to glorify and normalize male superiority. Even the mainstream literature based on Greek Mythology had only justified their dreadful mentality of subjugating women. The voice of the women was left unheard for ages. It was the intentional efforts of many female authors that brought a change to it.

Circe by the contemporary author Madeline Miller portrayed the narrative of Circe, with utmost justice to that character. Circe is one among many female characters in Greek mythology that had been portrayed as a monster because they choose to stand against the violation caused by patriarchy. There were no attempts made to view the story from their perspective. The presence and impact of the patriarchal system are blatant in the novel. From the very beginning, Circe is treated poorly. Being born unattractive and powerless had made her an outcast from her birth. Her father neglected her, forcing her mother to follow his path. Her mother Perse is a stereotypical representation of women in the novel. She felt inferior because of the social hierarchy, as she (the nymphs) belong to the lower strata. She was desperate to please her husband Helio because her existence depended on his satisfaction. Nymphs being an inferior community were hindered to minor jobs. They were denied opportunities and basic rights. Their lack of power had led to their violation throughout. They were raped and mutilated to the whims and fancies of Men. Violence evince in the form of physical, verbal, and psychological abuses in the novel. Circe herself had been a victim of rape and assault. She was verbally abused by her father, betrayed by her lover, abandoned by her son, and negated and isolated by other male gods. She was deemed unworthy by men throughout her life. Scylla, another female character in the novel, was discarded by her true love once he realized that she no longer possessed her beauty. Pasiphae and Medea possessed the power of witchcraft and thus were considered a threat to be taken care of. All the female characters mentioned in the novel, especially Circe, Perse, Scylla,

Pasiphae, and Medea had in one way or another been clear victims of patriarchal supremacy and dominance in the novel.

Finally, despite all these injustices she experienced, Circe steps down from violence and the power game, embracing mortality. This action justifies that, despite the many attempts to turn her into a monster, she culls in the path of humanity, heightening the goodness that she possesses. Perspicuously all the attempts made to dehumanize Circe went futile, proclaiming her a living martyr of patriarchy.

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