

# The Pernicious Effects of Societal Perceptions and Stereotypes on a Woman as Portrayed in *Circe* by Madeline Miller

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## Abstract

In Madeline Miller's "Circe," the plight of women is vividly portrayed through the character Circe, an immortal sorceress. The narrative delves into her struggles against patriarchal oppression and the confines of divine expectations. Circe's journey unfolds as a poignant exploration of female resilience, autonomy, and the quest for identity in a world dominated by gods and heroes. The novel challenges traditional myths, offering a compelling reflection on the enduring struggles faced by women throughout history. Miller's masterful storytelling underscores the universal theme of female empowerment, resonating with contemporary discussions on gender dynamics and the enduring quest for equality. Therefore, this paper aims to unravel the plight of women in the present society due to social stigmas that control the lives of women.

## Keywords

Madeline Miller, Patriarchy, Plight of women, Feminism, Greek mythology.

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Madeline Miller is an American novelist, who is known for her novels *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*. Growing up Miller always had an affinity towards Greek mythology and she has also worked as a tutor of Greek and Latin which ultimately paved the way for her debut novel *The Song of Achilles*, it was published in the year 2011. She has mentioned that it took ten years for her to finish the novel. This novel bagged the Orange Prize for Fiction and it is also noteworthy that she is the fourth debut novelist to receive the award. In 2018 her second novel *Circe* was published it was rated as the second- greatest novel of the 2010 by the digital magazine Paste. Her other works include *Galatea* (2022) and *Persephone* (2021).

Most readers of Greek mythology wonder at its majestic and powerful super heroes but the unfair treatment of women is left unquestioned. Even though goddesses like Aphrodite, Artemis, Hera, Medusa are given supreme importance, they are still treated as mere contraptions to produce children and their physical beauty is given more accentuation and admiration than their potency.

Miller's *Circe* is seen as the rewriting of *Odyssey* from a feminist standpoint. Circe who was introduced to the readers as a fragile and benign daughter to the sun god Helios later transforms herself into a vile and spiteful witch. Throughout her childhood, Circe believed her acquiescence and servitude to her father will make her his favorite child, her only intention is to receive some love. When she realized she will only be abhorred by everyone, she loathed her life.

Circe, who believed that being submissive, would bring her the glory which she aspires was proven wrong and all she

got in return was disrespect and humiliation. Helios, her own father called her as the disgrace of their family, the whole hall laughed at her when she said it was her power which transformed Scylla and Glaucos. All these embarrassments paved way for the evolution of Circe as one of the finest witches.

Even though Circe felt as if the whole world is against her, she continued as endurance has always been her virtue throughout. Aiaia, her island initially filled her with terror and trepidation but then later she realized it was this solitude which she was in dire need for. She finessed her sorcery and understood that transformation is her greatest gift. "Then I learned that I could bend the world to my will, as a bow is bent for an arrow" (Miller, 73).

Slowly, Circe started losing the benevolence in her. Glaucos, a mortal fisherman was Circe's first love. She admired every action of his and wanted him to be immortal so she can marry him. With the help of pharmaka, a kind magic which involves the use of potions and herbs, she transformed him into a blue skinned sea god. As an addition to Circe's misfortune Glaucos became intoxicated by his new power and started looking at another nymph, Scylla. She was known for her abilities to lure men and Circe wanted to end the madness. Hence she mixed moly, a vicious drug in Scylla's bath which turned her into an obnoxious six headed sea monster. "I used wicked pharmaka to make Glaucos a god, and then I changed Scylla" (Miller,53). Circe's jealousy over a man resulted in the birth of a blood thirsty monster. It was these incidents which metamorphosed her soft nature.

Helios and Zeus were terrified, when the new power was

discovered in Circe and her siblings. Even though the same ability was found in the sons, Perses and Aetes only the girls are targeted. Helios wanted them under control. So, he married Pasiphae to Minos saying "He will keep her in her place" (Miller, 128) and Circe was exiled. The ultimate aim of those men is to prove their dominance but honestly all their efforts to turn Circe and her abilities down miserably backfired, the more they tried to push her down the higher she flew.

Circe grew up like a wild tree; in her shade many sought solace. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus is one of those. Penelope and her son Telemachus were shattered by Odysseus' useless pride and after his death Circe accepted them, gave the place in Aiaia. Apart from being a supporter she went a step ahead and taught Penelope witchcraft "She weaves and casts spell while nymphs glide around her" (Miller, 332). Circe observed that the worth of any woman is generally constricted to their sexual attributes; she became aware that with her power she can't cure everything and everyone but her presence is obviously capable of revolutionizing the confinements of the society.

Circe evolved from an impuissant nymph to a formidable witch. Circe in the beginning of the novel was very dependent she had her hopes leaned on others, for example when Aetes went to his new kingdom Colchis, she thought he would take her with him but Aetes left her alone. Similarly when Zeus and Helios decided on her exile she thought he would come forward and talk on her behalf but Aetes stood still.

Pasiphae's absurd lust for a divine cow created the Minotaur, a flesh craving monster. No one, not even its own mother was able to tame or control it but Circe was able to temporarily restraint its hunger which ultimately saved Minos and his kingdom from the impending disaster. Pasiphae's rude comments and Helios' misjudgments never affected Circe's power no matter what.

"Nymphs are allowed to work only through the power of others. They could expect none for themselves" (Miller, 127). Nymphs are considered as menial creatures by gods and were always taken advantage of. So they heavily relied on their marriage to get hold of some sort of power. Pasiphae married Minos only because he is the son of Zeus and that marriage will aid her power and a respectable position. Even Circe initially believed that her marriage with Glaucos will bring her some reverence and she will have at least one person to support her but he failed her. Hence Circe had to stand up against everyone in order to prove the world that brilliance precedes gender.

When Circe learnt Scylla is a man eating monster, it became one of her biggest regret, not only the fact she turned a beautiful damsel into a revolting monster, it is the fact that many sailors are eaten by her on a daily basis. If Zeus wished he could have easily solved the issue but as Hermes, the god of travels and Circe's companion, mentioned gods loved their offerings therefore no one bothered helping the poor mortals. Circe learned that it is worthless to believe the so called creators and decided to rectify her own mistakes. She with

Telemachus went into the sea, with the help of her wit and her powerful draught she was able to turn Scylla into a stone. When each and every woman around obeyed the men, Circe stood alone on behalf of everyone to prove what she as a woman is capable of.

Circe in the end of the novel is unrecognizable when compared to how she was initially. She was startled by the remoteness of Aiaia in the first instance but towards the end she went into the sea all by one self to meet Trygon, it is one of the eldest and greatest creatures alive. The sting from its tail makes the most deadly weapon which can make even Zeus fold. But getting its tail was a life threatening task; the person who wins it should suffer an eternity of unfathomable pain.

Even after the Trygon mentioned that everyone in Circe's family has tried and failed the inflicted task which is to sacrifice one's life, Circe was desperate. Unlike the former Circe who would have been petrified and discouraged the moment she was told about the task, present day Circe is brave. She said, "I must try, for my son" (Miller, 244). It was her valor that fetched the sting of Trygon.

Kindness was still a chief attribute in Circe's heart until a group of Sailors took advantage of her hospitality and exploited her. When a crew of men begged Circe for food she invited them inside her palace, served them all the delicacies she had and took really good care of them. When the men found that there is no men to guard they one by one took advantage of her. "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" (Miller, 164).

Once she is wrecked thoroughly, finally Circe was able to say the spell and right away their flesh ruptured and she could hear their bones breaking. She transformed all those men into literal pigs. From then she started waiting for such men to come to Aiaia and felt so much delight in seeing them suffer.

It is also important to note that Helios has never been unsuccessful in failing Circe but still as a daughter she expected Helios will intervene when those men were tearing her down. She thought he would be offended by the filthy mortals raping his daughter, she hoped his golden chariot would come and they will be burned to ashes for the molestation of his daughter, but the immutable fact is the no one showed up.

Regardless of how much Circe suffered she understood her father won't be bothered by it so she resolved to make him bend and get what she wants. She summoned the great god of sun, revealed that she helped Prometheus in his court when Zeus was punishing him and if Zeus knew this there will definitely be a war between the Titans and the Olympians. And this instigated fear in Helios' heart that he persuaded Zeus and lifted Circe's exile. When he snapped at her that she is the worst of his children Circe added that "I have a better idea. I will do as I please, and when you count your children, leave me out" (Miller, 313).

The docile girl who was lying at her father's feat has progressed to become this new woman who is unbothered and

unafraid of Helios' faculty. Circe who was devastated by seeing Prometheus being tortured resolved to torture men herself. These people made sure to prove that being compassionate and tolerant is unnecessary. Circe's circumstances proved that when a woman wants to survive she has to prove her dominance and it is undeniable that a woman is safe and secure when men fear her.

Gentleness was one of Circe's distinct traits, but it went unacknowledged. She saw everyone as her kin but the people around only saw her as a disdain to their name. In the concluding phase of the novel, her voluntary forfeit of immortality for a lasting connection with her beloved Telemachus, her willingness to sacrifice her own life to the Trygon in order to safeguard her son, all of this proves until what extent she will go to care for her loved ones. The unfortunate misunderstanding between Circe and Helios had deprived them of the possibilities of bring a truly magnificent family.

Circe stands as an exemplar of how detrimental societal pressure and male chauvinism are for an independent woman. When everyone thought they won by alienating her, Circe resurged back fiercer as an incentive for every woman who was confined by incongruous laws of the society. She could have accustomed herself like all the other nymphs around and continued living the same dreadful life but it was her uncompromising nature and the agony inside which transformed her to a vanquishing hawk, as her name implies.

Miller's skillful narration beautifully balances the stories from Greek mythology with the contemporary ceaseless themes like identity, feminism and complexities in the lives of women etc. The novel is not just a mere retelling of an epic but tale that explicates how the unfair treatment of women is still an unfading factor in our lives, centuries pass by and still women are treated miserably. Hence Miller's dynamic work adds another jewel to the crown of feminist literature.

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