



WITCH DAUGHTERS OF HELIOS: A COMPARATIVE CHARACTER STUDY OF CHARACTERS CIRCE AND PASIPHAE IN CIRCE BY MADELINE MILLER

Prof. Dr. PARUL TYAGI

Principal
Rani Bhagyawati Mahila Mahavidyalaya
Bijnor 246701
(UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Throughout literary history, witches are often seen in one particular light: vengeful, powerful and evil. While the word “witch” has its etymological roots in Old English, the concept has prototypes much older and geographically widespread. There is a myriad of witch stories, one of which is about Circe a Goddess witch from the heroic text Odysseys by Homer and her golden-haired sister Pasiphae. One with wild passions for Glaucos and an enchantress behind the sea monster Scylla. While the other sister, the queen of Crete and mother of Minotaur, a two-horned beast. The paper explores Madeline Miller’s Circe a myth and a strongly uphold adaption of Homer’s classic poem The Odyssey. It is told from the perspective of the witch of Aiaia, the daughter of Helios, Circe. This paper examines the comparative study of the characters: Circe and Pasiphae.

Keywords: Greek Mythology, beauty, women as objects, body.

INTRODUCTION

“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.” (Miller 2018: 1) Thus begins Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, a reinterpretation of significant Greek mythological events and figures through a female-centered lens. The novel was published in 2018 and incorporates a rejection of patriarchal norms, empowerment, and self-reliance. In resonance with modern-day challenges women face, this paper details how the growing power of women is

Prof. Dr. PARUL TYAGI

1 Page



considered a threat to society. Circe the protagonist is the firstborn of Helios, the God of the Sun, a Titan and Perses, a sea nymph and Pasiphae a second born with a twin son Perse. At first glance, they both appear to be quite different from each other. Perse is brash and arrogant, whereas Circe is calm and gentle. The respect they hold for their father also varies. But coming to the middle pages it comes to light that their nature is contrasting and similar at times to each other.

In this paper, I'll examine the first phase of our heroines as the Nymphs of Helios' Castle, their position, the prophecies Helios gave on their birth, the treatment of the female body by other characters, Pasiphae as an idol candidate to marry the blood of Zeus and their role as sisters to their brothers. Lastly, I'll discuss the second phase, the Rising Witches threat to patriarchal norms, denial of their powers by heroes and consideration of it as a threat to the world, and exile of Circe to Aiaia which demonstrates how powerful women are forced to hide under the dark abyss of patriarchal norms, a reunion of sisters at Crete for the birth of the Minotaur and the hate in eyes of Minos for Pasiphae's honesty which indicates female genital mutilation. It will develop an understanding of how a woman uses all of her strength and powers against men's views of her body as female.

Nymphs of Helios' Castle

1.1 Prophecies by Helios

Every time Perse gave birth, Helios told a prophecy for each child. Circe who had thin yellow eyes and a strange thin voice was told to make a fair match which wasn't enough to please Perse, just a fair match, "surely, she'll marry the son of Zeus." (Miller 2018: 3). A disappointment took over the eyes of Perse when Helios uttered a few sentences to knock her off from imagination, "No. Her hair is streaked like a lynx. And her chin. There is a sharpness to it that is less than pleasing" (Miller 3). She longed to wear the finest robes to Zeus' gatherings and her longingness was quenched by her second daughter Pasiphae who came to this world with her brother Perses. 'My father blessed them both with one hand. "You," he said to my luminous sister Pasiphaë. "You will marry an eternal son of Zeus." He used his prophecy voice, the one that spoke of future certainties. My mother glowed to hear it, thinking of the robes she would wear to Zeus' feasts. "And you," he said to my brother, in his regular voice, resonant, clear as a summer's morning. "Every son reflects upon his mother" (Miller 2018: 6).' This demonstrates that women in Ancient Greek were destined to marry a suitable suitor which is evidence of the subordination of women in society. Their purpose in life was to present themselves as the epitome of beauty. The prettiest will marry Zeus's son while the one with a brittle chin will just make a fair match. We live in a culture that makes it close to impossible not to be compared with other women. Beauty standards



particularly relate to feminism as they imply that women are mere objects, appreciated solely for their physical appearance. It reduces them to objects of sexual pleasure and gratification.

Pasiphae was 'luminous' as mentioned by Circe. She was divinely resplendent and more beautiful than any rainbow which further made her a suitable bride for the son of Zeus. She and her brother loved to pick on Circe. They called her names and compared her features with terrifying things: her eyes are yellow as piss, her voice screechy as an owl and her face as ugly as a goat. They called her a hawk. Their beauty stood as a power to establish dominion over all plain-looking cousins. Beauvoir in *Second Sex*, explicitly says,

Through compliments and admonishments, through images and words, she discovers the meaning of the words pretty and ugly; she soon knows that to be pleased is to be pretty as a picture; she tries to resemble an image, she disguises herself, she looks at herself in the mirror, she compares herself to princesses and fairies from tales. (1949 [2010: 304])

It establishes an understanding that women are bound to the societal standard of women's outer appearance and live their bodies as objects for another's gaze. Pasiphae knew from the beginning that she was beautiful enough to marry Zeus' son which gave her the power to call the rest lot unattractive or less worthy. Perse the mother herself differentiated between Circe and Pasiphae because of their beauty. Even though *Circe* was published in the 21st century, it talks about the problems that women faced in the 19th and 20th centuries as well as today. Thus, Circe is closely related to feminism.

1.2 Life in Helios Court

Circe and Pasiphae's courtly life was like a stem between a rose and its thorn. Circe looked up to her father right from the beginning. She was seen mostly at her father's feet and narrated, 'At my father's feet, the whole world was made of gold. The light came from everywhere at once, his yellow skin, his lambent eyes, the bronze flashing of his hair. His flesh was hot as a brazier, and I pressed as close as he would let me, like a lizard to noontday rocks (Miller 2018: 4)'. She sought knowledge by asking the same question from everyone. 'What would happen if a mortal saw me?' she asked her father. 'Will you tell me what is a mortal like?' she questioned the bleeding Prometheus. When her youngest brother Aeetes was born, she found a constant companion in him, unlike Pasiphae and Perses. He was very sharp and often summoned by Helios to sit on all his councils. They together went to a deserted shore and talked for hours. Aeetes would ask her questions making Circe peep into her inner self.



‘.....he would ask me questions that I had never thought of and could barely understand, like: How does your divinity feel? “What do you mean?” I said. “Here,” he said, “let me tell you how mine feels. Like a column of water that pours ceaselessly over itself, and is clear down to its rocks. Now, you.”’ (Miller 2018: 23)

While Pasiphae and Perses stayed mostly out of Helios palace, they preferred to stay at Oceanos’ their grandfather’s Halls. There they together picked and played pranks on infant naiads and river lords. Unlike Circe who spent every second on her father’s feet, the rest of the bunch didn’t look much up to their father. They secluded themselves in their chores and preferences. One day Helios offered Circe a chance to ride with him in his golden chariot to see his fifty pure-white heifers. When she was back from her little day trip Perses and Pasiphae mocked her for being so ignorant by calling the heifers beautiful.

‘Perses laughed. “She doesn’t know! Have you ever heard of anyone so stupid?” “Never,” my sister said. I shouldn’t have asked, but I was still drifting in my thoughts, seeing those severed bodies sprawled on marble floors. “What don’t I know?” My sister’s perfect mink face. “That he fucks them, of course. That’s how he makes new ones. He turns into a bull and sires their calves, then cooks the ones that get old. That’s why everyone thinks they are immortal.”’ (Miller 2018: 9)

1.3 Marriage of Pasiphae

Pasiphae was betrothed to Minos, an eternal son of Zeus and king of Crete. ‘She had been angling for it a long time, sitting in my father’s lap and purring of how she longed to bear a good

lord children,’ (Miller 2018: 25) Circe narrated. Even though Minos was a son of Zeus, he was still a mortal and this demotion dissatisfied the mother and twin brother. But there was no line of worry on Pasiphae’s forehead, she stood there smiling and eagerly waiting to be married which gave a strange feeling to Circe and me as well. Pasiphae would have rebelled, the contempt she held for her father was expected to vent out here. Did she submit herself to the abyss of darkness of patriarchy? In the halls of Helios, the only thing women do is seduce other men and get married. Even though Minos was a mortal, he was the son of the leader of Olympians and Pasiphae was happy to rule Crete as its Queen. Pasiphae’s position reflects many cases in which ancient Greek women were given in arranged marriages.

The Rising Witches

2.1 Ungrateful Glaucus, Scylla the sea monster and Banishment

Prof. Dr. PARUL TYAGI

4 Page



The curiosity of knowing mortals was witnessed multiple times in Circe. She was seen asking questions about mortals frequently. Even on Pasiphae's wedding day, she was excited to see Minos' court members, advisers, his vassals and astronomers, cupbearers and servants. When she met Glaucos, a fisherman, he looked up to her with utmost dignity. He addressed her as a kind goddess which came as a surprise to her. She narrated,

“I had stood beside my father's light. I had held Aeëtes in my arms, and my bed was heaped with thick-wooled blankets woven by immortal hands. But it was not until that moment that I think I had ever been warm.” (Miller 2018: 33)

The warmth they exchanged was something new for Circe. She looked forward to seeing him. She loved to watch him perform daily tasks. Such constant stare made him feel conscious about his stature. Once he said, “I know I am ugly to you.” (Miller 2018: 33) Circe was happiest and wanted everything to keep him with her. She asked her grandmother to bless his net with fish in return a promise was made not to lie with Glaucos. Days went by the warmth they shared increased and now all Circe wanted was Glaucos. The only solution to it was to transform Glaucos into God. This was the beginning of witchcraft in Circe's life. She brewed a Pharmaka and transformed Glaucos into a God. The word spread among gods and it was considered a miracle of fate. The magic of Circe remained in the dark while Glaucos, now known as sea god drooled over alcohol in gatherings of Gods. He even became fond of a nymph Scylla and when Circe confronted him, he said, “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 favours me, and I hear even Apollo is jealous.” (Miller 2018: 47) He denied Circe's magic powers and called his transformation an act of fates. This is when Circe brewed her second pharmaka and poured it into the bath of Scylla leading her to become one of the most furious sea monsters.

Not even one among the gods believed in Circe's power. When she confessed to Helios that she was the reason behind Glaucos and Scylla's transformation, he merely mocked her. She stood firmly on her statement and when it went out of hands Helios shut her up with his raised voice and furious heat. It was Aeetes who confirmed Helios of Circe's witchcraft and that's how Helios meet Zeus to give her lifetime banishment to Aiaia, a stranded island.

If we look closely, right from Glaucos to other Gods to Helios, everybody held prejudice against Circe. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) suggest that because society forbade women from expressing themselves through creative outlets, their creative powers were channelled into psychologically self-destructive behaviour and subversive actions.



In *Limited to the Body: Madeline Miller's Circe as a Feminist Revisionist Myth* by Sydney Laseter, a scholar of Universiteit van Amsterdam says, "It is only when she is alone, exiled to Aiaia that she is able to free herself of this conditioning. She fully occupies her island, climbing the hills and exploring the caves, "drunk, as the wines and nectar in my father's halls had never made me. No wonder I have been so slow, I thought. All this while I have been a weaver without wool, a ship without the sea" (Miller, 2018: 71). She finds everything about her that was lacking in Helios' halls is enough to fill her house in isolation. And she notes when she began to have lonely thoughts, she turned to the forest for comfort. Miller is using the connection of the female witch to nature, as a place of comfort and connection."

2.2 Pasiphae Rules Crete with her Poisons

When Circe was making friends among the nature of Aiaia and shared passion with Hermes, a messenger god, she was summoned by Pasiphae to Crete for an urgent task. This is where we get a brief description of Pasiphae's life as a witch of Crete. The first sight of Pasiphae is seen in labours. She lay on a purple couch and even in pain she looked beautiful and commanded the room. Pasiphae was with a child who hasn't moved for days. It stayed in her fetus and needed to be cut out. When the child was out, he was not a common one, he was Minotaur a bull-shaped boy.

"From the cage, a wet chewing sound. The finches had gone silent. "The gods sent a bull, pure white, to bless the kingdom of Minos. The Queen admired the creature and desired to see it more closely, yet it ran from any who came near. So I built the hollow likeness of a cow, with a place inside for her to sit. I gave it wheels, so we might roll it to the beach while the creature slept. I thought it would only be...I did not—" "Oh, please," my sister spat. "The world will be ended before you stammer to your finish. I fucked the sacred bull, all right? Now get the thread." (Miller 2018: 109)

Not even once Pasiphae's voice stumbled. She did it and had no shame. Minos was known for having affairs. He despised Pasiphae's power like any other man.

"The hate in Minos' eyes was a living thing. "Foul harpy! It was your spell that caused their deaths! All you breed is evil! I should have ripped that beast from your cursed womb before it could be born!" "But you did not dare, did you? You know how your dear father Zeus dotes on such creatures. How else can all his bastard heroes win their reputations?" She cocked her head. "In fact, shouldn't you be slaving to take up a sword yourself? Oh, but I forgot. You have no taste for a killing unless it is serving girls. Sister, truly, you should learn this spell. You need only—" (Miller 2018: 116)



The society these two witches existed in would not give any acknowledgement as powerful goddesses. Pasiphae herself was humiliated for her powers. The witchcraft she practised was considered a threat to Minos. In support of a misogynistic outlook, the women of Greek mythology are often depicted with a host of negative emotions: anger, jealousy, promiscuity, revenge and even male subversion. To claim that these hostile personified forces (known as gods) are exclusively female, though, would also be a mistake.

Once Hermes told a story about Pasiphae's early wedding days to Circe. When Minos used to order any girl to his bedchamber, she cursed him with a spell to turn his sperms into scorpions and snakes. Whenever he lay with a woman, she died naked on that very bed.

A hundred girls Pasiphae informed Circe. Unfortunately for Pasiphae, the custom in Ancient Greece was that women were not allowed to instigate a divorce, this was the man's choice, so she was bound to her unwanted marriage and worked according to her instincts.

This misogynist attitude was common among gods as well. It was Minos who cheated on Poseidon by sacrificing the brown bull when he had to sacrifice the golden bull. He kept the bull in his herds to glorify himself. Who was punished for this? Pasiphae! She was cursed with lust for the king's finest bull.

2.3 Confrontation between Pasiphae and Cerci

All the help Circe did right from delivering that child to brewing a potion to diminish the hunger for human flesh in Minotaur, Circe expected a little bit of kindness from Pasiphae. All she got from her were the same harsh words. Right from growing up in Helios' palace to walking their own paths, the sister's relationship remained the same. The anger throated Circe and told Pasiphae, "I'm not your dog, Pasiphae, nor your bear to be baited." (Miller 2018: 126)

Seeing this behaviour of Cerci, her sister smirks and pities her for still expecting reward and appreciation for being obedient. She says, "Let me tell you a truth about Helios and all the rest. They do not care if you are good. They barely care if you are wicked. The only thing that makes them listen is power." (Miller 2018: 127) She mimics her mother and other goddesses in Helios' palace where she demonstrates what we receive when we ask something for being good, "Oh, sweetheart, it cannot be done. Oh, darling, you must learn to live with it. And have you asked Helios? You know I do nothing without his word." (Miller 2018: 127)



Pasiphae exclaims that she has seen Circe being bullied and squashed a thousand times including herself who left no chance to be mean, but still, Circe came back the next day. This is when Pasiphae says those legendary words, “They take what they want, and in return, they give you only your own shackles.” (Miller 2018: 127) She says that the whole arena of gods and goddesses was surprised when Circe came out as a witch. But she wasn’t, she knew from a long back that Circe loathed all of them as she did. She believed this is where their power comes from.

CONCLUSION

In this analysis of Madeline Miller's Circe, the researcher found that Circe and Pasiphae, the witch daughters of Helios appeared to be different in the beginning but they both fought the same demons of the dark. Pasiphae is the realist while Circe is a witch of imagination. While Pasiphae came out of her bubble of imagination at an early age, it took Circe a great deal of time. Circe craved warmth and love. She was seen seeking love from Glaucos, Ulysses, Daedalus and Telegonous. In the last section 2.3, it all made sense. Pasiphae called Circe for help because she knew men like Aeetes, Perses, and Helios wouldn’t wait to scorn her. They would have made her beg for crumbs.

She says that Minos cannot do any harm to her because of her power. He knows what she would do to him. Helios sent Circe to an abandoned island to keep his precious alliance with Zeus. Crisp and clear is what Pasiphae sounded throughout Miller’s Circe.

The researcher also found a form of patriarchal culture in Greek mythology and Ancient Greek. The challenge women with or without power faced. Traces of which are still prominent in modern days.

REFERENCES

- Miller, Madeline. Circe. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. Feminist Theory: A Reader, 1952
- Lasetar, Sydney. 2020, ‘Limited to the Body: Madeline Miller’s Circe as a Feminist Revisionist Myth’, MA Thesis, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam.
- MLA. Gilbert, Sandra M. The Madwoman in the Attic : the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. New Haven :Yale University Press, 1979.

Prof. Dr. PARUL TYAGI

8 Page



PUNE RESEARCH ISSN 2454 - 3454

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH VOL 9, ISSUE 1

- Feminist Approaches to Literature by Kate O'Connor at <http://writersinspire.org/content/feminist-approaches-literature>. Published on 03 August 2012. Accessed on 05 December 2022.
- The (Imperfect) Feminism of Ancient Greek Myth by Allison J. van Tilborgh at <https://medium.com/interfaith-now/the-imperfect-feminism-of-ancient-greek-myth-4a67ed87d5e2>. Published on 01 April 2020. Accessed on 06 December 2022.
- The Tragedy Of Greek Goddesses: Feminism In Ancient Greece by Bethany Williams at <https://www.thecollector.com/the-tragedy-of-greek-goddesses-feminism-in-ancient-greece/>. Published on 10 April 2021. Accessed on 06 December 2022.

Prof. Dr. PARUL TYAGI

9 Page

VOL 9, ISSUE 1 www.puneresearch.com/english **JAN – FEB 2023**
(IMPACT FACTOR 3.94) INDEXED, PEER-REVIEWED / REFEREED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL