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Revisiting Homer in the Novels of Madeline Miller: A Contemporary Approach to Mythology

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Abstract

Contemporary literature has witnessed a renaissance of mythological retellings. While mythologies enjoy a timeless and universal appeal, their perceived flaws and ambiguities have now been subjected to scrutiny. Modern writers have scrutinised these lapses through their contemporary lens and offered their interpretations in keeping with the present-day scenario. This paper focuses on Madeline Miller's two novels, *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), both of which are retellings of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* respectively. Miller has reimagined the Greek epics from the perspectives of marginal characters and rewritten the script to deliver justice to the hushed voices. The present study highlights the contemporary approach to mythology by examining Miller's rendition of Homer. Analytical and interpretative methodologies will be employed to evaluate the themes of feminism, queer relationships and gender roles in the novels under consideration.

Keywords: mythology, retelling epics, feminism, gender, sexuality

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RETELLING MYTHOLOGY: A BACKGROUND

Since the last few decades, literature, art and film studies have ruthlessly interrogated and scraped the glossy surface of established hegemonies, hierarchies and stereotypes pertaining to gender, class, race etc. which had been circulating and perpetuating erroneous notions and practices for centuries. But thanks to a much needed exposition, no single voice or sect can dominate the narrative now, not without some challenge at least. One such trend that debunked and toppled the existing hierarchies is a recourse to mythology as containing and disseminating malicious stereotypes and beliefs. The misrepresentation and underrepresentation of certain sections like women, LGBTQ+ community and various races have kept them subjugated for very long. The characters who have been kept in the shadows and peripheries in mythology acquire the centre stage in the retellings.

Writers like Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik, Margaret Atwood and Madeline Miller have woven their own narratives out of age-old mythical tales and given us a glimpse into the untold stories of marginalized characters. In the originals, these voiceless, passive and invisible characters only exist to magnify the central characters. In an interview Madeline Miller contends that it is important to "revisit these stories because there were many voices that were silenced in the original version … it's important to go back and open the texts up and challenge the texts." Of course, the tradition of retelling myths did not originate in their writings. It has been prevalent since ancient times. Myths and legends have been passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition in which bards would often add their own improvisations. In Miller's own words, "There's no such thing as a definitive myth … It's not even certain whether Homer was a person". The classical Greek stories have been retold by Virgil, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare in their own versions. The Augustan writers like Pope and Dr Johnson imitated the classical poets. The Romantics drew upon myths to represent their belief in the pristine, ideal and divine nature. In the works of twentieth century modernist writers like James Frazer, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, myths acquired an altogether different purpose. These writers incorporated popular myths in an experimental and chaotic style to reflect the fragmented and degenerate postwar world.

Almost a century later, mythology and classical texts continue to invite contemporary writers to experiment. In the current literary scene, we have a panoply of novels inspired from Greek myths. The credit of bringing the renaissance of mythological retellings and alternative readings into the mainstream reading culture of the 21st century can be attributed to the likes of Miller, Atwood and Divakaruni.

THE SONG OF ACHILLES (2011)

Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* has been all the rage ever since it came out in 2011. It is also the winner of the Orange Prize for fiction. The title of the novel gives us a glimpse into the side of Achilles that we do not get to see much of in the *Iliad*. The word 'iliad' means 'the song of Troy'. In the *Iliad* when Agamemnon's Embassy comes to Achilles' tent, he sings and plays upon the lyre beautifully. Miller foregrounds this soft and gentle side of Achilles who is otherwise remembered for his hubris, rage, brawn and brutality. This is one way in which she alters his legend. Her next powerful stroke is placing a side character, Patroclus at the heart of the novel. Achilles is neither the narrator nor the singular protagonist. It is Patroclus, the closest comrade of Achilles. We experience the story through his first-person narration and perceive other characters as seen through his lens. Maria Antonietta Struzziero draws our attention to the "strategy of transfocalisation" utilised by Miller in her novel: "she enters the story from its margins and adopts the point of view of Patroclus" (135). Jeremy Rosen defines this contemporary literary practice as "minor-character elaboration" in which a minor character

from a classic becomes the protagonist of a new work. This move enables an author to "simultaneously exploit both the timeless value of the classics and ostensibly oppositional political energies" (Rosen 144). Miller chose Patroclus as her narrator because she was piqued by the mystery surrounding this quiet character. He is described as the most beloved companion of Achilles but we do not see much interaction between them. He is mostly seen in the background, lying low. But when Patroclus is killed, Achilles lets all hell loose on the Trojans. Achilles' intense reaction intrigued Miller who speculated that their relationship was possibly "implied" but not "spelled out" in Homer. "Patroclus becomes Achilles' conscience, his anchor, his touchstone … Achilles doesn't always realise that but when it's taken away from him, we see what happens to him. (Miller).

Achilles and Patroclus' Love Story: Miller's Masterstroke. The structure of the novel is dominantly hinged on the love story of Achilles and Patroclus; the Trojan war serves as a foil to their relationship. In the *Iliad* Patroclus is older than Achilles but Miller makes them quite closer in age. Since ancient times, there have been debates about the kind of relationship they shared. It is not clearly defined in Homer whether they were friends or lovers. Some later Greek works portray them as lovers, one example is *The Myrmidons*, a play by Aeschylus. Plato in his dialogue *Symposium* sees them as not just lovers but as ideal lovers. The nature of their relationship and interaction that gets hidden behind-the-action in Homer is the fertile space Miller chooses to cultivate into a garden of romance. Miller's master move is the depiction of the tender relationship between Achilles and Patroclus as they grow from boyhood into young men.

Patroclus is awestruck by Achilles' youthful grace ever since he sees him at the Olympics. After being exiled from his kingdom, Patroclus is taken in by King Peleus. It is in Pelion that Patroclus gets to see Achilles from close quarters. Achilles' charm lies in his "unself-consciousness" of his godly beauty. He knows he is destined to be the "Aristos Achaion" (Best of the Greeks) but he accepts it as a matter-of-fact, rather than out of arrogance. Initially, Patroclus is even envious and tries to ignore him but he finds himself uncontrollably drawn to him. Because other boys in the court are afraid of Patroclus due to his dark past, he finds it much more comfortable to segregate and hide himself. It is Achilles who finds him and encourages him to come out of his seclusion. He extends his hand of friendship to Patroclus, invites him to his princely lessons, and they become inseparable. Achilles soon declares Patroclus as his "Therapon" (companion; brother-in-arms) in front of his father. He is protective of Patroclus from the beginning. This is clear from the fact that Achilles does not give upon him despite the disapproval of his mother, Thetis. Gradually, we see Patroclus becoming livelier, having found a comfort nook and purpose to live in Achilles.

We see Achilles from the perspective of Patroclus. In the portrayal of his lover, Patroclus is infinitely poetic and rich in similes, finding him ethereally beautiful at the touch of every light that falls upon him. Indeed it even appears that Patroclus deifies Achilles and worships his otherworldliness. He never fails to highlight Achilles' poise, "his gleaming hair", "his nimble feet", and "the inhuman deftness of his fingers". Shelby Judge in her thesis *Contemporary Feminist Adaptations of Greek Myth* (2022) observes, "In choosing to accentuate Achilles' beauty and overwrite his wrath, Miller's text preserves his legend and suggests that contempt for apparently feminine traits in men is a relatively modern concept" (152). The love scenes are delineated with delicacy and passion: "I did not need to look; his fingers were etched into my memory, slender and petal-veined, strong and quick and never wrong" (Miller 96).

Miller portrays Chiron, a centaur as a nurturing parent figure as well as a mentor who gives space to Achilles and Patroclus as they come of age. Their days at the rose cave are idyllic and conducive to their individual growth as well as to the blossoming of their romance. "Shortly after Achilles' birthday, they make love for the first time, thus moving into adulthood

… Their love-making marks … a step towards self-awareness and recognition of their most authentic gender identity" (Struzziero 139). Thus, the novel is also a bildungsroman. Miller has decentralised the theme of war and glory. Instead, she makes it a story about two young men growing together, discovering their sexuality and exploring themselves. Such a refashioning of the original makes it a lot more relatable to the modern readers.

The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus serves as a timeless paragon of love. Their love is tested several times, mostly by Thetis who plants one obstacle after another for Patroclus. However, that does not drive a wedge between them. When Patroclus goes to Scyros to find Achilles, the latter proudly announces "My husband has come for me" (123). This instance further highlights Achilles' identification with the feminine. Achilles is disguised as one of Deidameia's dancing girls but he is not ashamed of his costume. He is amused to play this role, making girly gestures and expressions. Achilles' drag calls to mind Judith Butler's postmodern definition of gender, according to which, gender is a performance rather than a fixed state. Thus, Miller subverts the archetype of the masculine hero.

Patroclus has a self-effacing love for Achilles. Even though he is deeply hurt over Achilles sleeping with Deidameia, the Princess of Scyros, his love for him does not alter. He ascribes it to the trusting nature of Achilles who was led into that deceptive arrangement by his mother. Likewise, Achilles stands by him when Odysseus and his men come to claim Patroclus as a warrior bound by his oath to save Helen. Through the same-sex relationship of Achilles and Patroclus, Miller fosters compassion and encourages an open mindset towards the LGBTQ+ community. Odysseus teases the couple: "One tent's enough, I hope? I've heard that you prefer to share. Rooms and bedrolls both, they say … Come now, there's no need for shame – it's a common enough thing among boys" (Miller 165). Patroclus is worried about Achilles' honour but the latter stands up for their relationship unapologetically, "I have given enough to them. I will not give them this" (166).

The Tragic Hero Achilles: Fall from Grace. Miller's portrayal of Achilles draws upon his innocence, beauty and feminine softness. "Rather than exemplifying oppressive masculinity, Miller's Achilles clashes with such patriarchal power, as is epitomised in Agamemnon" (Judge 153). Achilles is not interested in partaking in the Trojan war, but wily Odysseus cajoles him into it saying he will "miss (his) chance at immortality" and "grow old in obscurity". This is a turning point in their life. War and glory begins to get the better of a tender Achilles. Readers wince at the arrogance slowly tainting Achilles' innocence when he joins Agamemnon's army. All the warriors shower him with reverence which goes to his head. He argues with Odysseus, "We are each generals … I will take Agamemnon's counsel, but not his orders" (170).

These new developments have an impact on Achilles and Patroclus' relationship: albeit living in the same tent, there creeps a distance between the two. Their love has not diminished but their principles propel them in two opposite directions. Whereas Achilles is indulging in his raids, Patroclus strikes a friendship with the war-slave Briseis, who admires his humaneness. Achilles seems to revel in killing without being conscience-stricken. It is Patroclus who "release him from it, and make him Achilles again" (212) by reminding him of his humanity.

Situation aggravates as Achilles' pride reaches its peak. He offends Agamemnon saying "What is your army without me?" (266), finally refusing to fight for him any longer. This brings about a change of fortune; peripeteia. It must be pointed out that Patroclus stands by Achilles even in his disgrace but he does not condone his wrong acts. He goes against Achilles when the latter allows Agamemnon to take away Briseis from him, leaving her vulnerable for exploitation. Even Achilles acknowledges that Patroclus is a better man than he is.

Achilles' inflated sense of self takes a final toll on their lives. Unable to bear the losing reputation of an unrelenting Achilles, Patroclus puts on Achilles' armour and goes to fight the Trojans, culminating in his death at the hands of Prince Hector. When Patroclus dies, Achilles

goes berserk and wreaks havoc on the Trojan warriors. Miller's description of Achilles' grief is palpably heart-wrenching. At the news of Patroclus' death, Achilles' instinctive reaction is to reach for his sword to kill himself, only to find that he had given it away to his beloved before parting. He pulls out his golden hair from his head and wails Patroclus' name. He does not eat or sleep. Most importantly, he refuses to cremate Patroclus' body for several days. He cradles Patroclus' corpse all night, and covers it to muffle its smell. Once he has cremated him, he wants their ashes mingled in an urn. King Priam's visit to Achilles' tent to retrieve his son's corpse is one of the most touching scenes in the novel which captures the human predicament wrought by wars as well as human ego:

> That is – your friend?
>
> '*Philtatos*', Achilles says, sharply. Most beloved. 'Best of men, and slaughtered by your son.'
>
> Yet I beg you to have mercy. In grief, men must help each other, though they are enemies … It is right to seek peace for the dead. You and I both know there is no peace for those who love after. (333-334)

Miller remarks on the double-edged destiny of Achilles: "Achilles has to make this choice that he can live a long and happy life and no one will ever remember his name or he can die young and be famous forever" and he chooses the latter. Thus, Achilles is a tragic hero. His hamartia is his hubris which brings upon his nemesis. When he undergoes anagnorisis, he is unable to bear the consequences and meets a tragic end. His downfall teaches us that power and glory is elusive, so we must stay grounded. His fate urges us to examine our own choices because they have a decisive impact on our lives.

The Gentle Hero Patroclus: a Healer in the World of Fighters. It is Patroclus who sings the song of Achilles in his soft and compassionate voice that reverberates throughout the novel. "By designing the narrative from Patroclus' point of view, Miller places empathy at the heart of her literary work. This is a striking contrast to the *Iliad*, which centered around Achilles and his militaristic feats" (Siderakis 2).

From the beginning Patroclus' opinion of himself is very low since he grew up loathed and looked down upon. Loss of a simple mother as well as rejection and contempt of his father instilled a feeling of worthlessness in him. Siderakis highlights the effect of parents' insensitivity towards their children: "Being an impressionable youth, Patroclus begins to internalize his father's glaring lack of empathy for his plight … Due to his father's attitude, Patroclus begins to define himself in terms of all that he cannot do – rather than his positive qualities" (9). He uses negative adjectives for himself: " … small, slight. I was not fast. I was not strong. I could not sing" (Miller 1). This self-deprecation continues to echo even after he grows into an adult: "I was not a prince, with honour at stake … or a hero whose skill would be missed. I was an exile, a man with no status or rank" (228). It is a well-established fact that poor parenting has a long-lasting adverse impact on the psyche of children. They often grow up with low self-esteem and look for external validation. Being raised by highly censorious parents makes these children develop compassion for others. They often become people-pleasers, always trying to avoid discomfort for others, and trying to avoid being a burden. Patroclus is no exception.

It is no wonder then that Patroclus' attitude towards Achilles is very magnanimous and forgiving, since Achilles was the first person who validated his existence. Patroclus' empathy extends towards everyone. He advocates for rescuing the war slaves by convincing Achilles to save Briseis from Agamemnon's sexual exploitation. While grieving Patroclus' death, Briseis describes him as gentle. Menelaus also describes him as being kind to everyone. These epithets were not commonly used for ancient Greek heroes. Thus, Patroclus stands out in this respect. He is also shown as being a healer. He is a natural at operating on the wounded soldiers and healing them without causing them much hurt. He becomes a beloved surgeon and healer

appreciated by the warriors for his delicacy. Offering an anti-war reading of the novel, Siderakis underscores the "profound sense of pacifism" that can be ignited in readers through Patroclus' empathetic lens. Patroclus is disturbed by the sight of a blood-stained Achilles. This often makes him ponder over the grief of the victims' families. Instead of visualising a glorious battlefield, he sees "a burst of spraying splinters and bronze and blood. A writhing mass of men and screams …" (225). His childhood trauma also contributes to his blood revulsion. Yet he steps up to the occasion when the circumstances demand. He dons on Achilles' armour and charges into the battlefield while Achilles is sulking in the tent. This alone proves his courage as well as self-sacrificing love for Achilles. Patroclus is a strong warrior as he kills Sarpedon, the son of Zeus himself. He avoids going to the war scene simply because he is a peace-loving human. By foregrounding Patroclus' role as a pacifist and relegating Achilles' killing feats in the background, Miller condemns war.

Thus, the true hero of Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is not Achilles but Patroclus. When Patroclus dies, Briseis snaps at Achilles, "You care more for him in death than in life … He was worth ten of you. Ten! And you sent him to his death! … I do not know why he ever loved you. You care only for yourself!" (323-324) Achilles' rage which flares up in the argument with Agememnon comes a full circle after he kills Hector. Afterwards, there is no action, no life, no breath. The lull is only broken when Achilles returns Hector's body to Priam. But now Aristos Achaion has nothing to life for. He embraces his prophesised death with a smile as Paris guided by God Apollo shoots an arrow at his back. Achilles' self-reflection and eventual reunion with Patroclus in the Underworld reiterates the novel's primary theme, that is, timeless love.

***CIRCE* (2018)**

Miller's second novel *Circe* revisits *The Odyssey* and replaces Odysseus with the titular heroine, who is known for turning Odysseus' men into pigs. The first few chapters of the novel trace the neglected and lonesome childhood of Circe, a sea nymph, undistinguished, bullied and scorned by her family. Women's perspectives have seldom received any space in any epic. Miller states, "Women have been traditionally shut out of Epic … Their lives have not been considered important enough for epic … The topics of epic are all very traditionally male – warfare, inheritance, vengeance." But Miller breaks this tradition. Like a sculptor, she carves Circe's character into a dauntless, clever and resourceful goddess commanding respect and fear, and at the same time possessing human qualities of compassion and self-reflection. "Miller's decision to use first-person point-of-view serves as a meta-reclamation of Circe's story from millennia of male storytellers" (Thomas 2).

Circe's Childhood: a Witch among Gods. Miller initially casts Circe as a stereotypical passive and invisible female character. Born to the Sun God, Helios and the crafty nymph Perse, Circe is immediately dismissed as a disappointment, endowed with neither beauty nor great powers. Her siblings sneer at her. To avoid attention, she mutes her presence. She finds comfort in raising her brother Aeëtes but he too abandons her to rule his own kingdom. Even in her powerless state, she has the heart to help the chained Prometheus, the Champion of Humanity. He prompts her to think that she can be a different goddess from the rest. Having experienced rejection since childhood, Circe feels like a misfit and yearns for a sense of belongingness. Thus, when she falls in love with a mortal fisherman, Glaucos, she undergoes the risk of turning him into an immortal. However, godhood goes to his head and he too snubs her in favour of the beautiful nymph Scylla. A jealous Circe secretly uses the sap of some magical flowers which will reveal Scylla's inner self. Scylla turns into a hideous six-headed monster. Guilt-ridden, Circe confesses it to her father but he refuses to believe that she is capable of possessing such powers. When Aeëtes vouches for her, Helios and Zeus agree upon her exile to a remote island as a punishment for seeking pharmaka (witchcraft). Thus, her life is one of isolation and loneliness.

Circe's Feminist Arc: Reclaiming Her Agency. Circe is banished from her father's kingdom where she never belonged anyway and sent to the land of Aiaia for eternity. Henceforth begins her development arc: she bids goodbye to her vulnerable self exploited by mean people and embraces a newer persona. She discovers her identity as a Goddess of Witchcraft and Herbs. She realises "All this while I have been a weaver without tool, a ship without the sea" (Miller 71). From this point on, there's no stopping her. Circe rules Aiaia like a queen. She explores her territory, finds varieties of herbs, concocts magic potions, learns spells through trial and error, tames lions and wolves, and masters her craft:

> Sorcery … must be made and worked, planned and searched out, dug up, dried, chopped and ground, cooked, spoken over and sung. Even after all that, it can fail … I learnt that I could bend the world to my will, as a bow is bent for an arrow. I would have done that toil a thousand times to keep such power in my hands. (Miller 72-73)

In the *Iliad* Circe is described as beautiful, sexually attractive and exotic. But in the novel, she "learned to plait (her) hair back, so it would not catch on every twig, and how to tie (her) skirts at the knee to keep the burrs off" (63). Sarwar and Fatima explain, "In Miller's retelling, her same plaited hair implies her lone hard work, practice and dedication … Miller breaks a significant stereotype regarding women's characterisations by revealing the fact that a woman's beauty is nothing except a demand of patriarchy, her actual power is her strength" (345). Circe is the prototype of "the strong, independent and successful contemporary woman whose destination is defined by her hard work, dedication and determination" (355).

Miller stays faithful to the basic structure of Circe's meeting with Odysseus which occurs in Book X of the *Odyssey*. In the original, Odysseus and his men come to her island. Some sailors are sent to her palace. She eagerly welcomes them and throws a lavish but poisoned feast to her unsuspecting guests who soon turn into pigs. One of the cautious sailors escapes and informs Odysseus. The reason for Circe's turning men into pigs is not explained in Homer. "The inference is that she is a playful witch who does so out of her wickedness" (Sarwar and Fatima 339). But Miller explains Circe's motive, that is, self-defence against molestation at the hands of crew captain.

Odysseus is aided by the trickster God Hermes who gives him a herb, Moly, which makes him immune to Circe's magic. In the *Odyssey* Circe tries to deceive Odysseus but he threatens her by pointing his sword at her. She takes a fright, falls to her knees, screams, clasps his knees, and begs for mercy. Then she invites him to her bed and falls in love with him "in one speech" (Miller). Here, however, Miller departs from the original as she did not want to "put her on her knees, the phallic sword". Also, this episode in the original is narrated by Odysseus to the people who are hosting him, which suggests some scope of "self-aggrandizement". Such areas of tensions in the original versus what ought to have been invite writers like Miller to revise the tale to suit the contemporary values.

Miller's Circe is unyielding and always a step ahead, planning and laying traps, outsmarting the aliens who try to boast their powers in her dominion. She makes a bargain with the clever Odysseus and goes to bed with him on her own terms. Thus, rather than a meek goddess with scarce power, she fashions herself into a forbidding lady in charge of her sexuality and territory.

> Witches like Circe, by virtue of their supernatural powers, operate outside the bounds of etiquette and social mores that work to physically and socially constrain women. Free from the concerns of mortals, sorceresses revel in their special knowledge of magic and use it to seduce and subdue the men in their orbit. (Nagy)

Shelby Judge invokes the Greek concept of *oikos* (family, home, hearth) to highlight Circe's control over her dominion. Odysseus is the patriarchal head of his oikos, Ithaca. But on Circe's island, the oikos has a matriarchal hegemony. "Both immortal women (Calypso and Circe) maintain their hegemony in the *Odyssey*, and Odysseus is subjected to it rather than the

conqueror of it … Circe's transformation of intruding men into pigs ensures her complete control over her oikos" (Shelby 161-162). By turning men into pigs, Circe reverses the humiliation that is so casually inflicted on female characters in mythology in the form of sexual violence. Circe relishes in her power: "I kept the leader for last, so he could watch. He shrank, pressed against the wall. Please. Spare me, spare me, spare me" (Miller 171). The shocked and horrified reaction of the captain satisfies her to some extent in exchange of the rape she endured. She taunts: "Sorry you were caught, I said. Sorry that you thought that I was weak, but you were wrong (171). Thus, she reclaims her body and dignity. Circe demonstrates "how the perpetuation of patriarchy should be dismantled. Being a rape victim, she does not isolate herself but rather wants men to learn a lesson from her" (Sarwar and Fatima 355).

Interrogating Masculine and Feminine Values. Miller destabilises the unquestioned gender roles. Odysseus is known for his worldly wisdom and quick wit: "he could shuck truths from men like oyster shells" (Miller 172). Whereas in the epic he is soaring in self-praise, in *Circe* he humbles himself before the enchantress and requests for the favour of extending his stay. In her hearts of heart, this is what Circe wants too, but Miller depicts her as shrewd, masking her joy under a veneer of proud reserve. Later of course, Odysseus regales his hosts with his exaggerated tale of "the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy." Through her mouthpiece Circe, Miller takes a jab at the stereotypical portrayal of women in literature as docile, needy and virtuous: "Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep" (181).

On the other hand, Miller emphasises Telemachus' sensitivity and appreciates his subtle, calm and reliable character. Unlike his father Odysseus, he does not crave adventure, fame, or glory. He is content to look after his father's kingdom and spend a low-key life. This baffles his father who has a wanderlust and considers his son "dull". Telemachus is not lured by Athena's patronage and tempting offer. Here, one can't help but draw a parallel with Achilles who is unable to resist a similar offer made by Odysseus. Whereas Achilles is terrified of dying in obscurity, Telemachus has no qualms about living in anonymity. Even Circe who has kept herself guarded for millennia is drawn towards the calmness, patience and practical knowledge of Telemachus. She undoes her immortality to spend her life with him. His character challenges us to think of the hyper-masculine culture which often glorifies adrenaline and fame, and treats other forms of masculinity as effeminate. Circe, Telemachus and Patroclus give us an alternate view of gender roles.

Nymphs, Slaves, Witches, and Wives Break Free. Nymphs have been at the bottom of the hierarchy of ancient Gods. They are portrayed as weak and an easy prey to be violated. Their only purpose is to be beautiful and please the innumerable gods and mortals who treat them as objects of sexual pleasure. "Brides, nymphs were called, but that is not really how the world saw us. We were an endless feast laid out upon a table, beautiful and renewing. And so very bad at getting away" (171). In Ovid, we usually see nymphs being raped or being forced to marry men against their choice. So, in the mythology their life is hardly that of honour. For example, Achilles' mother, Thetis is ravished by Peleus which makes her abhor mortals: "Her resistance mattered no longer: a deflowering was as binding as marriage vows" (18). However, Miller portrays Thetis as an intimidating nymph. She is a fiercely protective mother who approaches even Zeus and Hephaestus to ensure her son's safety.

Circe does not get acceptance even as a nymph and she too rejects her heritage in return. She embraces her witchcraft with as much pride as Zeus might have prided in his thunderbolt. She is often called the first witch in the Western Literature. Refusing to be content with her bare nymph powers and status, Circe cultivates her own powers through diligence. Because her powers are incomprehensible, even the top-tier Gods are nervous of her. She fathoms the deep sea to challenge the enormous monster Trygon and obtains his stinger for the sake of her son Telegonus. She also stands up to the powerful goddess Athena to protect her son.

In the *Odyssey* double standards can be clearly observed with regards to sexuality. While Odysseus has affairs with several women and goddesses in his long journey, Penelope is celebrated as the epitome of a faithful wife. Miller depicts this tenacious loyalty of Penelope sans sentimentalism. "Loyal, songs called her later. Faithful and true and prudent. Such passive, pale words for what she was" (292). Miller characterises Penelope as practical, worldly wise, and calculating as her husband. Circe relates Penelope's loom-weaving with cunning and deception: "Penelope the weaver, who could lead you over and under, into her design" (276). After being widowed, Penelope comes to Circe's island with her son Telemachus with an ulterior motive, that is, to avert Athena's judgement from her son. She calls it a fair bargain as Circe's son had brought disaster upon Ithaca by accidentally killing Odysseus. Miller's Penelope is also adept at learning sorcery. For twenty years she had maintained Odysseus' kingdom in his absence but never accorded the equal status as her husband. Circe bequeaths her empire to Penelope, trusting her managerial acumen. The initial coldness between Circe and Penelope eventually dissolves as they strike a sisterhood, instead of being rivals in love.

Briseis in the *Iliad* is another female character who does not get her voice, known simply by her father's name, despite being the epicentre of Achilles-Agamemnon's ego battle. She is captured by Achilles who makes him her slave and concubine. Miller invents a story line for Briseis, reconfiguring her as a woman with a voice. Although it is a male figure, Patroclus who offers her a protective shelter, it is an upgrade from the original as "it shows Patroclus distancing himself from a masculine realm predicated on the exchange or trafficking of women" (Struzziero 146). Patroclus saves her from Agamemnon's lust by asking Achilles to claim her. Briseis, a traumatised war slave, lives among the dangerous, brutal men who brought upon her misery yet she regains her voice by learning the conquerors' language from Patroclus. She uses this language to call out Achilles' self-centredness in the face of his wrath. She defies Phyruss' rape attempt by trying to kill him. Since her attempt is unsuccessful, she dives into the sea. "With her final refusal to see her body appropriated and brutalized, helpless to defend herself, she subverts the rape script waiting for her – for any woman – taken prisoner" (Struzziero 147).

Reversing the Tone of the Hero and the Heroine. Miller has approached the protagonists of both her novels from opposite angles. She had initially written Patroclus as a lofty first person narrator but eventually decided against the grandiose tone of Homer, inspiring his tone instead from the lyrical world of Catullus and Sappho. On the contrary, she gives Circe "a full epic scope that women are usually denied" and lets her have a "huge playing field like Achilles and Odysseus get". Morgan Thomas conceptualises five stages of voice to trace Circe's character development. "As Circe becomes more autonomous, her voice gets continuously stronger until she is unafraid to use it boldly … the growth her voice undergoes is best captured through five categories that correspond with tone and volume of voice: Silence, Whisper, Conversation, Assertion, and Shout" (3). This crescendo aligns with Circe's growth graph.

Powerful and Poetic Prose. Both the novels sparkle with flowery and evocative prose on every page. Consider the delicacy of these lines, for example: "I could recognise him by touch alone, by smell, I would know him blind, by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth. I would know him in death, at the end of the world" (Miller 126). "It is this rhapsodic language that persuades the reader to consider Achilles as a romantic figure … these sentences use multiple clauses to create a tripping sensation, as though there are too many emotive epithets to express" (Judge 185).

Miller's style is garnished with similes and vivid imagery. To illustrate, "The stars were yellow as pears, low and ripe on the branch" (315). First, she indulges the reader with her tender and aromatic sentences and later delivers the blow, evoking poignancy by ironic twists. Achilles' innocent statement "Well, why should I kill him (Hector)? He's done nothing to me" turns ironically true when Hector deprives him of his Philtatos (most beloved). Patroclus

giddily lists "This. And this and this" while enjoying sweet moments of love with Achilles. At the end of the novel, his spirit recollects "This and this and this" with Thetis as they mourn under the tomb of Achilles. The scene sequence bursts forth like a stream of nostalgia of the good old days. Struzziero's remarks capture this impact:

> "The last section of the text is painfully lyrical and intensely poetical and moving: it is the moment when humans and mortals stop perceiving the otherness of the other and acknowledge what each of them has done for the person they most loved in life. It is out of an act that is both of love and (self)forgiveness that, at last, Thetis marks Patroclus' name on the tomb near Achilles,' thus allowing them to be finally reunited in the underworld. The last gesture of love of a mother for her beloved son." (148)

Conclusion

Miller's novels are inviting, engrossing, and thought-provoking for those uninitiated to the Greek epics. For those well-versed with mythology, they are a treat and a worthy homage to Homer. It is a testament of her brilliance as a storyteller that *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* appeal to the masses as well as the classicists. Her casting of two marginal characters as lovable and awe-inspiring protagonists is masterfully executed. It was her novel *The Song of Achilles* which ushered in a resurgence of retelling of the myths. Consequently, plethora of books, like *Mythos* (2017) by Stephen Fry, *A Thousand Ships* (2019) by Natalie Haynes, *Ariadne* (2021) by Jennifer Saint etc. have emerged on the horizon. Modern readers have appreciated and resonated with these timeless tales with a modern twist. This vogue keeps inviting more readers, thus creating a distinct niche for readership.

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