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Greek Cultural Memory and Mythological Retelling: *Circe* and *Stone Blind*

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Abstract:

This paper explores how and why the archetypal figures of Circe and Medusa have been recast in modern retellings of Greek mythology. These figures are either unjustly represented as revolting or inhumane when they were victims of patriarchy and oppression. *Circe* and *Stone Blind* bring the readers' attention to the misogynistic attitude existing in Greek narratives. Medusa and Circe are given a voice through these retellings, and the readers are exposed to stories that have long been highly and exclusively male-centered narratives. These figures are victims of patriarchy, oppression, and abuse. Greek mythology sings the stories of the victory of heroes and masks the cries of such violated figures. The very idea of 'woman' involves specific features pertaining to body and mannerisms, for anybody to qualify as one. These desirable attributes of a woman include specific linguistic and speaking skills, Mannerisms, Posture and locomotor styles, and social skills. These qualities are socially acquired, through training and discipline. Any skill she might possess needs to be displayed and deployed in the home or family for it to be of any significance.

Keywords: Greek mythology, Feminist works, Retelling of Greek mythology, Gender Studies, Collective memory.

Greek Mythology presents fanciful tales based on historical facts, and portrays a wide range of Gods and Goddesses, heroes and monsters that represented the life and beliefs of the ancient world. It also gives meaning to everything ranging from religious rituals, weather and the components of the surroundings and daily life. Most talked about women in Greek literature as well as the mythology is usually the four- faithful wives, like Penelope in Homer's 'Odyssey'. Penelope is the wife of Odysseus. She embodies the ideal of the loyal and devoted wife, reflecting societal expectations of women's fidelity and patience. Penelope, a young and beautiful wife can be seen cleverly fending off suitors while patiently waiting for her husband throughout the period he goes to war. The femme fatale includes women such as Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra. These women embody female power. Helen of Troy in Homer's 'Iliad' plays a pivotal role in the Trojan War. They are represented as dangerous and influential, challenging the patriarchal order and exploring the consequences of female power. The wise woman is represented by Goddesses like Athena, and the figures like the priestesses, who stood for their wisdom and guidance. These women highlight women's roles as counsellors and protectors. Then there is the Rebel, which includes characters like Antigone and Medea. They symbolize defiance and the struggle against oppressive systems, making profound statements on justice and morality.

Mythology mirrors the prevalent ideas of the society from which they originate. Greek cultural memory is the term used to describe the collective memory of the Greek people, which includes their beliefs, history, and customs that have come to define their identity over the years. It incorporates aspects of legendary stories of heroes and historical events like wars and political upheavals that shaped the Grecian history and as a result served as touchstones for Greek education, Philosophy, and morality. "...characters possess the trait of a fridged woman

trope. These women have been, in one way, or another, killed, abused, and or depowered to serve the character of a male protagonist thereby reducing their characters as a plot device leaving no room for character development.” (*The Fridging of Selected Female Characters in Greek Mythology*, M. Bangasin, 2022, p.8)

This paper focuses on the women who were cast aside as antagonists when in reality they were the victims. Two of such figures are Circe and Medusa. Madeline Miller’s *Circe* and Natalie Haynes’s *Stone Blind* retell the stories of two of the most misunderstood characters in Greek mythology. Both of these are feminist novels that analyze the role and treatment of women in the Grecian mythology. “Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history- by her own movement.” (Helene Cixous-*The Laugh of the Medusa*)

According to the Grecian mythology, Circe is an enchantress and a minor Goddess, with deep knowledge of potions and magic. She is the daughter of the sun God, Helios, and the Ocean nymph, Perse. She appears in Homer’s *Odyssey*. With her powers, she would transform her enemies into animals. Circe resides on the mythical island of Aeaea or Aiaia, which is often depicted as an enchanting place filled with lush forests, and mixture of pasture. Circe’s stone house was located in a “dense forest of trees” “in a place that could be seen from far” (*Odyssey*, Book X). Animals produced by her powers surround her home. As narrated in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus met Circe for the first time on arrival at Aeaea. Wary from their long journey, he and his crew were seeking sanctuary. Circe initially appears as a hospitable hostess, inviting the men to feast. She creates a potion with her powers, with the help of which she transforms Odysseus’s men into swine. However, Hermes intervenes, by giving Odysseus, an herb called *moly* to protect him from Circe’s magic, enabling Odysseus to confront Circe and force her to return his men to their human forms. She turns into an ally to Odysseus. Circe provides them with hospitality for a year and helps them navigate their journey back to Ithaca.

Madeline Miller is an American novelist. She attended Brown University, where she completed both her bachelor's and master's degrees. Her work, *The Song of Achilles*, published in 2011, won the Orange Prize for Fiction. It was an instant New York Times bestseller and has been translated into twenty-five languages. She is a 2019 recipient of the Alex Awards. *Circe* by Madeline Miller, published in 2018, is a novel belonging to the genre of Mythological Fiction and Historical Fantasy. It was nominated for the Women's Prize for Fiction. The novel reimagines the character of Circe, exploring her life and motivations in depth.

Circe is branded strange, she is not mighty and terrible like her father, nor is she mercenary and gorgeous like her nymph mother. However, she has a dark power of her own- witchcraft. When Circe's power threatens the Gods, she was banished by her father, to the island of Aiaia where she hones her newly found powers. She is alone in her exile, but not for long- among her island's guests is an unexpected visitor: the mortal Odysseus, for whom Circe is ready to risk everything.

In Madeline Miller's retelling of the myth of Circe, Miller portrays the enchantress in a way that has never been seen before. In *Odessey*, she is presented solely as an obstruction and evil force like the nymph Calypso, who tries to entrap Odysseus and his men on the island. However, Miller shows the evolution of Circe; from an innocent and gullible young girl who is unaware of her powers, she turns into a powerful Witch and a caring mother. Miller explores Circe's humanity, hence, countering her representation in the mythology. Circe is moulded by the torment she has faced as part of the divine family. Circe has only known a childhood of loneliness and misery; she is differentiated from her siblings at birth, and grows up ignored and bullied. She spends years trying to prove her worth to her mighty parents, especially to her father, Helios, the sun God. Growing up in closed quarters, Circe has known loneliness all her life.

Circe's identity transforms to a whole new level during the exile. Away from her family, she is no longer "like a bird bred in a cage..., too dull to fly even when the door stands open" (Miller, 2019, p. 71). She hones her powers which she realizes, threatens even a mighty Titan, like her father. This is Circe's way of voicing herself, contributing to her personal growth. She evolves from a nymph with little to no powers to an arduous witch who discovers her strength and identity. The struggle for power and autonomy is a recurrent theme. Circe's journey is a struggle as she tries to reclaim her agency in a world dominated by Gods and men who seek to control or reduce her. "I was alone and a woman, that was all that mattered" (170). This included familiar figures like her father and strangers like the sailors who seek refuge on her shore. As she explores her powers, she takes her safety into her own hands. The men who threaten her are turned to pigs. Being a woman, Circe is expected to be meek and submissive, and to *perform* her gender identity-in her dress, attitudes, speech, skills, manners and the personal choices she makes. Gender is a performance of a set of socially ascribed and expected attributes, and it is a *performance* that has to be repeated. Greek mythology frequently depicts strong and independent women as challenges to male authority. Circe, a sorceress who resides in solitude, possesses the ability to turn men into animals, symbolizing a loss of control for male heroes. She stands out due to her autonomy, which threatens the powers that try to coerce her into submission.

Circe faces double-oppression based on gender as well as origin. As a woman, she is seen as a land to be explored by the rugged men that end up on her shores. She is forced upon and exploited for her body. "When you are in Egypt you worship Isis, when in Anatolia you kill a lamb for Cybele. It does not trespass on your Athena still at home" (194-5). Circe is a nymph. Hence, she belongs to the lower strata of the divine beings, making her vulnerable to exploitation. "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).

Circe challenges the traditional notions of feminine strength. Her possession of traditional qualities and formidable power contributes to redefining what it means to be strong. Her sister, Pasiphaë, is another character who experiences the crushing hold of patriarchy. She does so in her new home, and fights back on her own. Her husband, Minos, was the power she hated and fought. The creature she birthed is “her whip to use against Minos” (121). Here, Pasiphaë functions as a symbol of the man’s ability to acquire property. Among the property he acquires is a wife/woman; rendering the woman not only as a commodity that is bought and sold in the market but also as something the man shows off as an acquisition. She is less of a human being and more of a spectacle or possession that adds value to the man. In Chapter X, Minos says to Circe, during an argument, “Your father gave her to me as if she were a treasure, but if you knew the things she has done to me—” (116). The same is the case with Circe, as Pasiphaë remarks, “Zeus is terrified of witchcraft [and knowing that Helios’s offsprings possessed the art of witchcraft] and wanted a sacrifice” (128). Both of them are treated as commodities for trade or collateral for making deals for acquiring power, here, as done by their father, Helios. The wife is a mark of the man’s success. Therefore, she does not represent anything more or anything else than his progress in life, with nothing of her own. It becomes quite evident when Pasiphaë remarks: “Minos does not want a queen, only a simpering jelly he keeps in a jar and breeds to death. He would be happy to have me in chains for eternity...” (128). She possesses limited value, but adds an adjunct to his value. She owns nothing, not even her children, because they too are seen as a man’s property.

Maternal figures play an immense role in the process of identity formation of a child. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow argues, the nurture and care that a child receives from its mother determines the formation of gendered identities. In other words, apart

from creating a psychological bond with their children, a mother-child relationship also acts as a child's initial exposure to their understanding of gender roles. Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* is a psychological and sociological study of the role of mothers in developing gendered identities. "Women's mothering is central to the sexual division of labor." (*The Reproduction of Mothering*, 11). Women often find their primary social location within the sphere of social reproduction.

Circe constantly struggles to find common ground with her mother, indicating the influence the relationship holds for her to identify her position in the family of gods. Circe's relationship with her mother, Perse, is marked by rejection and emotional neglect. Perse is cold and distant with her Children, especially Circe, making her feel unworthy and powerless. This absence of maternal support shapes Circe's early identity, making her feel like an outsider in both her family as well as the world of Gods. Her strained relationship with her mother becomes a source of personal trauma, but it also fuels Circe's desires for independence and to be different. Circe's journey of self-discovery is driven by her need to break free from Perse's style of mothering; she journeys in search of her own voice. Pasiphaë, on the other hand, mirrors this detached and bullying trait of their mother so as to gain her approval. Unlike Circe, Pasiphaë complies with the demands made by her parents to stay in their good books and keep her powers hidden. Her retaliation comes much later, after her marriage to Minos. This marriage, in a way, provides her a space to express her raw anger and distaste as she is aware that this marriage determines the fate of the Titans. Pasiphaë's marriage with Minos is set to pacify the tension existing between the Olympians and the Titans. She knows that, no matter what she does, her father and husband will go to great lengths to hold this marriage by its threads.

Chodorow argues that, even while nurturing, mothers are often caught in patriarchal constraints that define their roles within rigid gender norms. Perse's motherhood is caught up

in such constraints, as she considers her daughters as articles that would soon have to be given away in marriage. But, Circe's relationship with her son, Telegonus ultimately becomes one of self-discovery, as she develops into a maternal figure who is nurturing yet powerful, defying the passive, subservient role often prescribed to mothers in patriarchal systems. As a matter of fact, Circe's power emerges through her defiance of the traditional roles imposed on her as a woman. Her transformation into a witch, an autonomous figure outside the control of male gods like her father, forms the trajectory of her reclaiming her agency. She is an apparent victim of intergenerational trauma. Chodorow examines how patterns of mothering are passed down through generations, by doing so, creating a cycle of gendered behaviour that is difficult to break. Circe is trapped in a cycle of emotional neglect, which shapes her interactions with others. This fact becomes evident in Circe's relationship with her mother, and later with her lovers- Hermes and Odysseus. Nevertheless, when it comes to her son, she tries to break this cycle of emotional toxicity and detachment that she so persistently holds with others.

Medusa, as represented in Greek mythology was born to Phorcys, a primordial sea God and Ceto, a primordial sea Goddess. She appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Unlike her sisters, who were gorgons by birth, she was a mortal, who stood out for her breathtaking beauty. Ovid praises the glory of her hair as the "most wonderful of all her charms". Poseidon, the God of the seas, seems to have been captivated by her beauty. Medusa was a priestess in the temple of Athena. Poseidon raped her in the temple of Goddess Athena, resulting in the wrath of Athena on Medusa. An enraged Goddess Athena transformed Medusa's enchanting hair into a coil of serpents, and those who looked into her eyes would turn to stone. Another version of the myth suggests that Athena transformed Medusa to protect her from harm after the violation.

Natalie Haynes is an English writer and broadcaster. Her book *A Thousand Ships*, published in 2019 was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2020. Her novel *Stone Blind*, published in 2022 is a retelling of the tragic fate of Medusa. Medusa is a quite

misunderstood figure in Greek mythology. Most of the narratives that exist portray her as a ruthless monster. In contrast to these narratives, Natalie Haynes has a more distinct and humanized perspective.

Delving into the origins of this mythic tale, Haynes revitalizes and reconstructs Medusa's story with her passion and fierce wit, offering a timely retelling of this classic myth that speaks to us today. (*Goodreads*)

Medusa is the sole mortal in a family of Gods. Growing up with her Gorgon sisters, she realises that she is the only one who experiences change. When Poseidon violates Medusa in the temple of Athene, the Goddess takes her revenge on the victim. Medusa now has writhing snakes for hair, and anything that meets her gaze is turned to stone. She becomes desperate to protect her beloved sisters from her new power, condemning herself to a life of shadows, which continues until the arrival of Perseus.

In Haynes's retelling of the myth of Medusa, the women characters are given a voice, which is to be found absent in Greek mythology. They are seen to be constantly violated both physically and mentally, regardless of their status, Goddess or mortal. Athene and Medusa stand for such a Goddess and mortal, respectively. The Gorgon sisters, Sthenno and Euryale, have a baby disposed at their shore by their father. They become responsible for taking care of their new sister, who, unlike them, is a mortal. "Stheno was immortal, Euryale was immortal, their parents, grandparents, siblings were immortal" (Haynes, 2022, p. 25). People often point out the differences between the sisters, especially with the arrival of Medusa, the mortal one from the three. She is defined to be the symbol of beauty, only in contrast to her sisters. Her sisters are described as monstrous. The novel constantly questions such labels. "So to mortal men, we are monsters. Because of our teeth, our flight, our strength. They fear us, so they call us monsters" (272). Such labels are part of the patriarchal power pervading in the story.

Medusa's transformation into a fearsome Gorgon with the ability to turn men to stone with her gaze can be seen as a punishment for her beauty and its power to captivate even the Gods. When Medusa is trapped by Poseidon in the temple, he threatens Medusa by saying that he would rape two young mortal girls who are playing on the beach, if she did not succumb to him. Her empathy drives her to put the safety of those children first and in order to do so succumb to Poseidon.

In *Stone Blind*, Haynes reinterprets Medusa's story by exploring the complex relationships she holds in her life. The relationship between Medusa and her mother is marked by emotional neglect, harm, and cruelty. Their relationship is almost non-existent. Medusa's mother, Ceto, a sea nymph, is far from the idealized maternal figure Chodorow discusses. Instead of providing the nurturing and safety expected from a mother, Ceto robs Medusa of any motherly love, as she places her child under the care of her Gorgon daughters. Hence, the only affection close to motherly love that Medusa has experienced comes from her sisters. This experience shapes her identity in a world that does not value her. Medusa's transformation into a Gorgon can then be interpreted as a consequence of the abuse and rejection that she faced in her life. After Perseus severs her head, the Gorgieon head becomes a catalyst of Medusa's feelings of hatred and revenge, she is no longer a part of her once mortal body which possessed the humane qualities. The experiences of abandonment and rejection that Medusa faces mirror Chodorow's idea that a lack of maternal attachment can lead to an individual's feelings of alienation and internalized violence. Chodorow argues, mothers play a significant role in shaping their children's early identities, in *Stone Blind*, the absence of a nurturing maternal figure for Medusa contributes to her internalization of powerlessness and rage, which on her transformation is redirected into a destructive power.

With the appearance of characters like Perseus, the readers are made to question the attributes that truly distinguish a hero from a monster. Perseus is considered a hero, mainly due

to his parentage, being one of the many sons of Zeus. The deemed hero proves himself to be the most monstrous through his actions. Through Perseus's character, Haynes suggests that such attributes as cruelty and injustice are what creates a monster and not their appearance. Even though Sthenno and Euryale are Gorgons, they present the more humane qualities than any mortals do in the novel, especially in contrast to Perseus. One other character who maintains her humanity is, obviously Medusa. She isolates herself in the cave in order to protect her sisters from her new powers. Even after being turned into a gorgon herself, she cares deeply for her sisters and willingly secludes herself from the outer world to cause no harm. Medusa shows nothing but empathy and compassion. When her sisters are called monsters, Medusa can be seen rebuilding their confidence as she says, "Men call you monsters because they don't understand you" (272). Throughout the novel, the male characters seem to take Medusa as something similar to a land to be explored or conquered, like the idea of the "Other" in Postcolonial theory. This aspect evidently stays the same before and after she is turned into a Gorgon, but in varied ways. The very idea of 'woman' involves specific features pertaining to body and mannerisms for anybody to qualify as one. These desirable attributes of a woman include: Specific linguistic and speaking skills, Mannerisms, Posture and locomotor styles, social skills. What is to be noticed is that these qualities are not innate but are instead trained and assimilated to be part of a woman's acceptable characteristics. The readers can discern the value system that consigns the woman to a secondary status in the domestic space of the home/family, and in society. The woman is owned as property, commodity and prize, but herself owns nothing except her body in a limited sense.

Women who are violated are often labelled as heretical. This act of labelling is done by other women characters as well, as made evident by Athene. Athene avenges Medusa for the horrid act which was committed in her temple. Medusa is the one targeted and punished for, when she clearly was the victim of Poseidon's transgression and force. The Goddess Athene,

is “Vengeful and cruel, always blaming women for what men do to them” (138). Haynes highlights the broader patriarchal structures that victimize women and perpetuate gender-based violence. Perseus’s act of securing Medusa’s head makes the readers question the morality as well as the guidelines by which Greek culture served justice. The Olympian Gods here stand for the patriarchal society that drives the deeds and forces the labels, which is done in such a manner that their hands are clean, and they maintain their reign regardless. Poseidon exudes this power as he says to Medusa: “I am one of the Olympian Gods. You should feel honoured that I am singling you out in such a way. It is a privilege you have done nothing to earn. I have seen you and decided to bestow my favour upon you. It wouldn’t occur to you not to want to. It will occur to you to say thank you, I suppose” (53). Poseidon is of the view that his power and status justifies his transgression. As a mere mortal, Medusa is expected to be thankful for being favored by a God as powerful as himself.

The Greek myths focus on male heroes facing challenges, frequently represented beside formidable female characters. For instance, Odysseus has to withstand Circe’s enchantments and eventually conquer her. Similarly, Perseus is celebrated for defeating Medusa, which emphasizes the notion that perilous women need to be vanquished or controlled. In Greek mythology, women frequently face punishment for actions that are deemed wrong. Rather than receiving protection, Medusa, who was originally a devoted priestess of Athena, was transformed into a monster after Poseidon assaulted her in Athena’s temple. Circe, although not punished in the same way, is often portrayed as a lonely and feared character because of her magical powers.

Both Circe and Medusa represent elements of the mysterious and the uncontrollable. They are feared and placed apart as they are found to be different from the stereotype set for women. In Greek culture, magic is frequently linked to the East, foreign territories, and feminine strength, all of which were regarded with scepticism. Thus, Circe’s power to

manipulate nature and change men stands in stark contrast to the conventional Greek perspective, which equates order with male dominance. Here, a woman develops to take control over her life and stand against the existing hegemony, which is found to be threatening. Both novels emphasize the arbitrary power of the gods, showcasing how they punish individuals without any clear moral reasoning. Circe's isolation and Medusa's transformation into a monster are portrayed not just as gendered punishments, but as outcomes of divine cruelty and the whims of the cosmos. Thus, their punishments seem to be "justified". Their destinies are influenced by higher powers whose choices appear to stem from envy, revenge, or a desire to uphold divine order, rather than being solely a reflection of male dominance. Doing so, makes the central figures in both retellings, serve as scapegoats for the gods, who use them to justify the chaos in the world. This element of divine politics highlights their victimhood, as they endure repercussions that far exceed the significance of their actions.

The transformations undergone by Circe and Medusa serve as powerful symbols of imposed otherness. Their physical changes set them apart as outsiders, they are rejected and misinterpreted by society. This sense of alienation is depicted as a deeply personal tragedy, where the forfeiture of a "normal" identity evolves into a story of pain and solitude. Thus, their journeys involve not just surviving outside challenges but also coming to terms with their new identities and their true selves. This internal conflict, depicted in both novels, highlights a story of victimization that focuses equally on self-identity and personal development as it does on external oppression. The enduring impact of trauma is explored in the novels. Medusa's transformation, for example, is deeply connected to her experience of violation and betrayal—a trauma that reshapes her identity. In a similar vein, Circe's tale is filled with the anguish of rejection and the weight of her magical powers that set her apart. By highlighting these experiences, the novels enable readers to perceive these characters as survivors of deep violence rather than innate monsters.

In reclaiming their voices, the novels enable Medusa and Circe to express their own histories, shifting away from a simplistic depiction of evil. This act of storytelling serves as a therapeutic reclaiming of identity and agency, providing a counter-narrative to the reductionist view of them as villains. Both authors employ contemporary literary techniques to challenge the established myths. They examine how traditional narratives have often silenced or misrepresented these characters, presenting alternative perspectives that delve into their inner lives, motivations, and vulnerabilities. By giving these characters emotional depth and complexity, the novels prompt readers to connect with their experiences. This shift in perspective helps us see their actions as reactions to difficult situations rather than as signs of inherent malice or moral failing.

CONCLUSION:

Gynocentric writing helps to represent women in contrast to traditional representation. One central aspect and essential goal of the retellings of Greek mythology is that women are given voice which they have been clearly denied in mythological narrations. In the retellings, the violated female figures of the Greek mythology narrate their side of the “truth” that has been presented to the broader audience for centuries, by moving away from the masculine centered narrative. *Circe* and *Stone Blind* bring the readers’ attention to the misogynistic attitude existing in Grecian narratives. These figures are victims of patriarchy, oppression, and abuse. Greek mythology sings the stories of the heroes’ victory while hiding the cries of such violated figures.

The reference to mythological figures proves the deep rootedness of the idea of gender and the violations based on the deemed “difference” between the genders. The very idea of ‘woman’ involves specific features pertaining to body and mannerisms for anybody to qualify as one. These desirable attributes of a woman include: Specific linguistic and speaking skills,

Mannerisms, Posture and locomotor styles, and social skills. These qualities are not natural, instead, socially acquired through training and discipline. Any skills she might possess need to be displayed and deployed in the home or family for it to be of any significance.

Both Circe and Medusa represent elements of the mysterious and the uncontrollable. They are feared and placed apart as they are found to be different from the stereotype set for women. In Greek culture, magic is frequently linked to the East, foreign territories, and feminine strength, all of which were regarded with scepticism. Thus, Circe's power to manipulate nature and change men stands in stark contrast to the conventional Greek perspective, which equates order with male dominance. Here, a woman develops to take control over her life and stand against the existing hegemony, which is found to be threatening. Both novels emphasize the arbitrary power of the gods, showcasing how they punish individuals without any clear moral reasoning. Circe's isolation and Medusa's transformation into a monster are portrayed not just as gendered punishments, but as outcomes of divine cruelty and the whims of the cosmos. Thus, their punishments seem to be "justified". Their destinies are influenced by higher powers whose choices appear to stem from envy, revenge, or a desire to uphold divine order rather than being solely a reflection of male dominance. Doing so, makes the central figures in both retellings, serve as scapegoats for the gods, who use them to justify the chaos in the world. This element of divine politics highlights their victimhood, as they endure repercussions that far exceed the significance of their actions.

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