

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Research

The dichotomy of male and female character's portrayal is a direct reflection of patriarchal values that have influenced literature and storytelling for centuries. In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir explains how children's books, mythology, stories, and tales reflect the myth and the pride and desires of men. Beauvoir shows that the existence of male superiority in literature is overwhelming because there are Perseus, Hercules, David, Achilles, Lancelot, Du Guesclin and Bayarad, Napoleon, and many more, but one Joan of Arc. Moreover, biographies about famous women are tiresome as they are pallid figures compared to famous men, and most bask in the glory of masculine heroes (292).

Male domination in literature due to the patriarchy reinforces the belief that male perspectives and stories hold more value and superiority over female stories and further perpetuates the patriarchal structure by how it continually represents men as the default protagonists and women as the antagonists or secondary characters. This pattern is often found in many classical texts, including Homer's. According to Balme and Lawall, in ancient Greece, "women lived in the shadows of their men" (43). Homer's poems display a male-dominated society where men dictate the roles and behaviours they deem socially acceptable for women and construct them accordingly (Pomeroy 50). As a result, we seldom see women

having agency in Greek mythology, and when they do, they are often presented as having agency as a means to uphold patriarchal ideals or to be depicted as evil and demonic (Scanlon 12), which evidently could be seen in stories of Athena and Medusa.

McDonough states that for a character in a literary work to have agency, they have the capability of actively making choices and following through with the corresponding actions (4). According to McDonough, to claim agency means going against societal norms to do what is best for her, her family, her friends, or society. It involves doing the right thing despite society's attitudes, structures, and possible negative consequences. Thus, the character takes responsibility for her actions and accepts herself as a subject who can make and act on her own decisions (11). Furthermore, Trites explains that for a female protagonist to have agency, it means that they become more aware that they have the ability to assert their personality and enact their own decisions by the end of the novel, which is in contrast to the beginning (6).

Madeline Miller is a renowned classicist and an American author known for her works based on Greek mythological retellings, such as *The Song of Achilles* (2011), *Galatea* (2013), and *Circe* (2018), which often challenge societal patriarchal norms. In *The Song of Achilles* (2011), Miller challenges patriarchal heteronormativity, casting Achilles and Patroclus, who traditionally are depicted as either relatives or friends as two queer men in love. This novel shows the "adversity and dilemma of queer individuals in coming out for fear of loss of respect and

dignity and the ostracisation of homosexuality by human society” (Samukhtha 175).

In *Galatea* (2013), Miller took the ancient Greek story of Pygmalion and Galatea. Like Circe, Miller took Galatea, who is originally a passive character in many classical texts and made her the centre of the story by narrating the whole event. Miller showed that Galatea was not a secondary character, a statue who was brought to life to fulfil the role of a lover for a man, but a complex character who endures abuse from her husband. For Pygmalion to exert his power over Galatea, restricting her freedom and isolating her from society pushes her to break free from him by fleeing in search of a new life (Jabbar 476), ultimately taking control of her own life.

In her novel *Circe* (2018), Miller illustrates a more significant view of traditional female Greek myth characters often depicted as passive beings, as those who actively assert their agency. Miller took a complete 180 spin on one of Homer’s infamous villains in *The Odyssey*, Circe the Witch. Originating from Homer’s *The Odyssey* and set during the ancient Greek mythological period (particularly during the Greek Heroic Age), Circe has been infamous for centuries for being portrayed as a manipulative and evil witch who lures men and turns them into pigs. Her story ends with Odysseus defeating her and taking him to bed as a conciliatory gesture. In *Circe* (2018), Miller shows that Circe is not a mere one-dimensional character whose purpose is to be the antagonist in Odysseus’ story, the villain the protagonist has to defeat.

In a feature article in The New York Times entitled “Circe, a Vilified Witch From Classical Mythology, Gets Her Own Epic”, Alter reported that since a young girl, Miller has always been bothered by how Circe, one of the most powerful female figure in a classical epic, was portrayed. Miller explained how Circe is a character that embodies male anxiety about female power, and as a result, she must be defeated; “For the hero to succeed, the woman has to be put in her place, and that was always so disappointing,” (Miller qtd. in Alter).

Upon reading the original Homeric Greek text of *The Odyssey* for the first time, Miller started to rethink Circe’s story, which has usually been told from Odysseus’ point of view as he talked about his time on her island. Miller sees that Circe plays a crucial part in helping Odysseus return to Ithaca and that she is far from being a villainous evil witch; instead, she has a benevolent side (Alter). Moreover, in Miller’s *Circe* (2018), Circe’s encounter with Odysseus was only a tiny part of her story. Circe’s story in Miller’s version goes back thousands of years before meeting Odysseus, beginning from birth in her father’s palace, the sun god Helios. Additionally, Miller drew from the plot of *Telegony*, a lost ancient Greek epic that tells the story of Telegonus, son of Circe and Odysseus.

The field of classics has long been male-dominated, with Goff stating that “the discipline of Classics has often been defined by the exclusion of women” (1). Thus, it stands to reason why many interpretations and translations of ancient texts and history favour the patriarchy. Miller seeks an end to this bias, “Epic has been so traditionally male... All these stories are composed by men, largely starring men,

and I really wanted a female perspective” (Miller qtd. in Alter). As such, interpreting these texts from a female perspective is important as they look at them differently and more nuancedly.

Not only Madeline Miller, in recent years, there has been a trend in the publishing industry of female authors writing Greek myth retellings centring on female characters. As reported by The Independent, “representation of women in Greek mythology is finally changing and in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of myths being retold through a feminist lens” (Mactaggart). In many bookstores, there have now been collections of feminists or feminist-esque Greek mythological retelling books centred around women protagonists, e.g., *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) by Pat Barker, *A Thousand Ships* (2019) by Natalie Haynes, *Elektra* (2022) by Jennifer Saint, and more.

In a The New York Times article entitled “The Women of Greek Myths Are Finally Talking Back”, Alter reported that many of these novels arose in the wake of the #MeToo movement, as many features of these stories give voices and agency to female characters who are victims of sexual violence and assault. Thus, this has encouraged authors, such as Madeline Miller, to revisit ancient Greek myths from a feminist perspective and highlight the inner lives and struggles of women who were traditionally sidelined or vilified in their original epics.

In turn, Miller delivers a fresh view of the character Circe that transcends the misogynistic tropes that have defined her for years. This novel dives into an in-depth view of Circe’s life and world, beginning from her birth and not just her

encounter with Odysseus, as shown in Homer's *The Odyssey*. Miller provides a comprehensive view of the complexities of living in a patriarchal society through her illustrations of how it affects the lives of different characters. Each character faces different privileges or obstacles depending on their gender, social status, and role in society, which highlights how these societal norms influence their interactions and actions with one another.

Through this, Miller brings significance in portraying Circe's struggles and suffering against the backdrop of an overly patriarchal society, showing how she remains resilient in the face of patriarchy despite being thrown into exile and the obstacles she faces, and asserts her agency in forging her own path in life. As such, Miller challenges the traditional portrayal of Circe as a one-dimensional wicked villain and seductress and gives her agency, showcasing how she is a subject capable of making and enacting her decisions. Therefore, this thesis examines Circe's assertion of agency by first identifying the victims and agents of patriarchy to showcase how the patriarchal structure in this novel operates, which will result in highlighting how Circe's assertion of agency defies patriarchy.

1.2 Identification of the Problem

In the novel *Circe* (2018) by Madeline Miller, Miller highlights Circe's struggle to assert her independence and agency in a world that strictly abides by patriarchal norms and values that exist to uphold male power and dominance. The female characters from this novel often face discrimination and lack agency due to their

gender. As women, their roles in society are dictated by the men in their lives, and they often have no control over their bodily autonomy, as many face some form of male violence.

As a female minor goddess, Circe is hierarchically placed in a lower rank than most divine beings, i.e., male divinities or Olympian gods, giving her limited powers and control over her life. Having no power to control her life, Circe often faces abuse and discrimination from both society and her divine relatives on account of her gender and role in society. Her abuse ranges from being ridiculed due to not meeting societal beauty standards to being sexually assaulted and harassed by the men in her life. The discriminations that Circe and other female characters of this novel face are perpetuated by the patriarchal system that benefits men and exploits women.

Even when Circe discovers that she has magical abilities, instead of being celebrated for her newfound powers, the abuse she faces only worsens. Which leads to her being banished into exile on the island of Aiaia. Circe's exile illustrates male fear of female power, reflecting gender disparity in a male-dominated world. Miller's depiction of Circe's struggle to assert her independence in a male-dominated world showcases her struggles and how she continuously faces obstacles that challenge her sense of self-worth and agency.

Despite her challenges and living in exile, Circe gradually learns to embrace her powers, learns from her past mistakes, asserts her independence, and makes choices that define her own life rather than being controlled by others. Circe's

growth in this novel showcases her assertion of her agency. This aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's theory of feminist existentialism, that for women to break free of the patriarchal values and norms that constrain them, they must transcend the immanence. Thus, through this character arc, Circe's character transitioned from being a powerless and oppressed figure to one who defies patriarchal norms that restrict her, keeping her locked in her immanence; here, she has control over her own choices in life, transcending her immanence and gaining her agency.

1.3 Review of Related Studies

Numerous studies have been conducted to examine this novel. In an article entitled "Patriarchal Culture in Madeline Miller's *Circe*" (2023), Qasim and Rahayu explored the patriarchal culture shown in Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* (2018) by identifying the form of patriarchal culture that exists in the novel using Walby's theory of patriarchy. Qasim and Rahayu discovered two forms of patriarchal culture within this novel: Private Patriarchy, a patriarchy in the domestic sphere, and Public Patriarchy, which operates in a broader societal context.

Qasim and Rahayu's study examines patriarchy through its culture by applying Walby's private and public patriarchal framework. This thesis, however, will employ Walby's six structures of patriarchy in discovering the victims and agents of patriarchy from the novel. This will show the interconnectedness of each structure and the complexities of how patriarchy affects the characters of the novel. Furthermore, this thesis will also show how Circe broke free from the patriarchy in

her assertion of her agency by applying Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist theory.

In an article entitled "Humanizing Circe, the Witch of Aiaia: A Novel that Projects the Repercussions of Patriarchal Supremacy" by Nithya Ranjith (2023), Ranjith explores the existence of patriarchy and its impact in Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018). Ranjith discovers that Circe's depiction as a monster and the patriarchal culture found in the novel is a result of patriarchal supremacy beliefs rooted in Greek mythology. The prevalence of patriarchal culture gravely impacts the female character of this novel, shown in Circe through her suffering, Perse through her feeling of inferiority, and other nymphs who are denied rights and opportunities and are victims of sexual assaults.

While Ranjith concluded how Circe's transformation to morality marked her humanity, this article does not explore how her resistance also marks her fully asserting her agency. Furthermore, this article does not apply a specific theory when conducting the research. This article focuses on the impact of patriarchy, illustrating the oppression the women suffer through and the consequences that come because of it. This article does not show who specifically is oppressing these women and causing their suffering.

Moreover, this article argues that Circe's resistance against the patriarchy is depicted in her transformation into a mortal, which shows her innate goodness. This article symbolises Circe as a "living martyr of patriarchy" (Ranjith 206), presenting her as a passive symbol of her resilience against the patriarchy instead of as an

active agent who shapes her own fate and life. Ranjith shows that for powerful women to resist the patriarchy, they must strip themselves of their power to be the bigger person, which is different from this thesis. This thesis will portray Circe's assertion of her agency as an active agent in choosing her fate in life, which ranges from her work, her growth of knowledge, her efforts in moulding her life free from the rules of the gods and the patriarchal society, and more. Circe's resistance against the patriarchy is not by how she strips herself of the mistakes and accomplishments she achieves but through becoming an active subject that forges her own path in life.

In a thesis entitled "Women's Rebellion Against the Patriarchal System in the Novel *Circe* by Madeline Miller", Ansar studied how women rebel against the patriarchal system and how the patriarchal system impacts society by applying Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Feminist Existentialism. Ansar discovered that the women in this novel follow societal norms, aiming to be what society perceives as an ideal woman, and for women to rebel against the patriarchal norms is only seen through Circe's acts.

In discovering how the women in the novel rebel against the patriarchal system, Ansar applies Simone de Beauvoir's Book Two from *The Second Sex* (1949). This part of the book showcases the four stages of "Woman's Life Today", which include the formative years, situation, justification, and liberation. Ansar explored these points and mirrored them in Circe's life. Ansar discovered that the data found in the justification shows that Circe illustrates the narcissist, the women in love,

and the mystic, and argued that through this portrayal, Circe shows behaviours and actions that reflect women's strength and resistance, thus making her a transcendent woman.

Unlike Ansar's paper, this thesis will discuss the patriarchy of the novel using Walby's theory of patriarchy, exploring who the victims and agents of patriarchy are and why they are classified as such by applying Walby's six structures of patriarchy. Other than that, to discover Circe's assertion of her agency, this thesis will focus on the four points Beauvoir mentioned regarding how women should strive for transcendence: going to work, becoming intellectuals, working to achieve social transformation, and refusing to internalise otherness. This thesis will also highlight how Circe's assertion of her agency is her becoming an active agent in deciding her own fate, proving how women in ancient Greek mythology are not merely two-dimensional passive characters.

There is also an article by Yusuf and Susiolo in which they apply Beauvoir's theory of Feminist Existentialism to a different novel in their paper titled "Existentialist Feminism of Woman's Struggle in *Cigarette Girl* Novel" (2020). In this article, Yusuf and Susilo examined women's resistance in facing struggles in the novel *Cigarette Girl* (2012) by Ratih Kumala. They discovered that the women of this novel could work, become intellectuals, work to achieve a socialist transformation of their society, and refuse to internalise their otherness, demonstrating that they have the same capability of surviving life the same way as men, which is per Beauvoir's theory of Feminist Existentialism. As a result, things

that point women to being “the second sex”, “retarded”, “limited”, and “weak” become irrelevant.

The result of Yusuf and Susilo’s paper shows that through Beauvoir’s theory of Feminist Existentialism, women have the same capability to survive life the same way as men, which mirrors Circe’s life in Miller’s *Circe* (2018). Circe asserts her agency when transcending her immanence, Circe is equal to the men in her life and society. She is not puppeteered and controlled by the patriarchy and men in her life. Instead, she is her own person. Capable of having powers and controlling them and also controlling her own life.

In an article titled “The Presentation of The Female Character in Picard’s *Les Visitandines*: An Existentialist Feminist Reading” by Ahmad Albtoush (2020), Albtoush applies the thematic analysis approach in examining this paper to analyse the depiction of female characters in Picard’s “*Les Visitandines*” through Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of existentialist feminism. This paper discovers that the depiction of the female characters here aligns with Beauvoir’s idea of how women are seen as the other in society: weak and hesitant, a depiction of women before they transcend their immanence. Therefore, the female characters discussed in this paper have not broken free from the societal constraints that are limiting them. Thus, this paper brings relevancy to this thesis as it gives insight into how they are contrasted from Circe due to not having transcended from their immanence.

Other papers also study the topic of this thesis, which is female agency. Wongkaren and Wahyuni, in their article “Female Agency in the Novel *Sold* (2006)

by Patricia MacCormick” (2021), analyse the forms of agency of the female characters in the novel who live in a patriarchal society in Nepal by using the concept of agency from a feminist perspective. This paper discovers that there are three types of agency: intrinsic agency, self-definition, and self-direction. It discusses how, in Nepal, patriarchy is a common belief and discrimination towards women is a common phenomenon. Wongkaern and Wahyuni discover that though the female characters of this novel face suffering, it does not stop them from having agency, and they are as much as capable as men as long as they resist society’s construction of gender roles, which is similar to Circe’s life. However, this thesis will examine Circe’s assertion of her agency by applying Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of Feminist Existentialism.

Finally, in Morwani’s “The Construction of Female Agency in David Mulwa’s Prose Fiction” (2016), Morwani analysed female agency that is constructed in David Mulwa’s novella *We Come in Peace* (2011) and novel *Flee Mama Flee* (2014) within the context of colonialism and slavery. This study redefines what “power” and “agency” mean in the context of slavery by analysing Mulwa’s portrayal of female characters through laughter and voice as an act of agency. Morwani uncovered that Mulwa empowers women by allowing them to challenge the forces that marginalise them and restore their agency. By applying the Narratology and Postcolonial theory, this paper analyses textual choices and issues of marginality, concluding how Mulwa’s fiction challenges the powerlessness associated with women’s situation along the Kenyan coast. While Morwani

analyses David Mulwa's novella *We Come in Peace* (2011) and novel *Flee Mama Flee* (2014), this thesis will analyse Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* (2018).

The related studies above show that some papers have discussed the existence of patriarchy in Miller's *Circe* (2018). However, differing from those studies, this thesis will explore the patriarchy—particularly the victims and agents of patriarchy—by employing Walby's six structures of patriarchy. Furthermore, in asserting her agency, this thesis aims to show that Circe's assertion of agency is a result of being an active agent in choosing her fate to take control over her own life, which is done by utilising the four strategies Beauvoir outlines for women to transcend their immanence (going to work, becoming intellectuals, working to achieve social transformation, and refusing to internalise otherness) in her theory of Feminist Existentialism.

1.4 Research Questions

In regard to the topic of this thesis it will focus on answering two questions:

1. Who are the victims and agents of patriarchy in *Circe* (2018)?
2. How does Circe assert her agency in *Circe* (2018)?

1.5 Scope of the Research

This thesis focuses on the depiction of patriarchy in Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* (2018), particularly how Circe challenges these patriarchal structures to gain her agency. By applying Sylvia Walby's six structures of patriarchy, this thesis

examines the patriarchal structure in this novel to show the dynamics and interconnectedness of Walby's structure of patriarchy, which is reflected by identifying the victims and agents of patriarchy. This analysis will highlight how, in gaining her agency, Circe challenges patriarchal norms, thus embodying Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Feminist Existentialism.

1.6 Objectives of the Research

This thesis aims to analyse Circe's assertion of her agency. In analysing how Circe assert her agency, this thesis will first identify the victims and agents of patriarchy within the novel by applying Sylvia Walby's six structures of patriarchy. Through identifying the characters who embody the role of the victims and agents of patriarchy in this novel, this thesis aims to discover the way patriarchy operates as a social structure, which will highlight how Circe's assertion of her agency as challenging the patriarchy by applying Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Feminist Existentialism.