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**THE LANGUAGE OF DESCRIBING THE FEMALE FORM
FROM THE ILIAD TO CIRCE**

Bakalářská diplomová práce

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma: “The language of Describing the Female Form from the Iliad to Circe” vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího diplomové práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

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Abstract

The research study looks at the language used in the description of the female form in Homeric literature (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and Madeline Miller's *Circe*. The language used in these narratives is analyzed through the feminist theories of agency and embodiment. Agency refers to the aspects of free will and autonomy that human beings possess in making decisions. Embodiment, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which the human body is used to assign various roles and responsibilities to men and women. The research study finds that Homer's epics usually demeaned women and rated them as second-class citizens in a highly stratified society. The lack of agency in women's lives meant that they had little in the way of making decisions for themselves thus limiting their potential for growth and development. On the other hand, Miller's *Circe* provides an alternative feminist outlook that makes it possible for the reader to appreciate a woman's point of view. Viewing *Circe* from the standpoint of a woman's experience serves to provide a fresh perspective on the journey that she makes in her long life as she resists the oppositional influences of a patriarchal society. It is in this perspective that Miller's *Circe* differs significantly from Homer's epics when it comes to the description of the female form.

INTRODUCTION

Women must have the ability to determine their destinies and to fulfil their desires away from the dictates of men and the culture they created in that regard. The focus of this thesis is to present the journey of women as depicted in Homeric Literature and Madeline Miller's *Circe* as they interacted with various societal elements and contended with the notions of personal fulfilment. To understand the focus of this thesis, the reader must be aware of the feminist theories of Agency and Embodiment and the role they play in the deconstruction of societal limits imposed on women throughout human history. It is also critical that the reader have a firm understanding of the events that transpired in Homeric literature (*Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) as well as Madeline Miller's *Circe*. Miller's *Circe* will provide the basic case study through which the reader will get to appreciate the alternative biography of Circe and the role it plays in revealing the inequalities that women have been subjected throughout human history. Homer's narration of events depicted in his epic poems certainly focuses a lot on the male characters with women having to play minor roles. The essential feature of this dynamic is that the women were rarely casted in positive light and were merely props for the advance of men's objectives and desires. Homer's narrative fails to provide the quintessential female experience that one gets from reading Miller's narrative of the same events. Miller's work helps to provide an in-depth analysis of the thoughts and emotions of female characters as they responded to the world around them. In this regard, it becomes possible for the reader to appreciate their growth and development throughout the individual journeys.

The research conducted in this study is important as it helps to provide a deeper understanding of the nuances of gender discrimination as depicted in narrative form. The essential feature of this thesis is the feministic outlook provided by Madeline Miller in her depiction of Circe and her interactions with her environment. While the story is based on Homeric literature, the reader gets to have the unique perspective of perceiving this world through the unique view of the female perspective. The battles, trials, and triumphs that the women go through in Miller's narrative provide a refreshing take on Homer's work.

The first chapter of the book provides the analytical framework that will be used to analyze the contents of the selected works of literature. It provides a rationale for the central thesis and what will be used it also argues why Miller's *Circe* provides the central effect of creating the real idea of the re-imagined female subject. The second chapter will look at the theories of Agency and Embodiment and the

role they have to play in analyzing the works of literature selected for this narrative. The next chapter will discuss the same concepts but through the secondary sources derived from other published authors who have an interest in the identified matters discussed in this paper while the final chapter summarizes the thesis and the main points derived from this analysis.

Background Study

In Homeric literature, particularly the Iliad and the Odyssey, women are presented as weak and inconsequential in a variety of events and decisions made in these epics¹. Their role seems particularly limited to the domestic household context. For example, Telemakhos instructs Penelope, her mother, to occupy herself with domestic matters such as ‘weaving and spinning.’ Telemakhos does not perceive it proper for her mother to be involved in matters to do with poetry and intonations of war and conquest. However, Circe moves away from this thought paradigm of restrictive female roles in Greek society in her depiction of Circe and other female characters such as Scylla who first appeared in Homeric literature.

Circe by Miller discusses a fictional autobiography of Circe and provides a unique feminist analysis of her life. In Homeric literature, Circe is not placed at the center of the narrative but is instead portrayed as a means to an end. Instead of being a passive character, Miller presents Circe as a proactive character who possess the ability to influence her world in the attainment of her goals. In doing this, Miller’s feminist perspectives create a sharp contrast between the role of women in Greek society as expressed in Greek mythology and her work as portrayed by *Circe*². In contrast, Homeric literature, as perceived in the Iliad and the Odyssey, consistently portrays the woman as a weak and clueless individual who only exists to live under the terror and whims of men³. Women in Greek society were often at the center of war and conquest. However, they could not participate in these events as they were perceived as weak beings. Their beauty was viewed with suspicion and contempt by men. On the other hand, Miller’s

¹ Benjamin, Lauren. “Circe’s Feral Beasts: Women and Other Animals in Joyce’s Ulysses.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 43.2 (2020): 41-59.

² Neal, Tamara. “Circe [Book Review].” *Classicum* 44.2 (2018): 29.

³ Cantarella, Eva. “Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece.” *Poetics Today* 6.1/2 (1985): 91-101.

tone and narrative empowers women to view their beauty as an essential part of their nature. For example, Circe's monologues portray this idea as she reasons her way towards self-acceptance. She lived in a world which made her feel insecure and incomplete due to her looks. However, her process of growth and development results in a confident woman who accepts herself and her ability to function in a male-dominated society. In doing, this, Miller essentially occupies a powerful position that counters a long-held position of glorifying masculinity at the expense of the female form.

Traditional epistemology privileged the viewpoint of the middle/upper-class European male. Essential, epistemology is concerned with the issues of truth and belief. For a large part of history, women were denied the opportunity to participate in literature development and were confined to domestic affairs. On the other hand, men from the upper class were deemed worthy of creating literature such as autobiographies, books, poetry, and so forth. For a large part of European history, women were denied the opportunity to do the same. Naturally, this situation placed restrictions and suffocated the opportunities available for women to create narratives that had a female voice in them. The feminist philosopher, Anne Seller, argued that alternative perspectives cannot be easily integrated with existing knowledge due to a phallogocentric ideology that has dominated literature throughout human history⁴. A phallogocentric ideology is one that focuses on the idea of male dominance in all aspects of the society. A poststructuralist critique of identities has made it possible for biographical and autobiographical feminist writers to create new representational spaces in literature. A poststructuralist approach is one that attempts to perceive the world in a way that challenges the accepted norms and beliefs of truth and knowledge. As such, poststructuralists tend to question the process through which certain accepted facts and beliefs serve to reinforce the power and dominance of particular actors in the society. In this particular case, the actors in question are the men who have had a strong influence in the affairs of all aspects of the society. However, the progress has been slow with the female subject being doubly alienated. Linda Anderson notes that the female subject tends to occupy "a place of alterity and non-presence⁵." Essentially speaking, she is unable

⁴ Greene, Gayle. "Feminist fiction and the uses of memory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.2 (1991): 299.

⁵ Rooney, Ellen, ed. *The Cambridge companion to feminist literary theory*. Cambridge University Press, 2006: 42.

to fully capture her essence without succumbing to a phantasm. The female subject is essentially doubly alienated by virtue of the male role in the society. The female subject has always been marginalized throughout much of history. She does not possess the influence and the acceptance she deserves to alter the course of events in various spheres of a given society. She mostly operates in the realm of illusion making her unable to practically function in the real world.

Nancy Miller provides more insight on this subject through her analysis of the “crisis of the subject.” The ‘crisis of the subject’ essentially refers to the inability of the female subject to be genuinely reflected and expressed through various narrative forms such as poetry or biography. In the past, women could not participate in narrative building which made it impossible for the female subject to be fully and authentically expressed in the world of literature. Nancy Miller elucidates on the way writing seems to alienate the female subject as it focuses on the masculine political imperative. Women have been deprived of their ability to bring out the nuances of subjecthood in literature. Essentially, because men were the only ones permitted to write literature, they could not accurately capture the true feelings and perspectives of women even when they wrote about and described female characters in their literature. Even stories written about women and with women in focus had the high probability of being highly skewed towards the male perspective. It is borne out of the lack of women’s historical relation of identity to institution, origin, and production that men have had the privilege of accessing⁶. These practices are resident within U.S. literature: something that Elizabeth Weed alludes to in her deconstruction of U.S. reworking of poststructuralism. According to her, U.S. literature posed its discursive production as simply academic theory concerning issues such as linguistics and philosophy. It is a phenomenon that occurred at the expense of its political resonance⁷. Such an environment makes it difficult for feminist politics to take hold due to the absence of a stable and recognizable female subject to refer to in the first place.

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 87.

Various forms of literature, such as biographies, became significant points of debate, backlash, and anguish between feminist writers and traditional historians who called for “a return to the narrative⁸” through their built-in storytelling of life’s processes beginning from birth to death of a character⁹. The intertwining of the subject and the biographer became one of the most important issues highlighted by feminist critics. To this effect, feminist writers became engrossed in the process of experimenting with this genre. The process entailed a thorough questioning and reevaluation of the nature and uses of evidence in biographical writing. Additionally, feminist biographers walked away from the construction of any coherent narrative and embraced the idea of the self-conscious description of the process by which biographers could imagine an individual’s past based on present cultural, academic, and political norms. Of course, the choice of the female subject to be used in this context became a focal point of questions and debate by feminists¹⁰. The elite and educated women had long been preferred for such type of literature. The elites were often educated within a particular framework of thought that was shaped by a patriarchal society. It was only predictable that the stories and narratives written about women would fit into this mold of the elite and educated woman. It should be noted that the women who were regarded as “educated” in the past did not essentially receive the same type of education as the men. Women’s education was severely limited and served to engender long-held beliefs of the woman’s role as being that of a household manager. However, feminist historians went above the norm and began to chronicle the lives of all women. They explored the intersections of class, race, gender, religion, and ethnicity. The idea of documenting the affairs of elite women alone could not suffice among these feminist historians who desired the fullest expression of the female experience in the society. The chief idea was to create an environment that allowed women to fully express themselves based on their unique experiences in the society. It is this ability to fully document the female experience from the woman’s perspective that makes it possible for the female subject to depart away from marginalization and the alienation that results from a phallogocentric ideology.

⁸ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 41.

⁹ Rooney, Ellen, ed. *The Cambridge companion to feminist literary theory*. Cambridge University Press, 2006: 76.

¹⁰ Srivastava, Kalpana, et al. “Misogyny, feminism, and sexual harassment.” *Industrial psychiatry journal* 26.2 (2017): 111.

Miller's *Circe*: A Feminist Depiction of the Empowered Female Subject

These ideas were explored at length in Madeline Miller's *Circe* which is presented as a fictional biography and is narrated by Circe who tells the story of her life. Madeline Miller starts to tell Circe's story from the moment she was born and ends with her possible death. Indeed, as a goddess, Circe's lifespan differs from that of mortal women as the reader gets to track hundreds of years of her life as they identify her character and personality, her grief and happiness as well as her insecurities and accomplishments¹¹. Circe was born the daughter of a nymph and titan Helios. As such, she is predisposed to do great things in her long life. However, things do not work out as expected¹². Miller paints Circe as a character with a frail voice as well as lacking in exceptional beauty and this is revealed through some of the conversations Circe has within her. She feels alienated from the rest of her society due to the peculiar physical characteristics she possesses. She is also unable to harvest any special powers as is the norm with deity. Usually, deities are born with inherent abilities and powers. Circe's siblings do possess such powers and are able to wield them at will from a young age. However, Circe seems unable to exhibit her powers as a deity thus making it difficult for her to fully fit in and be identified as a proper deity. As such, she is doomed to spend her life alone in her father's halls. Her life contrasts sharply with that of siblings. Her brothers seem destined for greatness due to their exploits. She is also overshadowed by her sister's beauty which has the effect of making her invisible to her parents, other nymphs, and gods. As far as myths go, Circe fails to cut the known image of a traditional god. She is not a beautiful nymph as her aunts and nieces nor is she a powerful deity as compared to her father and brothers. In her younger days, she is depicted roaming the halls of her father's palace; powerless and alone¹³.

¹¹ Arthur-Katz, Marilyn. "Sexuality and the body in ancient Greece." *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 4.1 (1989): 155-179.

¹² Cantarella, Eva. "Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece." *Poetics Today* 6.1/2 (1985): 91-101.

¹³ Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. 1st ed. Little, Brown and Company, 2018: 15.

However, Madeline Miller's narration of Circe's life brings out a different narrative that runs counter Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. It is this difference in the narrative that this thesis seeks to elucidate more based on feminist theoretical concepts of Agency and Embodiment. The theories of agency and embodiment, as viewed through the feminist perspective, will show Madeline Miller's activism and significant contribution towards a movement designed to bring a greater sense of clarity on the female subject when it comes to literature. The Agency theory is associated with concepts such as free will, autonomy, choice, intentionality, reflexivity, and so on. Essentially, it portrays the idea of actions considered to be distinct from behaviors characterized as instinctual, habitual, and unreflective¹⁴. For example, by presenting Circe as a powerful woman who overcomes various obstacles and challenges thrown her way, Miller shows the power of agency in a way that Homer could not in his narratives. Homer's Circe does not have a clear path of growth and development owing to the lack of an origin story to clearly identify her growth and transformation from when she was a young child in her father's place. The revisionist mythmaking essentially focuses on female characters who were often sidelined or stereotyped in the original epics.

Embodiment is also a critical feminist theory that has come to play a significant role in the feminist movement seeking to alter literature discourse in academic and political fields. For example, feminist theorists have intoned that the female form is usually used in demeaning fashion in contemporary forms of media. The female body is often used as a source of stimulation and attraction for men and this is reflected in advertising as an example. Additionally, feminist theorists have contended that the female body is mostly identified as a child-bearing vessel due to how a patriarchal society has come to view the utility of women. Such ideas focus on how the body is used in the symbolic construction of sexual difference. The human body has long been used as a ground for political exclusion or inclusion¹⁵. It is also used as a prospect for self-realization, a locus of subjectivity, and the material focus of many labors that typically fall to women. For example, Western feminine subjectivity tends to force women to fashion their bodies as ornamental surfaces for the sole purpose of gratifying the muses and fantasies of

¹⁴Ibid., 44.

¹⁵ Sutphin, Christine. "The representation of women's heterosexual desire in augusta webster's "circe" and "medea in athens"." *Women Writing* 5.3 (1998): 390.

men. These ideas are prevalent in Homeric literature which is notorious for its depiction of women as inferior to men. There is a dangerous mischaracterization of women as opposed to those whose bodies and minds are thought to be the very image of freedom and wit¹⁶. Even though Homer's Circe is a powerful female figure, his narrative fails to position her, as well as other female characters, in a positive and empowering light. These concepts will be discussed in greater detail in the ensuing chapters.

¹⁶ Devi, Dr. N. Banita, and Nganthoi Khuraijam. "From Subjugation To Empowerment: Recasting Homer's Minor Character In Madeline Miller's Circe." *UGC Care Group I Journal* 10.7 (2020): 275.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this section is to provide a methodical analysis of the feminist theories of agency and embodiment with regards to Madeline Miller's *Circe* and the portrayal of characters in Homeric literature. In feminist theory, agency is concerned with the ability of women to determine the outcomes of their lives based on their fundamental values, beliefs, and potential. It is derived from the understanding that every human being is gifted with innate talents and abilities that allow them to manipulate their environment thus determining their fate and destiny. Agency holds the position that women do not have to strictly adhere to societal codes and norms that restrict their functionality in any given society. Instead, they can fulfil their potential as they follow their intuition and do as many exploits as they wish to accomplish during their lifetimes¹⁷. On the other hand, the theory of embodiment looks to address the way in which the female subject is often marginalized and disregarded due to their anatomical features and the differences they possess with regards to the male subject. Throughout history, the body has been used in symbolic construction of sexual difference and a ground for political exclusion or inclusion. For example, women were rarely permitted to partake in matters of the state and politics and war as their bodies were considered to be inferior to that of men. Indeed, even though men are anatomically more powerful and able to endure the harsh conditions that come with war, it does not automatically women are unable to do the same. Human history is inundated with female warriors who would also go to war and lead the charge against enemy invasions. A good example of this is reflected in the wars of independence in Africa where women would lead armies to war

¹⁷ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 39.

and fought against colonial imperialists such as those seen in Angola and West Africa. For example, Portugal was unable to successfully mount an invasion against Angola due to the prowess exhibited by the women warriors who vehemently defended their territories due to superior military tactics. Embodiment is a principle that argues that anatomical differences should not be used to segment human beings into specific roles in the society. For example, the fact that a woman is a human being with the ability to give birth to a child does not preclude her from participating in other matters of the society. Women possess the inherent capabilities to nurture a child from infancy to adulthood. However, men have also been shown to do the same. Finally, the Embodiment principle contests the position that the woman's body is designed to satisfy the sexual desires and fantasies of men. These issues will be the focus of discussion in this section as it seeks to debunk long-held beliefs and notions that the woman's body is automatically relegated to specific aspects of a society such as domestic care and the management of the household.

Agency

Agency is commonly understood as a person's capacity to intervene in the world in a manner deemed as relatively autonomous or independent. Essentially, the term 'agency' is associated with concepts such as free will, autonomy, choice, intentionality, and reflexivity¹⁸. Free will denotes the power to act without constraints imposed by fate or necessity. It is the ability a person possesses to act at one's discretion. Autonomy refers to the ability of a person to act and make her own decision. It provides the central premise for the concept of shared decision-making and informed consent. Essentially, decisions are made without coercion or any other threats. It is closely related with the idea of choice whereby a

¹⁸ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 39.

person exhibits the ability to choose between two or more possibilities. In this context, Agency describes the capacity for women to have various choices regarding their fates and functions in the society. When it comes to intentionality, the word describes the aspect of being purposive or deliberate. In the philosophical aspect, the term refers to the quality of the mental state which consists of a person's ability to direct their minds, beliefs, thoughts, hopes, and desires towards an idea or state of being¹⁹. Intentionality is well-explained through the Agency theory which seeks to assert that women do have an intentional aspect in their being that drives them to pursue their desires irrespective of the limitations placed on them by the society. Finally, reflexivity denotes the act of self-reference and self-examination. A person who exhibits low levels of reflexivity is basically one that is shaped largely by the society and their environment²⁰. On the other hand, a high level of reflexivity denotes a person with the capacity to shape their tastes, norms, preferences, desires, and politics. Reflexivity is an important aspect of the Agency theory as it provides a framework by which a person can assess the extent to which one is limited and shackled by the dictates of culture in a society. Even though the substantive meaning of these qualities is often contested in academic literature, there is a commonality in perception when associating feminism and agency; agency portrays the idea of actions considered to be distinct from behaviors characterized as instinctual, habitual, and unreflective; that individuals are more than just docile or passive bearers of pre-given social roles²¹. In this case, one can argue for the fact that purposive agency is a fundamental as well as the self-evident property of personhood. The purposive agency points to a humanity that is driven to influence, to have an impact, and to transform the world around it²².

The feminist movement has always had to counteract oppositional forces and sociocultural and political constraints to have its presence felt in the world. The process has been characterized by

¹⁹ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²² *Ibid.*, 40.

innovative methods that were often challenging, and at times, posed existential threats to its proponents²³. Feminist theories of agency do focus on the concepts of domination and power because patriarchy portrayed the idea that women will always be incapable of action. A patriarchy refers to a system of government or society in which the eldest male/ father is the head of the family²⁴. Descent is also determined through the male line. Unfortunately, such a system created a situation where the government and system of society resulted in men holding power and influence on societal, cultural, and political outcomes while women were largely excluded from it. Such a societal structure and organization meant that men could inherently determine the fate of women through disenfranchising. Essentially, women would be at the mercy of men when it comes to many things including domestic affairs. Even the personal processes and tribulations that feminist women have had to go through point to this dynamic²⁵. Essentially speaking, feminist theories of agency are particularly attuned to the concepts of domination and power because patriarchy portrayed the idea that women will always be incapable of autonomous action. Patriarchy has always construed womanhood as being volatile, fragile, and generally “inferior²⁶.”

Miller’s *Circe* strives to correlate to reveal the role of agency as an empowering and transformative idea for women in Greek mythology. To begin with, the novel focuses on Circe as the central figure in the story. Miller presents Circe as a powerful woman who overcomes various obstacles and challenges thrown her way. Circe is a woman who is driven by ambition and the desire to prove her worth to the people who eschewed her due to her differentness. She gradually becomes aware of her abilities in magic and witchcraft and purposively wields them in the attainment of her goals and objectives. She uses them to control men as seen in the instance where she turns them into pigs. These actions denote an entity that fully flows in the power of agency over her life. The concept of agency provides a broadened perspective to assess other feminist ideas that distinguish the adapted book from

²³ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵ Christ, Carol P. “Mircea Eliade and the feminist paradigm shift.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7.2 (1991): 75-94.

²⁶ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 41.

Homeric literature. The revisionist mythmaking essentially focuses on female characters who were often sidelined or stereotyped in the original epics. In this particular case, *Circe* is keen to focus on the gradual process of growth and development in the life of Circe. Usually, this type of narrative was only reserved for men who were often depicted as “travelers along the road.” It is a state of mind that often fails to depict women as individuals who can control their outcomes²⁷.

Women have had to overcome various material and symbolic constraints in a bid to make their presence felt in the world. They have done this in challenging and innovative ways. However, while the theory of agency is counterposed to determinism, it is not reducible to the voluntarism of the sovereign agent. Indeed, a lot of theorists do not believe the power of agency serves to portray women empowerment issues to their fullest extent when viewed as an abstract set of potentials and capacities²⁸. Agency must be viewed within a social context. One reason for this viewpoint is that the ability to independently act is always mediated by the dominant relations and norms of power that shape outcomes in a given context. As such, feminist theorists have invested their energy into deciphering the myriad of neglected forms of female agency²⁹. The underlying argument in this quest is based on the notion that the reliance on hyperbolic notions of an autonomous and independent who is unencumbered and fully rational serves to engender a perspective that is masculine in nature. It is a perspective that fails to fully address the reality of a society that is characterized by social interdependence. Personal growth and development tend to occur within embodied interactions and social norms³⁰.

Such a view of agency and feminism fails to recognize the fact that the lives of women continue to be characterized by conventional norms of femininity as well as the demands imposed on them by others. Additionally, traditional perspectives regarding agency tacitly reinforce a heroic model of action which is counterintuitive due to how society perceives heroic actions. Essentially, disembodied heroism

²⁷ Christ, Carol P. “Mircea Eliade and the feminist paradigm shift.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7.2 (1991): 75-94.

²⁸ Arthur-Katz, Marilyn. “Sexuality and the body in ancient Greece.” *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 4.1 (1989): 155-179.

²⁹ Arthur-Katz, Marilyn. “Sexuality and the body in ancient Greece.” *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 4.1 (1989): 163.

³⁰ Colley, Helen. “A rough guide to the history of mentoring from a Marxist feminist perspective.” *Journal of Education for teaching* 28.3 (2002): 257-273.

serves to downgrade practical and mundane types of social agency³¹. Many of these forms of social agency have come to be associated with the domestic and private spheres³². Additionally, more often than not, many of these forms of social agency are carried out by women including domestic labor, care work, and childrearing. These activities are viewed as second and quasi-natural activities that offer little intrinsic merit as well as social significance. Arendt opined that these types of activities are the “dark background of mere givenness³³.” In light of this background, the model of agency in its transcendent form contains a significant social quality as well as moral and ethical status. Empathetic bonds and relational ties that characterize feminine perspectives tend to be relegated to occupy a secondary and limited ethical status. The opposite is true when it comes to the detached and impartial morality that has come to be associated with the masculine perspective that is used to explain the principle of agency in society³⁴.

Embodiment

Embodiment occupies a central role in the realm of feminist theory. Feminist theorists have always sought out to address the inherent qualities that befell women as a result of their bodies. As defined before, the system of patriarchy meant that women would be relegated to ‘inferior’ household functions while men had the free reign over all other matters of the society. The issue is reflected in Homeric literature where women were not even required to participate in matters to do with rulership. Rulership in Ancient Greek culture was closely related with war and conquest. Since women were deemed to be weak and inefficient at war, they were subsequently precluded from participating in rulership dynamics. Unfortunately, men would make decisions for them and determined the role that women would play in their society. As such, embodiment looks at the way the body is used in the symbolic construction of sexual difference, a ground for political exclusion or inclusion, a prospect for self-realization, a locus of subjectivity, and the material focus of many labors that typically fall to women.

³¹ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 42.

³² Cavarero, Adriana. *In spite of Plato: A feminist rewriting of ancient philosophy*. Taylor & Francis, 1995.

³³ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 53.

³⁴ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 55.

Women have been primarily held responsible for caring for the bodies of men, children, and elders³⁵. Additionally, the ideals of Western feminine subjectivity always result in women having to fashion their bodies as ornamental surfaces for the sole purpose of gratifying the muses and fantasies of men. These ideas are ingrained in society through various modes including religion.

For example, Western philosophical tradition has been somatophobic with these ideas being drawn from ancient roots which include Christianity. Western philosophical thought asserts a separation and hierarchy between the body and the soul³⁶. However, feminist theorists continue to assert that this hierarchy also refers to the difference between the masculine and the feminine. It is a distinction that automatically alludes to power dynamics³⁷. There is a long-standing connection between the denigration of the body and the denigration of women as is reflected in Plato's words when he noted that a woman is someone who is "quintessentially body-directed." Essentially, this meant that women were incapable of being rational³⁸. Various philosophical systems have looked into the distinctions that exist between the body and the mind. To this end, it is often established that a woman is a person who is inescapably bound to the body. She exists to tend to its needs. Unfortunately, this idea resulted in the oppression of women³⁹.

The same ideas are prevalent in Homeric literature which is notorious for its depiction of women as inferior to men. There is a dangerous mischaracterization of women as opposed to men whose bodies and minds are thought to be the very image of freedom and wit. One of the most powerful female figures is captured in Circe. However, Homer's narration of events points to a lack of understanding of the true power of the female form. Miller's Circe comes across as someone strong, independent, and confident of her female form. Many female characters in Homeric literature were confined to obvious and "less-important" subplots such as marriage, kidnapping, rape, birth, objectification, and so forth. On the other

³⁵ Halliwell, Emma, and Helga Dittmar. "The role of self-improvement and self-evaluation motives in social comparisons with idealised female bodies in the media." *Body Image* 2.3 (2005): 250.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

³⁹ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 208.

hand, male characters came across as powerful, ambitious, courageous, and honorable. Moreover, their body descriptions align with the idea that only male characters are capable of performing great acts⁴⁰.

That being said, some 20th-century feminist theorists have also viewed the female body as deficient. They have expressed some somatophobic beliefs just as an ancient thinker did. However, they do believe that the body could be overcome⁴¹. Some have argued that women are bound to and bound by their bodies in ways that men are not. It is this fact that makes them argue that the female body is a significant factor in women's oppression. Simone de Beauvoir noted that the liberation and emancipation of women are dependent on their release from the more mundane aspects of life⁴². Women desire to be free from the concerns of the body so that they might take part in acts of freedom that are body-transcendent. Other feminist theorists have gone to extremes in their description of this transcendence of the body⁴³. For example, Shulamith Firestone envisioned a future where women would be able to overcome the limitations imposed by the reproductive system. She opines that women will be able to place their faith in technology to help overcome some of these natural deficiencies borne out of the female body⁴⁴. However, in line with this research thesis, it is appropriate to consider the words of Beauvoir as she said that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman⁴⁵." She observed that the subordination of women is often constructed as a natural condition that is undisputed and immutable. A lot of feminist theorists have joined Beauvoir in contesting the true destinies of women. For example, feminists have criticized scientists who believe that that the uterus, ovaries, chromosomes, hormones, menstruation, or pregnancy dictate the destiny of women. In their opinion, such mindsets are steeped in

⁴⁰ Gilman, Sander L., and Sander Lawrence Gilman. *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*. Cornell University Press, 1985: 78.

⁴¹ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 208.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴³ Colley, Helen. "A rough guide to the history of mentoring from a Marxist feminist perspective." *Journal of Education for teaching* 28.3 (2002): 257-273.

⁴⁴ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 211

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

‘Platonic essence’ and do force women to conform to male dictates⁴⁶. As long as a man represents a woman to himself, she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Essentially speaking, for the man, the woman is fundamentally a sexual being.

It is dynamic that is reflected in Miller’s *Circe* as well as in Homeric literature. For example, Circe’s sisters is depicted as being disdainful of Circe who desires to follow her own path independent of the one dictated to her by her family. It is expected of Circe to be betrothed to a man for marriage. However, Circe has a different opinion of her fate and this brings about a lot of consternation from her family members. The same can be seen in the case of Penelope who, despite her wit and cunning mindset, must remain loyal to her husband Odysseus until he returns. His son keeps reminding her of this fact and reinforces the idea that Penelope must tend to Odysseus’s household and refrain from participating in matters to do with poetry and matters of the state. Odysseus, on the other hand, seems to view the women around him as objects of desire and comfort. He finds that any woman who resists his advances as spoilt and evil. Such Hellenistic attitudes persisted throughout the reign of Ancient Greece and were carried down future generations and into other future civilizations.

The moral and intellectual effects of such ideas have a significant effect to the extent that they appear to spring from nature: or women’s nature. The differences in humanity come from intricate processes that divide it into two major classes of individuals whose faces, clothes, smiles, bodies, interests, gaits, and occupations are inherently and manifestly different. These differences are always structured by power which makes it important for society to be wary of romanticizing sexual differences⁴⁷. In some respects, it makes it highly dangerous for women to voice out their desire for equal rights since such equivocations are grounded in abstract concepts of equality that pose inflexible dilemmas. It is either that women cannot demand greater equality as their social condition is a reflection of the inherent limits set forth by nature or that they have no grounds for complaint as they are already equal regardless of material situations⁴⁸. It is this reason why the theory of embodiment provides an

⁴⁶ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁷ Srivastava, Kalpana, et al. “Misogyny, feminism, and sexual harassment.” *Industrial psychiatry journal* 26.2 (2017): 111.

⁴⁸ Arthur-Katz, Marilyn. “Sexuality and the body in ancient Greece.” *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 4.1 (1989): 155-179.

alternative aspect of understanding femininity by avoiding the topic of “equality in difference” that men seem to have accorded women⁴⁹. Feminist theories now encourage women to claim freedom by resisting the negative conditions of existence⁵⁰. It is a fight against ambiguity, contingency, and potentiality borne out of the desire and intentional commitment to live. These concepts emerge in the women characters that Madeline Miller uses in her book.

The focus of this literary thesis will look at the depiction of the female form and female characters in Homeric literature. It will compare these depictions with those detailed by *Circe* as narrated by Miller. The feminist theories of agency and embodiment will form the basic framework by which these depictions will get to be scrutinized.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 172.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 178.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Agency: The Iliad, Odyssey, and Circe

The Iliad and the Odyssey by Homer represented women as weak yet cunning as compared to men who were strong, brave, and courageous. Women come across as foolish and weak-willed. They are curious yet to succumb to curiosity as it turns out to work out to their disadvantage. In such moments, they often find that they need a man to help and guide them. The problem is that such a dynamic means that they are always in the control of men. Essentially, they lack the ability to control their destinies and fates⁵¹. They lack the agency to lead meaningful lives according to their desires and wishes. The Odyssey depicts some of these women as independent and devoid from the control of men. However, such women are characterized as being “dangerous.” A woman was only positively when she was a wife or a person of virtue⁵². Women who fit such a profile ought to be defended and admired. Other common characterizations of women in Homeric literature include slaves and chattels. In this forms, female characters were perceived as pawns within the larger schemes of men who wrestled for control and power.

Most women who worked to assist Odysseus tended to be wives or daughters who offered him hospitality whenever he needed it. Offering hospitality was a virtue that was highly regarded in women⁵³. The fate of many women in the Odyssey was hinged on how they received Odysseys whenever they encountered him. Those who opposed his advances and wishes for hospitality are portrayed as weak-willed, lacking virtue, stubborn, or willful. These terms negatively portrayed female characters. Furthermore, such character traits in Homeric literature meant that the women were prone to lust and had little self-control. Indeed, even when a woman is thought to be virtuous, she is often punished when she

⁵¹ Rodríguez, Rosa María Moreno. “DEAN-JONES, Lesley. Women’s Bodies in Classical Greek Science.” *Dynamis: Acta Hispanica ad Medicinae Scientiarumque Historiam Illustrandam* 15 (1995): 510-513.

⁵² Ibid, 511

⁵³ Ibid., 512

employs cunning and wit in her endeavors as seen in the case of Penelope⁵⁴. The crux of the matter is that women are defined by the men surrounding them.

The society depicted in the *Odyssey* is highly stratified based on class, age, and gender. At the top of the pyramid are the kings and the wealthy men. Below them are the male citizens and further down on the ladder are the women. Even who come from nobility are ranked lower than any young man. The only group of people who fall below the women are children, servants, and slaves. Homer's depiction of this society shows the men exercising their power over the women. In the first several books of the *Odyssey*, it is made clear that men are superior to women. As mentioned before, women such as Penelope were frowned on for being smart and tricky. Men are disgusted by the idea of a woman outsmarting them and their advances. The suitors accuse Penelope of "exploiting the gifts Athena gave her⁵⁵." Penelope was a woman who was gifted. However, the most surprising this is that these men who have had their advances rejected by Penelope get to punish Telemachus for her supposedly wrongful actions.

In line with the principle of agency, such behaviors show that even young men such as Telemachus have power and authority over the women of society including their own mothers. It is inconceivable that a situation would take place in the modern context. These actions show the power of a patriarchal society to limit the voice of the woman⁵⁶. Penelope fails to fully appropriate her actions as her own. It is her wit and trickery that allows to stifle her suitors' advances. In the grand scheme of things, however, it is her son who seems to have had the final say in such proceedings. It is interesting to note that her son would also routinely command her and give her instructions on how to behave. In one particular instance, Penelope begs the bard to pick a different song. However, Telemachus forbids her from doing so and sends her back to her chambers. Even when it comes to entertainment, the Greek society limited the women's ability to select their preferred entertainment forms. In this particular case, Telemachus uses his authority as the male heir of Odysseus. He commands Penelope by saying, "Mother,

⁵⁴ Occhiolini, Alessandra. *Mired In Mud: Circe, Atwood, And The Female Mythmaker*. Swarthmore, PA: N.p., 2016: 23.

⁵⁵ Fallon, Elizabeth A., and Heather A. Hausenblas. "Media images of the "ideal" female body: Can acute exercise moderate their psychological impact?" *Body image* 2.1 (2005): 62-73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

go back to your quarters⁵⁷.” It is in this context that he gets to describe the role of women in the Greek society and their households to be specific. He intonates that women are supposed to tend to their own tasks which include working on the loom. It is interesting that Telemachus expects the women to go to work while the men were eating lazily and lounging off the hard work of the women⁵⁸.

To better understand the absence of agency in women’s lives in ancient Greece, one has to look at the role men played in this society. Much of Greece believed that man was the active member of the society. Men were the ones expected to go out to war. They also received proper education and participated in politics⁵⁹. They were the only members of society who were permitted to attend entertainment events such as plays. Women, in contrast, were relegated to a passive and submissive role. These issues point to a phallogocentric reality that evidently favors masculinity and shapes reality to fit into this structure. To understand the lack of agency among women of Greece as described in Homeric literature, one must look at the relations of power and its effect on the society⁶⁰. Essentially, agency is inseparable from the analysis of power.

For the men, it seems that they were afforded a lot of societal benefits and advantages by virtue of their physical strength. It is clear that their ability to wage war and fight battles gave them a significant leverage over the affairs of society. Homer’s epics are essentially concerned with power, heroism, and victory in battle⁶¹. Odysseus being the main character of the epics best exemplifies the desired characters that ought to be found in a man. The conquests that Odysseus has women is also another major point of masculine expression in Greek culture. In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, women, including Penelope and

⁵⁷ Arthur-Katz, Marilyn. “Sexuality and the body in ancient Greece.” *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 4.1 (1989): 159.

⁵⁸ Tazudeen, Rasheed. “Eat it and get all pigsticky”: The Spinozist Body and Contagious Metaphor in” *Circe.*” *James Joyce Quarterly* (2014): 380.

⁵⁹ Öncel, İbrahim Mert. *Victim Or Witch? Circe As An Allegory Of Women’S Struggle During The Feminist Movement.* 2019. Web. 6 May 2021.

⁶⁰ Rountree, Kathryn. “Goddess pilgrims as tourists: Inscribing the body through sacred travel.” *Sociology of religion* 63.4 (2002): 475.

⁶¹ Arthur-Katz, Marilyn. “Sexuality and the body in ancient Greece.” *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 4.1 (1989): 168.

Helen are the prizes that men get to win for their conquests, wars, and adventures. Book three of the Iliad best captures this reality in the words of Hector when he says:

“...He [Alexander] asks that they lay aside their fair armor on the bounteous earth, and that he himself between the armies together with Menelaus, dear to Aries, do battle in single combat for Helen and all her possessions. And whoever wins, and proves himself the better man, let him duly take all the wealth and the woman, and take them home...⁶²”

In these particular words, women are effectively compared to and equated to possessions. The men engrossed in the heat of battle effectively view Helen as loot to be taken along with the treasure in the event that the armies of Greek conquered Troy. It is critical to also recognize the contrast between the active role of Menelaus (Helen's husband) and the passive role of the wife in Helen. Menelaus is the one who is required to engage in combat so as to secure her wife's freedom. Indeed, this can be recognized as an act of chivalry. The only problem comes about in the thinking process that the men use to plan and the impact it causes in the society. As long as women live in the background, they will always be victims of the decisions of other men. These active and passive roles reveal themselves in many instances in the *Odyssey*. For example, the overarching narrative in the epic depicts Odysseus going on an epic adventure. In this sense, Odysseus is actively involved in affairs around his world and reality. He gets to interact with deity, men, and women from all backgrounds⁶³. On the other hand, Penelope occupies a passive role in this epic. She only exists to merely serve as a prize for Odysseus to attain once he returns back to her. In addition to this, Penelope is idealized as the perfect woman who is virtuous and works to maintain a particular temperament, organizational structure in her household, and ideals that are most valuable to the Greek men.

These issues are critical to note in line with the concept of power relations in any given society. Agency automatically denotes the right for women to fully express their personhood without the limitations of men's preferences. As mentioned before, the theory of agency focuses on the concept of

⁶² Homer. *The Iliad*. London: Printed for J. Whiston, Baker and Leigh, W. Strahan, T. Payne, J. and F. Rivington [and 19 others in London], 1771: 341.

⁶³ Homer., and Theodore Alois Buckley. *The Odyssey Of Homer*. G. Bell And Sons, 1912: 212.

domination and power with a view of revealing the injustices inherent in a patriarchal society⁶⁴. At the core of this argument lies the assumptions that patriarchal societies believe that women are incapable of action. Patriarchal societies hold the belief that womanhood is a volatile essence that is also generally fragile and inferior as compared to manhood. However, these are all creations of a society and their development and adoption in mainstream society reflects more of the nature of humanity rather than manhood or womanhood in itself⁶⁵. Feminist theorists have compared the subjugation and the subsequent fight for women's emancipation to other civil rights movements that pertain societal pains such as racism. For example, racism flourishes because of the engendered beliefs in a society that one race of humans is better and superior to another⁶⁶. As such, some feminist theorists have also intimated that this dynamic exists to oppress women and to limit them in predefined public and private spaces as defined by the world run by men.

It, for that matter, requires that people view the issues of agency within a social context. After all, the nuances surrounding women's mischaracterization and misrepresentation in Homeric literature find utility when viewed through the social perspective. It is through such a paradigm that we get to understand the various ways women lose their power and are often relegated to minor issues in the grand scheme of things⁶⁷. Such a perspective fails to demonstrate the true nature of society which is often interdependent. All forms of personal growth and development only occur within interactions that people have with one another⁶⁸. Even the men who go to war attain great feats and victories as a result of their interactions with women. Indeed, epics revolve around a war that began because of a woman.

⁶⁴ Fletcher, Judith. "Signifying Circe in Toni Morrison's 'Song of Solomon'." *The Classical World* 99.4 (2006): 405-418.

⁶⁵ Devi, Dr. N. Banita, and Nganthoi Khurajam. "From Subjugation To Empowerment: Recasting Homer's Minor Character In Madeline Miller's Circe." *UGC Care Group I Journal* 10.7 (2020): 278.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁶⁷ Tazudeen, Rasheed. "Eat it and get all pigsticky": The Spinozist Body and Contagious Metaphor in "Circe." *James Joyce Quarterly* (2014): 379.

⁶⁸ Fletcher, Judith. "Signifying Circe in Toni Morrison's 'Song of Solomon'." *The Classical World* 99.4 (2006): 405-418.

Indeed, despite the negative light in which Homer portrays women, there are elements of heroism and responsibility that point to the capacity of women in Greek culture to go beyond the social dictates defined by men. Women are given a special illumination despite the reality in which they exist. Three women demonstrate heroic acts as seen in Helen, Andromache, and Penelope. The only problem is that these women are only termed as heroines as long as they get to demonstrate masculine characteristics and traits⁶⁹. For example, Andromache, the wife of Hector, shows that women can be regarded in a positive light that goes beyond their predefined and expected societal roles. Hector is seen actively seeking advice from his wife Andromache. In this situation, it shows that Andromache has the sort of judgment that would be useful to a man. Also, the same issue becomes apparent when one looks at Arete's position in the Scheria⁷⁰. She becomes the first person to address Odysseus upon his return and this interaction serves to improve her status within her society. It also shows that it was important for the queen to accept Odysseus on his return from his adventures. These women have a special claim to political power in ways that are particularly unwomanly.

Penelope also demonstrates restraint, caution, and influence in her interactions with the people of Ithaca. Even though she was not an active participant in the war, she exudes qualities that were supposedly in many of the men who went to war. Homer uses colorful imagery in her description of Penelope and notes her to be a woman who possesses a heart that is as hard as stone. She has a heart that is difficult to soften thus making her an iron-lady. These qualities were mostly used to describe the requirements of a warrior⁷¹. Some of these descriptions can be found in the Iliad where warriors often possessed the very same qualities that Penelope possessed as described by Homer in the Odyssey. Another issue to note lies in the fact that the both Athena and Penelope are described as being strong women with strong hands. In essence, these were women who had the capacity to hold power which fits the description of men in their ordinary circumstances. Indeed, apart from exuding leadership qualities during

⁶⁹ Fletcher, Judith. "Signifying Circe in Toni Morrison's 'Song of Solomon'." *The Classical World* 99.4 (2006): 409.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 409.

⁷¹ Rountree, Kathryn. "Goddess pilgrims as tourists: Inscribing the body through sacred travel." *Sociology of religion* 63.4 (2002): 480.

times of confusion and fear, Penelope, Andromache, and Helen specifically demonstrate an innate ability to match to the levels of men especially when it comes to the attainment of their objectives. Some of these women are described as lions rather than lionesses⁷². Indeed, even Odysseus describes Penelope as a “faultless king” as opposed to a queen. In looking at Andromache, her strength firstly comes from her name as well as well as her capacity to provide sound advice and leadership when it came to matters of the war. Indeed, one should not the masculine prefix in her name (*Andro* means *man*)⁷³. The remainder of her name means war which means that this name was not given to her by chance but rather due to her capacity and ability when it came to matters to do with military strategies and war. In line with the same theme, Helen’s ability to command immortality is definitely one that very few men can do.

These issues mentioned above point to the root of the problem that feminist theorists seek to address when it comes to addressing the lack of agency, autonomy, and freedom of women in contemporary society. It is something that Madeline Miller has definitively addressed in her book, *Circe*. Madeline Miller’s work fully conforms to the ideals of feminist theorists who argue for the idea that women should have the right to define themselves based on their perspectives as opposed to the ideas, notions, and principles set by men⁷⁴. It is important to understand that this reality is a new one as political and social reformation movements have always been based on the perspectives and notions set forth by men. When ideas regarding reality are described and propagated by men, it becomes difficult for women to find a true subject that best fits femininity. Additionally, Miller’s *Circe* is unique in its adaptation of Homer’s epics in that it provides a detailed description of the personal growth and development of the female characters who first appeared in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is easy to observe the personal transformation that Miller’s *Circe* goes through due to the fact that she occupies an active space. She has active roles and behaviors that are proactive and intent on attaining various objectives.

⁷² Rountree, Kathryn. “Goddess pilgrims as tourists: Inscribing the body through sacred travel.” *Sociology of religion* 63.4 (2002): 481.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 483.

⁷⁴ Macmillan, Catherine. “The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller’s *Circe*.” *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 31.

Circe as described by Miller reveals the true power of the feminist movement in its attempt to provide a new pathway for feminist writers as they construct biographies of female characters. One particular movement of growth and development in Circe is revealed when she begins to become aware of her powers; her otherness. Her transformation begins at this point as she casts off her shyness and insecurities until she is able to find her voice⁷⁵. As previously mentioned, Circe is unable to match up to expectations required of deities due to existential limitations. She is not as beautiful as her fellow sisters and other relatives. Furthermore, being a female deity, she is inherently limited in her ability to fully express herself and exploit her world the way her brothers do⁷⁶. Indeed, at this juncture, even Madeline Miller is unable to escape the duality and binary nature of society as she makes comparisons between the male and female albeit in tacit fashion. One cannot escape the feeling that Circe's limitations are often juxtaposed with the achievements and advancements made by her male peers. Nevertheless, this does not erode the argument proposed by feminist theorists who argue that the agency theory is best conceptualized within a social context⁷⁷. It is through this context that the reader gets to appreciate the power and the positivity that comes from personal transformation in the bid to overcome personal and innate challenges imposed by nature or fate⁷⁸. For example, Circe is a goddess who is unable to catch anyone's interest thus making her doomed to spend her immortality alone as she laments on her unfortunate and infinite future under the influence of wine. It is a reality borne of the fact that she is not a traditional goddess as is usually depicted in classical myths. She lacks the beauty of her aunts and nieces and is always alone and powerless. However, she differs extremely from the characters portrayed in Homer's epics in that she gradually embarks on a journey that leads to her full transformation as she realizes the true extent of her powers and abilities⁷⁹.

⁷⁵ Macmillan, Catherine. "The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller's Circe." *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 34.

⁷⁶ Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. 1st ed. Little, Brown and Company, 2018: 23.

⁷⁷ Macmillan, Catherine. "The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller's Circe." *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 29.

⁷⁸ Gilman, Sander L., and Sander Lawrence Gilman. *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

Her transformation begins when she roams a deserted island where she interacts with Glaucos; a poor and mortal man. To begin with, her journey towards transformation is unorthodox for a deity. The unorthodox nature of her transformation, albeit enforced on her by nature and fate, is one that she embraces fully and wholeheartedly. She is curious enough to test the limits of her growth and does not shy away from challenges⁸⁰. In the process, she encounters challenges and finds ways to overcome. She falls in love with a mortal being which is something that is frowned on in her familial circle. In doing so, she undermines the patriarchal court of her father. She also does the impossible by turning a mortal man into a god. Again, this is another juncture through that marks a massive point of inflection towards greater heights of transformation. Up to this particular point, Circe's life has been devoid of choice and its power to transform. However, her courageous decision to go into a 'deserted island' reflects on her ability to start from scratch and climb herself upwards towards a higher version of herself. These early formative processes are characterized by her ability to make clear choices in defiance of her material and immaterial circumstances. She finally gets to have the ability to change the world (and fate) of herself as well as those around her. It is a situation that stands in sharp contrast to those of the female characters depicted in Homer's epics⁸¹.

It is important to understand the way in which Circe's world is perceived in Miller's narrative. Helios speaks up in a manner designed to undermine Circe's achievements and progress. As her father, Helios is more concerned that her actions paint in him in poor light. Indeed, to Helios, it is not important what Circe says or how she feels or thinks. For him, all that her daughter is doing is merely making a 'spectacle.' It is unimaginable that a woman of Circe's stature would be able to harvest her powers in such a manner. Helios speaks up to Circe and notes:

“‘Daughter, you begin to make a spectacle.’ The words cut across the air. ‘If the world contained that power you allege, do you think it would fall to such as you to discover it?’ Soft laughter at my back, open amusement on my uncle’s faces. But most of all my father’s voice,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁸¹ Gilman, Sander L., and Sander Lawrence Gilman. *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

speaking those words like trash he dropped. Such as you. Any other day in all my years of life I would have curled upon myself and wept⁸².”

These words are a perfect testament of what Circe has to go through in order to become the full version of her true self. Her advances in life are not only curtailed by her male counterparts but her family. Indeed, the ultimate disdain that could go Circe’s way is that she is not punished for what she has done. Indeed, they believe that Circe does not even have the powers to do what she claims to have done in the first place. It is only when Aeetes, her brother, steps forward and confesses of having similar powers to Circe that the reality changes. For Aeetes, he is taken seriously for he is a man and the ruler of a kingdom. Helios decides to discuss this issue with Zeus and on arriving on a decision, Helios speaks and says:

“We have agreed [...] that these powers present no immediate danger. Perses lives beyond our boundaries and is no threat. Pasiphaë’s husband is a son of Zeus, and he will be sure she is held to her proper place⁸³.”

Again, the patriarchal system shines though and forces Circe to suffer from it. Her sister, Pasiphae, falls victim to this very structure and her fate is linked to her husband who is ordered to monitor his wife closely and keep her within the boundaries of what is accepted within their social structure. The situation contrasts sharply with their brother’s fate. Perses, unlike his sisters, is immediately placed within a system of trust as he is termed as being truthful and reliable. He does not suffer exile or any other form of punishment. Ultimately, the gods get their scapegoat in Circe and the consequences are captured in Helios’ words he admonishes Circe saying:

“You were all here when confessed that she sought her powers openly. She had been warned to stay away, yet she disobeyed. [...] It is agreed with Zeus that for this she must be punished. She is exiled to a deserted island, where she can do no more harm. She leaves tomorrow⁸⁴.”

⁸² Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. 1st ed. Little, Brown and Company, 2018: 39.

⁸³ Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. 1st ed. Little, Brown and Company, 2018: 43.

⁸⁴ Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. 1st ed. Little, Brown and Company, 2018: 45.

It is unfortunate that a small gathering of men gets to decide Circe's fate and how she gets to spend her life in eternity and isolation. In looking at the issue of agency, it is important to understand that every decision is made based on the power that men have within this social structure. It is a patriarchal structure that ascertains that she truly possesses the powers that she claims to have⁸⁵. Before this point, Circe faced dismissals and scorn from her relatives. However, when the men decide that someone needs to be punished, they once again turn to Circe and direct all their angst towards her. The men in Perses and Aeetes do not come under the wrath of the gods due to masculine bias. Additionally, Pasiphae is not punished as she is a woman and her husband is expected to contain her and keep her in her proper place. Eventually, Circe departs to Aiaia where she embarks on a full inquest to the true nature of her powers and abilities.

Madeline Miller's narration depicts this process with great insight as it pertains to the power of agency to radically transform a woman's life. She is able to portray the power and strength of a woman who is unabated and unashamed of her abilities. Circe manages to go about her affairs with a fierce determination to prove her doubters and oppressors wrong. However, and more importantly, she carries herself in a way that first fulfills her desires and objectives⁸⁶. The imposed exile allows Circe to access a wide berth of possibilities that she would have been unable to access in her father's courts. In an environment that is unhindered by a patriarchal system, Circe manages to grow her witchcraft and is able to steward massive transformative processes and changes in her life and those around her. Her change process effectively becomes a form of resistance against the status quo⁸⁷. As she spent centuries in exile, Circe manages to encounter a wide variety of men, women, and deities. She gets to meet Odysseus, Hermes, Scylla, and so forth. She learns to turn men into swine, and lions into obedient pets.

One might argue that male characters are the ones who forced Circe to attain full agency in her life. However, this is far from the truth. From the very beginning, Circe is fully aware of the change

⁸⁵ Devi, Dr. N. Banita, and Nganthoi Khurajam. "From Subjugation To Empowerment: Recasting Homer's Minor Character In Madeline Miller's Circe." *UGC Care Group I Journal* 10.7 (2020): 278.

⁸⁶ Macmillan, Catherine. "The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller's Circe." *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 28.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

process taking place inside of her. She fully embraces the process it takes to become a powerful deity who is skilled in magic and witchcraft. It is an experience that is best conceptualized in her interactions with Prometheus as he faced a severe form of punishment from the gods⁸⁸. Seeing him in dire suffering, Circe is moved by compassion and empathy and approaches him and offers him help. She offers to bring him nectar in a conversation:

“His gaze rested on mine. ‘I would thank you for that,’ he said. His voice was resonant as aged wood. It was the first time I had heard it; he had not cried once in all his torment. I turned. My breaths came fast as I walked through the corridors to the feasting hall, filled with laughing gods. Across the room, the Fury was toasting [...]. She had not forbidden anyone to speak to Prometheus, but that was nothing, her business was offence. I imagined her infernal voice, howling out my name. I imagined manacles rattling on my wrists and the whip striking from the air⁸⁹.”

In these words, Circe showcases a great deal of agency by going against the wishes of her father Helios and Zeus. She speaks to Prometheus and is fully aware of her actions. She is cognizant of the fact that she could face a great deal of punishment from the gods. For Circe, it is important to align actions with her beliefs and feelings rather than abiding to what is expected of her. By taking such a stance, Circe essentially becomes a symbol of feminism and resistance against a patriarchal society⁹⁰. She is able to make individualist choices as a woman and as a minor goddess in the grand scheme of things. She realizes that she lives in a world that is surrounded by male Olympians and Titans whose only purpose and muse is power and might. Such a transformative process could only be brought by the sheer pain she endured while she lived in exile. The process strengthened her and enforced a sense of agency in her life in a way that truly allowed her to shine through.

⁸⁸ Devi, Dr. N. Banita, and Nganthoi Khurajam. “From Subjugation To Empowerment: Recasting Homer’s Minor Character In Madeline Miller’s Circe.” *UGC Care Group I Journal* 10.7 (2020): 275.

⁸⁹ Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. 1st ed. Little, Brown and Company, 2018. Print: 54.

⁹⁰ Macmillan, Catherine. “The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller’s Circe.” *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 32.

Embodiment: The Iliad, Odyssey, and Circe

Women have had to abide by social structures that limited their ability to fully exploit their world in line with their beliefs and emotions. It is why embodiment has come to play such a significant role in their lives. The embodiment theory pertains to the way in which the body is used in the symbolic construction of sexual difference as well as a ground for political exclusion or inclusion⁹¹. For women in Greek, the body became a major source of social stratification in a patriarchal society. Essentially speaking, women have been subjected to the realm of domestic affairs and were responsible for caring for the bodies of men, children, and elders⁹². Additionally, the ideals of Western feminine subjectivity essentially ensured that women had to fashion their bodies as ornamental surfaces for the sole purpose of gratifying the fantasies of men. It is part of a long tradition that is somatophobic and extends beyond the Greek empire itself. Unfortunately, these ideas are presently represented in various forms and shapes in contemporary society. It is impossible for a lot of men in contemporary times to view the female form in a way that does not objectify it⁹³.

Homer's epics do reveal this persistent narrative that has shackled women to the dictates of men as well as nature. The simple fact that it is only women who can give birth and possess the maternal instincts to take care of young ones goes a long way to suppress their full expression⁹⁴. Indeed, presently, a lot of women have voiced their opinion and their desire not to be limited to the reproductive elements of the female form that a patriarchal society seems to shackle the fates of women with. A patriarchal society essentially ensures that women will always be limited to taking care of the needs of the family and other activities related to the domestic sphere⁹⁵.

⁹¹ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 221.

⁹² Hekman, Susan. "Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22.2 (1997): 360.

⁹³ Disch, Lisa, and Mary Hawkesworth, eds. *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 247.

⁹⁴ Sutphin, Christine. "The representation of women's heterosexual desire in augusta webster's "circe" and "medea in athens"." *Women 'Writing* 5.3 (1998): 388.

⁹⁵ Porter, James I., ed. *Constructions of the classical body*. University of Michigan Press, 2002: 15.

The role of women in Homeric society illustrates the tragic truth regarding the way in which women are treated. It does not matter the position they hold in society since all women in Homer's world are labelled purely as either mothers, spouses, mistresses, or concubines. The culture of the Greek society at the time effectively ensured that women were reduced to raising children and caring for other issues around the house⁹⁶. As mentioned previously, Penelope's son is seen giving instructions to his mother to depart from the company of men and instead focus on taking care of domestic affairs in their house. It is something that would seem impossible to implement in the contemporary society. Such a perspective not only prevented women from going to war, it also excluded them from actively participating in conversations regarding military strategy, politics, and rulership. The situation contrasts sharply with the role that goddesses played in Greek culture. Goddesses had a more direct influence on the affairs of both men and gods.

In similar fashion to the theory of agency, it is important to recognize the role of social factors and dynamics that play a crucial role in the limitations placed on women due to their bodies. A good grasp of the socio-economic context helps to provide a good perspective on issues such as child-bearing. Again, it is also important to emphasize the reciprocal nature of the roles of both men and women and their importance in the continuity of the society. It should be noted that the society during this time was heavily dependent on the birth rate which made women play a critical role in the survival of the society⁹⁷. As such, one reason as to why women were not allowed to fight in battles could be deciphered as the need to protect them due to the invaluable service they provide to the society from a reproductive angle. Another reason could also be that women were generally regarded as weak both in body and mind⁹⁸. It is important to note that Homer leaves this interpretation and observation to the readers.

In observing the theory of embodiment, however, the reader can get to observe other subliminal intonations from Homer's epics that Madeline Miller seeks to correct in her book. Feminist theorists who have expanded on the embodiment theory have alluded to the fact that men have always believed that

⁹⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁹⁷ Porter, James I., ed. *Constructions of the classical body*. University of Michigan Press, 2002: 24.

⁹⁸ Porter, James I., ed. *Constructions of the classical body*. University of Michigan Press, 2002: 25.

women are incapable of rational thought. It is an idea that is rooted in the belief that woman's mind is "quintessentially body-directed" which is something that was highly popularized by Plato⁹⁹. It means that woman is a being that is inescapably bound to the body and exists to serve it. Such an idea is often oppressive to women and limits their ability to fully express themselves in their given contexts. It is no wonder that women, in Greek society, were not allowed to participate in military affairs, politics, nor government. These were issues that were left to be in the domain of men. However, as mentioned before, Homer does depict some women as being adept at matters to do with rulership and military strategy¹⁰⁰. Odysseus even goes ahead to praise his wife as being akin to a king due to her wit and cunning nature. It is this gross mischaracterization that ensured that women were always used as pawns when it came to human affairs or to do with things that occurred in the realm of the deities. Some of the aforementioned quotes exhibit this reality. For example, the men used women as part of their reasons to go to war. They would routinely gauge them as mere possessions that could be passed around for their pleasure¹⁰¹. Women could be conquered as loot just like any other material thing in the world.

It is indeed telling that a whole began because of a woman's beauty. Helen, being a woman of exceeding beauty was stolen away thus resulting in the Trojan war. She was also criticized for costing thousands of lives as a result of soldiers dying in battle while she gave in to the demands of her captors. It is important to note that nothing is mentioned with regards to terms that forced Helen to make such decisions during battle. Throughout the entire epic, Helen is regarded as the object of blame and desire. It seems that there is nothing she can do to be right. She will either be blamed for being beautiful or for lacking the ability to actually participate in the political and military processes that would make her become an effective decisionmaker.

Other women in Homer's epics, as mentioned before, were always portrayed based on their ability to offer hospitality. Again, this is an issue that is raised by the embodiment theory which seeks to

⁹⁹ Arthur-Katz, Marilyn. "Sexuality and the body in ancient Greece." *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 4.1 (1989): 155-179.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁰¹ Porter, James I., ed. *Constructions of the classical body*. University of Michigan Press, 2002: 37.

establish the patterns of male domination propagated in patriarchal societies in the bid to limit the role of women to predefined areas. In the *Odyssey*, women are portrayed as being eager to offer support to Odysseys as he moved on with his journey. However, the women who hindered Odysseys from going ahead and fulfilling his objectives and mission came across as lacking in virtue. These women were willful or too weak-willed. They could also be described as being stubborn. Other women were also portrayed to be prone to lust and lacking self-control¹⁰². These perspectives flourished in a phallogocentric world which essentially declared the female body to be inferior to that of the man. A masculine society such as the one exhibited in Greece would routinely find ways to systematically exalt the masculine body as being more noble. Women were regarded as being extremely sexually charged which made it difficult for them to fully express themselves. Sexual openness was something that was valued only among men. They were the ones who could express their sexuality without having to lose face and be judged by the society¹⁰³. As such, it would explain why Penelope was highly regarded in this narrative. She exhibits a strong will to turn away potential suitors by telling and shows a remarkable resilience to wait for her husband to return back to her. She finds cunning ways to keep herself engaged but is also punished when people discovered her brilliance. On the other hand, Odysseus is free to do as he wills.

Madeline Miller provides an alternative perspective on how the female body should be viewed. Circe, as portrayed by Miller, is a woman who is powerful goddess with supernatural powers of witchcraft that can turn morals into gods. These powers can also turn to work against the people as reflected in the fact that Miller used her powers to turn men into pigs¹⁰⁴. These are issues that are rarely delved into in Homer's epics. The stories depicted in Homeric literature rarely provide a deeper insight into the nature of life and transformation that Circe goes through to become a powerful goddess. Miller's Circe, however, can provide a deeper insight into the way reality is perceived.

¹⁰² Sutphin, Christine. "The representation of women's heterosexual desire in augusta webster's "circe" and "medea in athens"." *Women 'Writing* 5.3 (1998): 375.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 376.

¹⁰⁴ Macmillan, Catherine. "The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller's Circe." *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 31.

Women lacked the power of agency to transform their lives and live according to their wishes. It is a reality that is largely expressed in Homeric literature as opposed to the themes expressed by Miller in *Circe*. Miller's account of Circe depicts a woman who is strong, virtuous, independent, and unafraid to carve out her path. The power of agency as a feminist theory provides a powerful juxtaposition in which the reader can assess the depiction of female characters in Miller's *Circe* and Circe as depicted in Homeric literature¹⁰⁵. Homer's epics depicted female characters as powerless beings that were often at the mercy of masculinity. Even when there is something good in a woman, it is often associated with something inherently evil. Miller's *Circe* provides an alternative way to perceive the strength of a woman who is free to choose her path despite the insurmountable odds placed on her way.

In Homer's epics, the female characters did have a form of agency but these characters were few and far in between. They were also limited in their ability to influence events around them. Their capacity for action as well as the ability to cause change was often dictated by the dictates and standards set by men. Contrarily, the female characters in Miller's *Circe* were often the agents of change in their own terms and by their own devices¹⁰⁶. For example, Circe is able to make individualistic choices derived from her feelings and thoughts thus signifying a growing agency. The way in which she takes her chances to influence her environment is such that no one can stop her. Indeed, Circe begins to appreciate this fact when she caused the transformation of Scylla into a monster. She describes this experience and notes that, "It felt impossible to picture the horror Selene described. To make myself believe: *I did that*¹⁰⁷." Indeed, this is such a poignant moment for Circe as it becomes a moment of wonder as well as self-realization of the power inside her.

The way in which Circe is described is emblematic of a patriarchal society that seeks to discriminate against certain types of bodies. It is in line with the Homer's epics which often showed the

¹⁰⁵ Greene, Gayle. "Feminist fiction and the uses of memory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.2 (1991): 319.

¹⁰⁶ Macmillan, Catherine. "The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller's *Circe*." *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 34.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

way men desired beauty and objectified women for it¹⁰⁸. In this particular instance, Circe is described as a Hawk but she should instead be referred to as a Goat due to her ugliness. She has yellow eyes and her voice is screechy like that of an owl. Indeed, in of her conversations with Phaethousa, she finds herself in a conversation that effectively demeans her and differentiates her from the rest of her family¹⁰⁹. In the conversation, Circe tells Phaethousa that she has similar eyes to her. Phaethousa responds:

“How sweet! No, darling, ours are bright as fire, and our hair like sun on the water.”

“You’re clever to keep yours in a braid,” Phaethousa said. “The brown streaking does not look so bad then. It is a shame you cannot hide your voice the same way¹¹⁰.”

In this particular instance, these words were supposed to reflect the difference between Circe and the rest of her relatives. However, it also shows the ways in which a patriarchal society dictates the standards by which women can be treated and perceived. It is due to this dynamic that makes it difficult for Circe to actually connect well with her family members¹¹¹.

The theory of embodiment closely relates to the theory of agency in that men have the agency to do as they can with their bodies. Women, on the other hand, do not have the agency to do as they wish with theirs. Such a situation opens a whole new ground for interpretation and debate regarding women’s oppression and enslavement as a result of their bodies¹¹². One argument that can be made is that the agency that men have over their bodies means that they can make rational and wise judgments regarding many issues in their respective lives. Since women do not have agency and control over their bodies, they

¹⁰⁸ Arthur-Katz, Marilyn. “Sexuality and the body in ancient Greece.” *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 4.1 (1989): 155-179.

¹⁰⁹ Macmillan, Catherine. “The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller’s Circe.” *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 39.

¹¹⁰ Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. 1st ed. Little, Brown and Company, 2018. Print: 26.

¹¹¹ Macmillan, Catherine. “The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller’s Circe.” *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 28.

¹¹² Hekman, Susan. “Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22.2 (1997): 360.

are effectively unable to control their emotions thus excluding them from rational thought¹¹³. A good of example of this portrayed by Athena. She is a proud warrior goddess who also is also a champion and a role model to young women and mothers¹¹⁴. However, Athena's major flaw is her propensity to succumb to fits of temper, rage, and poor judgments. Such an allegory and mythical as well as metaphysical construct serves to entrench the idea that women are inherently weak-minded in nature. Due to their inability to control their emotions, they cannot be trusted to make decisions that affect the fates of nations¹¹⁵. Ancient Greek literature often related beauty to the idea of terror and this is revealed in Homer's depiction of Helen. Helen embodies the irreducible complex of beauty and evil. It is a constant theme to be found throughout both epics where a woman's beauty is juxtaposed with her ability to create chaos and bring about the moral downfall of man¹¹⁶.

However, there is a strange connection between the body and personhood that actually gets to mark Circe's dominance and difference in Miller's narrative. It is interesting that Circe is able to use her powers of witchcraft to transform bodies into any shape he desires. The fact that she can effectively change men into pigs is a massive win for her and serves to create another layer of poetic justice against a social system that consistently objectifies women and makes them to be inferior to men due to physical attributes. She was also able to turn a mortal man and make him become immortal. Such a perspective provides a liberating feeling to women. It shows that there is a woman who can effectively use her powers and go beyond the dictates of her body to the extent that she can affect the physical bodies of both mortal and immortal beings.

¹¹³ Greene, Gayle. "Feminist fiction and the uses of memory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.2 (1991): 300.

¹¹⁴ Gilman, Sander L., and Sander Lawrence Gilman. *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

¹¹⁵ Macmillan, Catherine. "The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller's Circe." *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 29.

¹¹⁶ Tazudeen, Rasheed. "Eat it and get all pigsticky": The Spinozist Body and Contagious Metaphor in "Circe." *James Joyce Quarterly* (2014): 390.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Embodiment in Homeric literature differs significantly as compared to Miller's *Circe*. Women do not play significant roles in these epics. However, there is still a lot of information that the reader can glean from the narratives given by Homer as she describes the women and the roles they get to play. These roles differ significantly from the ones depicted by Miller as she provides an autobiographical analysis of Circe and other heroines in the book.

Embodiment is first and foremost reflected in a woman's beauty. Looking at Helen, and the central role she plays in the epic, it is interesting that her most important attribute is her divine beauty. Homer indicates that she "shatter people with one lift of her eyelids." Homer also alludes to her tallness by describing her long cloak. Again, this points to the society's preference at the time where Greeks greatly admired women who beautiful and tall¹¹⁷. In this age, it would seem such a trivial thing for a nation to wage against another because of a woman's beauty. However, this was the case as depicted in Homeric literature.

These findings correlate with the research findings collected from other studies on the matter. Feminist theorists in the 21st century have continued to show greater strength and appreciation for the accurate representation of the female form and subject. Benjamin Lauren's work shows the role that race, sex, and species have created taxonomies of power which are then culturally reconstructed and mutually reinforced¹¹⁸. The famous scene regarding the emasculation of Circe makes this a very clear point in that direction. These ideas correlate with the argument made in this research study that the power dynamics regarding agency and embodiment are based analyzed within the socio-cultural context.

In a society, such as the one exhibited by the Greek empire, misogyny was the norm which resulted in the oppression of women. Women would be completely excluded from social, cultural, and political life. The intensity of this animosity would reach very high levels making it impossible for

¹¹⁷ Allen, Tana J. "Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece by Helen King." *Mouseion: Journal of the Classical Association of Canada* 2.1 (2002): 80.

¹¹⁸ Rodríguez, Rosa María Moreno. "DEAN-JONES, Lesley. Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science." *Dynamis: Acta Hispanica ad Medicinae Scientiarumque Historiam Illustrandam* 15 (1995): 513.

women to fully appropriate themselves and be happy to live within this context¹¹⁹. One conversation that exemplifies this reality is seen in Hippolytus' criticism of Euripides' tragedy:

"Oh Zeus, whatever possessed you to put an ambiguous misfortune amongst men by bringing women to the light of day? If you really wanted to sow the race of mortals, why did it have to be born of women? How much better it would be if men could buy the seed of sons by paying for it with gold, iron, or bronze in your temples and could live free, without women in their houses. . .¹²⁰"

The words spoken in this context do reflect on how men perceived women. The angst and the poor perception men had towards women clearly show a serious lack of appreciation for them. Men should have had children by purchasing them. Apart from this, women were also known to be disease carriers. For example, Corpus Hippocraticus notes a disease that uniquely affected virgins. It is a type of epilepsy that is characterized by its unusual consequences: the inclination of sick virgins to hang themselves thus committing suicide. However, as luck would have it, such an ailment has an obvious and readily available cure which is marriage. The argument made was that such a disease was caused as a result of abstaining from sexual intercourse¹²¹. The more appropriate explanation is that virgins who committed suicide succumbed to this disease as they were opposed to marriage. It is only through marriage that this disease essentially disappears once virgins are married effectively making men the cure. These issues point to a disturbing trend in Ancient Greece that routinely placed women at the mercy of men. Greek culture robbed women of the power of agency over their bodies and lives. The culture also demeaned their bodies and placed men as the ultimate beings who could help them overcome some of the limitations resident within the female body.

Women were also perceived, by men, in the same way, they did animals. They were the helpless prey of biological mechanisms that made them unable to exercise self-control. The cultural judgment was entrenched in the Greek vocabulary as seen in the word "estrous" which was derived from the Greek and

¹¹⁹ Allen, Tana J. "Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece by Helen King." *Mouseion: Journal of the Classical Association of Canada* 2.1 (2002): 81.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹²¹ Rodríguez, Rosa María Moreno. "DEAN-JONES, Lesley. Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science." *Dynamis: Acta Hispanica ad Medicinae Scientiarumque Historiam Illustrandam* 15 (1995): 512.

Latin word for “gadfly” (oistron or oestrum)¹²². The application of this word was used about the menstrual cycle in women. The effect of this word was to invoke the image of the helplessly tormented Io from Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*. Such a paradigm supports the ideas proposed by the theory of embodiment. The patriarchal culture at the time was highly phallogentric and demeaned the female form and body¹²³. Since they lacked an in-depth understanding of the biological processes, they automatically devolved into myths and legends. Predictably, this served to make the men seem superior based on their bodies while women, who could not control their bodies, were inferior¹²⁴.

Cantarella adds more to this argument and notes how misogyny in ancient Greek resulted in the blatant devaluation of women through exclusion from cultural, social, and political life. In this article, the author acknowledges that women were portrayed in a negative light¹²⁵. For example, they were scornful individuals who should always be feared. She intonates Hippolytus’s invective that essentially displays the desire of men to live in a world that had no women. As previously mentioned, Hippolytus desired that “*men could buy the seed of sons by paying for it with gold, iron, or bronze in your temples*¹²⁶.” He desired that their houses be free from women and their influence. Such words point to an extreme form of aversion towards women and their influence in society. It makes sure that women will always be treated with contempt due to their bodies. The notion that women being trapped in their bodies precludes from personal growth and development. They cannot hope to raise their status as their fate is already sealed due to the physical attributes of the female body.

These notions are reiterated by Devi et al. as they discuss the woman’s role in Ancient Greek. Women were often marginalized in epics as they tended to focus on the ideal qualities and adventures of

¹²² Sutphin, Christine. “The representation of women’s heterosexual desire in augusta webster’s “circe” and “medea in athens”.” *Women ’Writing* 5.3 (1998): 381.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 382.

¹²⁴ Greene, Gayle. “Feminist fiction and the uses of memory.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.2 (1991): 300.

¹²⁵ Cantarella, Eva. “Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece.” *Poetics Today* 6.1/2 (1985): 91.

¹²⁶ Sutphin, Christine. “The representation of women’s heterosexual desire in augusta webster’s “circe” and “medea in athens”.” *Women ’Writing* 5.3 (1998): 379.

their heroes¹²⁷. However, Devi et al. also note that the feminist writers have worked hard to change this perspective by liberating women from the shackles of cultural, social, and political limitations and misrepresentation¹²⁸. Their research study notes that women authors have revisited the classics by writing books and narratives that give a voice to female characters who were previously silenced. Female characters served to function as plot devices for the hero's adventures and conquests. However, feminist writers have sought out to change this narrative and by building a new way of understanding the female experience¹²⁹. The power of these transformations comes from the female experiences of these writers who powerfully deviate from the collective male fantasy that relegated women to some functions in the society that only served to further entrench patriarchal ideals¹³⁰. Appropriating masculine epics to a feminist female-oriented narrative helps to unravel the hidden virtues of the responses and actions taken by female characters in the circumstances they faced. Madeline Miller's narrative is a good example of this trend. For example, a male-oriented narrative that exemplifies patriarchal ideals focuses on Circe's beauty and her island's exoticism. On the other hand, Miller's narrative of events shows a great deal of agency in Circe's life as she discovers her abilities and learns to deal with the challenges while she lived in exile. For example, Circe learns to hone her skills in witchcraft by literally toiling through the island as she gathered herbs and works on them to reveal more of the hidden magical powers in her:

"I learned to plait my hair back, so it would not catch on every twig, and how to tie my skirts at the knee to keep the burrs off"¹³¹

The sequence of events portrayed in these words reveals the power of agency in a woman who was denied the skills to evolve and discover the world around her. More importantly, these events show what the power of agency can do to a woman as she embarks on the quest to explore her world and use her abilities to influence her environment in the attainment of set goals and objectives. Her plaited hair

¹²⁷ Devi, Dr. N. Banita, and Nganthoi Khuraijam. "From Subjugation To Empowerment: Recasting Homer's Minor Character In Madeline Miller's Circe." *UGC Care Group I Journal* 10.7 (2020): 275.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹²⁹ Rodríguez, Rosa María Moreno. "DEAN-JONES, Lesley. Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science." *Dynamis: Acta Hispanica ad Medicinae Scientiarumque Historiam Illustrandam* 15 (1995): 511.

¹³⁰ Greene, Gayle. "Feminist fiction and the uses of memory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.2 (1991): 299.

¹³¹ Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. 1st ed. Little, Brown and Company, 2018: 71.

signifies the intensity of toil, hard work, and the transformation that comes with focus and a sense of determination¹³². It is a narrative that contrasts sharply with Homer's idea of Circe. For example, Homer's narrative placed Circe's hair to signify a mysterious and dangerous sexual adventure. Inherent in this interpretation is the limitation of the female embodiment where a woman is first recognized from her physical body rather than her mental abilities. It is why the retelling of female characters such as Circe in Miller's *Circe* carries a heavy significance in contemporary society whereby women get to have a distinct voice especially when it comes to gender identity. Bestowing a distinct voice for the women is, for that matter, a way of asserting the female struggle in a society that routinely limits their power and strength.

The stereotyping of the female body did not stop with the Greek Empire. Indeed, presently, the media has conspired to propagate the "ideal" female body with the effect of causing significant psychological impacts. The usage of language and imagery is tacitly designed to enhance a socially acceptable female body¹³³. Research has shown that constant exposure to the media's "ideal" physique has the effect of increased mood and body image disturbance especially for women considered to be 'at-risk.' Fallon et al. noted, in line with the theory of embodiment, of the media's capacity to further serve an idealized image and idea of the perfect body in line with masculine desires and standards. Marketing drives also tend to target specific male-oriented narratives¹³⁴. These issues create a clear message to all women that their bodies are most valuable when perceived as objects of desire and sexual fantasies. Unfortunately, while it is good to appreciate the beauty of women and other aspects of femininity, society should recognize other positive attributes as well¹³⁵. It is a perspective that is in line with the issue of "otherness" when referring to the female gender. As long as narratives, stories, and history are written and dictated by men, the female gender will always be viewed as not part of the mainstream society¹³⁶. The

¹³² Neal, Tamara. "Circe [Book Review]." *Classicum* 44.2 (2018): 29.

¹³³ Fletcher, Judith. "Signifying Circe in Toni Morrison's 'Song of Solomon'." *The Classical World* 99.4 (2006): 411.

¹³⁴ Fallon, Elizabeth A., and Heather A. Hausenblas. "Media images of the "ideal" female body: Can acute exercise moderate their psychological impact?." *Body image* 2.1 (2005): 65.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

“Other” gender concept, which forms a crucial part of the theory of agency, best explains this dynamic that places masculinity as being core and central to the functioning of society.

The focus on masculinity and the male gender being treated as the highest class of humanity possible results in women being cultured to forget their dreams and aspirations in favor of domestic roles. For this reason, it is critical for women in contemporary society to embrace feminist perspectives that call for femininity to be viewed with a new and enhanced perspective¹³⁷. Gayle Greene asserts that there is little for women to be nostalgic about regarding the past¹³⁸. The past is not a place to which most women desire to go back to as history shows that they were severely marginalized and disrespected across a variety of social and cultural lines. Even presently, the reason why women live in the past is due to the deprivation of outlets and incentives available for them to fully exploit their present circumstances and contexts of existence¹³⁹. They relive their pasts through things such as family records, journals, diaries, and photograph albums as a way of gaining meaning and finding relevance in a world that severely limited their options to personally grow and develop. It is why feminist-oriented narratives, such as Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, have a powerful role to play in furthering the cause for women’s emancipation. Miller’s narrative differs from Homer’s in this specific way; it provides hope and meaning to women who fail to intuitively identify themselves with the female characters as depicted in the epics. In Homer’s narratives, the female characters are viewed through a narrow paradigm shift that makes it difficult for them to fully explore themselves. They fail to provide a variety of responses as well as uniqueness in the development of the narrative.

Gayle Greene’s idea of feminism is more of a process rather than a state of being or destination. In this particular sense, feminism is a process of remembering and re-assembling the woman’s lost past as well as the lost part of herself¹⁴⁰. Indeed, this idea would explain the steps taken by feminist writers, such

¹³⁷ Fallon, Elizabeth A., and Heather A. Hausenblas. “Media images of the “ideal” female body: Can acute exercise moderate their psychological impact?.” *Body image* 2.1 (2005): 70.

¹³⁸ Greene, Gayle. “Feminist fiction and the uses of memory.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.2 (1991): 300.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁴⁰ Greene, Gayle. “Feminist fiction and the uses of memory.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.2 (1991): 300.

as Madeline Miller, in the creation of new narratives through a reconstruction of myths and legends from the past. Such a process seeks to rewrite history through the woman's thought paradigm thus providing leverage in the quest to reconstruct the female identity and to push it forward towards a higher level of expression. In this sense, Miller's narrative does not just want to portray the idea that men and women are "equal." Equality in treatment on various issues, while being an important civil rights issue, fails to treat the core reasons as to why women have always been treated as second-class citizens. Indeed, women can receive equal pay in the workplace. However, that does not mean that a patriarchal society will stop the objectification of female bodies. To understand these issues more intuitively, they must be articulated from the standpoint of women for the simple fact that knowledge is situated and located at a particular time and place. The female experience is located within a precise set of social dynamics and relations. In this particular situation, the location in reference is the 'female experience.' It is by incorporating female experiences from the standpoint of women that people can get to a vantage position that reveals the truth about social reality¹⁴¹.

The revisionist mythmaking adopted by Miller's *Circe* is part of a trend that seeks to focus on female characters who were often stereotyped or sidelined in the original epics. Catherine Macmillan notes that Miller's *Circe* as a fictional autobiography can be viewed as both a chronotope of biographical time as well as real historical time¹⁴². Essentially, biographical time tends to concentrate on major moments of a person's life such as crisis and rebirth. These are issues that express themselves in *Circe*. However, *Circe* also details the gradual process of growth and development as reflected in the life of Circe. For example, the island of Aiaia transforms anyone who lands on it as reflected in the physical transformation of men into pigs¹⁴³. Additionally, it is on this island that we get to witness Circe's psychological growth as well as other drastic changes in her life that came from Odysseus' visit. There is an element of Circe remaining a 'stop on the way' rather than being a traveler along a road towards fulfillment. The role is traditionally reserved for male characters. However, this aspect of the narrative

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 301.

¹⁴² Macmillan, Catherine. "The Witch (ES) of Aiaia: Gender, Immortality and the Chronotope in Madeline Miller's *Circe*." *Gender Studies* 18.1 (2019): 29.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 30.

does not take away from the freshness of the perspective introduced by Miller regarding the female form. The principles of embodiment and agency adequately reflect themselves through the characters in the book. The interplay of interactions between male and female characters shows the nature by which a male-oriented universe undermines femininity and relegates women to roles deemed fit by men.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research study is to elucidate how Miller's depiction of female characters and the female body in *Circe* compares to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Miller depicts the female characters through a feminist perspective that empowers them as powerful protagonists in a narrative that marginalized them as playing second fiddle to the whims and the intentions of men. To uncover these feminist values, the theories of agencies and embodiment were used to deliberate on the values thus providing a comprehensive framework across the three subject books in the discussion. The Homeric literature noted women as weak yet cunning as compared to men who were strong, brave, and courageous. They come across as foolish and weak-willed. They have curiosity but often seem to succumb to this curiosity as it turns out to be too good for their good. In such moments, they often find that they need a man to help, guide, and control them. In *The Odyssey*, it is possible to encounter women who were independent of the lead and control of men. However, this situation often earned them the title of being "dangerous.¹⁴⁴" A woman could be a wife or a woman of virtue. In this case, the woman ought to be defended and admired. It is also possible for a woman to be a slave, chattel, or a wife to be used as a pawn as men wrestled over control and power.

Most women who worked to assist Odysseus tended to be wives or daughters. Offering hospitality was a virtue that was highly regarded in women. The fate of many women in *The Odyssey* was often hinged on how they received Odysseus when he came to them as a stranger. Those who hindered him are portrayed as weak-willed, lacking virtue, stubborn, or willful. These women are prone to lust and had little self-control. Indeed, even in a virtuous woman, the use of cunning and wit is often punished as seen in Penelope. One of the critical female characters in *The Odyssey* is a sea monster which is powerful imagery and metaphor when analyzed within the wider context and plot. Calypso is cast as a nymph which is designed to make her attractive and desirable.

Women lacked the power of agency to transform their lives and live according to their wishes. It is a reality that is largely expressed in Homeric literature as opposed to the themes expressed by Miller

¹⁴⁴ Hekman, Susan. "Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22.2 (1997): 345.

in *Circe*. Miller's account of Circe depicts a woman who is strong, virtuous, independent, and unafraid to carve out her path¹⁴⁵.

These events indicate a variance in the way women were treated in Ancient Greece as compared to how they are viewed in contemporary times. Women not only have the power and the means to achieve what they want and desire but they can also achieve them without relying on men. These are the ideas that Miller's *Circe* seems to portray in her narration of events. On the other hand, Homeric literature seems to deny the power of agency that women have over their lives. They seem locked into their pre-defined roles which are set in stone by a patriarchal society. These women do not have the power of agency to fashion their lives based on what they desire and feel is the best thing for themselves. Additionally, they seem to be restricted by the fact that their lives are confined to the female body. The female body becomes a vessel that automatically defines their roles and what they can achieve in life. However, these are concepts that are consistently torn apart by Miller as she describes Circe's life and her ability to overcome insurmountable odds and build a life for herself.

The theories of agency and embodiment reveal Madeline Miller's activism and contribution towards a feminist movement that has come to provide a greater sense of clarity on the female subject when it comes to literature. Agency, as previously described, is associated with the concept of choice, autonomy, free will, and reflexivity. *Circe* by Miller reveals these dynamics as it centers on Circe who overcomes several obstacles and challenges that came her way from the time she was born. Accordingly, the theory of embodiment complements the agency theory and focuses on the way the body is used in the symbolic construction of sexual difference. From the secondary resources used to support the research process, it is evident that the human body has long been used as a ground for political inclusion or exclusion. Throughout history, patriarchal societies have used the human body as a locus of subjectivity to the detriment of personal realization and fulfillment for women. Western feminine subjectivity as presently observed has also continued this trend in contemporary society and forced women to see themselves as objects of desire and sexual fantasies for men. These ideas are prevalent in Homeric literature which notoriously depicted women as inferior to men. The highly stratified Greek society

¹⁴⁵ Neal, Tamara. "Circe [Book Review]." *Classicum* 44.2 (2018): 29.

identified women as low-class citizens and was thus prevented from participating in many processes in the nation. Even mothers had to respond to their sons and take instructions from them. Miller's narrative of these same events as depicted in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* shows female characters who have agency over their lives. These female characters come across as beings that can independently interact with their environment without the permission and supervision of men. The reader witnesses a gradual process of growth and development in female characters thus creating a relatable image for readers who feel the alienation of female characters as depicted by Homeric literature. By moving away from stereotypes, Miller moves towards a process of empowering the female characters and giving them an identity that is separate from the dictates of a phallogentric society that places men above women; a society that limits the abilities and curtails the destinies of women.

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