

Reimagining Exile as Self-Empowerment in Circe

by Madeline Miller

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Abstract: *The paper studies the transformation of exile into a process of self-empowerment in Circe by Madeline Miller. Based on the mythological figure of Circe from The Odyssey, Miller, reimagines a marginal character from classical mythology and places her at the center of the narrative. Traditionally portrayed as a dangerous sorceress, Circe is reinterpreted in the novel as a multi-layered female protagonist whose exile becomes a catalyst for personal growth, independence and identity formation. The researcher examines how Miller transforms the theme of exile from a form of punishment into a space of self-discovery and empowerment. Being alone on the island of Aiaia, Circe gradually develops her magical abilities, intellectual independence and emotional strength. The paper proves analyses of the transformation from exile to a process of empowerment and search for self takes place. Applying archetypal criticism, by drawing on the theories of Carl Jung and Northrop Frye, the study highlights how modern literature revisits and reshapes classical myths in modern cultural imagination. Finally, the study proves that the novel transforms the narrative of exile into one of resilience, autonomy, and self-definition.*

Keywords: Myth, Reimagining, Transformation, Exile, Self-discovery, Self-Empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Myth has always been an important way of telling stories and expressing cultural values, beliefs, and collective human experiences. In most classical texts like The Odyssey, female figures are often presented in marginalized roles and are defined mainly through a male perspective. Such a type of presentation reduces their role to archetypal figures instead of fully strong individuals. For example, in classical myth, the character Circe is usually presented as a dangerous witch without much depth and complexity. In the novel Circe by Madeline Miller, the author attempts to change this traditional image and presents the female figure as a strong and complex protagonist who grows through her experiences. Circe's traditional portrayal changes into a deep transformation. Her exile first appears like a punishment when she experiences loneliness that comes from the notion of collective consciousness by Carl Jung, but it becomes a turning point in her life. Instead of turning Circe's life to sufferings, isolation, frustration, and silence, the exclusion or exile from her divine family helps her to understand herself and develop emotional growth, intellectual awakening, and individual identity. To be aligned with the theory of archetypal criticism by Northrop Frye, the study explores how exile in Circe employs recurring traditional mythic structure as a transformative process rather than suffering and how the conventional theme becomes a catalyst of transformation and self-empowerment. The paper also examines how the novel reshapes myth and highlights the theme of exile, which is reinterpreted as a meaningful and empowering experience in modern literature. The study also claims that ancient retellings of stories like Circe represent myth in such a way that highlights continuing use of archetypal patterns to deal with contemporary social issues in modern literature.

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine Circe's representation and transformation into a source of self-empowerment in the novel Circe by Madeline Miller.



2. To analyse Madeline Miller's style of recreating the mythological character Circe from The Odyssey and present her as a complex female protagonist in the novel.
3. To explore the journey of exile that contributes to Circe's personal growth, independence, and identity formation.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern scholars have increasingly focused on the reinterpretation of classical myth in contemporary literature. Writers often go through the ancient narratives to highlight the voices of marginalized characters and explore the theme of exile and self-empowerment. The novel *Circe* by Madeline Miller has gained significant scholarly attention for its feminist retelling of the mythological characters first introduced in *The Odyssey*. In Homer's epic, Circe appears mainly as an enchantress who obstructs the journey of Odysseus back home and transforms sailors into swine. Based on the idea of "Collective Unconscious" introduced by psychologist Carl Jung, critics like Northrop Frye claim that many literary works are developed on recurring common mythic patterns and archetypes. So myth becomes an important base of literary writing. Fryer's view is helpful to understand how contemporary writers revisit classical myths and reconstruct them in a new social, cultural, and psychological context. In this case, Madeline Miller's novel *Circe*, archetypal criticism gives a lens to describe how an ancient mythological figure is recreated into a modern literary subject while maintaining the symbolic depth of the original tradition. Joseph Campbell's view on the thought of the Hero's journey is helpful to myth-critical readings, showing how mythic narrative represents transformation, trial, and self-discovery as reflected in "The Hero with a Thousand Faces". *Circe* does not follow the conventional heroic structure; however, the novel highlights exile as a self-changing process through which the protagonist develops skill, knowledge, strength, and selfhood. This makes Campbell's claims on mythic transformation relevant to the study. Scholars observe that modern fiction often reshapes classical myth and make them meaningful for present-day readers. Recent studies further expand the understanding of *Circe* by Madeline Miller, by highlighting themes of exile, identity, and self-empowerment within the mythological recreation. By examining the gender role and power structure in the novel *Circe*, Scholar Shintarani Agustina highlights in her study "Exploring the Interplay of Gender and Power in *Circe*" how male-dominant social structure plays a crucial role in defining Circe's marginalisation as well as shaping her resistance and agency. Similarly, Pelin Kut / Belenli admits that through the study "An Island of One's Own: Home and Self-Fulfilment in *Circe*." The island of Aiaia has a symbolic space of self-awareness, reflecting that loneliness is a means of introspection and individual growth. Madeline Miller's *Circe* has been largely studied as a reimagination of Greek mythology that brings depth and subjectivity to ancient marginal character Circe from the epic *The Odyssey*. In literary studies on exile and identity, Krishanu Singh admits that Circe's isolation was a transformative space where silence and struggle turned into self-discovery and empowerment. The study shows how exile becomes her strength to challenge patriarchal norms and emerges as an independent and self-aware figure.

IV. RESEARCH GAP

Most existing studies mainly focus on female empowerment, neglecting the role of exile as an individual progressive experience. Largely, research often studies Circe as a strong female character, which gives limited focus to how exile helps in the transformation of herself from a marginalised to a strong, multi-layered female character. Therefore, the present study tries to fill the gap by employing archetypal criticism on the theories of Northrop Frye, based on Carl Jung. By analysing how exile works as a catalyst for self-search, independence, and empowerment in the novel is to be studied.

Theoretical Framework:

The study is based on archetypal criticism using the theory of Northrop Frye to examine the presence and transformation of archetypal and mythic patterns in modern mythical narrations, focusing especially on exile, transformation, and individual identity.



V. METHODOLOGY

The study applies a qualitative research method to examine the transformation of exile into self-empowerment in Circe by Madeline Miller. It primarily depends on close textual reading of primary and secondary sources to analyse the character development of Circe and understand the role of exile as a catalyst in reshaping her new identity and independence. It employs theoretical insight from archetypal criticism, drawing on the ideas of theorist Carl Jung and Northrop Frye to recurring archetypal patterns that reshaped into the modern cultural imagination. The analytical, interpretative, and critical methods will be used for this study.

Textual Analysis:

The analysis is based on archetypal criticism, on the ideas of the collective unconscious introduced by Carl Jung. The collective unconscious is the collection of shared images, symbols, and experiences inherited by all humans. The archetypal criticism examines the recurring patterns, symbols and character types that emerge from these shared human experiences. By extending the concept of the collective unconscious, Northrop Frye has proposed the idea that literature is structured through recurring patterns of myths that shape the narrative meaning. The study aligns with the idea of Frye to explore how these archetypal elements are recreated to foreground the themes such as exile, transformation and identity. Madeline Miller's Circe reinterprets exile as a source of self-empowerment by presenting it not only as punishment but also as a self-developing stage in the protagonist's journey towards self-realisation. In Greek mythology, Circe, a marginalised figure in the epic The Odyssey, appears briefly as a powerful sorceress who delays the journey of the hero and converts some sailors into swine. However, Miller's novel modifies her character by employing a strong feature of strength to develop skills and abilities in adverse circumstances. Miller depicts her exile to the island of Aiaia as a most important turn in her life and portrays her as a strong central figure. At first, exile functions in the form of punishment, which is imposed by the gods, reflects from the lines, "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." (Miller 63). Later, Circe discovers her magical abilities of witchcraft. She is forced to live an isolated life on the island Aiaia. In this sense, banishment appears to signify rejection, separation, and loneliness. Yet, Miller gradually reshapes this experience into a meaningful process of self-identification. Rejection from her divine family weakens her; Circe begins to develop independence and a deeper understanding of herself. As Circe's life in isolation, Aiaia becomes a space of learning, endurance, and self-fashioning. What first appears to be a place of confinement gradually turns into a place of freedom where she can cultivate her magical abilities and define herself on her own terms. At the moment of her own realisation, it marks a crucial turning point in her journey where exile becomes the very important base of her identity and power. It is clearly expressed when Circe reflects, "My witchcraft, the island, my lion, all of them sprang from her transformation There was no honesty in regretting what had given me my life" (Miller 85), highlights a deep acceptance of the past life, which is full of sufferings and isolation that shaped her identity and points out the rise of awareness of the self. The phrase "sprang from her transformation" suggests that her magical abilities, her dominance over the island, and even her companionship with wild animals is direct outcome of her exile. It highly signifies Circe's confirmation where she understands that her new identity is inseparable from her experiences of marginalisation. The rejection of regret "no honesty in regretting" shows her a mature self-awareness, which underlines Circe's true transformation because it demands acceptance rather than dissatisfaction with her previous life. Joseph Campbell's concept of the mythic movement of "separation- initiation-return" is useful here because Circe's exile functions as the stage of separation that leads to trial, self-discovery, and empowerment. In the same way, through the perspective of archetypal criticism, Northrop Frye's ideas help to understand how literature often builds upon recurring mythic patterns in which hardships, struggles, isolation, and sufferings become the most serious situation for transformation. In Circe, exile is not presented as self-destruction, rather, it becomes the way through which the protagonist learns and develops her inner strength, emotional maturity, and self-awareness. Miller's retelling also gives a modern reading of myth as a cultural and ideological form. Roland Barthes' view that "myth is a type of speech" helps explain how myths are not fixed stories but a set of meanings that can be reshaped according to changing cultural values. In traditional



cultural myth, Circe is largely presented as a dangerous witch defined through the male perspective. Miller changes this inherited image by giving Circe her own voice and consciousness. Circe's transformation begins through the experience of loss and acceptance. Emotional level, the experience of separation with her son "the bird had already flown" (Miller 242), captures a moment of emotional maturity where grief is taken with understanding. The word "bird" metaphorically symbolizes universal and unavoidable painful process, strengthening that loss must lead to learning. Through the lens of the theory of Northrop Fryer narrative reflects Circe's emotional growth through acceptance, transforming sorrow to wisdom. Circe actively engages with the difficulties of her isolated existence. Her journey into the unknown danger, transformation symbolises her ability to face challenges, it reflects when she admits "I stepped into the weaves. They rose over my legs, my belly. They rose over my face" (Miller 243), which reflects her agency. While she is going through the stress and burden of circumstances, she claims, "The ocean's weight piled like mountains on my shoulders." (Miller 243), yet she fights back patiently and consciously says "But endurance had always been my virtue, and I kept on." (Miller 243), which reflects her emotional strength and endurance. This is an important stage of transformation where exile becomes a testing space that develops her emotionally. Circe gets the power of dealing with fear, struggles, uncertainty, and exile, which becomes a means for psychological growth. Her depiction as a marginal figure, her declaration "I am ready, I said 'strike'" (Miller 245), reflects her emotional growth as a mother for her son's life; she becomes a courageous mother want to fight any situation for the affection of her son. That is the experience of exile that did not change her heart into cruelty, due to the sufferings, it strengthened her to bear emotional sacrifices and be willing to choose actions. As the narrative progresses, exile enables Circe to reconstruct her identity in terms of power and authority. That important change is seen through her dialogue with Penelope, who requests "grant me sanctuary on your dread Isle, for I have no husband and no home, and nowhere else in the world is safe for me and my son" (Miller 245). That pledge gives a position to Circe as a figure of refuge, reversing her earlier status as an outcast. Circe gives a response, "You will tell me everything, and then I will decide" (Miller 283), which reflects her own rules and control. It highlights that she has transformed from being oppressed to self-governance. The identity that once carried fear and exclusion is now openly claimed with confidence. Circe no longer sees herself through the judgment of others. Instead, she transforms the label of "witch" into a symbol of agency and power. Thus, personal growth emerges through the recreation of exile into a space of empowerment and agency. At last Miller represented Circe's deep realisation and transformation through her life journey, expressed in the dialogue "I rise then and go to my herbs, I create something. I transform something. My witchcraft is as strong as ever, stronger. This too is good fortune" (Miller 333) highlights her active engagement with her own power, underlines marginalized to agency. Furthermore, her confirmation that "My witchcraft is as strong as ever, stronger" highlights her transformation as an individual with an evolved identity where fear of magical powers changed into confidence and mastery. Circe declares that her powers are "good fortune"; this ability of realization recreates her gift as a privilege rather than a curse. The question "How many have such power and leisure and defence as I do?. It does not seek any answer but highlights her awareness of her unique status. It draws attention towards gratitude, privilege and self-recognition. The novelist uses rhetorical questions to transform Circe's voice, assertion, and confirmation to give importance to her changed sense of power and identity. She rewrites myth and gives a new cultural meaning. Circe's exile can be understood as both an archetypal and an ideological process of transformation. Therefore, Miller's Circe transformed the myth of exile into a narrative of resistance, growth and self-empowerment. The novel further illustrates this theoretical understanding of myth as a dynamic and evolving structure through its textual representation of Circe's transformation. Circe by Miller shows how myth is recreated to present exile as a way toward self-empowerment. Thus, the novel Circe by Madeline Miller reimagines myth by turning exile into a meaningful space of self-awareness and empowerment. In addition, the novel uses the traditional theme of exile and presents it with a positive and transformative touch instead of punishment. Through the critical perspective of mythology, Miller's Circe reshapes the traditional mythological story found in The Odyssey. By presenting exile as a process of growth and transformation, the novel shows how myth can be reconstructed to reflect modern ideas of identity and self-empowerment. Through this reinterpretation, the novelist gives Circe a strong voice that reflects her inner feelings, thoughts, and experiences. It



highlights that modern women writers employ imagining ancient mythological stories to give a strong voice that was previously ignored. Miller's novel becomes an example for shifting the viewpoint from a male heroic narration to the individual transformative journey of Circe herself, making the female central character of the story by using the theme of exile. At once portraying a marginal figure, Miller gives depth, agency, and emotional strength to the novel, reimagining the mythological figure as a powerful and independent female protagonist by applying the condition of exile.

VI. CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The analysis of Circe shows that exile functions as a central transformative space in the life of Circe. In traditional mythological narratives, where exile is reflected as a negative force, it leads the character into silence and isolation, whereas Miller reinterprets exile as an empowering experience. The change in contemporary myth reimagination gives a broader perspective where secondary characters feature with strong voice, agency, and deep emotional empowerment. Aligned with Carl Jung's concept of "collective unconscious" and Northrop Frye's theory of archetypal criticism, the study explores the journey of Circe's exile becomes the experience of suffering, hardships, loneliness, and a feeling of 'outsider', highlighting the recurring universal patterns in the novel to reflect Circe's self-empowerment. In the novel, as a theme, Circe's exile to the island of Aiaia is relevant to the idea of archetypal process from restriction within the divine family to the discovery of self-identity. Circe is able to redefine herself further from the restricted roles imposed by her family and society, where exile symbolises her inner journey through silence and isolation. In addition, exile enables Circe to increase her magical knowledge, especially through her practise of witchcraft, which becomes her framework of creative and intellectual empowerment. The novelist presents it as a way of confidence, self-expression and control instead, illustrating magic as a harmful element. Such modern presentation challenges the conventional marginalised portrayal of female strength in ancient mythic texts. The discussion also focuses on how exile turns into self-empowerment. Circe, initially portrayed as a marginalised figure who is isolated within her divine family, gradual change shapes her in an independent self. Her conversation with mortal and divine characters contributes furthermore to that evolution of identity, showing that the exile is not only a separation but a space for meaningful connections and ethical growth. This reimagination is relevant to contemporary literary issues that aim to bring back the weakened voices to a normal and healthy state after suffering. The novelist not only tries to challenge the influence of ancient myths like The Odyssey, but also presents the experience of exile as a positive force that leads a weak figure to self-empowerment rather than pulls in self-destruction. Thus, the study confirms that exile in Circe is not a fixed experience of struggle but a developing process that converts into transformation, self-discovery, and autonomy. Drawing upon archetypal criticism, the novel Circe shows how traditional myth can be reshaped by applying repetitive universal experience to present modern cultural beliefs of identity, agency and empowerment, and Miller successfully illustrated it using the motif of exile.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study analyses the novel Circe by Miller through the theoretical lenses of archetypal criticism to present how contemporary fiction reshapes classical myth, forcing the experience of exile to deal with modern concerns. It examines how the novel reshapes a traditional mythological figure, Circe, originally portrayed in The Odyssey as a marginal enchantress, is recreated as a multi-layered complex female figure whose exile becomes a space for growth, self-discovery, and autonomy. The analysis concludes that Circe's journey confirms that transformation is not achieved in the absence of adversity, but through the conscious engagement with it, making exile an essential and empowering aspect of human experience, also the study declares that the novel Circe by Madeline Miller demonstrates how contemporary fiction reshapes classical myths, highlighting the theme of exile, uncovering its transformative role in shaping identity, resilience and self-empowerment, bringing into focus the continuing application of myth in modern cultural imagination.



Recommendations:

Future studies may examine how female figures in classical texts like The Odyssey are reimagined in contemporary literature.

Scholars may further explore themes of exile, empowerment, and identity formation in contemporary mythological fiction.

Future studies may apply different theoretical approaches, such as feminist theory, cultural studies, and myth criticism, to gain deeper insight into modern myth retelling.

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