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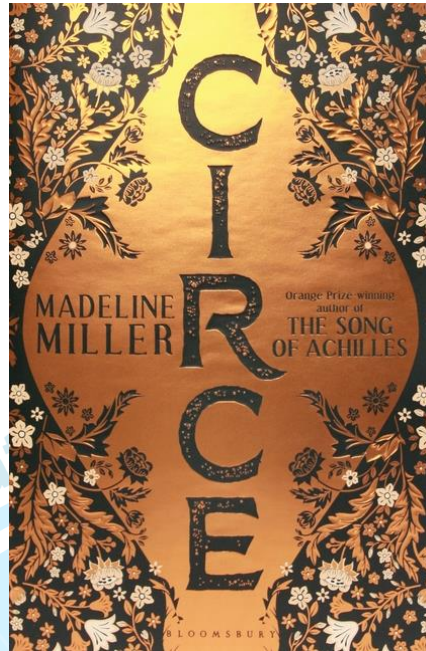
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## The Transformation of a Transformer

Ronica Wahi

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*Circe*

By Madeline Miller

First published: April 10, 2018, Little, Brown, and Company.

(Cover here of edition: April 19, 2018. Bloomsbury Publishing UK.)

Edition reviewed: April 19, 2018, Bloomsbury Publishing, Kindle Edition.

Pages: 345. Kindle Price: Rs. 251.37/-

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To retell yet another time tales that for centuries have been retold and yet maintain a curiosity for what is to come can only be called a remarkable achievement. To keep the elements of the characters as have been shaped through so many representations intact and yet render them in a new light is, for the reader, as exciting as it is astonishing.

Madeline Miller's *Circe* takes the reader into the enchanted world of Circe – and not just because Circe can perform spells. Here, the reader is as if under a spell. A feared, infamous figure of Greek mythology who performs frightening transformations is

herself transformed in this retelling into a figure that the reader does not fear but can identify with.

To appreciate this novel does not require the knowledge of Greek mythology – the different legends associated with Circe, taken from various literary texts, including the Homeric epic *Odyssey*, are related clearly albeit from a new perspective; also, the author has helpfully provided “Cast of Characters” at the end that includes additional details about important characters too. Moreover, this is, above all else, a tale of survival, of perseverance, of finally reaching a zone where self-worth is attainable. With the survival it presents, the journey it charts, and the way it does so, this novel will keep any reader hooked. Yet, a reader familiar with Greek mythology and classical literature is bound to appreciate even better the true extent of Miller’s achievement in making an often-maligned figure a hero.

While this is not the first relook at the representation of Circe, it is certainly a very powerful one. The reader cannot look at her as a witch alone – definitely not in the negative way the term has through history suggested. She is the one wronged in many ways – among other injustices, she is a victim of a power hierarchy that does not give her a place of pride and forces her to snatch power, and she is abandoned by those she loved dearest for they loved their selfish motives best. She is also the victim as a woman – she cannot exercise the powers men can, she is not valuable enough to her mother who wanted to trade her right at her birth for something better, she has the same fears that every woman has – when exiled, her first night alone on an island is a terribly fearful one, and she is raped despite the hospitality that she offered for the rapist knew there was no man to guard her. Her fears are felt by the readers – whether they are for her own safety, or for the safety of her mortal son, Telegonus. This is part of what makes Circe someone who can be identified with and pitied.

Through the novel’s twenty-seven chapters, Circe narrates her own story, along with laying bare her weaknesses, her fears, her hesitations. She relates how she was named Circe, meaning *Hawk*, for her yellow eyes and thin voice. Her lack of “adequate” power, her little claim to beauty, her eyes that were not as bright as would have been liked, and her voice that was strange to the Gods, nymphs, and other immortals became the subjects of jibes aimed at her. Within her own household, she did not have the love and warmth she desired. She spent years lying at the feet of her father, but as her sister pointed out to her at a later point long after she had been exiled, she was the one he trampled on first. She was unlike the other immortals in another significant way – she did not enjoy the sufferings of those made to endure pain. The cruelty of her father Helios, for instance, towards astronomers who predicted his movements by deliberately not doing as they predicted and getting them executed, for none need discuss how he would act, disturbed her greatly.

This sensitivity towards sufferers was what made her commit her first act of rebellion towards the Gods – she fed the damned-to-eternal-punishment Prometheus nectar. Her attraction to mortals was in part derived from this sensitivity. With much emotion does the narrator Circe present her tale of Glaucos, and what she does for him. The turn of events lead her to punish Scylla in a way that has been instrumental in shaping a maligned image of her, but here, hearing the tale from her lips and the suffering she endures for centuries afterwards, evokes empathy.

The lack of everyone's belief in even the possibility of her having any power, the insults she endures, and finally, her exile when some power is sensed and when she confesses to her acts start her journey of self-discovery – at a much later point in the novel, she says to Penelope that witchcraft is possibly much about will. The emotions of shame and guilt that she knew were not associated with Gods, and her conviction that the evil world was not what she wanted steeled her resolve to remain strong. Her power was drawn from the Earth and could not be bound by divine laws, and she slogged to attain these powers, to learn everything on her own, starting from the basic herb-lore that even young mortals were familiar with. Her journey of learning is inspiring to any reader, stressing as it does the worth of endurance, of assertion, and of attaining self-worth despite obstacles. This is a tale of tapping potential, of fighting when shunned by all, and of still remaining eager to aid those in distress. This is a journey of growth – not only in terms of acquiring power, but also in terms of becoming an individual better prepared to face both immortals and mortals.

Miller reworks the many stories of Circe, such as those involving the Minotaur, Daedalus, Odysseus, and Telemachus. In exile, despite the powers she gathered, she was a sufferer, not the one who made others suffer. As Daedalus had told her, *A golden cage is still a cage*. Even in this exile, even on her own island, she was not subject to her will alone. The nymphs, for instance, arrived as Aiaia began to be seen as a place fit to send difficult daughters to. Her story with her son Telegonus is particularly moving as she struggles to keep him safe and finally does realize that she could not keep him tied to herself all her life; Miller presents the perspectives and motivations of both mother and son so well that the reader cannot help but empathise with both. Revealed is the reason, truly justified in view of necessary self-defence, as to why she turned men to pigs. Circe often refers to the literature that has been written of the episodes of her life, and how they have been changed, even pointing out how men have moulded them to her disadvantage. Through centuries of living, she realizes that her immortality has not been a gift – Gods could not hold on to anything, however dear. The ending, in view of the popular legends, is surprising and thrilling.

Miller brings to life Gods, other immortals, and the famous mortals from Greek mythology and classical literature, and recreates the Greek world of antiquity. Her novel is well-researched – her training through her BA and MA in Classics, and years of exposure to Latin and Greek through her teaching certainly have played significant roles in gifting her so much knowledge. Equally important is her imagination – she moulds the oft-represented attributes of the characters she portrays, bending such attributes to her will and her purpose. The same myths and stories, and the same weaknesses and pettiness of individual immortals, but with changed perspectives.

One key achievement of Miller is the feminist aspect. In a world where even Goddesses did not have rights over their bodies, and immortal daughters are punished in ways immortal sons would never be, the author lends the strength to Circe to protect herself. For instance, she, unlike other poets, does not make Circe beg for the mercy of Odysseus. She also gives personality and voice to Penelope, who strengthens Circe's view that women were not wholly fragile.

The language portrays well the sense of eternity, flowing so smooth and calm as if there is all the time in the world left to know the tale. Yet, there is much action, compelling the reader to go forth on a swift pace. Comments and elements unexplained at one point and picked up at another further keep the reader hooked. At places, Miller goes

backwards and forwards in time, before returning to her largely chronological narrative. Her descriptions are almost visual delights too – the rendering of the power of nature and the sketching of Circe’s island Aiaia, or the description of a ship of yore, as derived from representations in classical literature.

The book has absolutely deserved the accolades it has been receiving since its publication. At some stage, all have been uncertain, fearful, needful of attention, and misunderstood. This novel, therefore, will speak to all.



**BIO-NOTE**

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Ronica Wahi completed her MA in English from the University of Delhi in 2014. She dedicated the next three years to furthering her capacities in language in the role of a Creative Writer with the firm Experts' Global. Here, she was engaged in a variety of writing and editing tasks, and also in content development for GMAT prep. She received awards for her good quality work during this corporate experience, including the award Ms. Meticulous. Owing to her inclination towards different aspects of culture, she completed a course in Art Appreciation from the National Museum Institute, New Delhi in 2015, and started her training in the classical Indian dance form of Kathak in October 2015. She started writing book reviews in December 2017. She won the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize book review contest, June 2018 for her review of *The Tree with a Thousand Apples* by Sanchit Gupta. She has also been learning Spanish from Instituto Cervantes since November 2017.

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