GODDESSES GIVEN VOICE: TRAUMA AND MYTH IN NATSUO KIRINO'S *THE GODDESS CHRONICLE* AND MADELINE MILLER'S *CIRCE*

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Abstract: This paper explores the resurgence of mythic revisionism in literature, analysing goddesses and their traumatic experiences in Natsuo Kirino's The Goddess Chronicle (2008) and Madeline Miller's Circe (2018). Both authors spotlight marginalized female characters through retellings, offering fresh interpretations of Izanami and Circe. The paper examines how Kirino and Miller imbue their mythic worlds with trauma, contributing to the literary trauma discourse. Using insights from scholars like Cathy Caruth (1996), Shoshanna Felman (2003), and Dominic LaCapra (2004), the analysis traces how trauma shapes narrative construction, showing how fantastic literature, particularly revisionist mythology, articulates suffering and resilience. The trauma studies framework reveals how mythological narratives can capture complex emotional landscapes, demonstrating that Kirino and Miller not only adapt myths but also reflect on the nuanced impact of trauma on identity and agency. This work highlights the role of myth in expressing the intricate dimensions of trauma and survival.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing interest in mythic revisionism, where contemporary authors rework traditional myths to spotlight peripheral or marginalized characters. In Western literary tradition, such revisions often reinterpret familiar mythological plots to reclaim the voices of those historically silenced. This trend, identified by scholars like Adrienne Rich (1972) and Alicia Ostriker (1982), revives images reflecting the collective and historical suffering of women, sometimes offering "instructions for survival" through these transformed narratives (Ostriker, 1982, 73).

The story of Circe, rooted in Greek mythology, has become a frequently reinterpreted narrative in Western literature, with multiple authors offering fresh perspectives on her character. Key examples include Eudora Welty's short story "Circe" (1955), Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems" (1974), and Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* (2018). Beyond Circe, other female figures from the same mythological tradition have also been reimagined in modern works, such as Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Miller's "Galatea" (2013), and Jennifer Saint's "Ariadne" (2021). Among these, Miller's *Circe* (2018), however, stands out as perhaps the most comprehensive and captivating retelling of the legend of the witch of Aiaia, exploring themes of power, autonomy, transformation, and trauma.

The resurgence of mythic themes in literature is not limited to the West; Japanese literature has also shown a deep engagement with mythological reinterpretation. Natsuo Kirino's *The Goddess Chronicle* (2008) revisits the ancient Japanese creation myth, exploring the societal subjugation of women. Shifting from her usual crime genre, Kirino reconstructs the myth of foundational deities Izanagi and Izanami, in which Izanami, after dying in childbirth, is relegated to rule the underworld, leaving Izanagi to continue alone. This narrative depicts gender hierarchies inherent in both the divine and mortal realms. The novel is "an imaginative foray into classical Japanese mythology" (Dumas, 2018, 172).

The affinities between these two novels by female authors – one rooted in Eastern myth and the other in Western – invite exploration. This analysis will examine Kirino's *The Goddess Chronicle* and Miller's *Circe*, focusing on the authors' strategies for crafting mythic worlds that house their protagonists' traumatic lives, deaths, and rebirths, addressing the issue

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of trauma representation in literature. Both novels reinterpret well-known myths and thus engage in revisionist mythmaking. As Rich asserts, this act of "looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich, 1972, 18) is vital. Similarly, Ostriker describes this transformative process as a way to challenge and subvert established cultural norms, where "a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture (…) for altered ends" (Ostriker, 1982, 72). Kirino and Miller engage in this form of mythic revision through their novels, using ancient goddesses to explore themes of reshaping gendered power dynamics and trauma in both Eastern and Western cultural contexts.

Kirino's *The Goddess Chronicle* explores female subjugation, with the underworld-bound goddess Izanami portrayed as an emblem of societal and existential rage. Scholars like Dumas (2018) and Copeland (2018) highlight Kirino's interrogation of gendered hierarchies, while others (for example, Qiao 2018) examine themes of anger and defilement within this mythic – or natural (Lianying, 2018) – framework. Miller's *Circe* similarly revisits the Greek enchantress's story, transforming her into a complex character facing isolation, reflecting what Macmillan (2019) and FitzGibbon (2021) describe as feminist and eco-conscious reinterpretations. This narrative shift not only redefines Circe's autonomy but, as Thomas (2021) and Altın (2020) discuss, uses her voice as a metaphor for female agency. While the existing scholarship on The Goddess Chronicle and Circe highlights key feminist themes, such as the deconstruction of patriarchal myths and the reclamation of female agency, it lacks the trauma studies perspective. This paper attempts to find ways to bridge this gap.

Positioned within a trauma studies framework, this paper argues that both authors employ myth to represent trauma's nuances. Building on the work of Cathy Caruth (1996), Dominic LaCapra (2004), and others, the study reveals how Kirino and Miller integrate trauma into their mythic settings. Both authors connect divine and mortal suffering through their goddesses, offering a vision of pain, anger, and resilience in narratives that resonate with contemporary gendered experiences. This exploration not only contributes to feminist discourse but also underscores myth's enduring capacity to address the challenge of representing trauma – what is deemed impossible in a standard setting is less so when placed in the fantastic, in this case, the mythic realm.

I. Mythological Foundations in Kirino and Miller's Novels and Female Revisionist Narratives

In contemporary literature, revisionist mythmaking has emerged as a powerful tool for reinterpreting and challenging traditional narratives, particularly those rooted in patriarchal structures. Seminal works by Adrienne Rich (1972) and Alicia Ostriker (1982) laid the foundation for this approach, offering critical frameworks that highlight the reclamation and reshaping of myth through a feminist lens. Building on this groundwork, writers such as Natsuo Kirino and Madeline Miller (among many others) reimagine classical mythological plotlines, infusing them with complex, nuanced portrayals of female agency, identity, and resistance. This section explores the main concepts offered by Rich and Ostriker, as well as how Kirino and Miller employ essential mythological elements to honour and subvert their ancient sources, creating revisionist narratives that confront and reconstruct the mythic past.

To understand Kirino's *The Goddess Chronicle*, it is essential to consider Japan's creation myth, *Tenchi-kaibyaku* ("Creation of Heaven and Earth"), as told in the *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihon Shoki* (720). This myth describes how the foundational deities Izanagi and Izanami used a jewelled spear to stir the ocean, creating the first land. They create islands and deities after a failed initial union (due to Izanami's transgression in speaking first). However, during the birth of the fire god Kagutsuchi, Izanami dies and descends to Yomi, the underworld. Izanagi attempts to retrieve her but, horrified by her decayed form, flees, permanently sealing Yomi's entrance and severing their bond. Kirino's novel reimagines this myth from Izanami's perspective, emphasizing its themes of trauma and separation.

In *The Goddess Chronicle*, Kirino conveys the divine narrative through the story of Namima, a young woman on a remote island who longs for freedom. Assigned a role as priestess of the dead, she rejects her fate and flees with her lover, only to be betrayed and end up in the underworld, where she meets the goddess Izanami. Like Namima, Izanami has been wronged and cast into the shadows by a male-dominated order, represented by her divine counterpart, Izanagi, who remains in the world of the living. Kirino critiques the oppressive gender norms and hierarchical structures in both myth and society, focusing on the emotional weight of unprocessed trauma and anger. Additionally, *The Goddess Chronicle* explores the concept of duality – life and death, divine and mortal, male and female – revealing the struggles of silenced and constrained women. Through myth, Kirino highlights the cyclical nature of suffering and the potential for agency, even within a preordained destiny.

Madeline Miller, an acclaimed American author and classicist, is celebrated for her vivid reimagining of ancient Greek myths. Her debut novel, *The Song of Achilles* (2011), reinterprets Homer's *Iliad* by focusing on the intimate bond between Achilles and Patroclus. Miller's *Circe* (2018) builds on this approach, diving into Homer's *Odyssey* to explore the life of Circe, the goddess and sorceress often relegated to a minor role in classical texts. Miller presents Circe as a complex, independent protagonist who defies the limitations imposed on her by gods and mortals alike. Banished to the island of Aiaia after angering the gods, Circe honed her witchcraft, confronted divine and mortal threats, and experienced love and loss. Her journey unfolds as she meets various characters from Greek mythology, each encounter pushing her to question power, mortality, and her place within a pantheon. Through Circe's defiance, the novel, like Kirino's book, critiques patriarchal constraints and examines the power dynamics between men, women, and the gods, celebrating the journey toward self-empowerment and the courage to forge one's path despite the gods' designs.

In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich (1972) explores how re-vision, or looking back at established narratives with new perspectives, is essential for women reclaiming their voices in literature. She argues that re-vision is more than just reinterpretation – it is "an act of survival" for women writers who must confront and transform the patriarchal myths that have historically shaped their identities. Rich contends that women have often been depicted in literature merely as muses or victims, trapped in roles that stifle their own creativity and agency. By engaging in re-vision, women can break free from these constraints, exploring "a whole new psychic geography" and redefining themselves outside of male-dominated narratives (Rich, 1972, 19). Rich highlights how traditional literary depictions, rooted in male authority, often render women as passive objects rather than active subjects, thus limiting their representation to a "luxury for men" rather than exploring their inner lives and complexities (Ibid., 20). In reclaiming these stories through re-vision, women writers strive to disrupt and rebuild language and myth, challenging what she calls the "masculine persuasive force" of literature (Ibid., 21).

In "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," Ostriker examines how contemporary female poets use "revisionist mythmaking" to challenge and reimagine patriarchal narratives and gender roles embedded in traditional myths. Ostriker argues that while language has historically been an "encoding of male privilege," female poets are "thieves of language," reclaiming it to articulate their own identities and realities (Ostriker, 1982, 68). This process of myth revision is not merely literary but "a challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (Ibid., 74). Ostriker explores how women poets dismantle traditional archetypes by retelling the stories of mythological figures like Helen, Circe, and Medusa. Through this process, women gain authority, enabling them to "seize speech" and make it "say what we mean" rather than what traditional narratives impose (Ibid., 68). For example, in Margaret Atwood's "Circe/Mud Poems" (1974), Circe refuses to conform to the passive, sexualized image that classical literature often applies to her.

The core of this mythmaking, Ostriker suggests, is not to reject myth entirely but to "deconstruct a prior 'myth' or 'story' and construct a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself" (Ibid., 72). The poets achieve this by creating a language that conveys

"female knowledge of female experience", where traditional symbols of femininity, signaling weakness, like flowers and water, are redefined as symbols of "force" and "creative imagination" (Ibid., 71). This revisionism not only "offers us one significant means of redefining ourselves and consequently our culture" (Ibid., 71) but also breaks from modernist nostalgia, avoiding "faith that the past is a repository of truth" (Ibid., 87). Through such transformative acts, women poets "reclaim" these myths, presenting female characters as active agents capable of reshaping their destinies, asserting that "to exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God" (Ibid., 73).

In examining the mythic revisions of Kirino and Miller, Rich's and Ostriker's frameworks reveal how contemporary women writers use remythologization to reclaim narrative authority and redefine female experience. Rich's concept of re-vision as an act of survival and Ostriker's view of mythmaking as a reclamation of language highlight a shared ambition to dismantle the limiting patriarchal constructs imposed on women throughout literary history. By engaging with myth through these lenses, Kirino and Miller align with a larger tradition of female revisionist writers who transform ancient stories into frameworks for self-definition, thus asserting a space within literature where women's voices actively shape cultural meaning. These themes are closely linked to the concept of trauma, which both authors explore in their novels. This will be analysed in detail in the following sections of this paper.

II. Narrating the Unspeakable: Literary Trauma Theory

To analyse Kirino's *The Goddess Chronicle* and Miller's *Circe*, both of which engage with trauma through mythic retellings, this section situates their narratives within the framework of contemporary literary trauma studies. These novels present female protagonists who, navigating loss, betrayal, and isolation, reflect on trauma in ways that connect personal suffering to cultural and structural constraints. Trauma studies thus provide a critical lens for exploring how these protagonists embody historical and ongoing traumas within their respective mythological settings. They offer insights into how such experiences shape identity and offer ways to represent trauma.

The field of trauma studies has grown considerably in recent decades, with Kurtz observing that "the vocabulary of trauma seems ubiquitous" (Kurtz, 2018, 1). This expansion into varied contexts – personal, cultural, and intergenerational – mirrors the themes in *The Goddess Chronicle* and *Circe*, both of which present personal suffering within larger societal frameworks. The contemporary body of work on literary trauma studies focuses on the challenge of representing trauma in language while processing traumatic events (Mambrol, 2018). Early trauma theories, heavily influenced by Freud's studies of hysteria, war neuroses, and traumatic memory, framed trauma as an experience that fragments the psyche, resulting in "pathogenic reminiscences" that disrupt ordinary consciousness. Freud introduced the notion of "latency," suggesting that traumatic events are not fully processed when they occur but only later, as they reemerge in memory, often carrying an intensified emotional impact. Thus, trauma is not only the event itself but also the delayed, often compulsive, "re-memory" of that event. As Freud stated, "Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (Freud, 1955, 7), suggesting that the repeated remembering of the original experience intensifies the pain of trauma.

Freud's view laid the groundwork for literary trauma theory, which often characterizes trauma as "unrepresentable." Cathy Caruth (1996), a leading figure in literary trauma studies, argues that trauma disrupts language itself, leaving it unable to convey the essence and emotional gravity of the experience. Trauma has been described as a "speechless terror" (Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1996, 172). where language cannot capture the full impact of the traumatic event, making the experience inaccessible primarily to direct narrative recall. Trauma fragments consciousness, leaving gaps in memory that, in literature, are often symbolized by fragmented or disjointed narrative structures. This dissociative effect renders

the traumatic event "unknowable," accessible only indirectly, through recurring absence or symbolic representations. As Caruth explains, "The most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness" (Caruth, 1996, 92). This view reinforces the concept of trauma as an experience that, while felt, cannot be fully grasped or represented in a coherent narrative form. Trauma's dissociative effect is apparent in both *The Goddess Chronicle* and *Circe*.

The first wave of literary trauma theory, led by Caruth, Felman, and Hartman, established trauma as a phenomenon that disrupts linear historical narratives and personal identity. For these scholars, trauma fragments the psyche and raises "transhistorical" themes by linking individual suffering to collective traumas, a concept echoed in Kirino's and Miller's novels, which situate their heroines' ordeals within cultural and mythic legacies. As Caruth (1996) explains, "Trauma's latency and dissociation disrupts the ability to understand or represent a traumatic experience fully" (Caruth, 1996, 11). Dominick LaCapra's (2004, 2014) theories reinforce this view, describing trauma as a disruptive experience that fractures the self and creates existential voids. LaCapra's insight into trauma's manifestation in the psyche and language is significant for understanding Kirino and Miller's stylistic choices, where symbolic representation reflects their characters' sense of self.

As trauma studies developed, scholars moved beyond the early "unspeakability" model, broadening the field to encompass cultural and social dimensions. This pluralistic approach considers trauma as influenced by socio-cultural forces, as seen in works by Ann Cvetkovich (2003) and Greg Forter (2014), who propose that trauma, while disruptive, can still be conveyed in language through culturally specific memories. Naomi Mandel (2006) critiques the traditional model's focus on trauma's inexpressibility, suggesting that the "problems inherent in speech" may sometimes obscure ethical responsibilities, particularly relevant to Kirino's work, reflecting how trauma is voiced and silenced in societal contexts. Mandel's perspective reveals how the representation of trauma can sometimes stem from cultural imperatives as much as from individual dissociation. Forter, too, pushes this line of thinking, arguing that "[t]he 'unrepresentable' character of trauma is thus due not to its being "originary" and hence, beyond history and representation. Rather, it concerns the enforced rupture…by particular regimes of power" (Forter, 2014, 77), a theme that resonates in *The Goddess Chronicle* and *Circe*, where female suffering is equally personal and institutionalized.

The field of trauma studies has also expanded to include non-Western contexts, examining the culturally specific forms that trauma takes. Scholars like Irene Visser (2018) explore how non-Western frameworks of trauma can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the subject, with Japanese trauma studies by Stahl (2019) and others examining how collective and social trauma, including war and cultural displacement, are processed in Japanese literature. This is relevant to Kirino's work, where historical and cultural underpinnings shape her portrayal of female suffering and resilience within a mythic Japanese setting.

Thus, the progression from traditional models of trauma as unspeakable to pluralistic models that engage with trauma's social and cultural dimensions informs an enriched reading of *The Goddess Chronicle* and *Circe*. In the following section, these frameworks will reveal how Kirino and Miller depict trauma as a rupture of the psyche and engage with memory, language, and identity to explore the mythological potential.

III. Goddesses of East and West: Trauma through Myth

This section examines the connection between two novels from East and West – Kirino's *The Goddess Chronicle* and Miller's *Circe* – to explore their representations of mythic goddesses and their links to original myths. This analysis investigates how Kirino and Miller artistically merge myth and trauma, narrating a shared archetypal story of pain and betrayal that resonates across gods and mortals. Special attention is given to the myth of the island, as each author uniquely addresses the mythic and traumatic aspects of womanhood, presenting goddesses as

symbols of contemporary female experience, in line with the revisionist approaches of Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker.

Integrating Rich's perspective on revisionist mythmaking, *The Goddess Chronicle* by Kirino and *Circe* by Miller portray mythic women reclaiming their voices and roles within male-centric narratives. As Rich observes, "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (Rich, 1972, 18). This idea is central to Kirino's and Miller's works, where Izanami and Circe resist their traditional passive roles, reinterpreting myth to challenge cultural archetypes. Kirino's Izanami, relegated to the underworld, transforms into a goddess of vengeance and death, showing strength even in suffering and defying her portrayal as a scorned wife: "She had to steal life from the living, all the while in possession of her woman's heart. Was that the source of her pain? Alternatively, was it that while she was a goddess who killed, she was also a female charged with giving birth?" (Kirino, 2021, 292). Likewise, ostracized on her island, Miller's Circe rejects the gods' imposed constraints, asserting her right to self-determination. She tells Helios, the Sun god and her father, "I will do as I please, and when you count your children, leave me out" (Miller, 2018, 283).

Ostriker notes Eurydice's passivity in male-authored works, observing she "exists only as the tragic object of Orpheus' love" (Ostriker, 1982, 74), which parallels *The Goddess Chronicle* and *Circe*, as well as trauma studies, by highlighting the often-silenced female voice. Like Eurydice rejecting Orpheus's narrative, Izanami and Circe create their own. The defiant line from Alta's poem, "damn them, i say. i stand in my own pain & sing my own song" (Alta, 1975, 8), encapsulates how both heroines narrate their trauma. Izanami and Circe's journey reflects a central tenet of trauma studies: voicing one's experience is critical for reclaiming identity.

Both novels explore the fates of goddesses – Izanami in Kirino's work and Circe in Miller's – using mythological tropes to represent trauma. In both, ancient myths are rewritten to voice their suffering; these goddesses, similar to Alta's Eurydice, narrate their own pain, leading to significant transformations in their fates. The myths unfold as biographies or autobiographies: in Kirino's novel, Izanami's story is retold mainly through Namima, a mortal who joins her in the underworld, while Izanami herself retells Japan's creation myth. Circe, by contrast, narrates her own journey from powerless nymph to enchantress, and ultimately to a woman struggling with divinity versus mortality.

Although the primary link between the novels is their focus on previously overlooked characters, the goddesses differ in their mythological roles. Kirino's Izanami is the primordial deity, creator of the world and ruler of the dead; Miller's Circe begins as a minor nymph, later known as the witch of Aiaia, mainly remembered in connection with Odysseus and her inhumane attitude towards sailors (turning them into pigs). Both novels shift perspective from viewing powerful goddesses as monstrous, allowing them to tell their own stories. Izanami's story is mainly narrated through Namima, whose life repeats in a way the goddess's tragedy. Miller's Circe, not being the first Circe in the western literature, in a way tells the story of the "second island" as another possibility, about which Attwood's Circe could only dream: "there are two islands at least, they do not exclude each other" (Attwood, 1974, 69). The "first island," so to speak, is Homer's "island," where the events run its course, Odysseys comes and stays and goes, and Circe becomes, in terms of Vice, one of the female characters who tend to be "stops along the way" of a male hero journey (Vice, 1993, 211). "The second island I know nothing about because it has never happened," says Attwood's Circe (Attwood, 1974, p. 69), and this longing for another, if not the course of events, then at least interpretation of them, is how it is possible to read Miller's *Circe*.

Kirino and Miller connect mortal women's fates with goddesses, illustrating how mythic narratives of female suffering resonate across mortal and divine lives. In *The Goddess Chronicle*, Kirino presents Izanami's story through Namima, a mortal betrayed and killed by her lover, who then journeys to the underworld, becoming a servant to Izanami: "My name is

Namima – 'Woman-Amid-the-Waves.' I am a *miko*. Born on an island far, far to the South, I was barely sixteen when I died. Now I make my home among the dead here in this realm of darkness" (Kirino, 2021, 3). This narrative choice blurs the line between goddess and mortal, positioning Izanami's tragic fate as a reflection of Namima's own and underscoring how divine and human suffering mirror each other. In contrast, Miller's Circe explores this goddess-mortal connection by bringing Circe into close association with Penelope, another significant woman in Odysseus's life. Both characters share a bond through their isolation and eventual turn to witchcraft, which Circe defines as an act of sheer will: "What makes a witch, then? If it is not divinity?" Penelope asks. "I do not know for certain," Circe replies. "I once thought it was passed through blood, but... I have come to believe it is mostly will" (Miller, 2018, 355). Here, Miller reframes witchcraft not as an inherent power but as a conscious act of resistance against trauma – a transformative force any woman can wield. Circe initiates Penelope into this "will," mirroring how Izanami draws Namima into her world, each goddess empowering their mortal counterpart to face and transcend pain. In Kirino's novel this "goddess versus mortal woman" conflict is resolved by elevating Namima (after her death) to the position of Izanami's vassal, while in *Circe*, the goddess thrives to become a mortal: "I have a mortal's voice, let me have the rest" (Ibid., 406).

Circe's rejection of divinity in favour of mortal life – a choice that allows her to embrace both mortality and femininity – is another significant difference between the two novels. Izanami accepts her role as the goddess of death and ruler of the underworld, as well as her trauma. Circe's experiences as a goddess are also steeped in suffering, revealing that her divinity offers no proper protection; instead, it is her will and witchcraft that sustains her. Izanami, conversely, fully inhabits her role as a goddess of death: "I have no intention of changing my destiny. I am the goddess who metes out death, after all. I will continue" (Kirino, 2021, 307). By doing so, she creates a sanctuary for those who are defiled, mistreated, and traumatized: "She was the goddess who invited our desire and also our defilement; she bore the weight of the past and lived on into the future forever" (Ibid., 308).

Before analyzing the mythological trope of the island in the novels and how it helps capture trauma, a brief introduction to the plots may be necessary. Namima, a sixteen-year-old girl, and her sister Kamikuu reside on an island off the Yamato coast. Namima, like Kirino's other female protagonists, desires freedom from the societal constraints imposed on her. Driven by love and autonomy, Namima defies societal taboos to escape with her lover, only to face betrayal. This betrayal leads her to the realm of the dead, where she encounters the goddess Izanami, who mirrors Namima's own emotional turmoil. Both protagonists deal with deep-seated resentment and trauma stemming from their pasts. Namima reflects on the intensity of her emotions in death compared to life, highlighting the amplified effects of trauma: "How strange it must seem, but the emotions I have now are much sharper than they ever were when I was alive" (Kirino, 2021, 3). Through Namima's narration of Izanami's story, Kirino explores the concept of trauma representation and its role in healing. By sharing and retelling the goddess's tale alongside her own, Namima engages in a process akin to therapy, facilitating emotional catharsis. This narrative mirrors the therapeutic benefits of crafting a trauma narrative, as outlined by Kaminer (2006), including emotional release, linguistic representation, and finding purpose in adversity. Through this mythic narrative, Kirino examines societal and psychological themes rooted in contemporary Japanese culture, using Izanami's story – a goddess betrayed by her spouse and condemned to the underworld – to parallel Namima's own experience of betrayal: "It's always the woman who dies" (Kirino, 2021, 104).

In *Circe*, Miller reimagines the story of Circe, a lesser-known figure from Greek mythology. The novel follows Circe, daughter of the sun god Helios and the nymph Perse, as she leads her life as an outcast among the gods, facing isolation due to her unconventional nature and burgeoning powers in witchcraft. "I would like to say that all the while I waited to break out, but the truth is, I'm afraid I might have floated, believing those dull miseries were all there was" (Miller, 2018, 16), Circe reflects on her family's attitude towards her calling it

"dull miseries". Her father, Helios, tells her at some point: "You have always been the worst of my children" (Ibid., 283). Rejected by her kin, Circe finds solace in her skills as a sorceress, discovering that now she can say: "I will do as I please" (Ibid., 283). Her journey intersects with other figures from Greek mythology, and through these encounters, Circe confronts issues of identity, love, and power, questioning the boundaries that gods and mortals impose. Her complex relationship with Icarus, Daedalus, Ariadne, for instance, reflects this duality: "No matter how vivid they were in life, no matter how brilliant, no matter the wonders they made, they came to dust and smoke. Meanwhile every petty and useless god would go on sucking down the bright air until the stars went dark" (Ibid., 138). Eventually Circe gets brave enough to proclaim: "I will not be like a bird bred in a cage, I thought, too dull to fly even when the door stands open" (Ibid., 116). As the end of the novel suggests, she chooses mortality and to "fly."

In Kirino's novel, the most prominent emotion becomes anger: "I could feel the black flame of anger emanating from Izanami's body" (Kirino, 2021, 131). Namima's story repeats that of the Goddess, both overwhelmed by emotions and unable to forget their past lives and traumas. Namima, like the Goddess, encounters betrayal and seeks revenge, embodying a shared bitterness that pervades the novel. Anger, thus, becomes a logical outcome of trauma.

In *Circe*, Miller's protagonist experiences a spectrum of emotions – her isolation, anger, love, fear, and regret highlight her complex character and propel the narrative. Anger plays a less prominent role here than in *The Goddess Chronicle*, making room for such feelings as acceptance, self-realization, and coming to terms with oneself. Her feelings of loneliness and resentment stem from her outcast status. At the same time, her love for mortals brings moments of genuine connection, though this connection does not fully cover or compensate for her traumatic past. Reflecting on her relationship with Odysseus, she notes, "He showed me his scars, and in return he let me pretend that I had none" (Miller, 2018, 246). This line implies that pretending to have no wounds is somehow easier, as she questions, "How many of us would be granted pardon if our true hearts were known?" (Ibid., 175). These emotions hint at her trauma but also serve as a means for her to process and ultimately overcome it. In a conversation with Penelope, she learns that understanding the world "so clearly" requires "a matter of keeping very still and showing no emotions, leaving room for others to reveal themselves" (Ibid., 319). These quotes mirror each other, suggesting the possibility of emotionally hiding behind others as they reveal their own feelings.

A prominent mythopoetic trope in both novels becomes the island, a motif with profound mythological resonance across cultures. This analysis focuses on Kirino's Umihebi and Miller's Aiaia, exploring their shared mythological interpretations to see how trauma is represented within these narratives. Smethurst argues that islands in stories like *Robinson Crusoe* or *The Tempest* serve as stages for "first encounters between people of different worlds, and in a sense from different times as well" (Smethurst, 2000, 225). This is true for Kirino's Island of Umehebi, where mortals live, die, and – in case of Namima – return from the dead, however briefly, and where a travelling god, Izanagi, visits only to descend into the realm of the dead himself. This is equally true of Aiaia, where the mortal time of Circe's human visitors contrasts with Circe's divine sense of time.

In Kirino's novel, the island setting, inspired by Kudaka Island in Okinawa, symbolizes a mythical space where the lives of mortals intersect with those of gods. The island's teardrop shape foreshadows the protagonist's fate with its traumatic connotations, which will amount to tears, and alludes to the mythical island of Onogorojima. The oppressive relationships between Japan and Okinawa accentuate the other types of trauma mentioned in the novel on a much bigger scale. Life on the island reflects the divine, paralleling the experiences of the protagonist and the goddess. The geographical layout, with its divisions between the living and the dead, mirrors the realm of the gods: "The boulder. Proof that our worlds connected. The boulder reminded me of The Warning on my island" (Kirino, 2021, 95). Namima's journey into the underworld reveals the interconnectedness of life and death, evoking memories of her past life and adding to her sorrow and accentuating her trauma. "I had

disobeyed Mikura-sama's injunction, no, I had done worse: I had disobeyed the island law" (Ibid., 42). Kirino explores themes of fate, mortality, and the interplay between the human and divine realms through these mythic elements.

In *Circe*, Miller's portrayal of Aiaia, as Macmillan suggests, embodies "the idyll, the threshold, and the road," with the threshold as the most significant element, as it "transforms all who cross it" (Macmillan, 2020, 27). Superficially, Aiaia is Circe's freedom, prison, exile, and dominion – a secluded paradise of abundance and tranquillity. However, it also becomes her fortress, a space for personal growth. "Islands were dangerous places. You met monsters as often as friends" (Miller, 2018, 191), she notes at some point. Nevertheless, she is alone on her island most of the time. Her eventual departure from Aiaia, when she is ready, underscores her evolution. Macmillan offers a convincing view of this journey, noting that Circe shifts from being "a stop on the way" for gods and heroes (sometimes an obstacle, as with sailors) to becoming "a traveller on the road herself." (Macmillan, 2020, 27)[1]

A more detailed analysis of the island motif in *The Goddess Chronicle* and *Circe* reveals its connections to themes of trauma. In examining islands as symbols, Campbell describes them as sites of "creation and birth," where mythological heroes often undergo significant life changes that echo the "cyclical journey of life, death, and rebirth" (Campbell, 2008, 135). Similarly, Eliade interprets islands as "sacred spaces" that act as thresholds between realms, emphasizing their role as "liminal zones where individuals confront their innermost selves" (Eliade, 1969, 68). Jung discusses islands as "isolated sanctuaries," spaces that, although separated from the outside world, serve as fortresses or prisons for the psyche, encapsulating trauma and fostering inner transformation (Jung, 1970, 202).

These interpretations align with the traumatic experiences that the protagonists of both novels endure. In *Circe*, for example, Aiaia embodies these ideas of isolation and sacred otherworldliness, becoming Circe's prison and sanctuary. McMillan's observation of Aiaia as "the threshold and the road" reinforces Eliade's notion of the island as a transitional space where Circe repeatedly faces and overcomes life-altering challenges. In *The Goddess Chronicle*, Umihebi island similarly mirrors these archetypal qualities, functioning as a place of both punishment and rebirth, where the protagonist's defiance leads to her death and consequent transformation into a citizen of the realm of the dead and a servant of Izanami. "On our island, everything is already decided" (Kirino, 2021, 29). Namima reflects on the mythical, predestined nature of her island, which, in a way, serves as a metaphor for Japan with its strict rules. Both novels employ the island motif as a setting and symbol, embodying the mythopoetic connection between the island and the human psyche's journey through trauma.

Island as a creation or birth appears in many myths, including the Japanese creation myth and Greek mythology: islands are seen as the first landmasses to emerge from the primordial waters, symbolizing the beginning of life and the emergence of the earth from chaos. In Kirino's novel, which "recycles" the creation myth of Japan, this mythological interpretation of the island seems especially suitable. In Miller's novel, Aiaia is more of a place of isolation and transformation. However, even there, the "birth" takes place. On a few levels at that: the birth of her son and the birth of the witch when Circe fully recognises and embraces her powers: "When I was born, the name for what I was did not exist" (Miller, 2018, 3) but when she fully realises her potential, the name emerges as well. Later, the possible birth of Circe the mortal also occurs there: "I thought once that gods are the opposite of death, but I see now they are more dead than anything, for they are unchanging, and can hold nothing in their

[1] It was Vice who analysed the trope of a woman as "a stop on the way." According to Vice, female characters in 20th-century road novels like Kerouac's *On the Road* often serve as stepping stones or structural components. This observation also holds, as both McMillan and Vice note, true for epics such as the *Iliad*, where Helen of Troy plays a minimal role in the narrative of the warships (Vice, 1993, p. 213). Similarly, in the Odyssey, female characters like Circe and Calypso seem to function primarily as structural elements, either aiding or obstructing Odysseus on his voyage back to Ithaca.

hands… I have a mortal's voice, let me have the rest" (Ibid., 406). In this moment, Circe reflects on the nature of immortality and the limitations of divinity. She longs for the impermanence and vulnerability she attributes to mortals, recognizing that proper growth and understanding occur through change. Painful and traumatic experiences facilitate this transformation, and the island becomes the scene for her suffering and development: her rape is probably one of the worst physical experiences she has to go through, while her partition with Odysseus and eventually with her son become her most difficult emotional ones.

Islands often serve as transitional spaces, acting as thresholds between different realms or stages of life (Campbell, 2008; Jung, 1970). They can symbolize the journey from one state of existence to another, such as the transition from life to death or ignorance to enlightenment. This concept is particularly evident in Kirino's novel, where the island represents a transition from life to death for Namima, who serves as a *miko* of darkness, eventually transitioning to the realm of the dead herself. She reflects that though her particular part of the island was "a realm of death, it had still coursed with life" (Kirino, 2021, 92). The "real" realm of the death "showed not the slightest hint of it" (Ibid.). Circe, despite her divine status and immortality, is not entirely immune to violence, as illustrated by the scene of the sailors' assault: "The man threw me back against the wall. My head hit the uneven stone and the room sparked. I opened my mouth to cry out he spell, but he jammed his arm against my windpipe and the sound choked off" (Miller, 2018, 195). However, she possesses knowledge of the underworld, and her island becomes a place where she guides Odysseus on how to navigate it and return safely. This represents a significant transition, linking life and death. Interestingly, the island also becomes the setting where Circe voluntarily chooses mortality, embracing the possibility and inevitability of death and discarding her divinity, which she perceives as monstrous and vile and "more dead than anything" (Ibid., 406). This transformation is not limited to Circe alone but extends to her son and divine and mortal visitors. However, she is at the centre of those transitions. Circe's first lesson, "Beneath the smooth, familiar face of things is another that waits to tear the world in two" (Ibid., 16), refers to the transformative power of the island. The shared experiences of gods and mortals demonstrate the universal nature of these transitions: "When we are young, we think ourselves the first to have each feeling in the world" (Ibid., 43). The sentiment, "for I was like any dull ass who has ever loved someone who loved another. I thought: if only she were gone, it would change everything" (Ibid., 57), captures her emotional states and proves that she has more in common with mortals than just her voice.

Islands, often depicted as realms of adventure and exploration in myths and legends (Campbell, 2008), serve as the backdrop for quests, journeys, and challenges. They symbolize the unknown and the pursuit of discovery. In Kirino's *The Goddess Chronicle* and Miller's *Circe*, the islands also serve as metaphorical vessels for trauma. In both novels, the protagonists are island inhabitants. Thus, the sense of adventure and exploration is primarily experienced by those who visit the islands – Izanagi in *The Goddess Chronicle* and a series of travellers who make a pit stop at Aiaia in *Circe*, including Odysseus. At some point, Circe reflects, "My island lay around me. My herbs, my house, my animals. And so it would go, I thought, on and on, forever the same" (Miller, 2018, 375). However, exploring the island itself becomes a metaphor for Circe's self-discovery. After experiencing trauma through her parents, siblings and peers, after being exiled, raped, abandoned, she uncovers reserves of strength within herself that she was previously unaware of. In her past life, Circe felt like "a weaver without wool" or "a ship without the sea," signifying her lack of freedom. She concludes her experiences with a proud declaration: "Yet now look where I sail" (Miller, 2018, 84). Similarly, trauma strikes Namima in *The Goddess Chronicle* – betrayal, exile, and a descent into the realm of the dead, where she encounters the goddess Izanami, herself trapped due to betrayal. "There is a deep connection between death and birth. I died in childbirth, you see" (Kirino, 2021, 100), notes Izanami. The island, once paradisal, transforms into a metaphor for Namima's inner journey to accept and overcome her pain. Her exploration of the island mirrors her quest for identity and can be compared to Circe's.

Analyzing *Circe* by Madeline Miller and *The Goddess Chronicle* by Natsuo Kirino reveals how personal trauma can be effectively represented in literary texts, particularly through the medium of the fantastic, specifically myth. These narratives highlight trauma's timeless and cyclical nature by placing it within a mythical framework. Through revisionist mythmaking, both authors reinterpret the roles of mythic goddesses, reframing them as enduring symbols of female resilience in the face of pain and betrayal. Through the mytheme of the island, Miller and Kirino situate trauma within both a physical and symbolic isolation, amplifying its timeless resonance. Ultimately, these works illustrate how myth allows trauma to be explored with greater depth and accessibility, making the experiences of the goddesses powerfully resonant across cultures.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed how Madeline Miller's *Circe* and Natsuo Kirino's *The Goddess Chronicle* use revisionist mythmaking to portray trauma, using mythological frameworks to make traumatic representations possible. Through the lenses of literary trauma theory (Caruth, LaCapra, Felman) and mythological revisionism (Rich, Ostriker), the analysis traced how these authors represent trauma as a force that shapes character identity and narrative structure, revealing how myth provides a linguistic framework to portray experiences of pain and suffering. Despite advancements in trauma studies, which have expanded from Western-centric frameworks to include non-Western perspectives (Visser), challenges remain in broadening this scope. This paper contributes to this discourse by examining trauma across cultural boundaries through the novels of Miller and Kirino.

The continuous interest in myth in contemporary literature also transcends geographical boundaries and cultural contexts. It has been established how each novel engages with mythical traditions to represent female autonomy and transformation, tracing the thematic continuities and differences between *Circe*'s reinterpretation of Greek mythology and *The Goddess Chronicle*'s reworking of Japanese creation myths. The analysis demonstrated the cultural and symbolic significance of Circe and Izanami, noting how each author reshapes these myths to address contemporary issues, particularly the enduring themes of power dynamics, societal constraints, and the silencing of female voices.

Building upon the foundations of literary trauma theory, the analysis provided a framework for examining how trauma shapes character development, identity, and narrative structure in each novel. Special attention is given to trauma representation in a literary text and its possibility. Drawing on the works of Caruth, Felman, LaCapra, and other trauma scholars, the paper highlighted how both Miller and Kirino use myth to address the psychological impact of trauma and its representability.

The findings illustrate that Miller's and Kirino's revisionist mythmaking is a deliberate artistic choice to challenge traditional mythic representations and provide a voice to historically marginalized female figures. By reinterpreting these myths, the authors bring the goddesses Circe and Izanami to life as complex, autonomous beings, highlighting their struggles and aspirations and reframing them as symbols of female agency. Through *Circe* and *The Goddess Chronicle*, Miller and Kirino create narratives that bridge Eastern and Western mythologies, accentuating the universal themes such as trauma.

This paper sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how Miller and Kirino employ mythological elements – such as death and life, birth and transformation, liminal spaces, the quest for power, self-realization, trauma and healing, and inner journeys – to represent the complexities of human experience. The myth of the island in both novels is examined to reveal its symbolism as a site of confinement, isolation, transformation, and cycles of birth and death. Another key element that both novels address is the conflict between divinity and mortality, which the authors use to show that the divide between gods and mortals is less significant than the divide between women and men. By blurring the boundaries between divine and mortal realms, both novels emphasize the interconnectedness of human and divine

destinies. Through linked narratives of mortal women and goddesses (Namima and Izanami, Circe and Penelope – among others), Kirino and Miller prove the lasting relevance of myth, even in its deconstructed form, as a tool for engaging with trauma. Both authors draw on Rich's concept of re-vision as an act of survival and Ostriker's idea of mythmaking as a reclamation of language and the ambition to "include oneself" within the myth, concepts that resonate throughout their works.

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