



Telltale Topography's Credulity and Entailing Description of Mythical Greece in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*

S. Avishia Arul

II B.A. English Lady Doak College, Madurai, Tamilnadu, India.

Primarily, a perceptible narrative space was presumed to be too evident to have it even be considered, a reliable navigator to stir the plot forward and only a description of the setting. Spatiality has acquired many facets since then. Narrative space is a universal environment where the characters of a story carry on with their existence. Mythical Greece and eventful places of Greek mythology associated with the life of Achilles and his companion, Patroclus, becomes of the narrative space in *The Song of Achilles*. Miller alternates between conceptual spaces and factual places in her fiction, as the story paces ahead with referentiality of real and fictional Greece.

The functionality of referentiality of predetermined reality and the supposed and its oscillatory nature along with instances that try to map the fictional and mythical Greek setting are prevalently present and are noticeable when we read the lines of *The Song of Achilles* with caution. Robert T. Tally Jr. in his review of Westphal's *La géocritique* noted that "all writing partakes in a form of cartography, since even the most realistic map does not truly depict the space, but, like literature, figures it forth in a complex skein of imaginary relations." Miller employs mapping of ancient Greece to her narrative advantage and recreates fallen cities as a montage that sits well with the telltale geography of the myth being retold.

Mapping of a world through narrative explanation of which the readers only possess informational knowledge but no receptive experience, helps them fundamentally focus on the spatial information and the account of experience provided by the narrator. Miller, likewise, uses her trusty narrator, Patroclus, to chart mythical war routes, castles, camps, and capital cities.

Patroclus mentions,

Slowly, the fleet straggled back together. Some had gone the long way around, south by the island of Lesbos. Others, taking the most direct route, already waited near Sigeum, northwest of Troy. Still others had come as we did, along the Thracian coast. United again, we massed by Tenedos, the island just off of Troy's wide beach. Shouting from ship to ship, we passed word

of Agamemnon's plan: the kings would take the front line, their men fanned out behind them. Maneuvering into place was chaos; there were three collisions, and everyone chipped oars on someone else's hull. (159).

Miller combines the obviousness of maritime routes with description of the topographical uncertainties that the Greeks face when sailing to Troy. Several other noteworthy mappings being explanatory literary sequence in *The Song of Achilles* are listed as follows,

Aulis, a jutting finger of land with enough shoreline to beach all our ships at once. (143); Tiny, gemstone-sized Phthia was the smallest of our countries, set in a northern crook of land between the ridges of Mount Othrys and the sea. (19); The Bay of Scyros was so small that I did not see it until we had swung around the rocky island's southern rim and were almost upon it. (95); To my right loomed Othrys, with Pelion just beyond it. I stared at its peak and tried to guess how much farther. (54)

Robert T. Tally Jr. in his translator's preface to Westphal's *Geocriticism Real and Fictional Spaces* "The Timely Emergence of Geocriticism" writes, We understand "fictional" spaces by grasping their own levels of reality as they become part of our world. and that A place is only a place because of the ways in which we, individually and collectively, organize space in such a way as to mark the topos as special, to set it apart from the spaces surrounding and infusing it.

When writing about Patroclus' search for Achilles, Miller draws on the world and explains the geography with the reality we know of in lines,

where. To Olympus perhaps, where I could never follow. To Africa, or India. To some village where I would not think to look. (92)

This increases the credulity of her mythical Greece by not completely alienating the fictional space from contemporary audience and providing them a latitudinal and longitudinal yardstick to help them fit in.

Topographical motifs and spatiotemporal metaphors found in *The Song of Achilles* issue deeper details into what makes



of the architectural set up that the characters of the story inhabit. Motifs act like conceptual spaces whose being seem credible only upon frequently repeated utilization. In the story, Miller marks the intimate times of Achilles and Patroclus by setting them near sea, in the shore,

Achilles and I spend all our time in the sea, seeking the meager comfort it offers. (148).

She associates cliffs and rocks and sea salt with Thetis and her arrival, fireside and storytelling with King Peleus,

After the men were gone, we would sit with him (Peleus) by the fire to hear the stories of his youth. (42)

We sat by Peleus' fireside; he had offered us wine, barely watered. (89)

The sky was bright, and the wind brisk, but in the spell of Odysseus' story I felt that we were by a fireside, with night pressing all around. (135)

Fictional context requires a language of its own. Distinctly deploying temporal semantics is an essentiality when obtaining affirmed verisimilitude is the prime motive and hence justifying the want for metaphorical apparatus and known stereotypical prejudices of the period. Such language found in *The Song of Achilles* that are satisfiable and relate to ancient geography,

A marriage for love, rare as cedars from the East. (130); A writhing mass of men and screams, sucking up rank after rank like Charybdis. (176) Only an Easterner would so dishonor the kindness of his host. Everyone knew how they dripped with perfume, were corrupt from soft living. A real hero would have taken her outright, with the strength of his sword. (87)

Reader's proximity with the narrative setting increases with explanation and definition of the same. Elucidation of topographical intricacies acts as an invitation for readers to have duality in viewing their imaginative conceptual occurrence based on the narrative explanation given, through their eyes and through the narrator's or a hypothetical observer's focal point. The awe of visual sensory reception is obtained through the verbal commentary of the narrator and the spatial description that does not overthrow but supplement the inception and fuel the fascination of cognitive readers. The responsibility of shouldering credulity of the story rests with the narrative explanation and the geographical stats as much as it does with the narrator. A reliable, unbiased narrator is crucial to map the geography for the readers. Although overloaded spatial description may halt the process of reading, it is witty to try and engage the audience and wiser to sustain their cooperation through elaborate narrative explanation and feed their implied imagination. Robert T. Tally Jr. says, Our understanding of a particular place is determined by our personal experiences with it, but also by our reading about others' experiences,

by our point of view, including our biases and our wishful thinking.

What appears from *The Song of Achilles* is that landscapes may cater to their symbolic generational mythological meanings. According to Bertrand Westphal who quotes geographer Hervé Regnauld, "we do not know if it [i.e., space] is infinite or not, we do not know if it moves toward contraction or infinite dilation, we do not know what form it has... We just know that it has little to do with the psychological experience we have of it, and it calls for more intellect than perception." Myths are either metaphorically expressed or symbolically read and Westphal adds "Historically, space has always been subject to symbolic readings. The concrete details of geography often relate to a spiritual hermeneutic rather than to immediate observation."

Based on Richard Buxton's observation on landscapes of mythical Greece the four prominent and recurring geographical forms in Greek mythology includes mountains, seas, springs, and caves. Mountains were the place of wilderness that stretches above and beyond, the place where poachers poach and bandits hide. When Patroclus hears rustling bushes when he rushes to join Achilles on his way to mount Pelion, he says,

I had not thought of dangers as I ran, but now my mind tumbled with them: soldiers, sent by Peleus or Thetis herself, white hands cold as sand on my throat. Or bandits. I knew that they waited by roads, and I remembered stories of boys taken and kept until they died of misuse. (55)

Mountains were considered to be a part of the other dimension, the one with the gods and beasts. When Patroclus introduces himself to Princess Deidameia of Scyros as such

"I have spent my time in the mountains and have not seen much of the world." (97)

In response, she frowns a little, flicks her hand at the door and walks away.

Buxton says, mountains are unsettling, for those in settlements; they are to be viewed from afar, visited only to be left again. Chiron, the wise, friendly centaur in *The Song of Achilles* lived in a mountain (Mount Pelion). Mountains played a major role in the making of wild and ruthless heroes custom-made for war and adventure.

The seas were associated with elaborate sacrifices that would safeguard the voyagers from raging gods. Like the former landscape, seas were also considered other-worldly. They belonged with the gods and outsiders. But unlike mountains, Buxton says, seas offered hope. They provided prophecies and endless possibilities of survival. When the Greek fleet stagnated in Aulis, the Greeks sacrificed Iphigenia, Agamemnon's daughter, as a plea to the gods to return wind to their sails. When Achilles and Pyrrhus were born, their

heroic lives were foreseen; It was Thetis, a sea nymph, who came with prophetic intel before ill befell the Greeks in the Trojan war.

Caves provided an ambiguous sheltering to mythical characters. Caves on surface housed shepherds or lovers whereas caves of the deep might become a pathway to ethereal plane. Persons, beasts, and gods were welcomed, born or raised in caves. Buxton writes, 'caves are also open, yet impenetrable. They give access to the sacred or, ultimately, to the dead. These ambiguities are the nourishment on which mythology thrives.' In *The Song of Achilles*, Chiron's cave was called the imperishable cave. And when Patroclus asked Achilles where Thetis lived, he said,

"The caves under the sea." Where the sea-nymphs lived, so deep the sun did not penetrate. "My father says I should not. He says no mortal who sees them comes back the same." (42)

Mythical springs of Greece are most likely to have a community dependent upon their existence. Springs were ritually considered sacred, denoted prosperity and were guardians of the places they passed by, ran through. In *The Song Of Achilles*, we get a mention of the trojan springs,

Troy. It was separated from us by a flat expanse of grass and framed by two wide, lazy rivers. (161)

Chest heaving, Hector races towards Troy's wide river, the Scamander. Its water glints a creamy gold, dyed by the stones in its riverbed, the yellow rock for which Troy is known. The waters are not golden now, but a muddied, churning red, choked with corpses and armor. Hector lunges into the waves and swims, arms cutting through the helmets and rolling bodies. He gains the other shore; Achilles leaps to follow. A figure rises from the river to bar his way. (251)

Setting and geographical details in *The Song of Achilles* were exercised to navigate through and avoid relocation of myth, considering its oral traditions and its numerous original variants. The reasons as to why aesthetically paint a picture of any topographical element apparent enough, why fear smearing the verisimilitude of pristine mythical Greece with extravagant description and how landscapes are integral part of myth were discussed. Entailing description of Greek geography supplements and does not topple the reliability of the narrative explanation. Likewise, description of telltale topography does not dilute the plausibility of narrative space. According to Westphal, "if credibility in fiction has always been measured in terms of the reference to the "real" world, in the postmodern era one can no longer say that the world of cement, concrete, or steel is more real than the world of paper and ink."

REFERENCES

1. Miller, Madeline. *The Song of Achilles*. HarperCollins, 2012. E-book
2. Westphal, Bertrand. *Geocriticism: real and fictional spaces*; translated by Robert T. Tally Jr. Palgrave Macmillan, May 2011. E-book.
3. Buxton, Richard. *Imaginary Greece: the contexts of mythology*. Cambridge University Press, 1994. Paperback.
4. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*; edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan. Routledge Ltd, 2005. E-book.
5. Dowden, Ken. *Death and the Maiden: Girl's Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology*. Routledge, 2014. E-book.

Citation: S. Avishia Arul, "Telltale Topography's Credulity and Entailing Description of Mythical Greece in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*", *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, Vol 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 8-10.

Copyright © 2022 S. Avishia Arul, This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.