

In Search of Medea's Atypical Motherhood in Euripides' *Medea*: Cultural and Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to highlight the common traits of atypical motherhood portrayed in Euripides' tragic play, "Medea" focusing on the character of Medea. The study explores the contrast between revenge and motherhood, showcasing how Medea challenges the traditional maternal roles which often emphasize nurturing and protective qualities. Medea challenges these norms and Conventional expectations through her complex and controversial actions by navigating the intricate interplay between love, revenge, and societal norms. The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating literary analysis, psychoanalytic perspectives, and cultural studies to unravel the layers of Medea's action. Through a detailed analysis of Medea's character, the paper examines subtle representations of motherhood, revealing the tensions between maternal instinct and the pursuit of individual agency. Additionally, the research investigates how cultural and historical context of ancient Greece influenced the construction of maternal roles in the play. By delving into the character of Medea, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding motherhood within the context of classical Greek literature. Furthermore, it invites reflection on the enduring relevance of these themes in contemporary discussions on gender, power, and societal expectations. Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of maternal roles in classical literature and stimulate discourse on the portrayal of atypical motherhood in ancient narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Euripides, one of ancient Greece's greatest tragedians, left an unforgettable mark on classical literature through his influential and thought-provoking plays. Born around 480 BCE, Euripides was a contemporary of Sophocles and Aeschylus. He was Well-known for his innovative narrative techniques and deep exploration of human psychology. He challenged the traditional conventions of Greek tragedy. His works, such as *Medea*, *The Bacchae*, and *Electra*, explore the complexities of human emotions, morality, and societal norms, which offer the audiences a profound and timeless reflection on the human condition. Euripides' writings continue to captivate readers and scholars alike, showcasing his permanent influence on the evolution of dramatic storytelling in Western literature. In exploring her character, we encounter a narrative that is not traditional. However, we cannot judge a mother's love based on some established definition alone. Her maternal pursuit indeed creates a complex and thought-provoking portrayal of motherhood, but that does not prove her love to be present in her or make her a bad mother. All the books regarding *Medea* portray her as a killer and a revengeful figure, but our findings suggest that Medea was an atypical mother by her actions. Despite committing the unthinkable act of killing her children out of rage, she simultaneously exhibited motherly care for them. She intended to spare them from greater suffering than they would face among the Corinthians. Euripides' portrayal of *Medea* raises thought-provoking questions about the nature of maternal love, the boundaries of morality, and the influence of societal expectations on women in ancient Greece. In the context of the play, Medea's actions defy traditional norms, pushing the boundaries of maternal devotion into unknown territories. To truly comprehend the significance of her atypical motherhood, we must contextualize it within cultural and historical framework of ancient Greece where societal norms and gender played a profound role over individual lives. Therefore, we can justify her actions in terms of their atypical nature by adopting a multidimensional lens that incorporates cultural and historical perspectives and seeking a deeper understanding of the motivations that drive her actions and the implications they hold for broader understanding of motherhood in antiquity.

METHODOLOGY

In searching of Medea's atypical motherhood in Euripides' *Medea* qualitative method is used in this research paper. This study uses library data which are categorized into two: namely- primary and secondary materials. Both the primary and secondary sources of information will be used from evaluative and analytical angle to establish the main theme of the study. In fact, the works of and on Euripides shall be vastly analyzed to probe into the key investigation of the research. For this reason, 'arguments and counter-arguments basis's analysis shall be the most viable approach to the study. A list of references of the books and articles used in the study will be included at the end of the paper. The research study follows APA 7th manual for the citation, references of the works and quotations used in this article.

DISCUSSION

The paper will begin providing a brief overview of the socio-cultural environment in ancient Greece, emphasizing the roles and expectations placed upon women in the context of motherhood. It will discuss the patriarchal structure of society, the then plays, and the societal norms that shaped the expectations of women in general and mothers in particular. In *Medea*, the portrayal of the central character Medea is complex and often challenges conventional views of motherhood, where elements of a little motherly instinct can be seen in Medea's character. However, her actions are extreme, and the play itself explores the darker aspects of human rage. *Medea* depicts the cultural image of the society of the then time investigating the relationships between men and women during that era. The tragedy of Medea is rooted in Greek myths, providing a vivid portrayal of the cultural and conjugal life of the society it represents as Kagan Kaya exposes:

Euripides' Medea is a great Greek tragedy that is based on a Greek myth, Medea and the keen observation of Euripides as he gives the most valuable information about the cultural life, and man and woman relationships in the Greek world in his era. (2017, p. 87)

In regard to discussing the writing style and themes of Euripidean plays, it is seen that they mainly contain major female characters, who play major roles in the narrative and explore domestic along with personal themes. Additionally, Euripides often questions conventional norms and rituals including those related to gender characters as Mastronarde says:

Euripidean plays in particular contain a greater number of major female roles, they more frequently explore domestic and personal themes, and they show pervasive engagement with contemporary intellectual trends, among which was the provocative analysis of nature and culture and the questioning of accepted norms, including those pertaining to gender. (2010, p. 246)

The new and unconventional dramatic technique found in the writings of Euripides shows the true self of a woman form out of the traditional belief of women's nature. He shows that love can be powerful and dangerous as well. The writer also dares to show or picture the inner world of a woman where the first strain of atypicality in the play is identified as Riitta Sirola upholds: "Euripides was the first dramatist to dare to put a woman's interior world on stage with all her wishes, anxieties, joys and adversities. He evokes love as a great, powerful and fatal source of passion" (2013, p. 95). In the play *Medea*, daughter of king Aeetes, got married with Jason and later Jason abandoned her for a younger royal bride. This marriage erupted the rage of Medea, ultimately leading her to kill her children. The questionnaire about the motherhood of Medea arose when Medea killed her sons, as Fiona Macintosh mentions: during the course of the last five centuries, many adaptations of Euripides' play have stressed Medea's roles as a witch, infanticide, abandoned wife, proto-feminist,

and outsider (2000, pp. 75-99). This occurrence made Medea revengeful on Jason. Throughout the play Jason is found emotionally blind. He has no feelings and connection with any of the factors where Medea can interrupt and hurt Jason, as Davrim Sezer said: "How can she hurt a man like Jason who seems so invulnerable, emotionally blind and indifferent to the expectations and suffering of other people, including his own family" (2015, p. 221)? Soon she found a weak point of her husband that is his children. And the only way Medea can take revenge by killing her children. Davrim Sezer also said:

It is rather a wish to hurt Jason precisely in the same way as he has wronged her; that is, through moral cruelty; and the best way to achieve this objective is to kill their own children because, from her debate with Jason, Medea gains the impression that Jason's affection for his sons is the only emotional soft spot in his otherwise excessively egoistic life-plan. (2015, p. 221)

So, she finalized her plan of killing her children after killing Jason's bride. But before killing her children, she had an internal moral debate where she asks, "Why should I try to hurt their father by making (my own children) suffer" (Sezer, 2015, p. 224)? The atypicality of Medea won here. Medea's female figure argues that revenge on Jason can only be fulfilled by killing their children. Tragedy took place where the verbal battle was going on. The motherly love of Medea is seen, but she also has individual rage for her husband, and that's why her children have to be killed by her own hand.

Euripides shows the elemental conflict between maternal love and revengeful child-murder. Medea is encouraged to kill her children mainly by wounded pride— "I will not let my enemies laugh at me" (Euripides, 2008, p.36/ line 818)—but also by a sense of divine justice— "The gods and I / devised this strategy" (Euripides, 2008, p.44/ lines 1034-35) to avenge Jason. Clark said, "Medea murders her sons when she learns of her husband's betrayal after he married Glauce, the princess of Corinth" (2022). He also pointed out two reasons for murdering her children. Those are:

Medea may not trust Glauce to take good care of her sons, so she slays them to make sure they don't suffer at the hands of another woman. In addition, Medea may have also felt that if she remarries, her children's welfare won't be better off since stepfathers have the same reputation as stepmothers during her era.

Another reason too is Medea had just killed the King of Corinth and her daughter and she feared retribution from the Corinthians. Thus, she doesn't want her children to suffer barbaric deaths at the hands of the people of Corinth when they come back for their pound of flesh. (Clark, 2022)

She didn't have any more choices other than killing her own children after murdering Jason's bride. Following the incident of killing Jason's bride, she faced the inevitable consequence that either she or her children would have to die brutally at the hands of the Corinthians. The culture and history depict that an exiled woman has to fetch various problems in the then society. Riitta Sirola expresses the idea of Flaceliere (1959) in her work:

The fate of an exiled woman in Ancient Greece would have been either prostitution or beggar or both. The children suffered the same fate, becoming slaves, beggars or child prostitutes. Medea could not go back home to her family as she had betrayed her father and killed her brother. Medea was left with nothing and nowhere to go. (2012, p. 97)

Consequently, she made the decision to kill her children by her own hands and leave Corinth. She is detected to say "I will kill them, I'm the one who bore them" (Euripides, 2008, p. 52/ line 1265) after she conceived the idea of murdering her children. Most literature enthusiasts categorize her as a murderous mother for what she did to her sons but in reality, she had little choice. The whole tragedy started from the action of Jason's second marriage. Others also see her as a revengeful wife whose jealousy and outrage got the better of her. However, Medea had to toil with the thought of killing her sons for a long time before deciding it was necessary for her own well-being and that of the children.

No question can be raised whether Medea loves her children or not. It becomes evident that she loves her children and does not want to kill them but the consequence led her to kill them. In the play Medea says: "Oh, how I love these hands, how I love these mouths, / the way the children stand, their noble faces" (Euripides, 2008, pp.47/ lines 1094-95)! "She has to steel herself to kill them, and she knows that she will suffer the pain of their loss" (Foster, 2021, para. 2). Here, she abandons her motherly love and instinct; instead, she focuses on her individual entity. Aside from the killing of her sons, the underlying maternal feeling is seen in Medea. She also becomes anxious of the fact of her children having been maltreated later by their stepmother. In ancient Greek culture, especially during the time of Medea, there was a general doubt about stepmothers who believed in treating children from other marriages with hate. The stepmothers wanted to ensure the inheritance of their biological children by ensuring that all her stepchildren were killed. Therefore, Medea does not rely on Glauce to take good caring of her sons. So, she kills them to make sure they do not suffer at the hands of another woman. Another reason is that Medea has just killed the King of Corinth and her daughter and she fears revenge from the Corinthians. Thus, she does not want her children to suffer barbaric deaths at the hands of the people of Corinth and they come back for their pound of flesh.

Medea killed her children from her individual female identity or the individual feminine rage, not as a mother. After killing her children, she seeks atonement. Her killing can not be regarded as a crime as in Lora L. Holland's writing, she pointed out that the murder of Medea was not regarded as crime: "Her action does not dehumanize and criminalize her, but the opposite; she publicly acknowledges is unholy and requires atonement. The atonement will begin with the funeral rites" (2008, p. 409). So, as the story of the play develops, it can be regarded as the mixture of "myth and social realism" (Mitchell-Boyask, 2007, p. xii). In the ancient cultural belief, it is seen that after

murdering the children Medea tried to follow a ritual believing that burying her child under the temple of Hera eventually would give them rebirth as M.L. West very explicitly highlights:

In the epic Corinthia attributed to Eumelus, which I date to the sixth century, the story was that Jason and Medea had moved from Iolkos to Corinth because the Corinthians, being without a king at the time, had invited her, as the daughter of their former king Aietes, to come and be their queen. Whenever she had a baby, she would take it into the temple of Hera and bury it there, believing that this would make it immortal. (2007, p. 5)

M.L. West also added that, the two words that do appear recognizable in Medea's last verse she was surely explaining what she had done with the children. She stills believe that after killing and burying her children, they are sent to a safe place in the care of a nurse: "I did not kill the sons that I myself bore, but sent them away in the care of a nurse" (West, 2007, p. 3). In his writing, M.L. west also pointed out the probable cause behind killing Medea's children was that: "It is conceivable that Medea might kill the children to prevent the worse fate of their being killed by her enemies" (West, 2007, p. 6). In Euripides' *Medea* she firmly declares her intention to personally end their lives, emphasizing her determination to prevent any delay that could result in a more brutal death at the hands of someone else. "They must die anyway, and since they must, I will kill them. I'm the one who bore them" (Euripides, 2008, p.52 /lines 1264-65).

Medea killed her children just out of anger and for taking revenge on Jason. Also, Medea considered the worst of all staged drama in the world so far. Here, the atypicality of Medea's motherhood is notably explored where Medea killed her children just to make Jason suffer as Kagan Kaya again says:

"Besides Medea's feelings for Jason, his wish to have royal children causes one of the most unearthly revenge in the history of drama. Medea's revenge could be considered the worst of all drama in the world so far. After she poisons the royal family, she kills her own children. When Jason learns that Medea has murdered his own sons, his grief is as large as Medea. As Medea thinks that Jason as a Greek father has never fathered to his sons except for thinking of their future, she does not even let Jason see the faces of his children, and even bury their bodies in Corinth". (2017, p. 90)

She did not want to kill the children, but she wanted to make the point that she lost everything to be with Jason, and since he no longer cares, she will rip everything away from him. This is what a women's rage can do. Euripidean drama reflects the best sample of gender conflicts and domestic intrigues of its time. The rage of an angry women can destroy the whole universe. Her filicide would go on to become the standard for later writers. Euripides was the first one to put all aspects of a society in a play like *Medea* as Mitchell-Boyask said, Euripides was "a radical who subjected all aspects of his society to a withering critique" (2007, p. xviii).

Euripides was a pioneer of his era, creating new myths through his atypical character, Medea. Morales also indicates the radicalism in Euripides as: "Certainly Euripides, perhaps the most radical of classical Athenian

playwrights, created new myths, or changed the old ones so drastically that it must have seemed to some to be a travesty" (2007, p.23). Also, in his plays Euripides pushes "the limits of what is possible in the tragic theatre" (Mitchell-Boyask, 2007, p xii), that is why his Medea is more tragic than any other familiar tragedies of his period. Medea then fled to Corinth for Athens with the help of Helios, the sun god, who provided her with a dragon-driven chariot. Kagan Kaya again noted: "Medea lastly avenges her husband's betrayal, but when she has murdered her children, has to escape to Athens in a chariot drawn by winged dragons" (2017, p. 87). This latter fact may indicate that the gods did not completely disagree with Medea's actions of murdering her children. Throughout the play, we see Medea always suppressed and abused by Jason. She consistently seeks negotiation and clarification of her deeds. But Jason never responded. He was arrogant as Kagan Kaya once again pointed out:

The play mirrors the transformation of Medea from a sympathetic abused woman to a dreadful sufferer and a monstrous child-killer. Besides Medea's being onstage since her first entrance, she has remained through the negotiations, meetings, supplications and choral odes which explain her exact grief in detail even after slaughtering her own sons. (2017, p. 92)

Finally, Kagan Kaya pointed out the nature of atypicality in Medea where he also pointed that maternity doesn't mean mother will always show the self-sacrificing act. Along with mother Medea was a woman with rage, anger and feelings said that: "Medea's illogical refusing reveals that even after the death of their children their traumatic pride has not been extinguished. This also shows that maternity is not regarded as self-sacrificing act forever" (Kaya, 2017, p. 91). Among all the discussion it may be pointed out that, Medea had love for her children but the rage and anger over Jason was superior. So, we cannot just justify a mother by her care or killing her children. Along with being a mother, Medea was a woman, a daughter of King Aeetes. And this atypical nature of Medea made her remarkable in the Greek Tragedies.

CONCLUSIONS

Medea fulfilled all the responsibilities of motherhood, showing care and maternal instincts for her child but along with the motherly instinct we see the rage of a woman over her husband. However, in constantly justifying her actions solely within the context of traditional motherhood, the multifaceted nature of her identity as a woman, a girl, and a lover of Jason have been overlooked. Despite the tragic consequences of her vengeful actions, it is important to acknowledge her simultaneous awareness of ensuring the safety of her children. Notably, she even sought to secure their immortality by engraving their bodies in the temple of Hera. It is inappropriate to generalize motherhood with a single, all-encompassing definition. In the case of Medea, she expressed her motherly instincts in a manner uniquely her own. And she broke the traditional rituals and showed motherly responses for her children and still her love was atypical.

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