

Public and Private Realms in Euripidis Medea - A Study of Contested Passions and Feminine Rage

Madhukar Rai

MA English, NET

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English

DDU Gorakhpur University

UP

Abstract

This paper deals with the gendered constructions of feminine identity in ancient Greece and how these constructions were often based on a flawed sense of authority that rested only in the hands of the men who dominated the 'polis', the public space and laid out a set of rules and statutes that others, particularly women were expected to adhere to. Euripidis in his play 'Medea' seems to pit these very potent myths of the Greek society and carves out a subversive theme of feminine transgression and how his central protagonist, Medea shatters the façade of gender duplicity by avenging and punishing her detractors. Medea turns out to be a model of exception who challenges the normative assumptions of feminine identity in Greek society as she proves that she can take recourse to any means to avenge her honour and dignity. This paper will also highlight that how through her defiance and subversion of the power norms of her society both as a woman and as an outsider Medea presents herself as a figure of resistance who is hell bent not only to achieve justice but also dismantle the falsified notions of the private and the public space demarcated on the grounds of performance and socially defined gender roles.

Keywords: oikos, polis, ghar, bahir, gender discourse, nationalism, transgression, infanticide, ethnic-otherisation, monster, Scylla, revenge, justice.

Medea written and produced in 431 B.C by the renowned Greek playwright and tragedian Euripides narrates the pain and agony felt by Medea, the chief protagonist of the play upon being deserted and betrayed by her husband Jason whom as the Greek myth goes she helped out of her limits to secure the Golden Fleece. Having helped Jason in his task, Medea fell in love with him and escaped with him to Corinth, a completely different country to marry and settle there after killing her own brother and father. Everything was going fine till Jason decided to marry Glauce, the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth in hope of succeeding to the royal throne and thus attain a sense of social stability in his wandering life. The news of this proposed marital union between Jason and Glauce destroyed all the hopes and aspirations that Medea had in her mind regarding her life with Jason.

As the play opens we are made aware of the wretched condition that Medea is in, lamenting copiously for the unjust treatment she has received at the hands of her husband and bemoans the scarcity of options that she is left with, in this condition of adversity .Her condition is much worsened by the twin disadvantages that lie in front of her of not only being a woman and distraught wife but also an outsider in Corinth .The rejection and denial that Medea faces in her private domain of being a loving and caring wife and a mother of two sons arouses in her a furious passion to punish Jason for the injustice that he has done to her. In the very introductory speech made by the Nurse we are made aware of the possible extent to which Medea can go to reclaim her lost honour and dignity in the private realm.

“I know her well

She'll not put up with being treated badly

.....

It won't be easy for any man who

Picks up a fight with her to

think she's beaten and he's triumphed".

(Lines 49-

58)

Through these lines we get a peek into an unknown aspect of Medea's personality that is of her capacity to break the boundaries of her private realm of a custom bound and loving wife to a wounded soldier who is adamant to vanquish her enemies by any means possible.

"As her temper grows even more intense,

it will soon catch fire. She is a passionate soul, hard to

Restrain".

(Lines 129-132)

Partha Chatterjee in his article 'Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India' outlines the nationalist dichotomy of the 'ghar' and the 'bahir' and claims that in its bid to answer the women's question in tradition the discourse of nationalism asserted that these two distinctions must be strictly maintained and conformed to. The 'bahir' represents the external world, the world of political and material contest owned by the males while the 'ghar'

represents the inner sanctity and spiritual quest of life and women are its sole representatives. This identification of social roles within the larger discourse of nationalism was to reinforce a narrative of gender distinction and various other attributes of conduct that came along to be associated with it. While men were regarded as the rightful representatives of the outer sphere, women were regarded as the chief custodians of the inner domain of tradition and culture. Any violation of this spiritual sphere was dealt with serious attention and frowned upon. Taking cue from this argument we can say that Medea in the same way faces a pertinent question as to the means she should adopt to avenge her honour and prestige as a woman. She chooses a path contrary to the normative expectations of a woman in Greek times, that of violence and murder and exercises her free will in order to prove that women too are capable of going to any lengths if the need arises and are not mere puppets at the hands of a male dominated world meant only to be confined in the inner chambers of the house relenting to the whims and fancies of their male 'protectors'. In her 'Women of Corinth' speech Medea makes a formal declaration of the evil she intends to cause to Jason and her enemies and thus marks her decision of transgressing the inner domain of family life and feminine values that she had cherished for so long.

"Women of Corinth, I'm coming here,

Outside the house, so you won't think ill of me".

(Lines 243-244)

Medea's patience finally gives in and she decides to take recourse to treachery and manipulation to get her desires fulfilled. Medea who posits a distinction between public and private roles has sought in her first speech to bring the public in line with the private. To resolve the personal turmoil that has come in her life, she takes recourse to direct action in the public domain thus

performing a violation of the defined limits of private life to protect herself from public ignominy.

"The man who was everything to me

My own husband has turned out to be

the worst of men .This I know is true.

Of all things with life and understanding,

we women are the most unfortunate".

(Lines 260-264)

In the words of George Steiner “the incensed heart of women continues to find voice via Medea”. Medea in her speech to the women of Corinth establishes her as a champion of their rights, being herself a victim of male indifference and broken allegiances and makes a doleful assessment of the subjugation and humiliation that women have to face on account of being treated as an object and a ladder to social prestige and then forsaken into the depths of despair and anguish.

Partha Chatterjee in Chapter seven of his book “**Nation and its Fragments**” titled ‘Women and the Nation’ talks about the gradual evolution of women in early nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal from living a completely secluded life under various social restrictions imposed by their fathers, husbands and their sons , being denied to go to school or to acquire formal education to the gradual recognition of the importance of female education and individuality thereafter.

Chatterjee makes a very interesting observation in his chapter that as women came under the influence of education they began to express themselves and voicing their opinions and ideologies which were suppressed since long. Reading, writing, singing and acting, slowly as they happened to women opened up new vistas of unharnessed potential that was earlier not available to them. Putting this discourse in Euripidean context we can realise the unconventional role that Medea subscribes to in her resolution to attain her place of respectability within the Greek canon. Medea takes a virulent jibe at the falsity and hollowness of men's claim that their identity(feminine) lies only in consonance with their private roles.

“Men tell us we live safe and secure at home,

while they must go to battle with their spears,

How stupid they are! I'd rather stand there

three times in battle holding up my shield

than give birth once”.

(Lines 287-291)

Ascertaining the unjust position Medea has been forced into she makes use of her agency of magic and artifice as it seems to be the only avenue of power left available to her by the society of her times which prioritized male identity over everything else. Medea very adroitly feigns before Creon and gains a reprieve of one more day to put her vicious plans to execution. Holding back her true intentions Medea puts up an artful pretence even in front of Jason to convince him

that she no longer has a grudge against his decision and participates in the misleading opinions that Jason expresses against her .After charging Jason of ingratitude and unconcern towards her for all the help and love that she showered him with, she pretends to be repentant and says-

“Jason, I ask you to forgive me

for what I said before. My anger

you should be able to put up with,

since we too have shared many acts of love”, (Lines 1021-1024)

“So I give in. I admit that I was wrong

But now I see things in a better light”.

(Lines 1048-49)

Medea is well aware that anger, revenge and disobedience are not her normative tendencies and she can only succeed if she feigns before her enemies that she still adheres to the traditional gender roles and hence gain the confidence of her adversaries regarding her meekness and harmlessness, for Medea interplays her role both in the public and private domains simultaneously to achieve the intended effect. Jason upon hearing Medea’s second speech in which she pretends a reconciliation feels relieved and tells her that now she is “acting like a woman of good sense” (Line 1173).

By putting up a false image of herself in front of Jason and Creon, Medea elusively puts her plans to work. She convinces Jason to plead with Glauce to spare the banishment of her children

and thus emerges successful in sending the poisoned gifts to Glauce to kill her. Medea defies the very fundamental tenets of the 'oikos' in her fit for revenge but she does not completely disown the hierarchical boundaries of conventional social arrangement, but works in acknowledgement of the importance that it has in relation to a woman's life. S. C. Humphrey claims that 'it was the masculine world of politics and the polis, power and honour taking first place in Athenian values'. Masculine psychology in Greece centred on the notion that men are rational, self-controlling while women give away to emotions and are mentally infirm and indecisive. That is the same set of constructs that Jason invokes to counter the fervent protestations of infidelity on his part.

"But you women are so idiotic,
you think if everything is fine in bed,
you have all you need ,but if the sex is bad,
then all the very best and finest things
you make your enemies".

(Lines 677-681)

Medea thus chooses to 'be both the woman and not be the woman' as an artifice to fulfil her passionate desires. Medea is a very clever character who even tries to take Aegeus in her confidence and succeeds in gaining a vow of protection in Athens after she is done with her plans in Corinth.

“Take pity on me in my misfortune,

Don’t let me be exiled without a friend

Accept me as a suppliant in your home

Your native land”.

(Lines 844-847)

Medea in trying to adhere to the private conventions of being a woman and an outsider very skilfully tries to assert her public abilities by speaking in the language of the Greek polis –an art which shows her knowledge of both the layers of Greek life that of the public and the private. When Medea decides to kill her children she is aware of the pain and grief that she herself will have to endure on account of being a mother as is evident in the line she speaks-

"I raised you

and all for nothing. The work I did for you

The cruel hardships, the pains of childbirth

All for nothing".

(Lines 1210-1213)

In Greek society infanticide was a serious criminal offence and attracted stringent legal punishment and social castration. Medea upon seeing the innocent faces of her children falters in her resolve as her personal love for her children seems to overpower her external motivation of

getting her revenge fulfilled. She suffers from a psychological crisis and failure to adhere to either the familial ties of her 'oikos' or to the world of action that is the 'polis'. However Medea finally cuts through this tide of emotional bondage and decides to commit the murder because in murdering her children she will be able to inflict a much greater pain to Jason who will neither have his new wife nor his children by his side. Even as Medea is firm in her motive of murder she vindicates her stand proclaiming it to be an act driven out of her public instincts while as a mother she still has the same affection and kindness for her children.

“My hand will never lack the strength for this.

And yet ...My heart don't do this murder”.

(Lines 1243-44)

Medea suffers from a personal disintegration and crisis as she embarks on her murderous journey – the disruption of her 'oikos' has stimulated her anger and fuelled her to get her wishes fulfilled, displaying that her estrangement as a woman and outsider in Corinth has failed to subdue her feminine spirit for it is invincible and she can transgress to any lengths to achieve her desired goal without erasing her womanhood altogether. Medea therefore to fulfil her vicious intentions neither abdicates her private role as a woman nor fully gets into the active public domain of masculine action. Medea's response when the messenger comes bringing in the news of the death of Glauce and Creon too reflects the subversion of popular conceptions of the female character that thought woman to be weak in heart and will. Rather than being shocked or horrified at the news of death Medea seems jubilant commending the messenger in words like-

“What really splendid news you bring

From now on, I'll consider you a friend, one of my benefactors”.

(Lines 1330-1333)

Medea in her unswerving conviction to principles of honour and self-respect resembles the legacy of the old Greek heroes like Achilles, Hector and Ajax who left no stone unturned to win back power and prestige in times of crisis and insecurity. Medea in her antagonism reverses the ‘order of the sexes’ and disrupts the well-defined boundaries of the society challenging that works which are taken for ‘granted’ arise not by natural decree but by a deliberate political positioning done by the society. For instance, women were expected to have a natural repulsion for evil and violence and anyone having such perverse inclinations was rendered unnatural, hysterical and unwomanly. Physical prowess, skill in battle and forceful rhetoric were some of the traits by which the ancient hero achieved his prominence, imposed his will on others and fulfilled the traditional injunction to ‘do good to one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies’.

When Jason comes to know of the murder of his sons he at first fails to believe his senses as evident in his shocking response –

“No. What are you saying? Woman,

you have destroyed me”.

(Lines 1561-62)

He further questions the Chorus in Line 1565 ‘Where did she do this? Inside or outside which brings in very pertinent issues of the private-public binary of the Greek times. The inside denotes the space of the family where feelings of love, affection and sacrifice reign supreme and

committing such a gory and awful deed within the sanctimonious space of the home arouses a great deal of bewilderment and mortification in the minds of the audience. Jason in his deep repulsion towards Medea strongly slams her with scornful anger in the lines that he speaks to her-

“You accursed woman, most hateful

To the Gods and me and all mankind.

You dared to take the sword to your own boys,

You the one whose bore them-and to leave me

Destroyed and childless. Having done this,

after committing this atrocious crime,

can you still look upon the Earth and the Sun?”

(Lines 1578-

1584)

These lines reflect the utter destabilization and chaos that was caused by the infanticide committed by Medea-an act completely unexpected of a woman in Greece; Jason reinstates this view in these lines-

“No woman from Greece would dare

To do this, but I chose you as my wife

above them all, and that has proved to be a

hateful marriage-it has destroyed me,
you're not a woman .You're a she-lion
your nature is more bestial than Scylla,
the Tuscan monster. But my insults,
multiplied a thousand fold, don't hurt you
your heart is too hard for that".

(Lines 1596-1604)

The derogatory names by which Jason refers to Medea as the tiger, Scylla, monster, polluted wretch, child- killer demonstrates the dehumanisation and the racial and 'ethnic otherization' that an outsider had to face in Greek society . In the play the private -public binary can be evident from one more fact that seems to be a recurrent motif throughout the play-that of giving birth to sons which underlines the inherent aspect of 'social legitimacy and recognition' that only came with having sons who were seen to continue the family lineage by exhibiting their valour , strength and intelligence in the public domain .Killing her sons also testifies the destruction that Medea willingly caused in terms of public order and sentiment.

Edward Said in his book '**The Politics Of Dispossession**' talks about how an outside identity allows one to speak truth to power, to challenge the status quo and confront the orthodoxy and dogma associated with the double standards of treatment for the inside and the outside people

.Medea in this regard as an outsider challenges the whole ideological and social outlook of contempt that the immigrants were seen with.

In the concluding lines of the play Jason invokes Zeus to look at his wretched condition imploring how could he see all this injustice and stay silent. Jason invokes divine intervention in this precarious state of anarchy and evil that Medea has unleashed on him calling her a she-lion and an abomination. Jason's heart rending exclamations of eternal pain that he suffers also throws light on the conception of divine faith to restore order and justice in a society torn asunder of its values of order and trust. The fleeing away of Medea on the dragon chariot given to her by the Sun God brings to the fore certain quintessential questions of whether Medea would be exonerated of her crime that she committed, and does her escape from Corinth also imply her escape from the hands of law and punishment. Medea's escape leaves various pertinent questions unanswered. The city of Athens which was known for its democratic principles and rule of law giving refuge to an outlaw like Medea makes a mockery of its own principles of law and justice.

The chorus in the ending of the play espouses the universal theme of inevitable suffering where the plans human beings have in mind are thwarted by the unexpected turn of events which leads one to conjecture about the grace and benediction of divine agency in a world where the guilty and the innocent have to suffer equally.

References:

1. Euripides, and Philip Vellacott. *Medea and Other Plays: Medea, Hecabe, Electra, Heracles*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963. Print.
2. Barlow, Shirley A. "EURIPIDES' MEDEA: A SUBVERSIVE PLAY?" *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement*, no. 66, 1995, pp. 36-45. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43767987.
3. Charles Lloyd. "The Polis in Medea: Urban Attitudes and Euripides' Characterization in 'Medea' 214-224." *The Classical World*, vol. 99, no. 2, 2006, pp. 115–130. JSOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4353029.
4. Burnett, Anne. "Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge." *Classical Philology*, vol. 68, no.1, 1973, pp. 1-24 .JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/268785.
5. Blankenship, Debra (1992) "Oikos and Polis in the Medea: Patterns of the Heart and Mind," *Anthós* (1990-1996): Vol. 1 : No. 3 , Article 14.
6. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993. Print.
7. Bongie, Elizabeth Bryson. "Heroic Elements in the Medea of Euripides." *American Philological Association* (1974), vol. 107, 1977, pp. 27–56. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/284024.
8. Chatterjee, Partha. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1989, pp. 622–633. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/645113.
9. Foley, Helene. "Medea's Divided Self." *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1989, pp. 61–85. JSOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25010896.