

HOME AND EXILE: A POST-COLONIAL ANALYSIS OF EURIPIDES' PLAY MEDEA

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Abstract

In the wake of the forced mass displacement of people due to the outbreak of wars, the scintillating tale of the titular character in Euripides' play, Medea has found new meanings in the post-modern world. This research paper is an endeavor to study Medea along the trajectories of post-colonial discourse to suggest that she is a displaced outsider and a symbol of post-colonial survival. This paper argues that Medea's act of infanticide is not a monstrous act as she was forced to refashion her identity as an outsider and a foreigner. Therefore, by killing her own children, she strikes a blow against the system and in this process, she reclaims her own dignity. In fact, for Medea, it serves as a means of self-assertion. Bhabha's (1994) theory of Hybridity will furnish the main theoretical lens to critically evaluate the text through close reading. Though critical literature has critiqued Medea's act of defiance, her act of infanticide has not been analyzed in a post-colonial context. Her self-assertion allows her to transcend spatial and temporal bounds. The study of Medea's character will help readers understand cultural heritage and the dominant colonial power which Jason represents.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Displacement, Feminism, Greek tragedy, Hybridity, Migrant Crisis, Third Space.*

Introduction

Medea was first performed in the fifth century BC. From the pen of Euripides emerged a foreboding and controversial tragedy that

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has enthralled audiences since time immemorial. Despite its enduring and everlasting appeal, it is ironic that the play’s first performance was met with a very lukewarm reaction (Blondell, 1999). The acclaimed play by Euripides reiterates the tumultuous life of Medea who killed her brother and betrayed the trust of her father by choosing to marry Jason. After her marriage to Jason, Medea starts living in Corinth, (Greece). The play delineates Medea’s problems in the ‘new homeland ’as she begins to experience meaningful, radical changes. It is assumed that Medea would sever ties with her homeland and assimilate into the new culture. Thus rupturing of ties is a mere illusion that dawns upon Medea at the onset when she moans for the lost homeland. Above all, her husband (Jason) deserted her and showed an inclination to marry the daughter of the ruler, Creon. While it was for the love of Jason that Medea abandoned her family, this idea of rejecting her family haunts her throughout the entire play. To cope with Jason’s betrayal, she chose to seek vengeance by poisoning her children. Swift (2014) claims that the tragic events portrayed in Medea's story reverberate not only with the mythological past but also with contemporary society, tingling our imaginations with tremendous force. The iconic yet timeless tale of Medea has been translated, adapted, and reinscribed in countless ways for the ardent followers of Greek mythology (Heavey, 2015). New meanings have been traced and the modern adaptations have reimagined the play as a powerful story of a woman who refuses to be in a subservient position. “The work of historiography is to locate events in time, in all their contingent specificity. Myths, on the other hand, are unstable, inherently contaminated, existing precisely to be reread, rewritten, and reinterpreted. There are no canonical versions of the

Greek myths” (Higgins, 2022, p. 30) A detailed reading of the play would reveal that *Medea* by Euripides has become a case study for maternal filicide. The titular character has become a representative of a wider global community of refugee women who fend for themselves in a foreign land without any familial support. An in-depth analysis of *Medea* in the current scenario would be instrumental in highlighting how multiple factors such as anxiety, displacement, and economic instability could compel women to commit atrocious crimes like maternal infanticide. The Ukraine crisis is one of the many cataclysmic incidents in recent times that have triggered large-scale humanitarian, migration, and refugee crises. The ongoing political conflicts between Russia and Ukraine have displaced six million Ukrainian refugees (Barnes, 2022). This crisis has disproportionately impacted women and girls in Ukraine, who are increasingly vulnerable to gender-based violence, exploitation, and trafficking. Furthermore, they face higher rates of maternal and newborn mortality as a result of limited access to essential services and healthcare. Additionally, the ongoing warfare has culminated in suffering and trauma among those impacted (Barnes, 2022). By locating the tragic and disturbing tale of *Medea* in the contemporary political scenario (such as the plight of refugee women), the modern reader has “long left behind the political and religious framework in which these stories first circulated [. . .] Greek myths remain true for us because they excavate the very extremes of human experience: sudden, inexplicable catastrophe; radical reversals of fortune; seemingly arbitrary events that transform lives” (Higgins, 2022, p. 5).

The rendition of Greek tragedies such as *Medea* on a global platform has initiated conversations about pressing issues of social

injustice and identity crisis. Greek drama offers a cathartic experience that allows characters to express their desires, fears, and rage without getting self-conscious. It is a departure from modern drama, which typically revolves around subtext and nuanced meanings while Greek drama features characters who readily express their motives without the use of obfuscation (Marks, 1998). Moreover, tragic plays especially Greek tragedies which are based on myths, offer a predicament to the theatre-goers with no easy resolution. As a form of art, these plays elicit a certain response from the audience, jolting them out of their situations to mull over things and issues that might assail them such as how would they react if they end up in situations not drastically different from the ones unfolding in front of their eyes in a theatre. In the case of *Medea*, these questions become more pertinent because the Greek tragedy sheds light on patriarchal values and norms which affected the marital bliss of Medea and Jason. A cursory glance at *Medea* highlights that women are financially dependent on their husbands and are therefore vulnerable. This particular aspect makes the drama more relevant in the Pakistani context. The gender equality disparity in Pakistan is a cause for concern. Recently Pakistan ranked second worst in the Global Gender Gap report (Asad, 2022). It is critical that we investigate the underlying causes that have led to this situation in order to address it. Women, who make up approximately fifty percent of the population in Pakistan, face numerous challenges throughout their lives that impede their chances to achieve equal standing with men (Asad, 2022). This research paper contributes to scholarly debates around diaspora, transnationalism, and displaced asylum seekers by doing an analysis of *Medea* by Euripides. The paper has

framed questions about the rights of women and helped in providing a better understanding of the factors which urge people to relocate to foreign territories. By espousing Bhabha’s (1994) concept of Third space, the paper reiterates that identities formed in the diaspora are constantly in flux. This study is guided by the following questions: In what ways did displacement and migration give vent to fissured identities in Euripides’s play *Medea*? How has the environment and context facilitated the creation of a Third Space in the selected drama? This research paper is a response to a global issue that threatens and undermines the status of women.

Research Methodology

The study has been conducted using the qualitative method by analyzing the selected data, through the conceptual framework proposed by Bhabha (1994). A detailed close textual analysis of Euripides’s play *Medea* was done to explore and investigate the diasporic sensibilities experienced by the characters. Close textual analysis is appropriate method for this research paper as it will aid in “the construction of textual meaning in a variety of cultural texts” (Lockyer, 2008, p. 865). According to McKee (2003), textual analysis is an attempt to grasp sense-making practices not only in cultures that vary greatly from our own but also within our own nations. Through textual analysis, one can delve into the intricate layers of the human psyche, empathize with characters from different cultural and historical contexts, and uncover the underlying social, psychological, and moral implications embedded in Greek tragedies like *Medea*. Close textual analysis of Greek tragedies may enable us to move beyond temporal and cultural barriers, shedding light on the universal aspects of the human experience. It will assist us in recognizing the

similarities and differences in sense-making practices across societies, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse viewpoints. Close reading, according to Catterson (2017), is a purposeful pursuit of particular features of a text, with thorough investigation and scrutiny. In this research paper, close textual analysis is instrumental in understanding Medea’s actions, intentions, and interactions with other characters. This methodology is vital in delineating those factors which contribute to her transformation from a potential perpetrator of violence to a victim of circumstance.

Literature Review

A cursory glance at the literary scholarship available on the famed Greek tragedy would reveal that a significant chunk of it falls under the realm of reception studies. Similarly, the first phase of researchers expounding thematic concerns in Euripides’s play *Medea* were the ones who gave vent to reception studies. The reception studies are often labeled as a “sub-discipline of Classics” (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 1). The scholars are divided in their responses to this dichotomy between the primary text and its multiple adaptations. They assert that “these primary texts can also be characterized as secondary since they are transmitted to us through the process of ancient reception” (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 1).

According to The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (the APGRD), there are eight hundred and ten entries for productions of the play (*Medea*) from 1539 to 2009. (Kekis, 2010, p. 2) *Medea* has been the single most popular Greek tragedy since the nineteenth century in the United States (Foley, 2004, p. 77). As for the United Kingdom, “there were periods in the 1990s when more plays by Euripides and Sophocles were performed on the London

stages than by any other playwright, including Shakespeare”(Kekis, 2010, p .2). *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Euripides* is an effort to document and arrange all the adaptations of *Medea* thematically under different subcategories in different guises and forms namely literature, “intellectual history, visual arts, music, opera and dance, stage and cinematography” (Scharffenberger, 2015, p. 2).

Over the years, *Medea* has championed women’s rights globally. The researchers have argued that she is an abandoned and abused wife (Caraher, 2013; Cairns, 2014). Similarly, debates concerning Medea’s identity as a hero or a heroine have also been contested by gender theorists (Durham, 1984). Psychoanalytical interpretations of Medea to make sense of the heinous and gory crimes she committed by poisoning her own children have also been a favorite line of investigation amongst literary scholars (Mills, 1980).

Unearthing postcolonial dimensions in *Medea* are only a recent phenomenon. The Greek play has been re-read as a post-colonial protest where *Medea* is deemed a “subaltern Barbarian” (Kekis, 2010, p. 4). It has been contested that Medea as a subaltern cannot articulate her concerns. *Medea* has also been reimaged in the context of the African Diaspora (Van Zyl Smit, 1992). In this regard, multiple works have appeared: *African Medea* by Jim Magnuson; *Black Medea* by Ernest Ferlita, SJ; *Pecong* by Steve Carter and *Medea, Queen of Colchester* by Marianne McDonald.

The Greek tragedy is explored through the lens of political science theories also. In this regard, political interpretations of the play where Medea’s ambivalent and unique position as an asylum seeker “ and a phugas, the term for a person exiled, on the run, displaced, vulnerable, and in need of refuge” are recent development (

Kasimis, 2020, p. 393). Basically, this research project invites a paradigm change in the research of Diasporas and ethnic cultures. Also, the research paper will address the wide schism that exists in literary scholarship which has hitherto failed to delineate the sensibilities of a woman who is in the third space (Bhabha, 1994), and whose identity is constantly in a state of transition.

“It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Bhabha has conceptualized multilayered concepts of hybridity and ambivalence in post-colonial discourse. He advocated that Hybridity and third space connote a liminal space where different cultures merge and interact. It is in the third space that different cultures overlap. He further adds that “our existence today is living on the borderlines of the present. The shifting condition is often characterized using prefix ‘post’ as in; “postmodernism, post colonialism, postfeminist” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). These concepts magnify “the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). Bhabha (1994) incorporated the term ‘beyond’ to elucidate that “we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (p. 1). It can be deduced that the third space or beyond are emblematic of “spatial distance [that] marks progress” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). The ‘beyond’ is incomprehensible and therefore cannot be represented in simplistic terminology. Consequently there is a sense of; “disorientation, disturbance of direction, in the beyond” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1).

Beyond alone becomes an intervening space. These in-between spaces provide; “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new sings of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Hence in these liminal spaces, new identities are forged. Inspired by culture, the differences are nuanced in the Third space. The cultural differences are shaped by tradition but they are negotiated and redefined through the conditions of contingency and contradictions. However, individual idiosyncrasies of a person’s personality do not deliquesce into a mesh in the third space. “Bhabha wants to bypass simplistic interaction theory by pointing out the complexity of an encounter. The Third space of enunciation is employed as a metaphor for the ambiguous virtual field that emerges when two or more individuals or cultures interact. In a sense, the Third space is the space of hybridity itself” (Bhandari, 2020 p. 82).

Data Analysis

The acclaimed play by Euripides reiterates the tumultuous life of Medea who killed her brother and betrayed the trust of her father by choosing to marry Jason. The play centers on the story of a pair of star-crossed lovers Medea and Jason experiencing a series of displacements. After her marriage to Jason, Medea starts living in Corinth, (Greece). She is welcomed by the Corinthian women but still, she experiences feelings of alienation and isolation. Medea is like other women; the inherent difference between the female chorus and Medea is that once she believes that her reputation has been tarnished and that she and her children have been placed in a dangerous situation, she opts for action over silence. Euripides

purposefully fashions the chorus's response to Medea's situation to indicate to the tragedy's audience how to look upon this betrayed wife and mother. The chorus promises undying and unflinching support to Medea. “Then, go, Nurse, tell Medea we are outside, faithful friends, women who can bear the worst of what she feels. When she sees us, our voices will be a song that calms her anger. Do this quickly, with no excuses. Time is all she needs” (Euripides, 2006, 177-185). The feeling of being displaced is experienced by almost every migrant. However, in the play, Medea is twice displaced. First, her marriage to Jason forces her to conform to the role of a doting wife who must politely endure her husband’s indiscretions. Secondly, her exposure to a new culture in Greece forces her to revise her ideological conceptions. Hence realization of her ambivalent position in society urges Medea to mourn for the lost homeland. Bhabha (2006) theorized the concept of third space. He further asserted that culture is “not a fixed entity” and meanings are “appropriated, translated, historicized, and read anew” (p. 208).

At the onset of the play, Medea appears as a bereaved soul with no purpose in life. In moments of extreme grief and despair, she constantly yearns for an anchor or a home that she could call her own. At one point in the play, Medea remarks:

Women of Corinth, here I am, as you wish and not as you might think, uncaring. All of us know women whom no matter the occasion remain decorous, or because they stay at home are thought to be cold and implacable, indifferent to their neighbors’ needs. All of us judge by sight and not by knowledge. Because I’m an outsider I know this better than most, and have worked hard to fit in (Euripides, 2006, 221-230).

The feeling of severe hopelessness and despondency is reflected when she cries in lamentation that she is an 'outsider' who can never 'fit in'. Home in the above-mentioned extract becomes the metaphor for a haven or an anchor where she will not be forced to adapt or change. Such utterances of Medea raise essential questions about home and a sense of belonging. Home is a concept much grander than a mere geographical space.

What is home, the place I was born? Where did I grow up? Where do I work or live as an adult? Where do I locate my community- my people? Who are my people? Is home a geographical space, an emotional sensory space? Home is always so crucial to immigrants and I am convinced that this question-how one understands and defines home is profoundly political ... Political solidarity and a sense of family could be melded together imaginatively to create a strategic space I call home" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7).

As per Mohanty's (2003) concept of a home, Medea is in a continuous search for a place where issues concerning both familial bliss and political stability do not undermine her identity. Here at this juncture in the play, a remarkable change is witnessed in Medea's behavioral pattern. She experiences loss, not of a homeland but of the tradition that she had left behind. This idea of rejecting her family haunts her throughout the entire play, she wonders about the true implications of the word, 'Home'. Inhabiting a new territory and making one's home in another country is a recurrent motif in Diaspora literature. Medea's outrageous and outlandish personality at the onset of the play is in stark contrast with her intelligent persona. Her fall from wisdom is noticeable. In her new home, she is no more a respected professional healer but a Barbarian (Kekis, 2010, p. 4).

“Euripides’ Medea, the priestess of Hecate and sharer in the goddess’s most secret treasury of transforming drugs and charms, surely belongs. She is, to be more specific, a professional healer (and harmer) trained in the art of gathering, preparing, and applying drugs. Because this art depended upon the knowledge of certain divine rites and charms, some of which were revealed only to women, women held a secure place in this branch of knowledge” (Collier & Machemer, 2006, p. 19).

It is ironic that Medea for most of the play does not seem irrational or evil. Her diatribe with both Creon and Aegeus speaks volumes about her calculating nature. She promptly and hastily devises a plan and leaves Corinth unscathed towards the end of the play. Basically, through her actions and gestures, Euripides has brought forth those broader societal pressures that lie behind what she does. She insists that her dire situation is an aftermath of the stringent patriarchal rules governing marriage in Corinth. It seems women are dependent on their husbands and are therefore very vulnerable. The nurse has aptly pointed out:

“A refugee who’s won respect, admired—stable, domestic—supporting her husband as she should. But now she hates all things. What love remains is sick. Jason has left his sons and my mistress for a royal bed and bride—the daughter of Creon, the king who rules this land. Medea, enraged, recites the list of Jason’s vows, mocks the way he raised his hand as a pledge, and demands the gods stand witness to what her faithful love’s produced. Now she starves herself, except for grief and endless hours of crying since she learned about her husband’s wrongs” (Euripides, 2006, 15-30).

Bhabha (1994) asserted that culture is “not a fixed entity” and

meanings are “appropriated, translated, historicized, and read anew” (p. 208). From being regarded as a ‘stable and respectable’ woman, she has been forced to refashion her identity. Medea has tried relocating yet she finds herself unhomely. “The ‘unhomely’ is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9).

But I’ve been talking as if our lives are the same. They’re not. You are Corinthians with ancestral homes, and childhood friends, while I, stripped of that already, am now even more exposed by Jason’s cruelties. Remember how I came here, a war bride, plundered from my country, an orphan? Now, who’s obligated to shelter me? Not you, (Euripides, 2006, 270-280).

The woeful remark, ‘Plundered from my country?’ is a rhetorical statement that indicates that Medea regards herself as a passive object who has no agency or control over her actions. It is noteworthy that Medea believes that her sense of self is formed by forces beyond her control. Her personality becomes a vessel where external conflicts clash to give vent to an identity that is hybrid. In the same vein, nostalgia for ‘ancestral home’ suggests that Medea is at a loss. For her, having lost a home does not mean that she has no place to live, in fact, Medea has implicitly raised questions concerning belonging and identity in a new locale. “To be unharmed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 141).

Later in the play, Creon visited Medea and expressed his desire to get his daughter married to Jason. “Creon: No I’m bound to protect my family and home first. Medea: I need my birthplace more

than ever now. Creon: I love my children first and then my home. Medea: Yes, but what we love too much is dangerous” (Euripides, 2006, 347-350). This contrast between the two statements uttered by Creon and Medea signifies the two disparate ways of life. Medea must abide by the terms and conditions dictated by Creon if she wants to survive in a foreign land. By default, she is forced to take matters into her own hands if she wants to live peacefully according to her needs and desires. By rejecting Creon, she transcends the limitations imposed by the Third space. For Medea, “negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 218). Jason chides Medea for throwing a fit, he says to Medea, “Generous terms were offered to you: the house, protection, and privileges, but could you bear these gifts without complaint? Now exile is your reward” (Euripides, 2006, 449-453). To this, she retorts, “Replacement wife. I might understand your disappointment if I’d been barren but I gave you sons!” (Euripides, 2006, 490-94). Unlike Medea who has lost her home, Jason’s situation has advanced considerably. His remark, ‘bearing gifts without complaint’ suggests that Medea must relish and bask in joy under the positive cultural exchange in the Third space. In fact, it can be deduced that Jason’s interaction with Medea reveals another perspective of “Third space”. Medea’s woes suggest that immigrants can never have a blissful life. On the contrary, however, a meticulous appraisal of the primary text revealed that for Jason the new territory was a golden chance to advance his position. Jason has imagined himself as a savior.

The part of the savior has to be filled as long as the belief in the problem of ‘endangered species’ lasts. To persuade you that your past

and cultural heritage are doomed to eventual extinction and thereby keep you occupied with the Savior's concern, inauthenticity is condemned as a loss of origins and a whitening (or faking) of non-Western values. Being easily offended by your elusive identity and reviving readily an old, racial charge, you immediately react when such guilt-instilling accusations are leveled at you and are thus led to a need to defend that very ethnic part of yourself for years (Minha, 2006, p. 267).

Jason speaks in favor of his marriage, adamantly insisting that his marriage will work wonders to advance the situation of Medea and his sons. In other words, he makes a rather trivial excuse to justify an arrangement that increased his honor but destroyed Medea's. The play celebrates the fluidity and flexibility of hybrid identity. The constant clash and tussle between diasporic identity and national identity have diminished the totalizing and absolute nature of nation-states. In the light of above argument, Medea is neither the ultimate "other" nor the native. She is always in between. Viewing Medea's predicament in the "Third space" is meaningful as it allows one to make sense of the illogical actions taken by her later on in the play.

"I'll do what I do best. I'll poison them. See how easy it is to kill! But when they're dead where will I go? What country or household will welcome and protect me? None. If someone should arrive to rescue me, though time is short, then I'll use silence and trickery to carry out the murder" (Euripides, 2006, 407-410).

This traumatic proclamation by Medea is a harsh reminder of her "demographic displacement" (Bhabha .1994, p. 223). Murder was the last thing on her mind, she indulges in wishful thinking and hopes she

can be rescued. She offers the readers a glimpse into her life and mulls over actions taken by her previously. “I abandoned my country and father to follow you to Iolcus where I engineered your uncle’s murder, wasting that house, too” (Euripides, 2006, 485-490). It seems that Medea was always “in-between” (Bhabha, 2006, p. 206) the different cultural streams, therefore, traveling becomes a quest for self-assertion for her. Perhaps unconsciously, she hoped her traveling routes might lead her to the roots. The loss of maternal warmth is juxtaposed with the loss of a familiar turf which gave a sense of normalcy to her divided and fractured worldview. It seems as if she is cutting ties from everything that accentuated the fissure in her own identity. This phenomenon is labeled as a “subversive strategy” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 181). He further reiterated that it is more of a survival mechanism that, “negotiates its authority through a process of iterative ‘unpicking’ and incommensurable, insurgent relinking [...] It requires movement and maneuver, but it does not require a temporality of continuity or accumulation; it requires direction and contingent closure but no teleology and holism (Bhabha, 1994, p.184). Medea requested Aegius to rescue her, “I’ve endured, save me from friendless exile. I need refuge in your country, protection in your home” (Euripides, 2006, 706-710). The playwright has deftly established the duality of hybridity as both a destructive and creative force. Medea embodies the duality of hybridity as a destructive and creative force in the context of the play. Despite her vulnerability, she strikes a bargain with Aegius to protect her hybrid identity and agrees to relocate once again to maintain it. To her claims, Aegius responded, “My home will be your best protection. I promise. Medea: I understand these obligations. Now restate your promise as an oath.

Only then will I feel secure? (Euripides, 2006, 723-25) It is reaffirmed at the end that “The concept of 'home' often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong” (McLeod, 2000, p. 210).

Conclusion

The ancient Greek drama can be reinterpreted from the perspective of the prevalent crisis in today's globalized world. The research article emphasizes Medea's situation and makes the case that immigrants not only battle institutional exploitation but are also plagued by intrusive recollections of their own countries and cultural ethos. The play suggests that the challenges faced by immigrants are reflected in the cultural displacement and marginalization that Medea encountered in Corinth in Euripides' celebrated tragedy. While Medea suffered miserably initially, Jason made peace with his surroundings. Both characters had to assimilate, and Medea was forced to reconcile with the alien new culture. Her evolution throughout the play established that individuals can never fully assimilate and are in between opposing cultural streams. Medea pushed back against oppressive societal demands by taking matters into her own hands. Medea's story exemplifies the power of individual agency and the possibility of resistance against oppressive systems.

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