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From Colchis to Corinth: Mapping The Trauma of Exile in Euripides' *Medea*

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Abstract: Exilic trauma entails repercussions that trespass boundaries considering ontological positioning of different characters in literary landscape. Since bygone eras, individuals in writings have undergone numerous traumatized situations because of displacement from their native land. Tragedies, more so concerning Greek tragedies, often lead one to an introspective state as they weave a mire in lives of different characters making them subject to multiple interpretations. This paper critically attempts to problematize anguish and trauma resulting from exile as seen in one of the ever-lasting Athenian classics, Euripides' "Medea." It explicates Medea's character in the play, making a critical explication of her status as an outsider living in exile. Following Cathy Caruth, the paper hinges on the idea of "traumatic un-representability" to postulate that Medea's trauma could not exactly be depicted at point of occurrence. The paper employs a qualitative methodology, in that, it makes a critical analysis of Medea's character to comprehend her precarious position, first as a female in then Greece, and secondly, as an exile in the narrative.

Keywords: *ethnic otherness, exile, outsider, qualitative, trauma*

Human History has been a witness to manifold instances of displacement of beings from their native places, often leading to precarious situations. Various descriptions, be it oral or otherwise, coupled with individual experiences find a close alignment as they substantiate each other. Trauma of any kind, always appears to be an unclear idea with its abstract nature, making it doubly difficult to exactly portray in literary writings. What makes a traumatic narrative poignant is how trauma gets represented with various emotional traits of characters coming out to fore. If any traumatized situation forms a specific entity, it appears to be in stark opposition to its fundamental core of affecting cognitive faculty of an individual. That stated, what appears more cohesive is its comprehension as an elusive phenomenon that regulates characteristics of various individuals in a narrative. Right from ancient historical periods, trauma has been a pivotal element in literature- one that ties various narratives together to understand its causes. Starting from traumatic descriptions of characters in ancient epics like Ramayana to showcasing how trauma makes an individual devoid of serene living in classical tragedies, trauma has been an indispensable factor to literature at large. Although trauma has been a constant since ancient periods when soldiers used to hurt themselves in wars, this research specifically focusses on identifying its psychic impact which finds a notable diversion from its ancient depiction to current scenario. It appears primary to note that classical literature dealt with traumatized situations of lives by adhering to fragmented forms of language along with a form of narrative strategy which was not linear. These were used to portray inherent thoughts in minds of characters that resort to past memories to restructure their present lives. However, contemporary writings mark a distinct distinction from this way of depicting trauma to indicating how trauma gets within a larger social purview which gets formulated by power and politics (Tripoula, 2024). This research, in its attempt to subtly showcase how depiction of trauma in literature has moved away from only dealing with broken statements, monologues of characters to focussing on inner recesses of human mind today, elevates itself in its significance.

A gradual probe into its effects of on different individuals can lead one comprehend “events in excess of our frames of reference”

(Felman, 16).¹ “Medea” remains a long-standing tragedy that not only mesmerized audience with its depictions but also posed serious questions on attributes pertaining to individuality and identity of the central character, Medea. From its initial depictions, Medea has been shown to be adorned with troubles as she led to her own brother, Apsyrtus’ death besides marrying an individual called Jason in opposition to her father’s desires. It was seen that once she was married to Jason, Medea’s physical landscape suffered a massive jolt as she had to reside in Corinth, a Grecian city from her native Colchis. From being the daughter of Aeetes, ruler of Colchis, she got changed to a stranger who was a mis-fit in Grecian landscape. This change, as readers learn, marked the beginning of innumerable troubles related to acclimatization, slowing reducing her status to an outsider. Euripides showcases several instances in the narrative when Medea seems to lament her loss- one that was connected to her home that granted her peace. To compound her troubles, readers also learn that Medea was abandoned by Jason who expressed feelings for daughter of Creon, the ruler of that land. What followed Medea’s loneliness was beyond a mundane reader’s imagination as Medea decided to murder her own children, an indication of her vengeance against Jason. It finds alignment with different contemporary writings, creating massive jolts in minds of readers as they tinker inner recesses of psychic descriptions. What can be inferred from Medea’s act is her emergence as fierce lady, refusing to get caged and oppressed, only to find herself in a mirage of trauma and agony that drastically altered her life in the play.

Medea’s emotional state finds a key position in the play with characters like that of nurse and chorus plying their part to let audience know how she had to grapple with conflicting situations right throughout. It is a strong emotional portrayal of Medea that she stands out with her subjective authority, leading to her establishment as a dynamic force. Moreover, her character also alludes to how myths get comprehended in contemporary cultural milieu. Today’s society tend to re-inscribe and restructure mythical figures within locus of societal dynamics which help comprehension of

¹ Felman, Shoshana., “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching” *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma*, 48: 1, 1991, pp. 13-73.

their imbedded traits. Myths have always remained notable symbols denoting culture of a particular time frame. They get re-inscribed in various forms so that various purposes get fulfilled in different manifestations. If Medea is studied as a mythical character in the play, it becomes interesting to note that she tends to subvert various ideological foundations which otherwise act as signs of individual ontological demarcation in a society. There can be an underlying idea that everyone follows concerning

stories, recorded in the culture's epics and scriptures or transmitted orally in their more local versions reflect the answers . . . to the dilemmas of existence For most orthodox Hindus, tales are a perfectly adequate guide to the causal structure of reality. The myth, in its basic sense as an explanation for natural and cultural phenomena, as an organizer of experience, is verily at the heart of the matter. (Kakar, 2)²

Euripides orchestrates a very artistic characterization of Medea as an other, navigating her life amidst struggles without support from family at a strange land. Thus, Medea's character becomes a representative depiction of a bipolar dichotomy placed against what contemporary post-colonial critics call as debate between self and other. Her character also becomes very significant in bringing in essentiality of drama considering positioning of a so called oppressed other in terms of race, ethnic depictions, class.³ That Medea's life was nothing short of arduous found a notable manifestation in following lines by the chorus which equated her precarious position with death

*O my fatherland, my home!
I would that I might never lose my city
and so know that yawning life of helplessness that cannot be
endured –
of all the sorrows in the world, most pitiable.*

² Kakar, Katharina Poggendorf. "Middle-class Formation and the Cultural Construction of Gender in Urban India" in: Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld., (ed.) *Middle-class Values in India and Western Europe*. Social Science Press, New Delhi 2001.

³ Disempowered other also comes with an inherent image of someone not enjoying privileged positions, enviable entailments, luxurious adornments and are subject to various forms of discriminations in the society. Notable works by Cartledge (2002), Loraux (1993) and Zeitlin (1996) have focussed a lot on attributes of gender. Also, Hall (1989) has carried out extensive works on ethnicity.

*No! I would sooner die
and put an end to all the long days of my life,
for there is no grief greater
than to lose your native land.* (Euripides, 645–53)

Readers can also sense an inferiority in terms of Medea's social standing as her desertion by Jason significantly lowered her status as a woman as women tended to get identified with her husband during then societies of Greece which reeked of patriarchy. During initial stage of the play, Medea's precarious position as a female could well be identified as a result of her status as an exile. Cathy Caruth, the stalwart from field of trauma studies, tried to put a cursory comprehension of trauma by connecting the same to "describing an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon" (*Explorations in Memory*, 11).⁴ Thus, Medea's character can be identified to be drowned in trauma since her initial portrayal in an alien Greece with her dress resembling Oriental feature, indicating her non-belongingness belong to that land, thereby, making herself emerge as an outsider. Also, a barbaric status was associated with her personality which echoes that she was bereft of values pertaining to Grecian societies- those echoing class and grace much to the ignorance of Medea. This, in return, led to one very derogatory image of being mad and irrational with no sense of making rational judgements. Donald Mastronarde makes a very significant observation in relation to women's position in then Grecian societies stating, "the respectable women of citizen families were ideally imagined as confined indoors, silent, and subservient" (26).⁵ This image of an ideal woman was very much in opposition to Medea's character who echoed being barbaric. What characterizes contemporary portrayal of trauma is a greater focus on psychological ramifications of characters that differentiate them from ancient classical tragedies. Medea's character becomes an example of one-dimensional traumatic

⁴ Caruth, Cathy., "Introduction: Trauma and experience" in: Cathy Caruth., (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, John Hopkins University Press, London 1995.

⁵ Mastronarde, Donald J. *Euripides: Medea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

portrayal of Grecian tragedy which makes a bifurcation from current-day depictions. Euripides dramatizes Medea's trauma so much so in the narrative that he portrays her to be an isolated being in Grecian society- first, as a vulnerable woman and second, of a lady at an alien land devoid of a conjugal married life. Oaths and vows, which appear so central to Grecian heroes, appear meaningless in case of Jason which further belittled Medea's image as a wife as Jason betrayed her by not staying by her side forever. After Jason's treachery, readers find that Medea makes a strong prophecy of his downfall and death, indicating her god-like prowess. This can be related to presence of God-like influence in barbarians, dealing with exertion of justice for generally downtrodden ones. Medea prophesizes

but you, a coward, you will die a coward's death as you deserve, struck on your head by a remnant of the wreck of the Argo seeing a bitter end to your marriage to me. (Euripides 1385-87)

The chorus also plays a notable role in the play to indicate Medea's plight as it elucidates Medea's position after Jason's betrayal

You, Medea, in the mad passion of your heart sailed away from your father's home, threading your way through the twin rocks of the Euxine, to settle in a foreign land. Now, your bed empty, your lover lost, unhappy woman, you are being driven forth in dishonor into exile. (Hadas, 199)⁶

Caruth's notion of "traumatic un-representability" finds significant portrayal in Medea's life as her traumatic state of not being able to cope with a completely alien state of living could not be correctly represented. It was through her struggles, her fights in isolation that Euripides attempts to let readers come to terms with her trauma and sense of pain. It becomes very important to understand that Medea's decision to kill her own children was also inclined towards hurting Jason for his treacherous behaviour as it "will hurt [him] most that way" (Hadas, 208). Thus, more than becoming murderer of her own children this act was plotted to bring grief to Jason's life as it would bring an end to his own

⁶ Hadas, M., *The Legacy of Greece*. Bantam Classic (ed.) New York, Bantam 1982.

blood- a signifying depiction as to how traumatized Medea's life was. Readers learn that Medea plotted to kill Jason's newly wedded wife along with her father initially, showcasing her determined subjective position. Culmination of betrayal and her inherent thoughts to avenge Jason's treacherous behaviour cannot correctly be observed in the play considering trauma although her painful state of living could be sensed because "the traumatic experience is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs" (*Explorations in Memory*, 5). Trauma, identifying from Medea's life and following various arguments by Caruth, becomes an unexplainable and un-understandable entity that perturbs individual subjectivity.

Ideas concerning individual positions of women during ancient Grecian period find sharp depiction through Medea's character in the play. More than vengeance, which remains at the heart of this narrative, Euripides, albeit subtly, draws concerns of his readers to comprehend how aspects like that of barbaric illustration of a female appeared central to that society. Association of words like barbaric with Medea's character in the play leads readers to come to a pivotal conclusion- this barbarism leads to violence which nonchalantly pervades pages of the play. Medea's trauma also finds a connection with her portrayal to be an unrefined woman- someone who could not match with luxury and poise of Grecian lifestyle. In the same vein, Euripides makes it vividly evident that Medea's trauma also finds an inextricable connection with her wild behaviour of not even bothering to become a killer of her own kin. This is indicative of her act based on instinct more than rationality which was of prime importance for Grecian society. Also, by portraying Medea as a barbaric character, the author also links her character to attributes of witchcraft; validating her act to be based on wild passionate behaviour. Caruth makes a notable point of any traumatic situation leading to a shake in an individual's mind whenever it is being taken to account and is being thought of as this "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*Explorations in Memory*, 4). This becomes very much related to Medea's action of her desire to avenge her husband's deceitful behaviour along with her desire to kill her own children as her traumatized self always left her perplexed in an alien land. It was trauma and inherent sense of

confusion in Medea's mind that resulted in what Caruth calls as "psychic anguishes for traumatised victims" (*Listening to Trauma*, 11).

Euripides showcases that Medea's marriage attained a null status in Grecian societies as outsiders did not enjoy status and privilege of natives there. It was also understood as no foreigner could be in any legalized married relationship with native residents of Greece during that period which further compounded Medea's problems as in spite of her married situation, she was an outsider. Her traumatized expressions and isolated self-found vivid reiteration when she expressed her plight stating

Women of Corinth, do not criticize me... you and I are not in the same case. You have your city here, your paternal homes; you know the delights of life and association with your loved ones. But I, homeless and forsaken, carried off from a foreign land, am being wronged by a husband, with neither mother nor brother nor kinsman with whom I might find refuge from the storms of misfortune. (Hadas, 195)

If something, it was ambivalence which structured Medea's life in Corinth as she could not become an obedient wife to her husband (which was generally expected during that period) and also could not become a part of her external surroundings. As it was sensed, her problems to come to terms with societal features of Corinth significantly led to alterations of her ideologies and viewpoints which she nurtured while her stay in Colchis. Medea's precarious position in the narrative in terms of her lack of homeland can also be attributed to her lack of mental comfort which she had at home. Her act of leaving behind home and family members also denotes emblematic representation of rejecting own customs that she had grown with as a little girl. It also has to be stated that rules regarding marriage even at her homeland appeared to be very strict, indicating vulnerable positions of women as they were made to completely execute different activities with male support. In this regard, different barbaric and passionate activities undertaken by Medea in the play become glaringly identifiable with her pressures and dictates of society that appeared nothing short of suffocating. Euripides depicts nurse's character who explicates this predicament for Medea

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, 15-30)

Her desire to kill her native children appeared to be a significant means as a retort from her side to both hurt Jason and establish her being. Euripides has expertly crafted Medea's character to be swaying between her divided self and her attempt to structure her identity through a mechanism which was violent to its core. "Honor is coming to the female race!" (Euripides, 417-418) were the striking words uttered by Corinthian group singing chorus in the play.⁷ This statement is indicative of deceitful behaviour of males as it was Jason who failed to keep his oaths to Medea and her revengeful actions could well led to alteration of an otherwise unthinkable situation in Ancient Greece- subversion of patriarchal dominance. Thus, readers find Medea's portrayal almost in line with someone like that of Medusa- one who was feared by the society and was placed outside general determining factors of feminine being. Her traumatic life can be regarded as a pathway to understanding her maternal forces that led to heinous crimes of killing multiple characters in the narrative, often at the cost of her own sanity. Readers can clearly sense a very potent and violent misogynistic force within Medea which culminates in murders at different stages of the play. It also has to be acknowledged that there is a philosophical reiteration in what Medea executes in the

⁷ The chorus plays a pivotal role in the narrative as it acts as a pathway to letting readers know various actions, upcoming events, primarily different acts carried out by Medea right throughout the narrative. It is the chorus which describes that Medea was planning to avenge deceitful behaviour of her husband. Medea's acts in the narrative can also be regarded as efforts to subvert patriarchal domination which was indeed unthinkable during ancient Athenian societies which were completely based on dictates of males with no female voice or emancipation. Moreover, lines by the chorus also acted as significant outlines for various events that were to be followed in the play and were to be witnessed by audience on stage. Thus, the chorus acted as an omnipresent figure in the play which was a very important entity in ancient Grecian plays.

play- from living in tatters as an isolated newly married women in Corinth to planning to kill her own children for avenging her husband's deceitful behaviour. Eminent philosopher Immanuel Kant argues that human moral forces and duties should not always be associated with what is understood as external and societal rules. Whatever an individual carries out in the course of his or her life, Kant opines, should always be based on a common ground of logic which can be related to every being on earth. This is because, at a fit of rage or any powerful external emotional attribute, an individual might carry out violent actions which can prove detrimental in the long run which was evident in Medea's character in the play. Not only did Medea destroy her own husband but also became a murderer of children she herself gave birth to. Following lines by Jason become explicit of his misogynistic nature and are also evidence of Medea's powerful influence on him as a dominating force

If only in some other way

human beings [could] beget children, but that the female race did not exist.

And that thus there would have been no evil for men. (Euripides, 573-74)

Unlike Kant, who strongly believed in presence of any philosophical foundation and traces of empiricism behind execution of any task, Medea's violent actions were based on her own traumatic life and baseless passions. As Kant argues, different duties pertaining to ethics of mankind are based on a rational judgement which do not fall prey to momentary rage or pleasure. However, as a sharp contrast, character of Medea has been shown in light of her own tendencies and desires- those based on her barbarism and barbaric growth guided by fits of extreme anger. Medea's trauma can also be related to be her own conflicting situation of finding herself between her desires and instinctive thoughts and rational behaviour which never allowed her to lead a life of stability. Thus, philosophical echoing looms large in Medea's barbarism which never found alignment with the generally considered right in human societies, further justifying her traumatized self that knew only revenge at any cost. Caruth argues in her theoretical propositions that trauma exerted from getting displaced from one's home

results in psychological impact that can further damage an individual's actions. Multiple situations adorned with trauma related to Medea's life in the narrative appear as, in the words of Caruth "inherent belatedness" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 92) as they do not find resurfacing right at point of occurrence, leading to fragmented selves. As she further explicates, an individual gets affected by any traumatic event when there is "acknowledgement of the way in which traumatic experiences overwhelm the individual and defy language" (*Unclaimed Experience* 14).

One can also find a significant illustration of traumatic un-representability concerning Medea's life in her desires to kill her own children as there was influence of emotion and passion more than rationality. Also, readers learn that her decision was not instantaneous but was based on various negotiations, plans, and thoughts in mind which find translations to readers by chorus in the narrative. This echoes what Caruth calls as "filtering" (*Explorations in Memory*, 4) where traumatic events tend to get subverted at specific moments of occurrence and find resurfacing only at later stages where they do not find accurate portrayal thereby justifying their un-representability. That Medea plans to avenge her husband's treacherous behaviour by hatching his destruction along with aims to establish herself as a dominant agency more than a passive and voiceless entity reinforces that "trauma is repetitive, against the very will of the survivor and it is transgenerational in nature" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 2). Kant⁸ makes a very thoughtful observation when he utters the following lines concerning philosophical behaviour associated with morality, rightful behaviour of mankind

is it not thought to be of the utmost necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology? For, that there must be such a philosophy is clear of itself from the common idea of duty and of moral laws. Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the command "thou shalt not lie" does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it, and so with all

⁸ Kant I., *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, 2-3. Cf. Deligiorgi, 2017; Grigoriou, 2022.

other moral laws properly so called; that, therefore, the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason... (Kant, 2–3)

Readers also find a striking philosophical depiction when chorus says, “Since you’ve shared your plans with me, I urge you not to do this; I want to help you, holding to the standards of human law” (Euripides, 811-813) after learning after Medea’s intentions of murder. It vividly echoes that murder of own children would become an act which goes against laws and dictates of human societies, bringing in an inherent philosophical reiteration which Medea goes against. Euripides rams the death knell to Medea’s traumatic life by showcasing her heinous murders, first of Jason’s wife along with her father, Creon and then, of her own children. It was shown that her two children were with her inside their house with sounds of them screaming. Suddenly, Euripides also showcases that their screams dimmed- an indication that they were no longer alive. As dramatic as it was, Jason was brought to this scene with his request to let him in. However, what took place was beyond a mundane reader’s imagination as her children’s murder has been devised in a very captivating manner with their cries echoing background of the narrative accompanied by a song performed by chorus addressing Sun. This entire act was much to the dismay of audience as they could comprehend how brutal a crime Medea had committed.

Also, it was a vivid reiteration that Grecian tragedies never approved of God-like figures to be making a way to sky from their homes using doors. Even readers were also made aware that such an act was about to be executed, none of which was seen in Medea’s case. What followed was a remarkable portrayal of Medea on a winged chariot of Sun high above the house carrying corpses after her heinous act. This portrayal can be regarded as Euripides’ justification of Medea’s murder which was indicative of even God’s approval. Readers can also learn a transfer of passive agency to a very active one concerning Medea’s personality as she appears very powerful, shattering patriarchal dominance. The final portrayal of Medea was of a disobedient lady who blamed Jason for death of their children, further indicating his initial deceitful behaviour that led Medea resort to such a deed- one that has cemented her place

in Greek history as a powerful voice. Euripides also showcases that even the chorus, which was a prominent mouth-piece for Medea's different acts, became perplexed at such a horrifying act, a further reiteration of her powerful emotional in-comprehensibility.

Euripides's "Medea," thus, has withstood multiple tests of time and has surpassed numerous literary periods only to get it critically read and researched by scholars across the globe. This has been a tale of utter audacity- one that defies various boundaries which could be seen during then Athenian society where women always had to remain under dictates of patriarchal forces. "Medea" becomes a very notable tragedy that deals with tremendous confrontation at various levels- between poised Greece and Barbaric Medea, between general nuances of man and woman and between conflated social rules and overpowering human passions. Character of Medea can also be elucidated to be an archetypal figure which stood for almost all women during that time that had to face curse of male force. However, what elevates her status from an initial submissive female to a very authoritative female at the end was her inner trauma and traumatized state of living at an alien land. Thus, it was trauma which led to manifestations in her mind culminating in her overall actions; those never aligning with Grecian dictates that curbed female emancipation. By portraying heinous crimes like that of murders, Euripides has also showcased traits of time, leading readers to multiple introspections and elucidations that lead to emergence of various perspectives on Medea's character. If Medea echoed protest in its severity, she equally denoted voice of resistance that never knew bogging down in the face of defeat.



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