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MEDEA IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN GEORGIAN CULTURE

The central figure of the Argonautic mythos – Medea still remains to be much discussed in modern Georgia, the phenomenon of this legendary woman still excites our society remarkably. One can observe this excitement in various cultural contexts – be it a TV program discussing films, a new theatrical performance or even her statue designed to be erected.

Why are we so anxious about her? At first glance the answer seems simple – It is difficult for our society to accept the Euripidean interpretation of Medea – the very interpretation, which made Medea's image so popular all over the world. The phenomenon of a mother, killer of her children appeared very difficult to accept for the national consciousness. But on the other hand Medea is the first well-known Georgian, the figure so closely connected with Georgia's glorious past. Thus the problem around Medea is caused by this very complexity. What should we do? Should we speak about her, just neglect her, or interpret her differently from Euripides? Discussing it we come up against the problem identified as "the Medea complex", which exists in Georgia's reality.

The article aims to discuss the main tendencies in modern Georgian interpretations about Medea in order to create a picture of Georgian nation's attitude towards Medea's phenomenon. As we focus this time on the main tendencies of Medea's interpretations, we choose to discuss only the key productions and to discuss them all too briefly.

Just a few words about the history of the attitude towards Medea. One can't find in ancient Georgian writing any literary interpretation of the Argonauts' myth, though Georgians were familiar with this cycle.¹ The

¹ The episode concerning Jason sowing the teeth of the dragon in the earth is presented in the eleventh century Georgian translation of the Pseudo-Nonnos Mythological Commentary on

reason of it was the above mentioned one – the image of a mother-killer appeared to be inconsistent with the national character. Only in 60-ies of the XIX century – during the crucial period of our nation's awakening, when the raising of patriotic spirit became urgent, the literature turned to the Argonautic myth – the desire to depict the "gold abundant Kolchis" prevailed over the neglect and terror towards Medea.

In order to present the true picture of Georgia's glorious history an outstanding Georgian poet and a very important public figure Akaki Tsereteli wrote the poem "Media". The poem depicts the glorious days of Kolchis, when the Argonauts had just arrived here for the Golden Fleece. Medea, so active in this segment of the myth, is a totally passive young maiden here, neither helping Jason, nor killing her brother. Her only fault, if it can be called a fault, is her love towards Jason, the abuser of her country. The aim of the author was Medea's complete rehabilitation, but it caused her artistic image to lose its luster. What is here left from Medea? A Kolchian woman as the evidence of Georgia's glorious past recorded in the ancient sources. And yet, the poet failed to make Medea's image popular in Georgia.

Now let's turn to another artistic medium – theatre, which from the XX century onward began to play a very important role in Georgia's culture. Before the October revolution the Georgian professional theater especially favored the ancient tragedy, but never once staged Euripides' "Medea" – the negligence already familiar to us from the literature. The ice started to break only in 60-ies of the XX century, when the famous Georgian director A. Chkhartishvili decided to stage Euripides' "Medea". The news was not welcomed with enthusiasm. Some people criticized the theatre from the patriotic viewpoint; others considered the creation of Euripides as alien to the contemporary audience.² The director himself fully acknowledged the delicacy and the complexity of the problem facing him. He wrote: "What is the reason, that we took a dislike to the famous tragic image of a Georgian woman, pushed her aside and left her to "others?" In his opinion Medea's image couldn't have been abused and insulted in Euripidean tragedy, as the aim of tragedy was catharsis – tragedy had to raise a hero to ethical heights through torture no matter how burdensome his crime was. The price Medea paid for her vengeance was terrible self-torture, believed the director.³ Chkhartishvili invited Veriko Anjaparidze, an outstanding actress, to play Medea. In 1992 the actress was proclaimed by British Academy of Arts as

Gregory of Nazianzus' "Oratio funebris in laudem Basilii Magni". Otkhmezuri T., Pseudo-Nonniani in IV Orationis Gregorii Nazianzeni Commentarii, Versio iberica (Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 50, Corpus Nazianzenum 16), Turnhout-Leuven, 2002, 270-273.

² Kiknadze V., Theatre and Time, Tbilisi, 1984, 269.

³ Chkhartishvili A., "Interview", Theatrical Tbilisi, 1962, 5-6, 5-7.

one of the ten best actors in the world.⁴ At first the actress refused to play the role. Her explanation of the refusal is very significant: "Although I admire ancient tragedy. ... Medea, murderer of her own children, always frightened me to horror."⁵ The director began to prepare the Georgian audience. "Writers speak..." – a special cycle of articles appeared in the periodicals aiming to clear the way for comprehending Euripides' tragic genius. Chkhartishvili started to stage the play without Veriko Anjaparidze. During the rehearsals he was playing Medea's role himself. After some hesitation the actress agreed to play Medea.⁶

This performance – A. Chkhartishvili's "Medea" was considered to be an extremely significant work of art and what is very important for our discussion – the play was an attempt to get rid of "the Medea complex". The main innovations of Chkhartishvili interpretation seem to be the following: first, Medea's Kolchian origin was especially stressed in the performance. Betrayal of Kolchis, of her motherland and not of love became the main issue and the source of Medea's tragedy. Anjaparidze's Medea decides to kill the children only at the last moment, when Creon and Creusa have already perished. Thus Medea explains the murder of children as a compelled act, committed by mother in order to avoid their being killed by the Corinthians. And third, Medea doesn't escape with the dragon-chariot. She is left alive to be tortured, visually separated by a stone-wall from the society of men forever.

As we have mentioned above, the performance had a great success both among the audience and in the critical press. Though alongside admiration, certain criticism was also expressed regarding the interpretation of Medea. Here is one of such approaches: "There are controversial points. The tragic essence of Medea's character is not fully acknowledged. The interpretation doesn't expose the very fact of Medea bearing in her the force that causes her ruin. The essence of the character isn't disclosed from this aspect."⁷

Still the ice was in the process of breaking. In addition, another version about killing Medea's children existed in the ancient sources. Georgian scholars of Classical Philology investigated Argonauts' mythos narrated in the ancient sources in detail. They paid special attention to the versions of the myth told by Parmeniscus and Didymus. In their writings, the children were murdered by the Corinthians, who afterwards declared that it was Medea who

⁴ "Chiaureli Sophiko" – the article in: *Who is Who in the Modern World*. Biographic edition in many volumes, Moscow, International Biographic Centre, 1999, 373.

⁵ Ninikashvili K., Veriko Anjaparidze, Album, Tbilisi, 1968, 97.

⁶ We discussed this performance in detail at the I International Conference of the Theatre Studies in Athens, 2005. The article is forthcoming in the papers of the conference.

⁷ Mumladze D., *Modern Georgian Directors*, Tbilisi, 1973, 34.

did it. A well-known specialist of the ancient history and writer L. Sanikidze decided to use this version to give a different story of the Georgian princess. He presents in two of his writings his own interpretation of the Argonauts' cycle: "The Story of the Kolchian Maiden", a large narrative and a drama "Medea". In the preface to his narrative Sanikidze remarked, that there is much fantasy in his book alongside with well-known stories about the Argonauts. "But this isn't prompted only by the principle of fiction. The matter is that almost every Greek author seemed to be biased. They tended to belittle the achievements of "alien-barbarian peoples and extolled excessively the deeds of their compatriots... The author tried to reconstruct, at least approximately, the proper picture of the relationship of Ancient Kolchis and Greece."⁸ Sanikidze aimed to free Medea from the crime he believed she never fulfilled and was only ascribed to her. Notwithstanding the fact, that Tsereteli's and Sanikidze's writings interpret the myth differently, they both are the representations of one, clear-cut tendency of Medea's reception. In addition one case is also worth mentioning here. L. Sanikidze's drama "Medea" appeared to be quite a popular play staged frequently in various regional theatres of Georgia during 60-80-ies of the XX century. Yet, despite its popularity neither the drama, nor the novel could be considered a successful work of art. Significant is also a fact, that in the leading theatres of Georgia, forming the image of the Georgian theatre, L. Sanikidze's version was never staged. "The Kolchian Maiden", the opera (composer B. Kvernadze), whose libretto was based on this play was the only exception.⁹

While speaking about the "Medea" on the Georgian scene, the ballet "Medea" staged on the motifs of Euripides' tragedy is also to be mentioned (Choreographer G. Aleksidze). The ballet is significant first of all as a musical-choreographic embodiment of the Euripidean tragedy. Libretto's author G. Aleksidze not only retained the main feature of Medea's artistic image – killing of the children by mother herself, but based on it the whole performance. Besides, some significant changes are made. The action takes place in two temporal dimensions – in past and in present, so almost the whole legend is presented before the audience. As the ballet aims at portraying the psychological images of the heroes, their feelings and their emotional experiences Jason's and Creusa's love and Medea's jealousy become its leading themes. Critics considered the performance as the first successful monodrama in the Georgian ballet history.¹⁰

⁸ Sanikidze L., *The Story of the Kolchian Maiden*, Introduction, Tbilisi, 1963.

⁹ Kapanadze G., "Birth of the New Opera," *The Georgian Theatre's Day*, 1998. 14. I; Bibileishvili I., "The Tragedy of the Kolchian Maiden", *People Newspaper*, 1997, 7-13. X.

¹⁰ Balanchivadze E., "R. Gabichvadze's Ballet "Medea", *Soviet Art*, 1979, 3, 34-38; Nadareishvili L., "The Revived Myth", *Zaria Vostoka (Dawn of the East)*, 1979. 18. VI.

One of the recent productions of "Medea" was staged in the newly opened "Free Theatre" in 2002 by the director Gocha Kapanadze. The performance was a kind of compilation of Euripides', Anuilh's and Kapanadze's versions. The director endeavored to show Medea's innocence and, in his own way, tried to develop the aforementioned version of the myth, in which Medea didn't kill her children. The programme of the play quotes the sources of this version (Parmeniscus, Didymus). However, it is worthy of mention that the actors themselves don't refer to these authors during the play. Therefore in case a spectator hasn't read the program, he can't guess that Medea too has her "defenders". Thus when at the end of the play Medea treads Euripides' charges under her feet, the audience is confused, it watches the woman obsessed with hysterics without bringing any argument against Euripides. This was exactly the case why the critic L. Chkhartishvili regarded the performance as weak from the point of view of dramaturgy.¹¹

There are other novelties in the plot as well. The new characters are introduced, those of Destiny and Circe, Medea's aunt. Destiny stays on the stage throughout the whole play and conveys her attitude towards the characters without uttering a single word, merely through mimics and movements. Medea constantly struggles with her; at the end she is nevertheless defeated. Grieved, she begins to justify herself: "All what is written here is a total lie. Thousands of lies have been invented about me. O, Euripides, why don't you tell all around my true story! Yes, I loved my father, my brother, my motherland, but this is something you can't understand, because you belong to the race of the unfortunate."¹²

It seems to me, that the critics were right in noticing the main flaw of Kapanadze's version – an attempt to explain events by the proud, self-respecting nature of Georgians. Hence, this leads again to relating the attitude existing in the society towards Medea – "the Medea complex" with certain character traits of the nation.

The clear-cut new tendency in the Georgian literature of interpreting of the Argonaut's myth starts, in our opinion with O. Chiladze's roman "A Man Was Going down a Road", published in 70-ies of the XX century. The epos in prose of so called "mythological plan" explores the argonautic cycle without aiming to "restore" the legend. Here the famous myth, as the critic correctly notes, appears to be a tool for the allegoric denouement of the real story "placed" in the fabula.¹³ Allegoric denouement of mythology already in the Hellenistic period was a widespread mode of myth interpretation. O. Chiladze

¹¹ Chkhartishvili L., "The New, but Improper Life of Medea", Theatre and Life, 2004, 6, 15.

¹² Chkhartishvili, 2004, 15.

¹³ Merkviladze O., "The Movement of the Modern Novel", Criticism, 1977, II, 68.

develops this approach with excellence and presents the history of the Golden Fleece as an attempt of the Greeks to conquer Kolchis.

The legendary Cretan king Minos makes the plan how to conquer Kolchis. Sending Phrixos (not a prince, but a son of a very poor family) with a ram, who had to settle in Kolchis, was the first step of this plan. According to this plan, Jason's real mission was not obtaining the fleece, but to be killed in Kolchis by the Kolchians. After Jason's murder fulfilling of the third, final step would have been possible – then the Greeks could invade Kolchis, claiming, that they were only taking vengeance for Jason's murder. But Minos' plan was not destined to be fulfilled. Medea's love for Jason appeared to be the reason it failed.

O. Chiladze concludes his story of the Argonauts' expedition with their escape from Kolchis. Medea's story is ended by her leaving Kolchis as well. So discussing Chiladze's Medea we can speak only about what was she like in Kolchis and what was her function in the Argonauts' expedition to Kolchis.

Medea – the daughter of the powerful king of Kolchis – Aeetes lives in the rich, lucky and undisturbed country. Trained by Aeetes' sister Kamar, a sort of a witch, Medea from the childhood was skilled in the secrets of nature. By the time the Argonauts arrived in Kolchis, she is a young maiden, who sees Jason for the first time in a dream and woken up is already in love with the unseen foreigner. Neither Cypris, nor fire-breathing bulls nor other folk-tale attributes are found in the novel. All Medea's actions are caused by love. Because of this tragic force she becomes the betrayer of her father and her country – she helps Jason to obtain the Golden Fleece by making Aeetes fall asleep into an artificial sleep, while Jason creeps into the palace and steals the fleece. As in the myth afterwards she helps Jason to kill her brother by treachery, thus giving the Argonauts a chance to escape from the chasing Kolchians.

As we see, the function of Medea in this novel is very like of Medea's function in Apollonius Rhodius' "Argonautica", and in the whole Chiladze's Medea can be considered to be so-called "Helper-Maiden" type as well. The aim of the writer isn't the rehabilitation of Medea. He strives to depict subtle psychological portrait of the heroine, to give the original motivation of Medea's actions and portray her inner world in the moment, when two forces – love and obligation have a desperate struggle in her soul.

Discussing the main tendencies of Medea's modern Georgian interpretations in various artistic mediums her receptions in visual art requires a separate investigation.¹⁴ Though to create a more or less full picture we

¹⁴ See Gia Bughadze's article in this volume.

would like to treat briefly Medea's interpretations in Georgian monumental sculpture as well.

In 70-ies of the last century in Abkhazia, in Bitchvinta, on the coast of the Black sea the magnificent monument of the outstanding Georgian sculptor M. Berdzenishvili was erected. The huge, 8 meters high monument presents Medea, agitated like the sea, and her children in an extremely tense moment. The mother, overwhelmed with passion warmly puts hands on her children. Medea appears to be a beloved heroine of the artist. Naturally, he acknowledged fully the complexity of the artistic interpretation of this very controversial heroine. According to the well-known art critic Kagan for the comprehension of the monument Berdzenishvili used the principle "non finito", the principle of incompleteness of the artistic text.¹⁵ The sculpture's content is not definite and straightforward just as Medea herself is full of paradoxes and contradictions. The sculptor allows the audience to decide themselves – is this woman ready to kill her children? Or maybe she tries to defend them from someone, even defend from herself? A very interesting solution in our mind. Such an understanding makes Berdzenishvili's sculpture quite original and an extremely interesting art image, considered to be one of the most original interpretations of this heroine in Georgian culture.

A few months ago in Batumi, in the central square a monumental sculpture of Medea was erected. The news about erecting the statue again caused anxiety. The debate about Medea was still traditional and very familiar.

In this context the sculptor's interpretation of Medea deserves attention. Devi Khmaladze's Medea presents the figure of a woman standing on a high pedestal. Clothed in a long gown, she holds the Golden Fleece in her right hand, which she holds to the side. The golden parts of the monument (the fleece, the crown, the collar) grant the sculpture a spirit of solemnity and grandeur.

In our mind, this interpretation presents Medea mainly as a symbol of the wealth and strength of Kolchis and as such appears to be a kind of Georgia's visiting card. All that is tragic and ambivalent in her nature, her tremendous passions and her storms of emotion are left behind.¹⁶ It seems to us, that this monument continues the traditional tendency of the interpretation of Medea's by laconic forms characteristic to this kind of art.

Thus to sum up all we have discussed in this paper, we can say, that the main tendencies of the approach towards Medea in modern Georgian

¹⁵ Kagan M., *The High Art of Merab Berdzenishvili and the Problems of the Artistic Culture of XX-XXI Centuries*, Tbilisi, 2006, 27.

¹⁶ Chichinadze N., "The Sculpture of Medea in Batumi", 24 Hours, 2007.7.VII.

receptions include: silence, negligence, attempts to blame others and to rehabilitate her, considering her as a symbol of the glorious past and the new, original interpretations of the Argonautic cycle in the whole. But "The Medea complex" still exists in Georgia's reality and the question, is this complex an obstacle for us to create high artistic representations of this very important heroine, still remains unanswered.