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**THE TENDENCIES TO REHABILITATE MEDEA'S IMAGE
IN THE 20TH CENTURY EUROPEAN LITERATURE
(CH. WOLF, M. KARAGATSI)**

*'In fact, there was something special in this woman,
that excited so many minds, and it seemed
they were unable to free themselves from her.'*

Christa Wolf, Medea: Voices

Euripides' *Medea* has inspired a lot of writers since ancient times till nowadays. It is owing to the great tragedian that Medea became one of the most interesting and popular images for world literature. Bearing in mind many various interpretations, the 20th century European literature is distinguished by especially interesting tendencies. The one of "acquitting" Medea is particularly remarkable. There are various motivations. If Georgian writers are more concerned with discharging Medea from moral responsibility, European literature turns her image into a certain symbol of accomplishment of the so-called feminist ideas in modern world. This common tendency may be detected in the work by different writers separated by a remarkable chronological distance, who were less likely to be acquainted with each other's works. In my paper, I will dwell on the novel *The Great Chimaera* (1953) by M. Karagatsis, a 20th century Greek writer, and the novel *Medea: Voices* (1998) by a German writer Christa Wolf. These two books are completely different. *The Great Chimaera* describes the life-story of a French woman, Marina Reiz and indirectly alludes to Medea, while *Medea: Voices* is completely based on the myth. Anyway, both works reflect very interesting tendencies for the interpretation of the message conveyed through the image of Medea.

The novel *The Great Chimaera* is distinguished for original parallels between its central character, Marina, and several mythological images (Helen, Phaedra, Jocasta, Medea) out of which an allusion to Medea is the most essential. Marina is related to Medea in double ways: through her personal attitude to the mythological character and through the key episodes of her life that resemble Medea's tragedy. M. Karagatsis unambiguously resorts to Medea as a prototype to create Marina's artistic image, and offers a completely different and original way of rehabilitating the mythological character.¹

In the novel, Marina can be identified with Medea at several levels: 1. both are strangers – Medea was brought to Greece by Jason in the same way as Marina by Yannis; however, their functions are partly reversed. According to ancient Greek tradition, Jason took the barbarian woman to civilized Hellas, while Yannis brings Marina from civilized and emancipated France to patriarchal and less emancipated Greece. 2. Marina, like Medea, finds it difficult to adapt herself to Greek society. 3. Marina unintentionally becomes the murderer of her children (her six-year-old girl dies because of her negligence, while her suicide as she was in the family way equals the murder of a yet unborn baby), while according to Euripides, Medea kills her two boys purposefully. 4. Suicide is the only way-out for both characters: "But for this (Marina says about the baby in her belly), I would die, get released."² These words are the repercussion of Euripides' Medea: "I am undone, I have resigned all joy in my life, and I want to die."³

Karagatsis does not deny that Medea killed her children; however, he looks for a certain "good reason". *The Great Chimaera* presents a number of other parallels as well. We learn from Marina's recollections that she was educated in classical philology and her doctoral thesis dealt with the interpretation of Medea's image. She remembers how she addressed the Examination Board at the presentation of her thesis: "Medea fostered pathos in me. A woman, who killed her children because of erotic jealousy, is she a psychopath or not? This was the question that puzzled me. ... No, she is not a psychopath. If she was, she would not have inspired the genius of Euripides, who never looked among maladies for the themes for his tragedies. Medea is a psychological individual, whose mind is blinded by erotic pathos in the same way as this could happen to any ordinary individual. According to this

¹ Metreveli M., For the Relationship of Marina with Euripidean Medea according to M. Karagatsis' novel *The Great Chimaera*, The Proceedings of the Republic Conference I, KSU, Logos 2003, 130-133.

² Καραγάτσης Μ., *Η Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, Αθήνα, 2001, 318.

³ Euripides, *Medea*, The Loeb Classical Library, 1994, 2001, 227-228.

unusual conclusion, a person who is not capable of experiencing such pathos is not physiological."⁴

Marina's pathetic words in defence of Medea evidently persuaded the professors, who used to regard her with scepticism, in the rightness of her arguments and she was conferred the doctoral degree. So, Marina was fond of Medea's pathos since her young age. She found quite logical what Medea, driven by erotic pathos, committed with blinded mind. And later in her life, her fondness for Medea developed into her assimilation with the mythical character.

Feeling the parallels between Medea and herself, Marina tried to drift apart from her "mythic prototype" after she became pregnant with her second child. This is attested by the following fragment from the novel: "From that very day when she felt herself pregnant, she did not take *Medea* from the table."⁵

This episode implies the desire of a woman to avoid the curse of killing her second child. However, her suicide, which at the same time means the murder of her unborn child, does not allow her to overcome the "Medea complex".

Marina, the central character of *The Great Chimaera*, is French. Her nationality makes her appear different, distinguished in Greek society, which she eventually confronts. The author mentions several times that the woman is "alien" to Greeks. I find it relevant to cite a fragment where the author presents Marina and her mother-in-law, Ana Reiz, as the opposing sides: "It is impossible for these two women to live under the same roof. They are put apart by the infinite gap that lies between the countries, peoples and the differing consciousness. One is the daughter of brave fair-haired vikings, greedy for gold and pleasure. The other is Asian, with secluded spirit, in whose veins flows the blood of real sailors. They fight the waves, in order to sell the fruits of the earth. Some regard the sea as the means, and others as the target."⁶

Marina and her mother-in-law are united by a common sorrow beside the bed of the dying child. However, the author again accentuates the difference in their nationalities: "The seas, the mountains, the rivers that set apart Normandy and Cassos, again stretch out between them ... The Norman and the Asian definitely felt the infinite distance that put them apart, different

⁴ Καραγάτσης Μ., *Η Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 24.

⁵ *Ibid*; 298.

⁶ *Ibid*; 65.

bloods, which made their hearts beat in different ways. Nothing united them any more."⁷

Karagatsis aims to present the status of a woman, her concept of freedom, her attitude to the problem. His method is very interesting. The conflict should be discussed at two levels. On the one hand, the writer brings a strange woman into the context of the Greek society, into Greece and shows how she "adapts herself" to the Greek reality. He is interested if this is possible, or if the attempt is doomed to a failure. On the other hand, the author resorts to another device to make the conflict more severe and to give it tragic colouring. The opposition becomes more conspicuous when he accentuates Marina's nationality: Marina is French, which accounts for her conflict with Greek society, the conflict with old and firm traditions.

Karagatsis' intention is clear. He aims to show the reader the conflict between two cultures, two nations, two societies. In this respect, France is the antipode of Greece. The conflict and the tragic end of the character is inevitable. For Marina, rejected and ousted by the society, the suicide is the only way for survival, for preserving her own self, for becoming free, while Euripides' Medea ends with apotheosis, which in fact means that Medea leaves the world of mortals. So, the parallels between Marina and Medea in Karagatsis' novel are conceptual in their essence, as Marina embodies all what was essential in Euripides' tragedy: the free and emancipated woman.

The novel *Medea:Voices* by Christa Wolf is distinguished by unusual architectonics. In a highly original way, the novel is divided into 11 chapters, each introduced by the quotations of well-known writers. Each chapter is named after one of the characters of the novel – in fact, the characters represent the voices, the thoughts of the characters.⁸ "This new form of narration developed in parallel with other methods. It was only later that I heard the voices and realized that this way enabled me ... to present each literary figure equally and at the same time present Medea from an entirely different angle with all of her controversial character"⁹, Christa Wolf writes.

Although the novel is based on Euripides' tragedy (it follows the central plot elements of the myth), the author is principally opposed to a number of questions related to Medea, thus attempting to restore the earlier version existing in pre-Euripidean sources. And finally, what is Christa's Medea like? Is she a barbarian, a savage, a sorceress, or simply an emancipated, free

⁷ Ibid; 260.

⁸ Danelia M., Literary Interpretation of the Myth about Medea in Christa Wolf's Work, The Proceedings of the Republic Conference I, KSU, Logos 2003, 68-73.

⁹ Christa Wolf, *Medea: Stimmen*. Voraussetzungen zu einem Text, München, 2000, 80.

woman, who is unable to get used to injustice and fights for self-assertion in the patriarchal world at the expense of her life?

Medea abandoned her fatherland Colchis only because she could not bear injustice, when Aetes, willing to retain his royal power, let mad women dismember Apsyrtus. "I went with Jason as I could not bear any more to stay in this irrecoverable, doomed Colchis"¹⁰, says Medea. She shares the fate of her aunt, Circe, who also had to leave Colchis when she opposed the king together with her supporters. Circe was accused of crime and was ousted from her fatherland.

When presenting Medea's character, the author accentuates such properties as *pride, defiance and fearlessness*.

Pride – Jason noticed this character trait of Medea already in Colchis and could not hide his admiration:

"I saw how proudly she went down the streets of her country, holding up her head, how everyone around greeted her, how they talked to her. She seemed to be flying freely and boldly on the waves of universal wonder."¹¹

It was her pride that the Corinthians could not forgive her and interpreted as arrogance. According to Laocoon, the astrologist of the king, "the court was bothered with her pride".¹² In spite of this, Laocoon is fascinated with Medea and can not hide his admiration for Colchian women in general. They are so much different from Corinthian women, who have become the slaves and shadows of Corinthian men. "Well, how should I tell her that the Corinthians attribute her self-confidence to arrogance and that is why they hate her. ... However, other Colchian women are none the less. They do the hardest work, and still walk around with their heads up as if they were the wives of the nobles. The surprising thing is that they can not walk otherwise. I like this habit of theirs, but it worries me as well."¹³

In Colchis, Medea's mother taught her the following: "if some time anyone wants to ruin you, they will first have to kill your pride. This is truly so, and will be so for ever", Medea recollects.¹⁴

And truly, Medea is unable to tolerate the stern patriarchal society of Corinth, where a word or a thought of a woman is of no value. She openly confronts Greek society by her deeds and explains her behavior to Jason in the following way: "I have not come here from Colchis to go around humble."¹⁵

¹⁰ Christa Wolf, *Medea:Voices*, translated into Georgian by M. Mirianashvili, Tbilisi, 2004, 67.

¹¹ *Ibid*; 26.

¹² *Ibid*; 32.

¹³ *Ibid*; 112.

¹⁴ *Ibid*; 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid*; 43.

Medea exasperated the Corinthians with her *defiance* as well. She ruined the stereotype of an obedient woman, acceptable for the Corinthians, and in this way put herself and her children in a great danger. "As if she was playing with fire on purpose. Her manner of walking also has something defiant in itself. Yes, defiant, this is exactly the right word"¹⁶, says Jason.

Medea does not restrict herself and behaves as a queen even in the palace, at the festive dinner of the king. "I behaved like a queen. I wished to irritate the king. But am I not a queen? I am an offspring of the king"¹⁷, Medea says.

Medea opposes the Corinthians in their fundamental manners. Despite Jason's numerous warnings, she goes around with her hair down: "Neither does she stop walking around with that wild disheveled hair! She never has them gathered, as it suits married Corinthian women. ... Shameless!"¹⁸

Even the free and delightful laugh of Medea is the object of judgments: "Only she laughs so, why should we bear her impudent laugh?"¹⁹ Turon says to Glauce.

Medea's appreciation of Corinthian discontent with her is quite sensible and although she clearly sees the approach of her death, she does not lose her temper. *Fear* is alien to her. Medea has found the fearsome mystery of Corinth and has unveiled it although she understands that the Corinthians will never forgive her. "What is the use of pondering and grieving. I would act like this anyway and would not end up my days in this world of gods. There is even no air left here for me to breathe in"²⁰, says Medea.

Medea is truly distinguished in the Corinthian society. She is not like obedient wives of Corinthian men, for which the Corinthians detest her even more. "The Corinthian say I am reckless in the same way as I used to be. For them each woman, who has a bit of wits, is reckless. While the wives of those Corinthians remind me of thoroughly trained, tamed animals"²¹, says Medea.

Corinthian women cannot even utter a word in the company of their husbands, which is intolerable not only for Medea, but for other Colchians as well. "The right for the first word belonged to men; more than that, they are supposed to speak instead of women."²²

Even Jason believes that it is necessary to kill even a slight expression of free will in women. This is a commonly accepted opinion in Corinth. "We

¹⁶ Ibid; 30.

¹⁷ Ibid; 8.

¹⁸ Ibid; 43.

¹⁹ Ibid; 92.

²⁰ Ibid; 127.

²¹ Ibid; 9.

²² Ibid; 51.

should keep women in our captivity like slaves. We should kill in them any will to resist."²³

Medea could not accept Oystros' advice to live in a shadow and do not irritate people, because she simply could not live so. Here Medea admits that some inner forces drove her to the floor of the accused, and served as a reason for ousting her from the city. "All right, I, Medea, am a witch, if you wish so. But who are you? Strangers, savages. You will never see my fear and humiliation"²⁴, says Medea.

Christa Wolf's Medea is a free, emancipated and accomplished woman, who calls on others to express their own feelings, thoughts and desires. "Do not deny yourself any thought, even on the most shameful desires."²⁵

The writer completely relieves Medea of the responsibility for killing her children. Unlike Karagatsis' novel, Christa's Medea does not commit suicide in order to free herself. Medea is ousted from Corinth, which is the same as the escape from the oppressive society of Corinth.

So, the novels discussed above imply typological parallels as concerns the understanding of Medea's image. Both, Marina-Medea and Medea of Christa Wolf, are the symbols of feminist ideas. Both have to live in the society where female rights are rather limited. In one case, the protest ends in a suicide, while in the other case, the central character is ousted. These novels, written in the 1930s and the 1990s, have common pathos. Besides, as the author of the Great Chimera is a man, we may conclude that the so-called "feminist protest" is indirect in the first case, and direct in the second.

²³ Ibid; 148.

²⁴ Ibid; 130.

²⁵ Ibid; 98.