

Ann Chikovani (Tbilisi)

**GRIGOL ROBAKIDZE'S NOVEL, *MEGI - A GEORGIAN MAIDEN*,
AND THE INTERPRETATION OF MEDEA'S IMAGE
IN MODERN GREEK LITERATURE**

The present paper aims to investigate the literary image of Megi, a heroine of *Megi – a Georgian Maiden*. The novel was written by Grigol Robakidze, a famous Georgian writer of the first half of the 20th century, in German language. It was first published in 1932 in Tübingen.¹ The author revived the myth about Medea. The fate and the character of the young Mengrelian² girl are easily associated with the fate and character of the famous Colchian sorceress and healer – Medea. It is interesting, that the initial title Robakidze gave to the novel was *Medea's Braids*.

I shall discuss in the present paper Grigol Robakidze's interpretation of Medea's image, and shall draw parallels with Medea's image and the interpretation of the Argonaut's journey as offered by Modern Greek writers.

Medea's image, interpreted in many different ways, has been popular among writers for thousands of years. Medea, *who contained within herself mutually contradictory traits, was an ideal vehicle through whom authors and artists could explore what modern scholarship has called the problem of "self" and "other"*. Not only her checkered career allows authors and artists

¹ In 1934, the Italian version of *Megi – a Georgian Maiden* with the title *Le Trecce di Medea* (*Medea's Braids*) was published in Milan. The book was introduced by the author's *Autobiography* (for detailed information see G. Sharadze, Book I, 115). Unfortunately, the novel has never been published in Georgian language. During the preparation of the present paper I referred to the Russian translation of the novel, which was published as a book in 2003 with the title: *Меги Грузинская девушка*. The translation is done by S. Okropiridze.

² Mengrelia, or Samegrelo – region of Georgia, on the territory of ancient Colchis.

*to explore the opposing concepts of self and other, as she veers between desirable and undesirable behavior, between Greek and foreigner; it also allows them to raise the disturbing possibility. . . that the "normal" carry within themselves the potential for abnormal behavior. . .*³

Ancient Greek sources accentuate the *otherness* of the Colchians: as soon as the Argonauts reach the bank of the Phasis river, they discover, that in this country the dead are wrapped in animal skins and hung on the trees – this fact immediately make Greeks feel the *otherness* of the Colchian people. The different aspects of Medea – that of the *other* and the *Barbarian* – are observed in detail in Mariana McDonald's essay *Medea as Politician and Diva*.⁴ However, the issue we would like to discuss is that the interpretation of Medea's Image in Georgia and generally the position of Georgian writers, readers or audience is radically different from that in Greece or in the other parts of the world. For Georgians Medea is the *Self*, his/her famous past and consequently the boundary between the *Other* and the *Self* does not exist. More ever – in Greece or in other countries one can never meet anyone called *Medea* – nobody will give the name of children-murderer to his/her daughter, people are afraid of this name even nowadays. On the contrary, in Georgia *Medea* is an acceptable and even desirable name, wrapped with mystery and charm. Here the girls are often named Medea because parents want their daughters to inherit the wisdom, power, courage, knowledge of Medicine and many other merits. In Georgia nobody will ever tell you, that this is a name of children-murderer, this characteristic of Medea is either denied or neglected under different reasons.

It is interesting to investigate Grigol Robakidze's view about this character, who is beloved by Georgians and treated by them as their *Self*.

From the very first pages of the novel *Megi – a Georgian Maiden* the reader is convinced that Megi, with her beauty, internal power and majestic charm is the descendant of Medea. This is emphasized by the author throughout the whole novel. In order to learn how the literary character of Megi does coincide with the stereotypic image of Medea, let's see the differences and the similarities between the Medea from Ancient traditions and sources and Megi from Grigol Robakidze's novel:

³ S. I. Johnston, Introduction, in the book: *Medea, Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, Princeton University Press, 1997, 7-8.

⁴ M. McDonald, *Medea as Politician and Diva: Riding the Dragon into the Future*, in the book: J. J. Clauss and S. I. Johnston (Ed.), *Medea, Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, Princeton University Press, 1997, 297-324.

Differences:

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Medea is <i>Other</i> 2. Medea is <i>helper-maiden</i>, with the use of magic she helped Jason to obtain the Golden Fleece 3. Medea followed Jason to Greece 4. Medea killed her brother, Apsyrtos 5. Medea killed Glauce 6. Medea is clever 7. Medea is Hecate's priestess 	<p>Megi is <i>Self</i>, she is not <i>Other</i> Megi is not <i>helper-maiden</i> (but contrary to Jason, Astamur did not need Megi's help and those factors are interrelated)</p> <p>Megi didn't follow Astamur to Aphkazia</p> <p>Megi is the only child and this factor is also missing in the story Megi didn't kill Astamur's supposed fiancée, Khatuna Didia Megi's cleverness is not emphasized Megi is not a priestess</p>
--	---

Similarities:

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Medea is a princess, king's daughter 2. Medea is a healer 3. Medea brought up her children and then killed them 4. After Medea's death, her cult was established 5. Medea's aunt was the sorceress Circe 	<p>Megi is a princess, daughter of the noble family</p> <p>Megi herself does not heal people, but her portrait was miracle-working and was healing hundreds of ill, mainly those with mental diseases</p> <p>[Megi did not bring up her only son,] Megi killed or by accident strangled her son with her braids</p> <p>After Megi's disappearance, her portrait was healing the ill and we can speak about the portrait's cult, to which people used to bring different offerings</p> <p>Megi's grandmother / her mother's nurse Meneki is the hypostasis of Medea or maybe of Circe. She is a sorceress, healer, and exorcist. She knows mysteries of magic herbs as well as ancient myths and legends. She is Megi's close relative and teacher. Meneki was able to rejuvenate, she used different herbs in order to look younger than</p>
---	--

6. Medea is manlike	she really was Megi also is manlike (author sometimes compares her to Amazon). Megi is good at horse-riding, she goes hunting with a hawk etc. – these characterize her as manlike, but according to the novel, these qualities of her are considered normal and usual for her region – Samegrelo, or Colchis
7. Medea is considered to have functions of Goddess	Gr. Robakidze compares Megi to the Goddess Diana; Megi's portrait is called "St. Mary". This somehow is an endeavor to attribute divinity to Megi
8. Medea is hot-tempered and violent, fierce	Megi is also violent; in a surge of wrath she wrung the hawk's neck, which Astamur had presented her with. Megi's wrath is compared to the Amazon's axe
9. Medea is terrifying, frightful	Sometimes Megi is also frightful
10. Medea is bewitching, enchanting	Megi is also bewitching, enchanting, the author frequently mentions the bewitching power of Megi's eyes
11. Medea is proud	Megi is extremely proud
12. Medea is a witch	The crowd accuses Megi of being a witch Indirectly, Megi is also Sun's daughter;
13. Medea is the Granddaughter of Helios, the Sun	The symbolic function of Sun is attached to Megi's rich red (pomegranate) Braids. This is emphasized throughout the novel by the author

From the comparison we can see, that Grigol Robakidze's Megi 'falls short' of some properties of ancient Greek Medea. Nevertheless, the similarity of Medea and Megi is clear and we can say that Megi is Medea's hypostasis. The resemblance or the identity of Megi with Medea will become more evident if we add that the enchanting and bewitching power of the Samegrelo or Colchis land and a parallel retelling of Jason's and Medea's story by Megi's grandmother Meneki – are leitmotifs running throughout the whole novel. The main difference between the story of Megi and that of

Medea maybe considered the following: in the Argonaut myth Medea is an *Other*, Barbarian from a land on the far edge of the world, who despite all her positive qualities, her power, her wisdom and the help she provided, remains the *Other*. On the contrary, in Grigol Robakidze's novel, Megi is not *Other*; she is in her own country. Although, at the end of the novel Megi is marginalized from her society, because after her son's death she is not able/does not want to return to her home and starts roaming around the country. Megi wanders from one place into another. Her beauty bred passion and burst of effusion everywhere, but her spirit stayed virgin, emphasizes the author. In the last episode of the novel, Megi is proclaimed witch by the crowd, because of her similarity with her own portrait, which by that time was considered to be holy and was healing thousands of diseases. So she goes on her lonely way searching for her *Self* and for her place under the sun. In the very last chapter of the novel, the author turns Megi toward the reader and makes us feel and believe that she is not the *Other*, she is the *Self* to a greater extent than one could imagine, that *she is the present and the future of ourselves, that will exist forever, like the shafts of sunlight in her fiery red braids*.⁵

As we already mentioned, Grigol Robakidze wrote the novel *Megi - a Georgian Maiden* in German language. Consequently, the novel is primarily targeted at German or European reader. From this point of view, it might have been difficult for the Georgian writer to present Megi in the way acceptable for the European reader. The German reader had to accept Megi, the *Other* as a *Self*. This task was really difficult to be achieved, but taking into consideration the reviews and references, with which the novel was praised⁶, we can say, that the author succeeded in overcoming the difficulties in establishing the heroine's image. Megi is an example of *Self's* representation, with all its positive and negative sides.

The 20th century European literature, music and art found especially relevant the theme, the image and the role of Medea as a *stranger, other*, whose seemingly barbarian's deeds make people reassess their deepest values.

In modern progressive world it is unacceptable to discriminate on the basis of nationality, race, sex or religion, it is unacceptable to discriminate between *civilized* and *less civilized* cultures. The *Other*, the *different* one enters the everyday life and makes us believe that they are like us, that they are not different from our *Self*.

⁵ Григол Робакидзе, *Меги Грузинская девушка*, Тбилиси 2003, 136-137.

⁶ See G. Sharadze, *ibid*.

For the European literature and culture Medea as an exploited barbarian sometimes is considered to be a symbol of freedom fighter. Some researchers claim that she can be accepted as a revolutionary symbol. It is interesting that in Africa, Haiti and Ireland performances of *Medea* are staged as an affirmation of liberty.⁷

Despite the fact that the majority of literary works dedicated to the Argonauts' story and to Medea's theme follow the Euripidean interpretation of the myth, in the 20th century new literary works are created where an author, whether openly or not, tries to rehabilitate the Colchian heroine of myths. From European literature we can mention Christa Wolf's novel *Medea*. We do not intend to dwell on the work here, but would like to mention that the author suggests modern account of Medea's story. Christa Wolf's *Medea* flatly denies that she committed any of those crimes which have been attributed to Medea throughout centuries. Christa Wolf describes how the sins made by others (Aeetes – King of Colchis, or the Corinthians) through intrigues were ascribed to Medea – the wise and special *other* – who along with other Colchians is viewed as alien and consequently, an ideal scapegoat for anything that might go wrong.⁸

As concerns Modern Greek literature, it is interesting to draw parallels with the novel *Argo* by Giorgos Theotokas' (1905-1966). The author's view on Argonaut's journey is not ordinary. It is introduced in the novel through a young boy's impressions and ideas. Father explains to his son a lesson in mythology. The theme of the lesson is the Argonauts' story. The son can not understand many things – and especially, why it was right that Jason took away the treasure [the Golden Fleece] from the Barbarians, as far as this treasure didn't belong to Greeks and the Barbarians had no wish to give it away. Or why Medea helped Jason – a stranger – to rob her own country of the treasure. It is incomprehensible why it was wrong when Medea made the daughters of Pelias kill him, as far as according to the lesson, Pelias was a wrong and evil man?⁹ By offering impressions and ideas of a child, the author emphasizes the other side of the question, formerly ignored by the Greeks.

Destruction of Patriarchal stereotypes is attempted by the famous Greek writer – Lily Zographou (1922-1998) in her book: *From Medea to Cindarella*. The author notes in the foreword that she is not a feminist, and on the contrary she is passionate anti-feminist.¹⁰ Lily Zographou asserts that the

⁷ For detailed information about the issue, see: M. McDonald, *ibid.*, 301-304.

⁸ Christa Wolf, *Medea, A Modern Retelling*, Translated from German by J. Gullin, Virago Press London 1998 (Introduction by Margaret Atwood).

⁹ Γεώργιου Θεοτοκά, *ΑΡΓΩ*, Βιβλιοπωλείον της "Εστίας" Ι. Δ. Κολλάρου & ΣΙΑΣ Α. Ε, τ. 2, 172.

¹⁰ Λ. Ζωγράφου, Από τη Μήδεια στη Σταχτοπούτα, Η Ιστορία του φαλλού, εκδόσεις Αλεξάνδρεια 1998, 10.

image and the reputation of Medea had been unfairly sullied by history, that only the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy was the reason that Medea, a typical heroine of matriarchal society, was disgraced and the label of infant murderer was attached to her. Although Lily Zographou's book makes no mention of the word *Self* or *Other*, the whole book, written in an essay style, is dedicated to the rehabilitation of woman, as *other*, and of Medea, whom patriarchy placed in the marginal position.

Modern Greek Literature offers another new interpretation of Medea's image: this is the comedy *Medea* by Greek satirist and playwright, Bost – Chrysanthos Mendis Bostantzoglou. This comedy is a parody on Euripides. The *Medea* of Bost is one of the most comic plays in the contemporary Greek theatrical repertoire. Bost turns the Euripidean tragic protagonist into a tragicomic character and at the same time through the Aristophanic metaphors and invalid interpretations criticizes and castigates contemporary Greek reality. Evaluating his comedy *Medea*, Bost himself mentions: *This is a play, which criticizes critics, troubles judges and liberates the audience.*¹¹ This is one more example of showing parallels and differences between the *Self* and the *Other*.

All I have mentioned above prove that the theme of Medea is eternal and that it will remain in the conscience of mankind, to make us feel or to make us remember the opposition between the own *Self* and the *Other*. In the contemporary world the issue is considered to be of global importance. It once again attests to the vitality of mythos, and to the fact that problems stated in myths re-acquire relevance from time to time and revive in new works of literature, music, and art. Grigol Robakidze's *Megi – a Georgian Maiden* is the graphic evidence to this, as well as Medea's rehabilitated image in several works of the 20th century literature.

¹¹ Newspaper: Καθημερινή, 10. 09. 2007.