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THE FUNCTION OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL FEMALE IMAGES IN *THE BIG CHIMAERA* – A NOVEL BY M. KARAGHATSIS

M. Karaghatsis, who greatly contributed to modernization¹ of the New Greek literature, is a representative of the generation of the 1930s. He transferred a number of issues relevant in his contemporary Europe into the context of the Greek reality and rendered them with quite a new interpretation. In 1953 his novel *The Big Chimaera* was published. It was a transformed version of his earlier story *The Chimaera* published in 1936 and developed into a novel. The Greek literary critics showed a rather controversial attitude towards the novel, determined by the moral image of the protagonist of the novel – Marina. Discussing Karaghatsis's works, the critics view mostly the preponderance of sexual aspect, but give no heed to quite a few interesting elements of the novel. In our opinion, a special attention should be given to the unusual way the classical Greek tradition is interpreted in that work. Let us make a short review of the subject matter of the novel. A Greek sailor brings home from France Marina, a young girl, and marries her. Marina has experienced severe hardships in her past being a daughter of a prostitute. Still, she arrives in Greece with great hopes and expectations. Unfortunately, her life in the new country takes a dramatic turn. This was determined by a fatal step she undertook at the time of her husband's absence. In fact, not being quite sure of the propriety of her step, she nevertheless spent a whole night aboard ship with its captain, a stranger... Since her absence caused the worsening of her child's health, Anna, her mother-in-law and Minas, her brother-in-law disclosed her behavior. They both became extremely indignant at her immorality. This is followed by her another fatal step. By mere chance, Marina leaves her ailing child on its own and spends the night having a love affair with her brother-in-

¹ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Νεανικά Διηγήματα, Πρόλογος του Στρατή Πασχάλη*, Αθήνα 1993, 9-17.

law. That night her child dies. The moral burden of a perpetrated blunder proves unbearable for Minas who finally commits suicide. Marina, being pregnant from Minas, is incapable of withstanding public pressure and commits suicide too.

Our interest is aimed at the manner the author introduces images of the Greek mythology in connection with Marina, and also at the function these images are burdened with. Let us go back to the episode of Marina's arrival in Greece. Setting foot on the land of Hellas, the woman states: "Different gods now govern my fate. The gods, who harshly tested Medea, Clytemnestra, Jokasta and Phaedra...I must cover my heart with steel in order to elevate my soul and its suffering. I must be ready up to the core of my breast. I have to be considered with the divine, all knowing, towering and, terrifying gods. With the gods of Greece."²

In our opinion, by bringing the mentioned images into the narrative, the author displays notable parallels between the fate of his protagonist and that of the mythological heroines.

As far as we know, in the literary criticism available, there is no special study devoted to functions of above-mentioned female images in the artistic structure of the novel. Apart from that, there is also one considerable episode in the novel where Marina is compared to Helen. Apparently, factual identification of Marina with Helen has far-reaching artistic aims. Marina's likeness to Helen is revealed not only in their appearance, but also in the major result that their role implies: Marina destroyed the family she entered – in the same way as Helen destroyed Priam's family and Troy. An episode of our particular interest deals with the scene when Marina goes down into the city with her brother-in-law after visiting Acropolis. Catching sight of her, a group of elderly Athenians, sitting at the wall of Acropolis, suddenly repeat the words through which Trojan old men express their attitude towards Helen in front of Teichoscopia in the III song of *Iliad*, lines 156-160. In this case Karaghatsis represents Homer's text, word by word, in Old Greek:

Οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ ἑυκνημίδας Ἀχαιοῦς.
 Τοιῆδ' ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἄλγεα πάσχειν·
 αἰνῶς ἀθανάτησι θεῆς εἰς ὧπα ἔοικεν!
 Ἄλλὰ καὶ ὡς τοίη περ' ἐοῦσ' ἐν νηυσὶ νεέσθω,
 μήδ' ἤμῖν τεκέεσσι τ' ὀπίσσω πῆμα λίποιτο³

² Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, Αθήνα 2001, 46.

³ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 107.

"Small blame that Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans should for such a woman long time suffer woes; wondrously like is she to the immortal goddesses to look upon. But even so, for all that she is such an one, let her depart upon the ships, neither be left here to be a bare to us

The only difference is that after line 158 the author breaks off quoting Homer and describes how pleased Marina appears at so high esteem her beauty received. Yet, when the old men added 159-160 lines of *Iliad*, their words frightened and mortified her. She failed to make out the reason why the old people addressed her with those words: "Her heart is frozen. What does the old Greek mean? What relation does she have with the awful words which Homer puts into the mouths of the elders of Troy for Helen."⁴

We can see that the old Athenians, like their Trojan counterparts in *Iliad*, on the one hand are charmed by the young woman's beauty, but on the other hand, they cannot help noticing that her beauty can bring a series of misfortunes. So, in fact, they urge her to leave the country.

Thus, with this passage the author point out that a drama she brings to Yannis's family will not be only the drama of a single Greek family, but it has a more generalized meaning. This is clearly shown by the author in the final of the novel where the death of Yannis' brother Minas, along with his family, reminds the scene of destruction that followed the Trojan War with the deaths of Hector and his family.

The female mythological images that Marina mentions in her above-cited monologue have a definite common aspect that unifies them with her. Consecution of female names corresponds to the activities and deeds of the character, as well as to the intensity of that unity with the image.

In *The Big Chimaera* the likeness of Marina to Euripides's Medea is underlined repeatedly. From Marina's reminiscences we learn that she had majored in classical philology and her thesis for the doctoral degree was dedicated to the interpretation of the image of Medea. Marina remembers her words she addressed the examination commission members with on the day she defended her thesis: "Medea obsessed me. Is she, a woman, who out of jealous love murders her children, a psychopath? That is the question, which tyrannizes me. No, she is not a psychopath. If she were, she would not have inspired the genius of Euripides, who never pursues the themes of his tragedies in a cycle of morbidity. Medea is a normal person, whose passion for love obscures her logic, just like in each normal person. According to the meaningless conclusion: a person who cannot feel such an emotion is not normal."⁵ We are supposed to conclude that driven by the desire to defend Medea, she succeeded in reorienting the professors' initial skeptic attitude towards the matter and was duly awarded the degree. We can state that from the

and to our children after us." (Homer, *The Iliad*, with an English translation by A.T. Murray, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1924).

⁴ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 107-108

⁵ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 24.

days of her youth, Marina felt close to the pathos that was linked with the image of Medea. Marina found it motivated and justified, what Medea did under the influence of her erotic pathos and after the darkening of her mind. Marina's life continues in such a way that an attraction she felt towards Medea gradually transforms into her likeness to Medea. We must mention the detail of Jason's story: he brought Medea to Greece and Yannis did the same with Marina, the minor difference lies in comparatively changed functions that we trace in the novel. According to the Old Greek tradition, Jason brought a barbaric bride to the civilized homeland, while Yannis brings his emancipated wife from the civilized country – to the rather patriarchal and less emancipated Greece. And it goes without saying that the strongest connection and likeness is in the death of the heroine's children. A so-called fantastic scene deserves special attention – a dialog between Eosphoros and the planets, when Marina cites *Medea* of Euripides: "Medea? Who was she?" „She was a woman who killed her children out of love. She killed them in order to take revenge on their father, the man whom she loved, because he loved another woman." "How does this happen? How can a woman kill her children out of love? " "She can. When I, Eosphoros, grasp with my strong fingers the womb of a woman, when I bury my nails in the flash of pleasure and folly, the woman is capable of everything." "And this woman why she reads the story of a woman who killed her children?" "And this woman also killed her child out of love. This unfortunate one however did not want it. She did not want it. Whereas Medea wanted it." "Then, this woman is not so awful as Medea." "You are making a mistake. She is more horrible. Because the time when I, Eosphoros impelled Medea to kill her children, I was a god! Who dares to judge the wish of a god? "⁶

Marina strongly feels her likeness to Medea: after she had conceived her second child, she wanted to distance herself from her mythological prototype. This idea is supported by the following passage: "From the day that she felt her pregnancy, she didn't pick up "Medea" again from the little table."⁷We can feel here a desire of the woman to escape killing of her second child. Yet, her suicide, which implies the death of an unborn child, never lets her free herself from "Medea complex".

Thus, we can state that in Karaghatsis' novel, Medea is presented as a key figure. Most of all, the author is obsessed with the sole line of killing one's child. In both cases we can name erotic pathos as the reason, but the differ-

⁶ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 294-295.

⁷ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 298.

ence is that in Medea it emerges after learning Jason's betrayal, while Marina herself succumbs to her passion and becomes involved in adultery.

It is possible to link Clytemnestra with Marina through the following features: like Agamemnon's wife, Marina, too, is unfaithful to her husband at the time of his absence. And again, like Agamemnon's wife, Marina too starts an affair with her husband's next of kin. Clytemnestra is involved with her husband's cousin, Aegisthus⁸, and Marina – with her husband's brother, Minas. In both cases such links lead to destruction and death: Aegisthus and Minas, Clytemnestra and Marina. We can go farther and trace a certain likeness in other cases as well: Although Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon and Marina does not kill her husband physically, it can be inferred from the novel that her activity causes him to perish. Marina's mother-in-law predicts Yannis's possible "death" with these words: "If Yannis learns the truth, he will die from heartache. For him to live, he must know nothing".⁹

Marina also represents a clear link with Jocasta. The cause of misfortune in both cases is incest. In Jocasta's case the drama is even more horrifying because it is impossible to blame her for the fact and she represents a victim of Fate. Marina's case is different, because she is conscious of her behavior and fully understands the controversy related to the attitude of the social moral. Marina's mother-in-law's words of damnation, said at the grave of her husband, do not spare the deed of Marina and Yannis. She points out that the step they had taken was incest: "Konstantine, our son Minas turned out bad, a masked person and incestuous. He dishonored his brother and became the reason for the death of his niece – our grandchild".¹⁰ Both women fell victims to moral blow, caused by incest.

The likeness to Phaedra is not in the matter of incest, but rather in the understanding shared by the heroes about what kind of reaction they should expect from their husbands and society for what they had done. Phaedra kills herself before she gets an idea of the social attitude from her son-in-law – Hippolytus's stance towards the matter. As for Marina, she felt the force of the social reaction in the form of the mother in law's attitude towards her: „Is your goal to reveal to all of the world your disgrace? Do you want to humiliate my son completely? No, you will not come out from inside here! You will not come out in spite of a good deed, you as well as your bastard seed. The door is open. If you want you can go away. But don't come back;

⁸ It is known that Atreus, Aegisthus's uncle, the son of Thyestes, after taking a severe revenge on his brother, brought up and cared for Aegisthus as if he were his own son, therefore, Aegisthus can be considered, in fact, Agamemnon's brother.

⁹ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 301.

¹⁰ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 282

you will find it closed".¹¹ And with her suicide Marina tried to escape the moral responsibility.

Eventually, consideration of Karagatsis' novel from the angle we have chosen has revealed that the writer, whose works, at first sight, seem to lack notable links with the classical tradition (as is the case with so many other modern Greek writers), in fact uses Antique images in quite an original way to display individuality of his protagonist. If we take into consideration that in his early story the antique images are not present, and that the writer introduced them only after extending this story into a novel, we can assume that he gave considerable significance to this "innovation" and thus emphasized the properties of the main heroine. Consideration of the novel from this standpoint, shows that the so called "a thoughtless narrative" is not characteristic of Karagatsis, which he is traditionally accused of. In any case, usage of the antique images and their connection to the context of the novel reveals how profoundly the writer understands the function of those images in order to present Marina's destiny more distinctly.

¹¹ Μ. Καραγάτσης, *Μεγάλη Χίμαιρα*, 309