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**THE MAIN TENDENCIES OF THE INTERPRETATION
OF ANCIENT IMAGES IN GEORGIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT
(Medea, Antigone)**

The culture of the ancient Greece was closely connected with Georgian culture since the ancient times. Still the creative adoption of the classical heritage in Georgian culture as it seems started only in the XIX century. First attempts of the interpretation of the ancient themes and images are found in the Georgian literature. Later on, the Georgian professional theatre widely opened the door to the ancient tragedy. There are interesting receptions of antiquity in the various fields of Georgian fine art.

The aim of our paper is to present the main trends of interpretation of the ancient images in Georgian culture on the basis of studying Antigone's and Medea's Georgian receptions. Choosing of these images is surely not accidental, as far as they can be considered to be the most popular heroines of Greek mythology in the Georgian culture being quite frequently interpreted by Georgian writers, directors and artists. Thus their receptions can create definite impressions about the main tendencies of adoption of the classical heritage in the Georgian culture. Along with it Medea's Georgian interpretations in our mind should be especially interesting for the non Georgian audience as in her receptions we can see a clear-cut tendency, which is directly connected with the fundamental issues of the Georgian mentality, namely how open is Georgian society in a whole to other value systems.

The Argonauts' cycle was familiar to the old Georgian literature, still until the 60-ies of the XIX century there hadn't been any attempts of the artistic interpretation of this cycle. The reason of this negligence seems to be Euripides' Medea – mother, killer of her children was inconsistent with

the national character. The 60-ies of the XIX century was the crucial period of our nation's awakening, period when recalling Georgia's glorious past became urgent for our society. It was only then, that literature turned to this myth depicting 'Gold abundant Colchis'.

Akaki Tsereteli, the famous Georgian writer, dedicated to Argonauts' voyage in Colchis the poem *Medea*. The poet aimed to achieve two goals – to present Georgia's glorious history and to rehabilitate Medea. And indeed Medea is an innocent and totally passive young maiden, neither helping Jason, nor killing her brother. Her only betrayal is her love towards Jason, the abuser of her country. The poem failed to become a successful piece of literature, still this version of Medea's interpretation – namely, the comprehension of this myth in the context of Georgian ethno-historical problems occurred to be very viable for Medea's Georgian receptions.

As we have already mentioned the Georgian professional theatre was another cultural medium for the adoption of the classical heritage. In the 1910s the Greek tragedies, namely Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* were staged in the Georgian theatre. To interpret these performances, alongside the critical reviews and the memories of the witnesses the whole Georgian theatrical context should be considered. According to the theatre critics, the outset of the 20th century was marked for the Georgian theatre by basic changes and the search for the new aesthetic forms. Together with the theatre of comedy, holding the leading position for a long period, the drama theatre was being established step by step, with a new, much broader repertoire. Instead of the actors directing the plays, the professional directors became now the main driving force of the theatre.¹ The directors who were closely acquainted with the leading Russian theatre MKHAT favored both the principles and the methods of this theatrical school, which was clearly revealed in their performances as well as in their theories about theatre. The theatre of psychological realism popular in Russia and concentrating mainly on the exposure of a character's inner spiritual life in the end, after the years and years of struggle, found its right place on the Georgian stage. Thus, it can be said that the Georgian theatre of that period was already prepared to reflect the main tendencies of Russian and European theatres on the whole.

In the beginning of the 20th century the ancient tragedies with their high ethical values, heroism and ideals became very popular on European

¹ Kiknadze V., *The History of Georgian Dramatic Theatre*, I, Tbilisi, Saari 2003, 403-408.

stages, especially remarkable was Max Reinhardt's performance *Oedipus Rex* (1912), which can be truly called 'an international sensation'.²

Reflecting, as we have already mentioned, the main streams of the western theatre, the younger generation of the Georgian directors were quick to express interest in this new tendency from abroad – the ancient tragedies. At first Sophocles' *Antigone* was performed (1912, 29 September). The director of this play was K. Andronikashvili, the person much influenced by MKHAT school and well familiar with Reinhardt's theatrical experiments. Soon afterwards in 1912-1913, two different versions of *Antigone* followed.³

K. Andronikashvili's *Antigone* enjoyed a wide repercussion, though the performance was not a great success as a theatrical production. Critics noted that the direction on the whole was poor. Though the play was spectacular, its visual side prevailed over its emotional side, which was not found quite successful.⁴

The main flaw of the production was lack of originality and novelty of interpretation, but this was caused by the objective circumstances as well. The Georgian theater of this period was only beginning to get acquainted with ancient theatre, and was not yet ready to make innovative interpretations of the great ancient models – either change some parts of the plot or put different accents on the ideological issues.

Anyway, the staging of Sophocles' *Antigone* can be called a successful cultural event having a great importance for Georgia's intellectual life in general. It opened up a broad horizon for comprehension of Sophocles' tragic genius and at the same time set new perspectives for interpreting ancient dramas. But the Soviet regime ceased staging ancient tragedies. The year 1921 (the last performance of *Antigone*) was followed by a long pause and it was no earlier than the 1950s that Sophocles' great plays were back on the Georgian theatre.⁵

² On staging Sophocles' tragedies in Georgia see: Gurchiani K., Sophocles on the Georgian Stage: 20th Century (forthcoming in the volume of the 1st International Conference *Theatre and Theatre Studies in the 21st Century*, Athens). First staged in Berlin and Munich, Reinhardt's production was very soon taken to Russia. The performance had a big influence on K. Mardjanishvili working at that time in Moscow. He staged *Oedipus Rex* in the same year and soon after brought the performance on tour to Tbilisi.

³ In December 1912 V. Shalikashvili staged *Antigone* in Tbilisi, and then in Kutaisi in 1914. In April 1913 M. Koreli produced *Antigone* in Kutaisi. In 1919 followed the forth version of *Antigone* by Kushitashvili.

⁴ Urushadze N., Sophocles on the Georgian Stage, Tbilisi 1961, 19-20.

⁵ In Gurchiani's opinion the reason why the soviet theatre started to stage the ancient dramas was ideological – the heroic themes were necessary for soviet propaganda after World War II, Gurchiani K., forthcoming, 303.

Having considered the whole context of staging ancient dramas in the Georgian theatre, the negligence towards Euripides' *Medea* acquires more importance. The same fear and non-acceptance of the child killer mother that can be identified as so called 'The Medea Complex' – the phenomenon still existing in Georgia's reality.

After the long pause, the ancient drama returned on the Georgian stage in 1946. This time it was Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the tragedy so popular in pre-revolutionary Georgian theatre. The director of the play was A. Chkhartishvili, who had worked with the greatest Georgian directors K. Mardjanishvili and A. Akhmeteli. Chkhartishvili was the master of spectacular, large-scale performances with monumental decorations and statuesque plastic movements. Although the goal of this article is not to discuss the productions of *Oedipus Rex* on the Georgian stage, we have to dwell briefly on this production as it starts a new trend in the interpretation of ancient drama in Georgian Theatre.

The innovative approach of the director was revealed in several aspects: a. concerning ideological issues: Chkhartishvili aimed to present the king who struggled against the destiny, the kind king, whose main concern was the welfare of his people; b. the director made changes to the plot: In the final scene we watch 'purified' Oedipus, wrapped in white, going slowly up the stairs leading to the heaven (the structure and location of the stairs on the stage created an impression as if they were directed to the heaven). It was a symbolic act of his apotheosis which is the main theme of Sophocles' another, final tragedy about Oedipus – *Oedipus at Colonus*; c. the role of the chorus was altered – reduced in number, they appeared in the most tragic moments. However, together with the chorus, the performance featured a crowd that expressed emotions through plastic movements.⁶ This innovative approach to the chorus applied by the Georgian stage directors to ancient dramatic performances is a very interesting issue and needs to be treated separately.

Another performance revealing this new tendency of interpretation was D. Aleksidze's *Oedipus Rex* (1956), a play of tremendous success throughout the whole Soviet Union. The performance was followed by various versions of the play in the different theatres of the Soviet Union.

Thus, as we see, the new era of staging ancient tragedies in the Georgian theatre started. Anyway, years were needed to stage Euripides' *Medea*.

⁶ Kamushadze T., *The Interpretation of Ancient Tragedies on Georgian Theatre, Synopsis*, Tbilisi 1990, 10-11.

Only in 1962 the famous Georgian director A. Chkhartishvili decided to stage Euripides' *Medea*. The reaction that followed the director's announcement only confirms our suggestion of the attitude in our society towards 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.⁷ But the director aimed to break the ice. Chkhartishvili invited Veriko Anjaparidze, an outstanding actress, to play Medea. 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.'⁸ Only after some hesitation the actress agreed to play Medea.

The performance was considered to be an extremely significant work of art. The director mainly left Euripides' text untouched. Though he made some significant innovations in Medea's interpretation: Firstly, Medea's Colchian origin was especially stressed; the betrayal of motherland became the main issue and the source of Medea's tragedy. In his play 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.

Along with a success as a dramatic production, the performance was a very important event for its impact on the national mentality. To a certain extent it began the process of breaking the negligence and fear towards Euripides' heroine. The play started the new tendency of Medea's interpretation - the tendency that no longer approached the myth with the aim to depict Georgia's glorious past and to rehabilitate Medea.

Beginning from the 60-ies till the 90-ies of the XX century ancient tragedy achieved its highest point of popularity in the Georgian theatre. One after another Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King* were staged. Among the interpretations of Sophocles' *Antigone* of this period, especially noteworthy is D. Aleksidze's version staged first in Kiev and then in Tbilisi in 1971. The ways and methods of staging ancient dramas, the search for innovative approaches - a very important problem for all directors of modern times - exited Aleksidze throughout his entire career. He tried to expand the possibilities of modern theater in this respect. And indeed, his *Antigone* was the play, in which the director apprehended the tragedy's problematics from a modern standpoint. According to the theatre critics, on the material of Sophocles' *Antigone* Aleksidze embodied the idea of

⁷ Kiknadze V., *Theatre and Time*, Tbilisi 1984, 269.

⁸ Ninikashvili K., Veriko Anjaparidze, Tbilisi 1968, 97.

heroic, monumental and at the same time human theatre, through the destiny of a man presented the nature of sublime and eternal.⁹ The critics of that period regarded the performance as an innovative and up-to-date play.¹⁰ Like in his famous *Oedipus Rex*, here too Aleksidze succeeded in achieving the synthesis of heroic and psychological theatre. 'I am born for love, not for hate' – these famous words by Antigone became the leading idea of the play. Innovative was the interpretation of Antigone's image itself. Antigone here was moderate, moderate both in love and in rage. Her life on the stage is tragic, but at the same time it is full of somewhat calming beauty. Antigone's force is her truth, though the actress never stressed this very truth.

The director presented poetically Antigone's end, her death path. A lady-bird flies on Antigone's hand (it is the symbol of the heroine's tender soul). She pets the lady-bird and asks to take her to her destiny. And indeed, the lady-bird tries to lead her to the world of peace and harmony, where there is Antigone's real place to dwell, but on their way the palace executioners stop them by force. Here we watch mood changes taking place in Antigone's soul – the formerly tender maiden suddenly becomes full of rage, then sweet and submissive again until the very last moment, when overwhelmed by the feeling of protest she tries to free herself, rushes forward, but caught by the executioners, utters her credo 'I am born for love ...' for the last time. Notwithstanding these innovative approaches towards staging ancient tragedies, Aleksidze's *Antigone* didn't become a successful production of art and certainly fell short of his *Oedipus Rex* in terms of popularity. At the same time M. Tumanishvili's direction of *Antigone* by J. Anouilh in 1966 in the Rustaveli Theatre was certainly a great success and earned a broad public appeal. This performance deserves to be studied separately¹¹. Here we would like to point out only one important aspect of Tumanishvili's interpretation. Antigone's words, when she tells, that everything she did was only for her self-expression and now sentenced to death she doesn't know for what she is dying, were modified by the director. This means, that Tumanishvili didn't interpret Antigone as an existentialist character.¹²

⁹ Gugushvili E., *The Every-days and the Holidays of the Theatre*, Tbilisi 1971, 139.

¹⁰ Kiknadze V., 1984, 279-280.

¹¹ See the memories of the actress playing Antigone: Kverenchkhiladze Z., *My Antigone*, Tbilisi 2003.

¹² Gurchiani K., forthcoming, 302.

Notwithstanding these innovative approaches toward the ancient tragedy, overall attitude towards Euripides' *Medea* remained basically the same. Georgia's regional theatres mostly staged the *Medea* of the Georgian writer and the ancient historian L. Sanikidze. His version continued the trend of Medea's interpretation established by Tsereteli a century ago. The writer also depicted the glory of Colchis and rehabilitated Medea from the crime of child murdering – it were Corinthians not she, who killed her children as it was recorded in some versions of this myth (namely in Parmeniscus' and Didymus' versions).¹³

Viability of the Tsereteli-Sanikidze's version is proved by G. Kapanadze's apparently new performance staged in 2002 after a big interval. 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. In the spectacle Medea kills her children on the stage, but it is presented only as a false story invented by Euripides. The heroine herself blames Euripides in inventing this lie and obsessed with hysterics treads Euripides' charges under her feet. It seems to us, 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 first attempt of the new, original comprehension of the Argonauts' myth is, in our mind, a roman of the well-known Georgian writer O. Chiladze *A Man Was Going down the Road* published in the 70-ies of the XX century. Here the famous myth is a tool for the allegoric denouement of the real story 'placed' in the fabula of the roman. The story of the Golden Fleece is nothing else, but the part of the Greeks' plan to conquer Colchis. According to this plan, Jason's real mission in Colchis was not obtaining the Fleece, but to be killed here by the Colchians to give his compatriots – the Greeks reason to invade Colchis claiming, that they were here only taking vengeance for Jason's murder. Chiladze's Medea like Apollonius Rhodius' Medea is so called 'Helper-Maiden', who fell in love with a foreign enemy. She helps Jason to obtain the Golden Fleece, but it is done without any heroic efforts from Jason's side. The roman ends with the Argonauts' escaping from Colchis together with Medea. Therefore we can't foretell what Medea's actions could be like in Corinth.

¹³ Sanikidze L., *The Story of the Colchian Maiden*, Introduction, Tbilisi 1963.

It is really remarkable, that above presented two tendencies of the interpretations of the Argonauts'/Medea's myth we can trace in Georgian Fine Art, namely in monumental sculpture.

In the 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. 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 the Georgian culture.¹⁴

Medea's second monument erected a year ago in Batumi presents this heroine differently.

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.

Such an interpretation of Medea, in our mind, is a continuation of the above-mentioned same clear-cut tendency. The well-known mythological heroine Medea appears to be a symbol of the wealth and strength of Colchis and as such is a kind of Georgia's visiting card.

At the turn of the century - in 1999 and in 2002 - two more versions of *Antigone* were staged. The first was Anouilh's *Antigone* staged by T. Chkheidze in Mardjanishvili Theatre in 1999. The second performance called *I Want to Come out of the Present Moment ... Antigone* was staged in the new Basement theatre. As this last performance is a very different re-

¹⁴ Kagan M., *The High Art of Merab Berdzenishvili and the Problems of Art of the XX-XXI Centuries*, Tbilisi 2006, 27.

ception of Antigone's theme and at the same time gives a start to a new trend in interpreting the ancient drama in the Georgian theatre, we considered it necessary to discuss this production of *Antigone* more closely. Though the play under discussion is inspired by Sophocles' and Anouilh's *Antigone*, it appears to be an original scenario written by the director herself – N. Janelidze. The main issue of the play echoes the famous theory of reincarnation of souls: present and past being in a permanent union, thus human souls exist in an eternity as well as their deeds, which not only don't disappear together with their death, but predetermine their destiny, when returning on the earth again.

To embody this idea the performance is played in two dimensions of time and space and what is most significant – in two realities. The personages, who are actors of the XXI century theatre company, in the I part of the performance suddenly become the heroes of Sophocles' tragedy in the II part of the play. The change is unexpected – the terrorists dart onto the stage during ordinal rehearsal of *Antigone* and take the actress – player of Antigone as a hostage. The light engineer Tedo snatches the girl from the terrorists and is immediately killed. But before this happened, the attention of the audience was focused on this personage, on this unhappy drunkard, deprived of everything – daughter, wife and house, who endlessly was asking one and the same question – why the god had punished him in such a terrible way. Only in this great transitional moment – the moment between death and life Tedo finds out the answer to his torturing question. Tedo recognizes Kreon in himself.

This is the crucial scene, crucial moment. Further on the play is performed in the high reality of art – the main scene of Sophocles' tragedy, the scene between Antigone and Kreon is presented. We get acquainted with the souls of the heroes and learn what deeds predetermined their present fate. It is to be specially mentioned that alongside the famous themes, the author puts forward the new questions: 'What is homeland?', 'What is citizen's obligation?', 'What is as ideal of womanhood?' The play gives good ground for many issues. Among them the main seems to be the question put as the final chord: 'Listen to the eternity, it asks you the question: 'Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?'

The play is presented in the ancient genre of Mennipea. It is a kind of experiment, an effort to unite a modern and an ancient theater. The performance in its form is an attempt to represent various fields of art: clip, film, pantomime.

We suggest, that our very brief presentation here of the main trends of the interpretations of Antigone's and Medea's images in the Georgian cul-

ture allows us to make the following conclusions: a. The Georgian culture often refers to the ancient models – Euripides’ and Sophocles’ plays and their western receptions, though for Antigone’s case the reference to the ancient model is much more frequent than for Medea’s. At the same time, interpreters mainly emphasize the differences in the productions: sometimes changes are made in a plot, in other cases changes refer to the ideological issues; b. new, original conceptions in the comprehension of these themes are quite rare; c. in the interpretations of Medea theme the following clear-cut tendency is revealed: Georgian culture tends to reflect the Argonaut myth primarily in the context of Georgia’s ethnical and historical problems and to understand this myth as the symbol relating the Georgian culture to the western civilization. In addition, I consider that the attempts to rehabilitate Medea from her crime are also made. In our opinion, this tendency reflects the important traits of Georgian mentality and has a direct reference to the issue of the compatibility of the Georgian and the western values.