

# Beyond Feminist Poetics: A Critique of Euripides' *Medea*



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## Abstract

Feminism as a construct has attempted to challenge the patriarchal social order and though not manifest as it is today, women have since ancient times attempted to register their protest in myriad ways. Instances of protest by women are numerous in classical literature. The Greeks, considered to be the pioneers of dramatic literature in the West have preserved certain plays that display exemplary courage and fortitude of their women characters. *Medea*, a play by the Greek dramatist Euripides reveals a woman protagonist who defies societal conventions in pursuit of her love and in the end when she is betrayed, extracts her vengeance on her beloved. Euripides fashions *Medea* from Greek mythology but treats her in the play as a woman who is wronged, and ultimately takes her revenge by killing her minor sons to punish their father. In many ways, *Medea* inaugurates the feminist movement but considering the period when the play was written, Euripides was definitely treading new ground. The paper is an attempt to highlight the feminist angle of the play *Medea* and how it ventures beyond the feminist aesthetics.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Male-Female Debate.

### Introduction

*The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities, we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.*

- Aristotle <sup>1</sup>

*..... it is necessary for women to be made, as the Scripture says, as a helper to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation.*

- St. Thomas Aquinas <sup>2</sup>

The male-female debate is perhaps as old as human civilization itself manifested in the diverse activities and institutions that constitute it. Before feminism as a discourse of difference evolved in the literary sphere, women were systematically targeted as being weak, passive and docile, incapable of being independent. History, philosophy, literature and religion have over the years perpetuated this oppression in this largely male dominated scheme of things. One reason may be the absence of an organized and coherent opposition to this male hegemonistic universal belief that has helped perpetuate the subjection of women. When Aristotle says that a woman suffers from a lack of qualities he is merely articulating a universal male belief in the biological weakness of women. This very concept of lack is sexualized which has spawned a host of terms as the 'weaker sex', 'fairer sex' and so on. It is no wonder therefore that most societies consider women as property, as an object and thus deny them any voice or personality. Identity and selfhood are thus important constructs in the feminist discourse which attempts to express female subjectivity. It is noteworthy to mention here that in literature, over the ages, male writers have often attempted to portray heroic exploits of women set against the odds of their own sex. Some such works merit attention because of their bold and dynamic portrayals which bring out the strengths of their respective protagonists. One characteristic feature of such works is the demonstration or revelation of qualities and emotions which are antithetical to the prevalent notions of womanhood in which the very concept of femininity is challenged.

### Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to understand how *Medea* as a character transcends her womanhood and the characteristics of her sex, to emerge as a symbol of strength and fortitude. The paper is also an attempt to highlight the art of Euripides as a dramatist to portray a female character

who goes beyond her defined roles to assert her self and identity in the overwhelmingly Greek patriarchal order.

Much before the Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen (1826-1906) propounded his theory of feminist emancipation through his play *The Doll's House* (1879), the ancient Greek tragic dramatist Euripides (480- 406 B.C.) wrote *Medea* (431 B.C.) modelled on the sorceress daughter of Aetes, the king of Colchis situated outside mainland Greece. The importance of Euripides as a dramatist is acknowledged by the fact that he is the only writer to find a quote in the Bible. Aristotle refers to him as the most tragic of the tragic poets of ancient Greece in Chapter XIII of his monumental work *Poetics*. *Medea* is considered to be the most cruel play in Greek tragedy because in the play, the protagonist kills her own children. To achieve the desired effect, Euripides allows a great deal of violence on the stage unlike Aeschylus and Sophocles, and he coalesces the untragic and hypertragic dexterously. It can be said without doubt that Medea is the first feminist in history or in other words, she inaugurates the feminist movement. Towards the end of the play she transcends her individual self and epitomizes the figure of womanhood in general. What distinguishes *Medea* as a play is that the dramatist has effectively combined the tragic element with the fate of a wronged woman. And what ensues, brings forth the wrath of a woman in all her fury. In fact, Medea grows from a helpless, frightened, frustrated slave to the status of a hero - to a goddess. The feminist angle to the play can be attributed to the fact that Medea is no ordinary woman who is wronged. She vehemently reacts, defies and refuses to take injustices lying down for the one thing she fears the most is the mocking of her enemies towards her. The credit for raising Medea to the status of a goddess goes to Euripides for his singular distinction lies in the sense of realism which he injected into drama by rejecting the Homeric or epic theatre which was the order of his day. As a dramatic innovator, Euripides was ahead of his times because his plays were no doubt Greek in origin but they are of all times and places. Medea is no exception, for even though the source of the play can be traced to Greek legends and myth, what the protagonist does and suffers has an eternal and universal appeal to it. Medea is the representative feminine figure who acts and acts violently to exact her revenge as a wronged woman. In short, Euripides has been a successful dramatist in the eyes of his contemporaries and posterity.

*Medea*, Euripides' finest masterpiece begins with a speech by the nurse of Medea who recounts in brief the protagonist's past history. According to Greek mythology, Medea is a sorceress, the daughter of the king of Colchis, who by her magical powers help Jason to capture the Golden Fleece and return to Greece. In Jason's pursuit, Medea is an active participant aiding him by her magical powers. In return for her help, Jason promises to marry her and sets out for Iolcus, the native land of Jason in mainland Greece. When Medea's father pursued the couple, she cut the body of her brother who was accompanying

her, into pieces, and threw him into the sea such that the pursuit of her father can be delayed by the necessity of recovering his son's body. In her overweening love and faith for Jason, Medea contrives the murder of Pelias, the half-brother of Aeson, Jason's father and who was the ruler of Iolcus. She wanted Jason to be the king of Iolcus where they could lead a happily married life. But the people of Iolcus sensing Medea's growing powers chased the couple and expelled them from Iolcus and they subsequently settled in Corinth. After Medea bore Jason two sons, the latter marries Glauce, the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. The play begins at this stage when Medea learns about the betrayal of her husband and contemplates revenge. The strength of her character is reflected in the nurse's speech :

.....*She hates her sons :*

*To see them is no pleasure to her. I am afraid*

*Some dreadful purpose is forming in her mind. She is*

*A frightening woman; no one who makes an enemy*

*Of her will carry off an easy victory.*

The news of Jason's betrayal unnerves Medea whose first priority was to survive with dignity and respect. Euripides presents her as sympathetically as possible because she had forsaken her country and killed her brother for no fault of his and now these very acts boomerang into herself. With nowhere to go after being ditched by Jason, she broods over her present condition contemplating the best possible way out for her. She has lost her country, parents, husband, love and so she must do something. She resolves that the person, the individual, the identity called Medea must survive even with the death / murder of Medea as wife, mother or woman. As Simone de Beauvoir maintains in a different context:

*The well-known 'feminine sensitivity' derives somewhat from myth, somewhat from make believe; but it is also a fact that woman is more attentive than man to herself and to the world.*

(*The Second Sex*; 1988; Pg. 636)

The indifference of Jason to Medea's feelings spurs her sense of alienation and she raves, for the violation of her marriage bed almost turns her insane. This insanity comes from the scorn and shame and her meditation makes her a frightening woman. She watches her two sons intensely and her gaze unnerves the children. The revenge Medea contemplates must be clear and absolute and on her own terms. The action of revenge must be hers alone and the gods are involved only as witnesses. While contemplating revenge, Medea broods over the number of victims and the method to be employed for accomplishing it. Jason has ventured against her conjugal rights and thus he is guilty of blasphemy which is only punishable by death. On second thoughts, Medea resolves to punish Jason by killing his bride Glauce and her father Creon, the king of Corinth. Her children must also die because they are the most prized possessions of Jason. It has been

exceptionally painful to give birth and to give up one's motherhood was equally painful and she voices forth a universal feminist thought:

*Surely of all creatures that have life and will,  
we women Are the most wretched.*

To execute her plan, Medea begs for one day more to remain in Corinth before her banishment, to which Creon agrees. With her magical powers she gifts a bridal dress to Glauce laced with poison which kills her. Creon while attempting to save his daughter also dies in the process. Her next step is evident in her resolve :

*I'll not leave sons of mine to be the victims of  
My enemies' rage.*

*I understand*

*The honor of what I am going to do; but  
anger*

*The spring of all life's horror, masters my  
resolve.*

The children are extensions of her own self and she alone has the right to deny them the right to live in the process of exacting revenge on her husband, Jason, for whom she had forsaken everything. He is not even allowed to touch the pieces of his sons' bodies for burial. It was blasphemous in 5th century Greece for a man to be childless and Medea severs Jason's link with the future. Ironically, murder here becomes a bond of union, of identification because Medea cannot allow her sons to be taken away by anybody. The steely resolve of Medea can endure guilt of murder rather than endure the laughter of her enemies. Vengeance is coupled with inevitability in Medea's case for the total destruction of Jason was her only goal once the latter ditched her. Thus, Medea becomes a murderer by choice rather than be a plaything in the hands of Jason.

"Woman existed because if women did not have something in common, the full analytic value of the major foundational category of feminist theory would disappear" writes Judith Grant (1993) in an attempt to highlight the issues that broadly defines feminism. While it is debatable whether feminism as it is understood today in common literary parlance existed in the days of Euripides, Greek literature, in fact bears testimony to the exploits of women of substance like Cassandra, Jocasta, Agave, Alcestis, Electra and so on, who have challenged the then existing Greek patriarchal tradition in their own ways. In so doing, these characters have exhibited rare qualities which eulogizes the female self and places the female identity at odds with the male world. In this great tradition, Medea is also a constituent given the force and vehemence with which she rebels against the patriarchal order which was taken for granted and considered axiomatic and universal. It goes to the credit of Euripides for investing Medea with such qualities which question the limits of female tolerance and seeks appropriate retribution. The male-female polarity is no doubt pushed to its extremes in the play where the paradoxical dilemma enunciated by Simone de Beauvoir as to "What is a Woman?" is explored further. While there may be significant variations in the feminists' agenda over various societies and

cultures, the one unifying factor that binds all the categories of feminists is the expression of identity and selfhood and the desire for self emancipation. The mode and degree of such emancipatory ideals may differ and Medea may be criticized for being too rash and vindictive. But the fact remains that Medea wanted to avenge the violation of her marriage bed by her own terms. She not only poisons to death the newly found bride of her husband, Jason, but also wants to destroy the latter's link with the future. That Jason prized his two sons more than Medea can be gauged by his statement that:

*If only children could be got some other way,  
Without the female sex! If women didn't exist,  
Human life would be rid of all its miseries.*

Medea visualizes Jason's predicament at the loss of his lineage and the social scorn that would befall him thereafter and decides to finish him off psychologically for daring to think beyond her. In so doing, Medea extends the radical feminists debate of emancipation and expression of selfhood by defining her own standards. Her contention that her children are a projection or extension of her own self is set in sharp contrast to that of Jason for whom they are only a means to his future. While deciding to murder her children, Medea is trying to teach her husband a new definition of woman which stems from her anger which is the basic, determining co-ordinating impulse that drives her forward. Henrik Ibsen attempted the same principle in his play Ghosts (1881) in which Oswald asks for death from the hands of his mother, Mrs. Alving after realizing that he was suffering from a debilitating brain disease inherited from his father. But of all significant mother-son relationship in literature, Hamlet-Gertrude (Hamlet : William Shakespeare), Oedipus-Jocasta (Oedipus Rex : Sophocles), Hippolytus-Phaedra (Phaedra : Jean Racine), Oswald - Mrs. Alving (Ghosts : Henrik Ibsen), Paul Morel-Gertrude (Sons and Lovers : D. H. Lawrence) - the Medea-her minor sons relationship is given an altogether new dimension by Euripides. The greatest achievement of Medea is the termination of Jason's oikos, that is the family line, signified by the couple's two sons. Infanticide by Medea is by design because she is obsessed with the glory of life and she identifies the twin murders with her vengeance.

### **Conclusion**

'Feminism is a set of ideas linked to a social movement for change' (1995) maintains R. Sircar and it is debatable whether Medea's actions justify or negate the very foundations of the feminist ethos in the light of rapidly changing social realities. That Medea refuses to be taken in by Jason's entreaties and sweet talk stems from her precarious position from where she does not find any solace, inspiration or refuge. Thus, Euripides portrays her as not womanly in the sense of feminine but as a martyr who raises herself from a human to a divine level. Like Shakespeare's Macbeth who appeals as a character in spite of his shortcomings, Euripides' Medea is perhaps able to transcend the earthly bonds that seek to enslave her and we tend to sympathise with her towards the end of the play. The play inaugurates the feminist movement in literature and at the same time

seeks to re-define the very concept of womanhood. Euripides precedes a long line of writers who have advocated the rights of women and championed their cause. Mention may be made of John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Engels, August Bebel and Thorstein Veblen in this regard. The importance of Medea lies in Euripides' attempt to take the protagonist out of the limits of human rationality and yet create an important female character who is not restrained by the limits of her own sex. Therefore, Aristotle's dictum which classifies a lack of qualities in a female is overturned by Medea, and Jason is put at the receiving end. She never begs for mercy and her life is a success from her point of view. The chorus bades a fitting tribute to the unconventional nature of Medea's actions :

*The things we thought would happen do not happen*

*The unexpected God makes possible.*

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