

The Important Promoter of Filicide in Euripides' *Medea*: The Oppression of Patriarchy

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Abstract

In the history of world literature, Medea is undoubtedly an "alternative" among women. Medea is an image that takes into account both the goddess and the witch. She is kind but also evil, tolerant but also cruel. In the conventional view, her most unforgivable crime lies in killing her children with her own hands. However, through the interpretation of Medea's behavior of killing children and the study of the social background at that time, it is found that what made the true infanticide is not the evil of Medea's nature, but the dilemma of women's life in the patriarchal society.

Keywords

Medea; Euripides; filicide; patriarchal society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Critical interest in Euripides' *Medea* (431 BC) has understandably revolved around his portrayal of a revenge-seeking, filicidal mother. Corti suggested in *The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children* that the Medea myth can be regarded as a kind of complement and corrective to the Oedipus myth, articulating a pervasive "hostility toward children" (5). Medea became a controversial character because she "chose to take on the male heroic persona" (Kramer 11) and revenged by killing her children rather than being a socially acceptable mother who was supposed to be selfless and would act the role given to her that benefits society (Rich 42).

Although Medea's act of killing children for revenge seems cruel, there is a groundbreaking significance behind it. One societal blemish that Medea brought to its audience's attention was the "discriminating expectations that the male-dominated Greek society had of women, especially mothers" (Kramer 10). As Helen Foley pointed out, women in ancient Greece had no status but only the function to "produce a male heir" (130). Thus, instead of paying attention to Medea's act of revenge itself, it is necessary to explore the causes of her killing from the social perspective.

2. THE PREDICAMENT OF FEMALE SURVIVAL IN THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

Euripides' tragedy *Medea* was based on the archetype of Greek mythology, in which the life and fate of women fully showed the Greek society's view on women at that time. "Of all things that have life and sense we women are the most hapless creatures" (line 230), only one sentence from Medea expressed the sorrow of women in that era: in ancient Greece, women were at the bottom of society, they were regarded as the appendages of men without status and respect.

Demosthenes, an Athenian statesman, described the Greek view of women at that time in his speech: "We keep hetaerae for the sake of pleasure, female slaves for our daily care and wives to give us legitimate children and to be the guardians of our households" (122). We can not only

see that the role of wife was only for fertility and housekeeping, but that men at that time divided women into different functions according to their physiological and social needs: companion, slave or wife. The significance of the existence of female was completely ignored, and their value was entirely dependent on the temperament and positioning in line with the interests of male power. At that time in ancient Greece, "the Athenian citizen woman's status was derived entirely from kinship with males, and her primary function was to produce a male heir for the oikos ["household"] of her husband" (Foley 130). Thus, a woman's role in that society was limited to that of mother and her status was directly associated with men.

Even as early as the sixth century BC, the Greek institution of marriage was gradually established as monogamy. But that marriage system was very restrictive for women at that time. Engels argues in *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* that the formation of the modern monogamist family came about not because of the rise of sex-love relationships, but as a tool of the male sex that "began the capture and purchase of women" (25). When the primitive Pairing Family eventually adapted and evolved into monogamy— a family structure that Engels argued enslaved women to their husbands, by "taking a group of individuals that were highly regarded and well respected and eliminating their supremacy in the household by viewing them as property that in turn possesses an exchange value" (Lyons 102) – the emergence of patriarchy and the father-right began. Under monogamy, man could stray without any legal or moral constraints, as the chorus in *Medea* sang: "And if thy lord prefers a fresh love, be not angered with him for that; Zeus will judge 'twixt thee and him herein" (line151-152). That era did not provide women with a way to protect their rights. *Medea* had nowhere to vent her grievances in the face of her husband's wickedness and finally had to rely on her own strength to resist.

It is because male dominance not only exerted on the public fields like economic and political activities, but also entered the interior of familial and private relations that *Medea* also accepted the idea that son is the continuation of a father – no offspring is shameful. Like others, she regarded son as a father's property, reckoning the death of his son would be the greatest revenge to Jason. It is for this reason that *Medea* becomes the "socially deviant mother" (Kramer 7) looked down upon by the male-dominated society of ancient Greece.

The dysfunctional family values and gender oppression in patriarchal society made women face such a dilemma: even after awakening, their rebellious behavior still took place in the shadow of patriarchal culture (Allan 599). Though *Medea* avenged successfully, she herself also suffered the fallout. The painful hesitation and struggle before killing her children is the best illustration of this dilemma. Euripides used a long confession to show *Medea*'s ongoing pain: "O my babes, my babes...for I must lose you both and in bitterness and sorrow drag through life... Ah me! ah me! why do ye look at me so, my children? why smile that last sweet smile? Ah me! what am I to do?... Why should I wound their sire by wounding them, and get me a twofold measure of sorrow?" (line1018-1052). The painful struggling of avenger herself was so deep that she was not only the subject of the action, but also became the object of the consequences.

Motherhood is a "natural" or instinctive trait that women are equipped with from birth (Rich 42) and *Medea* is not an exception. Mothership, though, was a social role vested to women by patriarchal society at that time, the love for children after ten months pregnant period was also the natural affection of women. *Medea* had the same natural maternal love for her children. However, in the helpless situation of the patriarchal society, she had no choice but used some extreme ways like killing her children to fight against the oppression and defend her human rights. The only way that *Medea* could culturally gain the power and revenge over her enemies that she desires is by transcending her position as a woman and throwing off the cultural duties and expectations thrust upon her.

3. CONCLUSION

In the period of slavery democracy in Athens, women were undoubtedly the vassalages of men. But Medea does not want to bear the oppression of men, she has no way back but fight on her own strength. Medea thinks of herself as follows: "let no one deem me a poor weak woman who sits with folded hands, but of another mould, dangerous to foes and well-disposed to friends; for they win the fairest fame who live then, life like me." (line 810) she frankly admits her cruelty and is proud of it. In this way, the image of a woman who is spiritually free from the shackles of a patriarchal society appears.

Just like everything is relative, in the era of patriarchal rule, the accumulated oppression of feminism on women will eventually be expressed in the form of female resistance, which is the inevitable development of human consciousness and the necessary stage for the enlightenment and sustainable development of feminism. Medea is not an ideal woman but a woman in real life, so her awakening of self-consciousness is a process of gradual development, growing up in various contradictory movements and emotional conflicts. She had also placed all her happiness on her husband and prepared to live a normal life with him. But with the disillusionment of hope and the deepening of humiliation, Medea finally woke up and decided to dominate her own destiny.

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