

FROM ANCIENT TRAGEDY TO MODERN DRAMA: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF MEDEA'S CHARACTER IN PAATA TSIKOLIA'S PLAY

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Abstract. Paata Tsikolia is a director known for numerous experimental productions. In his work, Tsikolia adopts a radical approach toward the character of Medea, distancing the narrative from traditional concerns of national identity and mythical archetypes. Instead, the author focuses on pressing issues within contemporary European literature, such as the plight of immigrants in foreign lands and gender inequality.

The play is set in the mountains of Colchis, forty years after the original events of the Medea myth. King Aeetes is deceased, yet Medea's legacy remains vivid in the collective memory, haunted by her echoing cry: "It is I, Medea!"

The central narrative innovation of the play lies in Medea being brought to trial by her own family members. Humiliated and shamed before all of Colchis, she conceives a plan for global vengeance. In this interpretation, Medea is not a woman driven by love for Jason, nor is the Golden Fleece stolen by him. On the contrary, Medea—having defied her father and brother—flees Colchis, taking the Fleece herself as a means of punishment. Her ultimate goal is the destruction of her family and the downfall of Colchis, stripping the kingdom of its ancient glory. The author's portrayal of Medea is ruthless, characterized by cynicism and sarcasm; she is depicted as a remorseless perpetrator, declaring: "It is I, Medea, the cruel killer."

Keywords: Paata Tsikolia, Medea, Contemporary Drama, Reconstruction of Myth, Colchis, Revenge, Gender Inequality, Experimental Theater.

Paata Tsikolia is a director who has offered experimental stagings of contemporary plays. One of them is *Medea*, which he presented through a new standard and adapted uniquely for the stage. This, of course, was followed by ambiguity within society, which was natural because, "effectively, for the first time in the history of Georgian dramaturgy, the author offered the most radical Medea, who would certainly not appeal to a spectator who defines the Colchian daughter as their own ancestor" (Shamanidi, 2024:52).

Today, numerous interpretations of Medea's story already exist; "authors, whose average age is 35, essentially distance themselves from their predecessors and are entirely free from ethnic complexes. Although their approach toward the character of Medea varies, it is in no case determined by the character's ethnic origin. It can be said that contemporary Georgian theater and art in general have, as never before, approached European models of Medea's interpretation—the ethnic origin of Medea has been pushed to the background, and other features are increasingly emphasized; for example, the condition of an immigrant in a foreign country, gender inequality, and others" (Shamanidi, 2024:57); as for Tsikolia's *Medea*, such a terrifying and ruthless text has never before been created by a Georgian author.

From the very beginning, we should pay attention to the initials in the title, which somewhat incite the reader's interest; this is an indication that the text created by the author about Medea represents a "series," and we are facing the sixth episode of the first season. This means that the writer shows us only a fragment of the Medea myth, while this myth has begun a long time ago and, of course, will continue even after this

episode. Showing the story of Medea as if it were a series is a quite interesting interpretation, and through this, the society's attitude toward television series becomes clear.

The play is written for three actors and a chorus. The entire sixth episode, which the author presents, consists of 11 acts. Each of these acts has its own title: (1. Epope. Former Chief of King Aeëtes' Guard. "Egale" Boarding House. The Mountains of Colchis. 40 years have passed since that day. Evening; 2. Abbess Chalkiope. Chalkotaurus Monastery. The Forest of Colchis. That day. Morning; 3. Prince Absyrtus, the eldest son of King Aeëtes, with attendants. The Forest of Colchis. That day. Morning; 4. Princess Medea and Epope, Chief of King Aeëtes' Guard. The Forest of Colchis. That day. Afternoon; 5. Hecate Festival. The Forest of Colchis. That day. Afternoon; 6. Epope. Former Chief of King Aeëtes' Guard. "Egale" Boarding House. The Mountains of Colchis. 40 years have passed since that day. Evening; 7. Prince Absyrtus. "Phasifa" Hotel. The Mountains of Colchis. That day. Evening; 8. About the Myth of the Argonauts; 9. Epope. Former Chief of King Aeëtes' Guard. "Egale" Boarding House. The Mountains of Colchis. 40 years have passed since that day. Evening; 10. Epope; Absyrtus and Epope. "Phasifa" Hotel. The Mountains of Colchis. 12 years have passed since that day. Morning; 11. Medea, Argo, that night). These titles provide the reader with preliminary information regarding the subject of each respective chapter.

The entire play unfolds on Colchian land, specifically before Medea travels to Corinth with Jason. This naturally results in the omission of the episode involving the murder of her children, which manifests as the author's individual interpretation. "In this play, we do not have the scene of the children's murder, but the author hints that a woman who, with such indifference (although, I believe she suffers greatly while doing so), dismembers her own younger brother—who is filled with unconditional trust toward her and is still a child—is likely capable of doing what we Georgians so desperately do not want to believe: that she would also kill her children out of revenge against Jason" (Shamanidi, 2024:56).

It is noteworthy that Tsikolia's characters possess mobile phones and use social networks. Additionally, the mention of Christian monasteries and the popular model of tourism is significant; the author blurs the lines of the timeline, heavily integrating contemporary nuances into the world of ancient myths. Nevertheless, the play maintains elements of the Argonaut myth through a considerable number of attributes.

The first chapter of the play begins in the mountains of Colchis when forty years have passed since Medea's story; King Aeëtes has passed away, and the time has come when mentioning Medea's name becomes permissible. The dialogue clearly illustrates that even after forty years, no one has forgotten Medea; on the contrary, every nuance is well-remembered, and they have not forgotten her voice and her scream: "It is I, Medea!" (Tsikolia, 2020: 69).

The Chalkotaurus Monastery, mentioned in the second episode of the play, represents a kind of authorial insertion and another attempt to introduce a new interpretation into the myth, as churches and monasteries did not exist at that time. As seen from the play, this monastery is located in the forest of Colchis and is governed by Abbess Chalkiope. Everyone in the monastery is interested in Medea and her story; they seemingly envy Medea's strength and her free life. The primary interest of the nuns is who loves whom and who will be whose wife. Additionally, to our surprise, the nuns freely use social networks and are distinguished by their constant activity.

From the third episode of Tsikolia's play, a brutal war is ignited between Medea and her elder brother, Absyrtus. The brother constantly attempts to humiliate, shame, and torture Medea, which occurs through horrific means: she is covered in urine, beaten, and insulted before everyone, and she cannot defend herself in any way. This appalling spectacle is broadcast via "Live" stream, and all of Colchis watches. Absyrtus hates Medea and calls her a whore who sold out her father: "You traded your father for a Greek's d**k!" (Tsikolia, 2020: 19). Absyrtus orders the chief of King Aeëtes' guard, Epope, to rape Medea. Indeed, Epope does not

spare Medea—perhaps he has no other choice. Despite being covered in excrement and shamed, Medea still tries to stand firm, not to fall spiritually, and to remember everything happening around her so that later she may repay everyone for every single detail.

The main episode of the play is Medea being brought to trial by her own family members; we do not encounter this episode with any other author. Thus, Tsikolia is the only one who gives the character of Medea a reason for well-deserved revenge. This is precisely why he presents this episode so acutely: "(To Medea) Medea, sister, what has happened to you? – (Epo) Ugh, how it reeks. – What did you do, did you beat her? – Did you beat her? – How is that possible?! – How did you dare beat the princess, you slaves?! – Which one of you hit her, ha?! Ha-ha-ha-ha! – Popi, you old man! – (To Medea, calmly) Your dress is soiled, sister! – With piss and s**t. – Ha-ha-ha-ha! – Which one of you laid a hand on my sister? – (Roars) Ha! – Look at your faces, boys, what?! – Ha-ha-ha-ha! – What, were you afraid? – What frightened you? – You should hit her, of course! – Why else would you drag her to the forest? (Affectionately) You have to hit her and those like her, of course! – (Suddenly hits Medea) You have to hit her, of course! Of course! Of course! – (Stands up, takes out phone) – Medea, stay still for a second, I'm filming a video of you. – Medea, stop crawling!" (Tsikolia, 2020: 12).

Humiliated and shamed before all of Colchis by her own brother, Medea, of course, does not forget this and begins her revenge against the whole world. She starts by punishing her older brother and kills the young men through brutal methods. The people witnessing this reality remain astonished, as they have never seen such cruelty anywhere: "Apparently they were still alive when their genitals were torn off and stuffed into their mouths, because two or three had died of asphyxiation, suffocated by their own genitals" (Tsikolia, 2020: 37). Afterward, along with the Golden Fleece and her younger brother Egale, she departs from Colchis, though her revenge does not end here. In this play, Medea is not a woman in love with Jason, nor was Jason the reason for handing the Golden Fleece to the Greeks; on the contrary, Medea fled Colchis because by doing so she opposed her father and brother to punish them properly. Therefore, she needed to escape Colchis and required strong support from the Greeks. Her main objective was the overthrow of Colchis and the destruction of her own family.

The entire play is built on acute, tense episodes because "here we have to choose between the bad and the currently worse: Medea opposes Aeëtes (the face of a decayed state) through betrayal; Aeëtes punishes the traitor Medea (through his subordinates); in turn, Medea takes revenge on Aeëtes" (Shamanidi, 2024: 56).

Medea kills (this is an understatement; more accurately, she "chops and dismembers") her younger brother, Egale, so that her father cannot collect the body parts and must search for them in the sea forever. With this gruesome act, Medea manages to destroy Aeëtes, as Aeëtes lost not only Egale but Medea as well. It was difficult for the invincible Colchian king to come to terms with this fact. The wrathful Medea dismantled all of Colchis and stripped it of its ancient glory, accomplishing what no enemy had ever been able to do to Colchis. Aeëtes was betrayed by his own children, yet he could impose punishment on no one for this, as he himself was the culprit.

The final, eleventh scene — "Medea, Argo, That Night" — concludes with Medea's remarkable monologue:

"Now you surely recognize me, it is I, Medea, the cruel killer!

I am not the one who will be defeated.

I am not the one you will see fallen." (Tsikolia, 2020:68).

Our invincible character achieved her desire, fulfilled all her plans, and brought an end to both her own family and the whole of Colchis. It would seem that all this should have brought her peace, yet Medea is still anxious and somehow senses a future threat, that which awaits her in the future. At the same time, Medea knows that on foreign land she is a "corpse," although she is still "Medea."

Paata Tsikolia's play *Medea* represents a radical and demythologized reconstruction of the ancient myth. The author rejects the traditional understanding of Medea as the "Colchian Queen" and an "ethnic symbol," moving the character into a modern socio-political context. Tsikolia's Medea is no longer just a woman abandoned by Jason; she is a victim of humiliation by her family, shamed via "Live-stream," and a victim of systemic violence who responds to the world with horrific cruelty. Through this interpretation, the Medea myth is transformed into a modern tragedy with a "series" format, where ancient glory is replaced by the problems of emigration, gender inequality, and social alienation. Ultimately, the author portrays Medea as a "cruel killer" who, through revenge, destroyed her own identity and the past glory of Colchis.

In Tsikolia's dramaturgy, the formation of Medea as a "cruel killer" is not a coincidental act; rather, it is a response to the total violence that the digital age society births. Showing her humiliation through "Live" streaming adds a socio-political dimension to the play—here, tragedy is no longer a source of catharsis; it has become a spectacle, content that gathers likes and comments in the virtual space. In this context, Medea's body becomes a battlefield where the brother and father assert their power through her public shaming and a "digital panopticon."

The transformation of Absyrtus's character is particularly noteworthy, as he emerges as the face of an abusive system. His hatred toward Medea is saturated with toxic masculinity and patriarchal fear—the fear that a woman might disrupt the established hierarchy. The coarse, profanity-based vocabulary utilized by Absyrtus is not merely a sign of the character's lack of culture, but a form of linguistic terror aimed at the total annulment of Medea as a person and her reduction to a powerless object.

Simultaneously, in Tsikolia's work, Medea is an "alien" even while still in Colchis, which represents a sort of internal form of emigration. Her conflict with her family and society turns her into an exile on her own land, while her decision to follow the Greeks is no longer an act of romantic love, but a radical political escape. She leaves an environment where she is perceived only as a "whore," yet through this escape, she finds no freedom—she simply changes the form of her captivity and moves from one abusive system to another.

The cruelty Medea displays during the murder of her brother is presented in the play as an inevitable reaction to the systemic evil she has endured. The author does not attempt a moral justification of the protagonist; rather, he demonstrates the endless cycle of violence: when a person is stripped of their dignity and bodily autonomy, their only response becomes absolute nihilism. The horrifying act of genital mutilation serves as symbolic retribution for the sexual and physical degradation Medea suffered at the hands of her family members and the "chief of the guard."

In this process, the nuns of the Chalkotaurus Monastery perform the function of the ancient Chorus, though their role is far more cynical and modern. They embody public opinion, which hides base interests and a desire to revel in another's tragedy behind a religious facade. Through their active use of social networks, they become "complicit spectators" in Medea's shaming. With this, Tsikolia exposes the pseudo-morality that often becomes the basis for victim-blaming and collective surveillance in modern society.

The figure of Aeëtes in this play is no longer that of a powerful monarch, but the ruler of a "decayed state" who cannot control even his own family. His punishment—the loss of both Medea and Egale—is the logical conclusion of the tyranny that he himself established. The "dismantling" of Colchis by Medea is not merely a family vendetta; it is the collapse of an entire political system. Aeëtes' tragedy lies in the fact that he himself created the "monster" that ultimately reduced his kingdom and past glory to ashes.

The temporal confusion present in the play—the coexistence of mobile phones, tourism, and ancient attributes—serves to emphasize the eternity of the myth. By using anachronisms, the author erases the boundary between the past and the present, thereby forcing the reader to perceive Medea's tragedy not as a distant legend, but as a reflection of contemporary social pathologies. This reconstruction demonstrates

that despite technological progress, the models of human cruelty and the struggle for power remain unchanged.

Ultimately, Paata Tsikolia's finale leaves us with a Medea who has triumphed in her revenge but has lost herself. Her existential void and the admission that she is a "corpse" suggest that her radical rebellion has led to the total erosion of her persona. The author offers an entirely new, demythologized version of Medea's image, where ancient heroism is replaced by the loneliness of the modern individual and the tragic reality in which vengeance fails to bring peace.

Thus, Paata Tsikolia's *Medea* establishes itself in the Georgian literary and theatrical space as a prominent example of postmodern reconstruction, where mythic grandeur is replaced by the harshness and fragmentation of everyday life. The "series" format proposed by the author and the radical transformation of Medea's character serve not only to renew the ancient plot but also to shatter the ethnic and national complexes that for decades restricted the objective perception of Medea's image in Georgian culture. Tsikolia has removed Medea from the static role of an "ancestor" and transformed her into a living, pained, and terrifying character who, like a mirror, reflects the problems of violence, social alienation, and the empathy deficit characteristic of the digital era for the contemporary audience. The play confirms that Medea's tragedy is not exhaustible, but rather a perpetually regenerating process that finds a corresponding language and form in every new epoch for its own re-identification.

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