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### **Contemporary Reflections on the Medea Myth in the novels of Christa Wolf and Nino Kharatishvili**

*Medea is one of the most significant characters in the history of world culture. For centuries, she has served as a source of inspiration for creators across various fields of art.*

In the history of world literature, notable works include those by Euripides, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Pierre Corneille, Jean Anouilh, and Christa Wolf's "Medea." In Georgian literature, we should mention Akaki Tsereteli's "Medea," Grigol Robakidze's "Megi - A Georgian Girl," Otar Chiladze's "A Man Was Going Down the Road," Givi Margvelashvili's "Colchian Medea in the Kolkhoz," among others. Obviously, considering the context of the era (conceptual or aesthetic positions) and the author's intent, both certain motifs of the Argonaut myth and the prisms through which the Colchian maiden is perceived have been changing over time. Some creators see her as a traitor to her homeland and father, some see her as a vengeful wife and mother who kills her own children, and others consider Medea the first feminist, *who rejects all norms of femininity and opposes the patriarchal order.*

According to the Colchian narrative of the myth, Medea was the daughter of Aetes, the legendary king of ancient Colchis. She falls in love with Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, and helps him obtain the Golden Fleece. One of the versions of the myth tells the story of the lovers traveling to Greece, Jason's betrayal, and his marriage to Creon's daughter, Creusa/Glaucé (the myth acknowledges both versions of the name for Creon's daughter). Medea, in revenge against Jason, kills his fiancée, and the enraged Corinthians kill Medea's children. The devastated woman then returns to Colchis.

In the first literary interpretation of the myth—Euripides' "Medea," dated to 431 BC—Medea's mythical image is already significantly revised. Euripides deliberately changes the final part of the myth, transforming Medea into a mother who kills her children. Later, she and her son, fathered by Aegeus, become conquerors of barbarian tribes in Asia Minor, and together they found a new land, Media. The Greek tragedian also presents a different motive for Medea's return to Colchis. According to the myth, Medea is a devastated, defeated, and powerless woman for whom returning to Colchis is not a new opportunity or challenge, but an inevitable solution. However, in Euripides' tragedy, Medea is a triumphant woman and the savior of Aetes. She declares war on her father's enemies and helps the king regain his throne and consolidate his power.

Within the framework of our presentation, we propose contemporary interpretations of the Medea myth according to Nino Kharatishvili's play *"My Heart and Your Heart [Medea]"* and Christa Wolf's novel "Medea: Voices." Specifically, using a comparative analysis, we will explore how various passages and motifs of the Medea myth change within the context of these two different texts and, consequently, how Medea's identity is constructed and shaped.

Christa Wolf's (1929-2011) novel "Medea: Voices" was published in Germany in 1996. The action primarily takes place in Corinth, although the prehistory—specifically, the Colchis episode—is recalled by the main characters, Medea and Jason, in the text. In addition to Medea, the story is narrated by Jason, Agamedea—a Colchian and Medea's former student, Akamas—a Corinthian and the first astrologer of King Creon, Laocoon—a Corinthian and the second astrologer of King Creon, and Glaucé—the daughter of King Creon and Queen Merope. *The multivocality of the narrative allows the reader to understand and evaluate the story from various ideological and worldview perspectives.*

In the text, all significant motifs/aspects of the Medea myth are wholly deconstructed. Medea appears before us as a tragic heroine who is only a victim and no longer a perpetrator.

According to the novel, Medea is a sorceress, but she uses this ability only for noble purposes, such as healing people and positively influencing the psychologically unstable daughter of Creon, Glauce. The writer presents a different motive for Medea's theft of the Golden Fleece and her departure from Colchis. According to the myth, Medea's passionate love for Jason blinds her, but in Christa Wolf's novel, she cannot forgive her father for the murder of the future heir to the throne, Apsyrtus. Additionally, she accuses him of unjust rule, neglect of the people's interests, and social inequality. She rebels against Aetes, who is obsessed with gaining glory, hands over the Golden Fleece—the main support of the king's power—to the enemy, and punishes her father in this way. Thus, Medea follows Jason to Corinth not out of love, but out of protest against the autocratic rule of Colchis and in the hope of living with dignity in a just state in the Western world: "I followed Jason because I could no longer stay in this ruined, already doomed Colchis. This too was an escape" (Wolf )

Christa Wolf develops the plot differently when she describes the events in Corinth, as well. Medea secretly follows the silent Queen Merope and discovers the secret of the royal court in a dark cave—like Aetes, Creon condemned his own son, the heir to the throne, Iphinoe, to death. After she learns this horrifying story, the attitudes of Creon and his subjects towards Medea change drastically. The truth-revealing, rebellious woman is perceived as a threat, declared an evil sorceress, and becomes a victim of false accusations (She is first accused of killing her brother and later of killing her children, as well as causing natural disasters such as plagues and earthquakes). The campaign to demonize Medea ends with her expulsion from Corinth.

Thus, in the novel "Medea: Voices," Christa Wolf frees Medea from the complex of being a traitorous daughter to her homeland and father, as well as from being an evil sorceress and a murderous woman.

As for the contemporary Georgian writer *Nino Kharatishvili's* play "*My Heart and Your Heart [Medea]*," it was first staged in Hamburg, Germany, in 2007.

Like Christa Wolf's novel, the action in this text takes place in Greece, in Corinth, and the time frame of the story's development, according to the author's decision, is "eternity." The motives for Medea's departure from Colchis, Jason's betrayal, and Medea's revenge remain unchanged. The novelty of the plot is determined by Medea's conscious decision to make Jason a witness and accomplice in the murder of their children (she drowns them by filling their glass bedroom with water in his presence), and this horrifying scene ends with the parents' suicide. At the same time, Medea kills the dying Creon's hope of extending his power (she destroys the Golden Fleece through Creon's daughter—Glauce. The latter, inspired by Medea, burns the Argonauts' prize in Creon's bedroom).

It is noteworthy that at the very beginning of the play, in a dialogue with Jason, Medea intuitively senses the fear of losing her national identity, love, and children in a foreign land: "You must reassure me that nothing will threaten my world in Corinth" (Kharatishvili) The danger becomes inevitable after Creon separates Medea from her children and forbids her from seeing them. Creon's plan to make Jason the future husband of his daughter Glauce and the powerful ruler of Corinth intensifies Medea's sense of impending threat. Creon's goal is to strengthen his country and create a secure future for his daughter. In this process, he sees Medea as an obstacle—on one hand, as a rival to his daughter, and on the other hand, as a 'stranger'—the daughter of the powerful Colchian king Aetes, who is constantly tormented by nostalgia, guilt, and the desire to restore Colchis's former glory, including reclaiming the Golden Fleece.

Creon tries to neutralize the threat posed by Medea by subjugating her, erasing her Colchian identity, and demanding that she accept Greek order: "You will pray to my god, and thus you will acquire a new face. A face that I bestow upon you, Medea, and soon you will forget your name, find peace, and start a new life, grateful and silent" (Kharatishvili).

In the text, Medea initially confronts Creon's position with firm defense, and later with an offensive strategy. She not only refuses to comply with the king of Corinth's agenda but instead starts a rebellion and opposes him: "You are not my king!" (Kharatishvili). "I will not play your game" (Kharatishvili ). Medea defends her dignity by *destroying Creon's plans and successfully achieves her goal, as the king's dream of a glorious future for Corinth turns to ashes along with the Golden Fleece.*

Despite the significant differences between the plots of Christa Wolf's and Nino Kharatishvili's texts and their reflections on the Medea myth, the feminist discourse in both the novel and the play is common.<sup>1</sup>

Notably, in both texts, Jason's betrayal becomes the triggering factor for Medea's rebellion. The exiled ruler of Iolcus, blinded by the desire to gain power, agrees to Creon's challenge despite his inner struggle. ('How strong is the desire in men to remain in others' memories and to immortalize their names forever' (Plato, Symposium). He explains his decision to Medea as a desire to ensure the well-being of their children and create a bright future for them. Medea realizes that this noble pretext is actually the sublimation of a seductive passion for glory and a betrayal of his beloved woman. This unpleasant discovery becomes the basis for Medea's alienation from Jason and later, a deep crisis in their marital relationship: 'Jason is a stranger in a foreign land' (Kharatishvili ). 'There is no "we" here anymore' (Kharatishvili 2020: 36). 'Because of you, because of you and the children, I became like this. So that they would permit you to stay here,' claimed he. That's exactly how he put it: 'permit you to stay here,' not 'permit us.' He did not consider himself one of us" (Wolf).

The opposition between Jason and Medea is driven not only by their different attitudes toward love but also by their opposing ideological and worldview positions. Medea counters Jason's conformism with rebellion, exposing the evil of the system, along with Jason's treachery, and refusing to submit to male subordination and patriarchal order.

The masculine perspective can be discerned in the positions of the male characters (Creon, Jason, Akamas) in both the novel and the play, where women are primarily understood as beings subordinate to the will of men, with strictly defined roles and behavioral models. Medea, in both texts, disrupts the dominant discourse. Christa Wolf's Medea does not resemble other female characters in the novel—queens resigned to the murder of their children. She strives to remember the legacy her mother entrusted to her when she left Colchis: "Never become like me!" In Christa Wolf's novel, Medea shares the fate of her aunt Circe, who was expelled from Colchis and falsely accused of crimes she did not commit out of fear that she would expose the corrupt system. Circe, like Medea, was labeled as a sorceress. During her visit to Circe on the island, Circe reveals to Medea what her purpose is. "You are one of those who must live among people. Among men. To understand the whole wisdom of the relationship between women and men and to try to eliminate the fear that turns them into dangerous, cruel, and ferocious beasts" (Wolf).

In Nino Kharatishvili's play, Medea retains the identity of a vengeful and destructive woman, unlike in Christa Wolf's novel. The patriarchal system perceives her confrontation with Creon and punishment of Jason not as an attempt to defend her dignity and restore justice, but as an irrational and elemental act of revenge by a desperate woman. Hence, the system seeks to demonize and marginalize her. From a feminist perspective, Medea's struggle is seen as a successful attempt by the female character to move from the periphery to the center and to dominate over men. Essentially, Medea manages to overcome gender stigma, rejects the strictly defined socio-cultural role assigned to women, and frees herself from masculine restrictions.

In Christa Wolf's novel, after exposing the system, Medea experiences complete frustration as she realizes the absurdity of believing in the existence of a just and democratic state: "Now the barrier is broken, and from the ruins only one word has emerged - **vanity!**" (Wolf ). This revelation demoralizes her, making her indifferent to the false yet horrifying accusations against her. According to Catalin Schneider, the absence of question marks in the final chapter, which presents Medea's monologue, signifies her recognition of the futility of any further questioning. Medea becomes a victim of sexism, brutal political interests, and systemic repression.

It is evident that in Christa Wolf's interpretation of the Medea myth, the primary motif is portraying Medea as an outsider, a foreigner. She feels at home nowhere, being an outsider both in Colchis and Corinth. She is alienated from all forms of political authority. Medea's expulsion from Corinth and her life in seclusion—in a cave—should be understood as a metaphor for her perpetual exile, homelessness, and lack of a homeland.

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that the name 'Medea' is connected to the Greek word 'med' (meaning 'I think, I analyze, I conclude'). Accordingly, the name 'Medea' is interpreted as 'the giver of advice,' 'the strategist.' On a linguistic level, 'Medea' is associated with a group of heroic women - Argonauts, Polymedes, Perimedes" (Nadareishvili 2022: 5-6).

In Christa Wolf's novel, the typical motif of the opposition between dominant/marginal cultures, center/periphery, and Colchis/Corinth, which is characteristic of most literary interpretations of the Medea myth, is abolished. The traditional dichotomy is disrupted. In Wolf's novel, Colchis is no longer portrayed as a harmonious, mythical Eastern space, nor is Corinth depicted as a chaotic and destructive Western state. In both contexts, the governance model is authoritarian/totalitarian and patriarchal, restricting individual freedom and the rights of minorities—in this case, women. Justice becomes an unattainable goal.