

Jason and Medea's Relationship in *Medea*: A Postcolonial Analysis

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Abstract

Medea in Euripides' Medea murders her two sons to take revenge on her husband Jason who has married the Corinthian princess Glauce for royal power. However, little attention has been paid towards the cause behind the killing of her sons. This paper will examine the marital relationship between Medea and Jason from the perspective of the colonizer and the colonized and it will show Medea as the victim colonized who kills her brother and leaves her native land Colchis to marry Jason. Jason is presented as the oppressor colonizer who betrays Medea without whom he could have never achieved the Golden Fleece. The terms colonizer and colonized which are at the heart of the postcolonial theory are hardly applied with the play Medea. Therefore, analyzing this topic from the present-day postcolonial theory adds a new perspective to this Greek play.

Keywords: colonizer, colonized, postcolonialism, Medea, Jason

Colonialism - Colonizer and Colonized

Colonialism is described by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* as "the specific form of cultural exploitation that developed with the expansion of Europe over the last 400 years" (45). It is also the implanting of settlements on a distant territory (122). Ania Loomba defines colonialism as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods (8). Many postcolonial critics have focused on the terms "colonizer" and "colonized" which are present at the heart of postcolonial theory. For example, Edward Said thinks that the west or the colonizer refers to the east or colonized as the "other" and it is inferior to the west (qtd. in Barry 193). John McLeod suggests that colonizers seize foreign land for settlement (7) and that they consider the colonized as savage (77). Also, the colonizers suffer from displacement and search for their identity (11-14). Here I would like to add that colonizers seek power and they dominate the powerless class barbarously like the British colonizers who ruled the Africans as well as the Indians.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism has been defined by various critics. Elleke Boehmer addresses it as the "historical, political, cultural and textual ramifications of the colonial encounter between the west and the non-west, dating from the sixteenth century to the present day" (qtd. in Waugh 340). For Hans Bertens, postcolonial theory emphasizes the tension between the metropolis and the former colonies (200). It questions the aggressively expansionist imperialism of the colonial powers and in particular the system of values that supported imperialism of the colonizing powers and that it sees as still dominant within the western world (200). Another notable characteristic of postcolonialism is that it analyzes literature produced by cultures that developed in response to colonial domination, from the first point of colonial contact to the present (Tyson 418). Importantly, John McLeod identifies three features of postcolonialism in a literary context:

- 1) Reading texts produced by writers from countries with a history of colonialism, primarily those texts concerned with the workings and legacy of colonialism in either the past or the present.
- 2) Reading texts produced by those that have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism, or those descended from migrant families, which deal in the main with diaspora experience and its main consequences.
- 3) In the light of theories and colonial discourses, re-reading texts produced during colonialism; both those that directly addresses the experiences of Empire, and those that seem not to. (33)

The rise of this theory takes place for several noteworthy reasons. The demise of former colonial powers at the end of the twentieth century led to the heyday of postcolonialism. South Africa, India, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya got independence in the years 1931, 1947, 1957, 1960, and 1963 respectively. The First World War and the Second World War lessened the powers of colonizers and thus colonialism came to an end. This led to outbursts of various sensitive voices from former colonized nations against colonialism.

The postcolonial theory mainly deals with various literary pieces which study the encounter between the colonizers (oppressors) and the colonized (oppressed). This theory also throws light on those voices which talk about the rights of the colonized subaltern class. Moreover, it expresses the inferiority of the colonized race whose lands are taken by the colonizers or those at the center of power. Aside from these areas, the hypocrisy as well as the corruption of the colonizers who exploit the colonized class is criticized in postcolonial theory. Edward Said in *Orientalism* argues that the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination (5) and it indicates western superiority over Oriental backwardness (7). Overall, the Oriental is looked down upon as irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different. Thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, normal (40) and Orientalism is a western style for having authority over the Orient (88).

Another noteworthy idea in postcolonial discussion is the concept of the subaltern. This is a term adopted by the Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes (qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 215). As reported by Bertens, it is a term which categorizes those who are lower in position and lower in rank (212). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak associates this term with women who are shadowy figures with no discourse (qtd. in McLeod 193). In the case of colonialism, the subalterns are the suppressed, powerless, and voiceless Africans who are always at the background or periphery.

Greece does not strictly fall into the idea of a colony. However, in the case of *Medea*, Euripides' famous play, written in 431 BC, we see the focus on the strained marital life of Jason and Medea that is akin to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. According to Greek mythology, Medea, the enchantress of Colchis, marries Jason but years later he abandons her by marrying Glauce, the Corinthian Princess, for power. This angers Medea to such an extent that she murders Glauce and ultimately kills her two sons in order to punish Jason for his adultery.

Many critics focus on the colonizer-like cruel trait of Medea. Reid and Gillett call Medea a violent woman who follows vicious means like cruelty, hatred, jealousy, vindictiveness, callousness and greed in her life (20). Stuart Lawrence even goes to the extent of calling Medea a “barbarian and naturally passionate and therefore more likely to kill” (51). Other critics like Kitto throws light on the positive aspects of Medea who loves her children and Jason (192). Besides these views, Aristide Tessitore thinks that Medea is the “most glorious of Greek Heroes” because of her boldness and determination with which she cries out against Jason (595). One critic, Wertheim, has already defined Jason as a colonizer (338). This means that these critics are throwing light on the victimization of Medea.

A Postcolonial Analysis of *Medea*

In my paper, I will first analyze the character of Jason from a non-Eurocentric perspective which emphasizes his brutality and cunningness. I will then connect Medea with the concept of the Other, alterity and other lineaments of postcolonial theory. Finally, the terms of postcolonial theory like colonizer and colonized will be associated with Jason and Medea. Hence, the manifestation of Medea in this Greek play from the modern 20th century colonized postcolonial perspective as the subjugated and oppressed wife will remain the pivotal aspect of this paper.

I consider Medea as the representative of the colonized African people who are dominated and controlled by superior powers of white rulers although she successfully handles her revenge and mercilessly kills her two boys. Therefore, Jason emerges here as the brutal force of destruction and Medea a captive woman who fights for her authority like the Africans. So, Medea is the colonized and Jason is the colonizer.

To begin with, Medea is displaced from her home and must stay in Greece which is not her motherland. Her dislocation from her home connects her with the Other or the colonized people who are disassociated from their own root, ethnicity as well as race. Medea’s displacement is more abject because she was not abducted or taken by force. She was beguiled and compelled to commit crimes that make her situation even more complicated. Jason becomes her identity for a short time but soon the colonizer Jason neglects Medea when greater prospects for capitalism appear in front of him. Jason also belittles Medea’s Colchis as “barbarous” (25). Medea wants to commit suicide when Jason forsakes her, “If only I were dead!” (12). The outbursts of Medea like “O my father, my city, you I deserted” (14) and “I have no city” (16) reveals the psychological turmoil of Medea who has forsaken her native land for Jason.

Furthermore, Jason represents the occident as he believes in settlement and establishment in the land of Corinth. He renounces Medea because of her difference or inferior status but, in reality, it is his second marriage which shows his moral inferiority as well as degradation. His cruel nature makes him a mirror image of the whites who massacred the lives of the subordinate oriental people. To Jason, Medea is a woman whom he has brought from the “land of savages,” (50) and who must be exiled though he used her before to obtain the Golden Fleece. The question that arises here is whether Medea is actually uncivilized. The

Eurocentric colonizers have always looked down upon those whom they have subdued. They criticize the subjects as harmful, wild, savage, and uncivilized. Postcolonial theory defines these allegations as false because Africans had a rich culture and language, and are not savages as the fabricated stories of the whites would have the world believe. In fact, it is the colonizers who have looted the rich wealth of the Africans. It is not Medea's uncivilized nature but it is her love for Jason which leads her to commit crimes. Jason used Medea to obtain the Golden Fleece and similarly, the Europeans used the Africans to enrich their own countries. Just like the West, Jason also supposes in a self-righteous manner that he has bestowed a great favor on Medea by bringing her from her savage land.

To look at things impartially, Jason owes his success to Medea, a native of Colchis, to a great extent. Medea stoops too low while she betrays her father, kills her brother, kills Jason's enemy to bestow the Golden Fleece on him. Without the help of Medea, it would have been quite impossible for Jason to rise in status. Shockingly, Jason gives all the credit for his successful voyage to Aphrodite. Similarly, the British colonizers who ruled over Africa as well as India were also indebted to the inhabitants of these places who helped them with land and welcomed the colonizers wholeheartedly. Ironically, Medea who is "mad with love for Jason" (9) is betrayed by Jason and this parallels her distress to the Africans who were tricked by the colonizers. Hence, Jason who marries "for a royal bed" (10) and wants his sons to prosper with "brothers of royal blood" (27) is out and out a colonizer. The text of *Medea* may very well fall into the category of postcolonial literature because this plot revolves around the character of Jason who hinges on Medea to obtain the Golden Fleece but later deceives her for economic enrichment. In this manner, he snatches the rights and space of Medea and turns her into a colonized entity. He appears as the dominant colonizer who hardly considered the tribulations of his wife. Postcolonial theories take into account those literary pieces where a human being or a whole race is dominated by another human being or an ethnic group. In *Medea*, Jason wants to control Medea and thus the play becomes a topic of study in postcolonial theory.

In addition, the triumph of Medea at the end of the play highlights the freedom and success of the colonized African over Jason or the colonizers. Just like the superior race, Jason considers Medea unintelligent, foolish, barbarous, and irrational. Jason identifies Medea's agony as stemming out of "sex-jealousy" (26). Medea frees herself from the mastery of Jason by committing the murders as she believes that "no one shall take my children from me" (33). So, she epitomizes the subservient selves who are emancipated after their long struggle against the occidental group.

Medea could have accepted Jason's second marriage if she desired wealth. But Jason's infidelity triggers her sheer fury. It crushes her heart, leading to her searing wretchedness. Along with this, she is also aware of the inferior position of her children under the authority and domain of a powerless father and an enemy state. This situation is just like the slave women of Africa who give birth to powerless children of their white masters. She fights for the identity, existence, honor, and rights of her children. Thus, she is the voice of all those colonized people who want independence from the supremacy of the whites.

Although we pity Jason when he is not permitted to touch the dead bodies of his two sons, we must remember that he is culpable for his own downfall. He deserves the deepest wound for his heinous misdeed. Medea is just when she accuses Jason as the shameless, unmanly, “filthy coward” (23) as it is he who deceives Medea by marrying secretly. It is the “treachery” (50) of Jason which leads to the unclean, abhorrent, vile gross pollution perpetrated by Medea’s act of infanticide.

Turning to the play, we can notice that Jason evinces the sheer desire for political supremacy. He is too cautious about his own space, identity, and individuality. When Medea is the other or inferior, he seeks for more imperialistic power in Corinth. His marriage is only a political avenue to build his own territory. Jason is selfish in matters of power and he is greedy for wealth. To him, material gains become his pride. According to him, it is not a misdeed to suppress his wife for the sake of riches. He forgets about Medea with whose help he triumphantly bore away the Golden Fleece. Coupled with this, he thinks he has done a favor to Medea, the princess of a brutal race called Colchis, by bringing her to the civilized city of Greece. His ideas are the main features of the occidental beliefs which postcolonial theory discusses in detail.

Moving on to Medea who is a nonentity in Greece, it is seen that she sinks into despair as her identity of a wife is destroyed. She becomes an alter ego or the Other in the life of Jason as he marries for the second time. Cruelty of the occidental force as depicted by Jason makes Medea come face to face with the reality that she has been mistreated, her individuality has been ravaged, and her children will be marginalized in the future. Her rebellion is against those who have violated her and her children’s rights. Therefore, Jason appears as a domineering husband who has stigmatized the loyalty of the marriage and has deprived Medea from her matrimonial privileges. She is a subaltern woman who becomes a subject as well as an object in the hands of Jason and Creon. Jason has seized her marital rights and this is her struggle to establish her individuality. This quest for identity, equality, as well as freedom from a restricted and chained world remains the indispensable feature of postcolonial theory.

Conclusion

All in all, it can be seen that Medea is not merely the oppressed woman whose husband has married another woman and decided to forsake her and her children. In leaving her motherland for her husband, Medea became the colonized woman who finds no security and status in her supposed master’s abode, but at the same time, she is the embodiment of independence in her struggles to overcome her subordinate ranking. Jason seeks to dominate her like the colonizers by depriving her of her marital rights. And, in doing so, he also devalues his children and reduces them to a state of subordination. Medea’s acts of rebellion, therefore, place her in the position of the rising colonized who pursued and gained freedom, albeit at a very high price.

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