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THE REPRESENTATIONS OF "OTHER" IN EURIPIDES'S PLAYS

Nahid Fakhrshafaie

Abstract

A study of Euripides's plays shows how women in the ancient Greek society were regarded as "other" against the male Athenian "self". Euripides's male characters are associated with positive qualities like speech and reason but the female characters are usually deprived of either speech or reason: the dichotomy Man/Woman coincides with the dichotomies Speech/Silence and Reason/Madness. The heroines could be divided into two groups: passive angels, the "good women" who live only for the sake of others and active monsters, the "bad women" who possess an orgiastic and destructive nature. Both types are produced in a system of thought which is male-oriented. The first type, like Alcestis, represents the male dreams about ideal womanhood and the second type like Medea is representative of male fears concerning women. In both representations, the female characters are seen in relation to the male characters, as "other", not different in their own right.

One way to define things is to define them negatively, to see what they are not. In order to see what "self" is and where its boundaries lie, it is better to see what it is not. "Self" is defined against "other". The group or individual that wants to define itself attributes all that is negative to "other". In this defence mechanism of projection, the group or individual separates itself from "other" by taking on every positive quality and relating every negative quality to the community, group or person that has been chosen to fill the role of "other". Then this community, group or person becomes responsible for all the existing evil, while "self" is happily distanced from "other".

From the evidence in the plays, one could conclude that in the ancient Greece one such group was the female. Defined against the male Athenian self, the female presented everything that was abhored and atypical. She was regarded as an irrational being prone to emotional disorder, anger, and violence.

As she was subjected to the male gaze and

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judgement, she was destined to move within a predetermined frame of action. If she accepted to function as a dutiful mother, wife, or daughter, she was a "good woman". But if she refused to be subjected to the wishes of the male, to be regarded as the negative of the positive and not in her own right different, then she would be a "bad woman"; hence the images of angelic and monstrous women in literature. But to what extent does this picture conform with reality? And what was the real life that women lived in the ancient Greece? The issue has remained controversial.

Boardman et al (1986) argue that the playwrights portrayed women with greater vehemence and vivacity only because women were thought to be capable of irrational and violent action and the picture in the plays does not reflect reality (P. 215). They also stress the protecting function of family for women and their total dependence on their male guardian (P. 212).

Griffin also portrays a similar picture in which the women's untrustworthy nature leads to their imprisonment. He maintains that communities like ancient Greece which imprison women at home are uncomfortable about the things that they would probably do when their husbands are not at home. The fundamentally illogical and passionate nature of women is, according to these communities, tempted to wrongdoing (P. 129).

Kitto (1985), however, does not believe that women lived a life of confinement and repression. Accepting the limitations imposed on women like their lack of permission to attend assemblies, owning property, conducting legal business, and leaving the house alone, he observes that we cannot believe that something does not exist because we have no evidence that it does. Because we have no evidence about the relative freedom of women in Athens, we could not imagine them the victims of repression and disdain. The evidence of the vases and the plays show us that, contrary to commom belief, women lived in relative freedom. How could the vases and the plays be about something that does not exist in the society? Women, then, were not the "stunned creatures" they are supposed to be (PP. 228-29).

Indeed, the powerful presence that women make in Greek drama is remarkable, but whether this magnificent image represents an equally influential way of life is not certain.

In Euripides's plays, the majority of the main characters are female, the plays are peopled with female choruses, and most of them are named after the heroines: *Alcestis, Medea, Hecuba, Electra, Andromache, Helen, Iphiginia at Aulis,* and *Iphiginia among Taurians.* There are also other plays in which women have leading roles, like *Hippolytus* and *Ion.*

The freedom with which Euripides portrays his heroines, his sometimes sympathetic tone and the usual victory of his heroines has given him the reputation of a feminist and his play that of mirroring the social life. But one source questions the validity of this view by observing that Greek plays only show the release of stories about the untrustworthy, passionate and unreliable nature of women which were held in check before the society changed from agrarian to urban (Boardman et al, 1986, P. 215).

Euripides's heroines fall roughly into two groups. they are either passive angles or active monsters. Among his few angelic figures, Alcestis stands out from the rest. Obedient and faithful, Alcestis consents to die instead of her husband Admetus. This is because Fates have permitted Admetus to escape Hades by offering in exchange another body to the spirits below. Time and again in the play she is referred to as "the noblest of wives", and "the best woman under the sun by far". The praise that Alcestis receives because she has accepted to die instead of her husband shows the male's dreams and fantasies about ideal womanhood. But Alcestis is not rewarded the way such a sacrificial woman should have been rewarded. Her only request before she dies is that Admetus does not marry again. However, in spite of his promises, Admetus accepts Heracles's gift which is the veiled Alcestis brought back from Hades. But Alcestis is deprived of speech ever since her return form Hades. This could signify

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her spiritual as well as physical death. Her exclusion from the production of speech shows that women's oppression exists not only in the social structure but also in the foundation of articulation. It is not striking then that the dichotomy Man/Woman coincides with the dichotomy Speech/Silence. Speech is the prerogative of the male while silence belongs to the female. Alcestis represents one image of "other", submissive, silent, and obedient. This is the "good woman", the "sweet dumb snow white"[1].

Although Alcestis is brought back from Hades, it is her death rather than her revival that receives attention. Green (1996) observes that her death scene is used as a "funerary motif" (P. 54). But this is while she is offered to Admetus as a new bride. He also maintains that in Greek culture there was no great difference between a woman's marriage and her death. This is proved by the fact that bridal gifts are similar to gifts found in the graves of young women. As a young girl, a woman was protected by her father, after her marriage her husband took the role and after her death she moved to Hades, her new house (PP. 21-22). Alcestis's reunion with Admetus, then, is not a joyous occasion. Metaphorically, her silence implies death.

Without a share in the political and social life of the community in which she lived, a woman was transported from one domain to another. In her father's house she was regarded as a commodity which was to be handed over to the next guardian. In her husband's home, she was regarded as a stranger, and not a real member of the family. Nugent (1993) has pointed out the assimilation of the status of a woman and that of the stranger in Greek culture. Upon the entrance of a stranger into a house, ceremonies similar to those performed during a marriage take place. Any woman in this context would see herself as a stranger, an exile (P. 314).

An exile in the real sense of the term, Andromache is another submissive characater. Her submissiveness is emphasized because of her conflict with Hermione who is a demonic woman. Taken captive after Hector's death, she is given as slave to Neoptolomus and has borne him a son. This arouses the jealousy of Hermione, Neoptolomus's wife and she tries to kill Andromache. When they confront each other, Andromache lectures Hermione on the characteristics of a good woman, excluding Hermione from the description.

> Even if she gets a humble husband, a woman ought to be content and not start a competition of pretentions. If you had married a prince somewhere in Thrace, land of blizzards, where one husband shares his bed with many wives in turn, would you have slain these others? Then the sexual incontinence, manifest in you, would have been extended to all womankind (Euripides, 1977, P. 106).

And in accusing Hermione she goes on to accuse the whole sex:

> It is a strange thing that whereas there are antidotes, revealed to men by some god, against the venom of fierce serpents, nobody has yet discovered a remedy for a plague worse than fire or any viper -- the plague of woman. Such a curse our sex is to mankind (Euripides, 1977, P. 108).

This is usually the attitude of the male toward the female, but here a female identifies against herself. However, it is not only the "good woman" who condemns the "bad woman" The monstrous woman could also be critical of womankind.

Electra is a model of viciousness. Obsessed with self-pity and sex, she establishes herself as a bloodthirsty monster when she plans her mother's murder: "Let me shed my mother's blood and die!" (P. 214). When Orestes falters in his purpose, she urges him on by calling him a coward. Her motivations for revenge are envy of her mother and ambition rather than loyalty to her father. However she accuses Clytemnestra of being a bad woman when she attempts to justify her behaviour:

> You plead justice, but your plea is shameful. It behooves a woman of sense to yield to her husband in all things. Women who think otherwise, I maintain,

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> just do not count ... Any woman that cultivates her beauty when her husband is far from home could be written down as a wanton (PP. 232-33).

Clytemnestra belongs to the world in which Alcestis is praised for her "noble deed". "To the lives of all womankind has she [Alcestis] brought great glory in daring this noble deed" (P. 17). She has done just the opposite. Unlike Alcestis who has saved a husband, she has killed one. This is why she receives this treatment at the hands of another woman, her own daughter. Like Andromache, Electra identifies against her sex. When Orestes comes home with Aegisthus's body, she talks to the dead king, finding him wretched because he had been overshadowed by Clytemnestra:

> It is disgraceful when the woman and not the man rules the household. I loathe it too when children are called in the city not by the name of their father, the man, but of their mother. When a man makes a match with a woman of distinguished station, higher than his own, no one takes any account of the husband, but only of the wife (P. 229).

In undermining the power of women, Electra echoes Euripides's male characters who go so far as to question the female's raison d'etre. Hippolytus, for example, who flies into an uncontrollable rage when Phaedra's nurse informs him of Phaedra's love:

> Zeus, why did you let women settle in this word of light, a curse and snare to men? If you wished to propagate the human race, you should have arranged it without women ... Here is a proof that woman is a great nuisance. The father who begot her and brought her up pays a great dowery to get her out of his house and be rid of the plague. The man who receives the poisonous weed into his home rejoices and adds beautiful decorations to the useless ornament and tricks her out in gowns -- poor fool, frittering away the family property ... Happiest is he who has a cipher for a wife, a useless simpleton to sit at home. A clever woman I hate; may there never be in my house a woman more intellectual than a woman ought to be. Mischief is hatched by Cypris clever women; the helpless kind is kept from misconduct by the shortness of her wit ... (PP. 80-81).

Phaedra knows herself that she is "that object of universal detestation, a woman" (P. 76). When she decides to commit suicide, she also destroys Hippolytus by leaving a false message for Theseus about Hippolytus's evil intentions.

As Davis (1992) observes, the story of a married woman's love for a young man, the rejection of her advances, and her revenge on the man by accusing him to her husband appears in various forms, the most famous being the story of Potiphar's wife in the Genesis (P. 111). What is significant about Euripides's treatment of this theme is that the female is endowed with an especially evil drive[2].

That the female possesses an irrational, orgiastic and destructive nature is stressed in the other plays written by Euripides as well. In *Ion*, for example, when the old retainer finds Creusa in danger, he advises her to "do a deed worthy of your sex. Grasp a sword or use some trick or poison and kill your husband and the child before death comes to you from them" (P. 153). And Creusa follows his advice, trying to poison Ion when by accident Ion does not drink the poisonous wine and she finds out that he is her own son.

The destructive female has great powers of seduction, thus being a great threat to "mankind" . In *Trojan Women,* Hecuba warns against the danger of this kind of woman when she speaks to Menelaus about the mischievious Helen:

> I commend you, .Menelaus, for your intention to kill your wife. But flee the sight of her, lest she captivate you with longing. She captivates the eyes of men, she destroys cities, she sets homes aflame. Such are her witcheries. I know her; so do you and all her victims (P. 194).

But Hecuba herself is a femme fatal. As the title character in *Hecuba,* she avenges polydorus's murder in the cruellest possible way. Luring the Thracian king Polymestor and his children into her tent with cajoling tales about more of Priam's gold, Hecuba has his children killed and his eyes pulled out.

Among Euripides's "fierce mad queens", however, no one surpasses the infanticide Medea. Although in many myths she appears as the helper-maiden, in her past she has the murder of her brother. Euripides does not depict the murder of the brother but makes frequent references to it to show that the infanticide is not a sudden phenomenon[3].

At the beginning of the play, when the nurse speaks about Jason's remarriage, Medea is heard rather than seen. We hear her curse, moan and scream. She is grieving, but she is not doing it as a mild and obedient woman would have done.

She is doing it as a furious, rebellious and titanic woman. Before Medea appears on the stage, the nurse says to the tutor that Medea's rage would not subside until "the lightning of her fury has struck somebody to the ground" (P. 35). And the nurse foresees that the target of her fury would be her children. Before she does anybody any harm, though, in her first appearance on the stage, Medea delivers a lecture on the plight of women:

> Of all creatures that feel and think, we women are the unhappiest species. In the first place, we must pay a great dowry to a husband who will be the tyrant of our bodies ... and there's a fearful hazard: whether we shall get a good man or a bad. For separations bring disgrace on the woman and it is not possible to renounce one's husband ... They say that we have a sage life at home, whereas men must go to war. Nonsense! I had rather fight three battles than bear one child ... (PP. 37-38).

Unlike the female characters who are portrayed in opposition to a woman, Medea is opposed to a male character and turns out to be his superior[4]. From the beginning, she shows her readiness for fighting when she speaks about women's "murderous heart": "Woman in most respects is a timid creature, with no heart for strife and aghast at the sight of steel; but wronged in love, there is no heart more murderous than hers" (P. 38). Medea herself confesses that she possesses a "murderous heart" because she has been wronged in love. Before killing her children, Medea says that she knows how terrible her crime is but she cannot help it because "passion overrules my resolutions" (P. 56).

Passionate and mad, gripped by hysteria, this is another image of "other" in *Alcestis*; the female was associated with silence while in *Medea* the female is associated with madness. In *Alcestis*, the female was silent in a context where the males were identified with the prerogatives of discourse. In *Medea,* the title character's madness and hysteria is highlighted in the background of the reasonable behaviour of the male characters. The dichotomous opposition Reason/Madness parallels the dichotomy Man/ Woman. The woman is portrayed as either silent or mad. These are impasses confronting women whose cultural conditioning has deprived them of the very means of protest or self-affirmation.

Medea should be pitiable. She has lost her husband and is about to be exiled. What adds to her plight is that she is a foreigner in Greece. And what should have rendered the situation still more intolerable is that she has left her homeland and killed her brother for the sake of Jason who has now left her for a new bride. In spite of all this, Medea is not portrayed as a helpless victim. She has the power to change the situation the way she wants to. Unwilling to accept the passive role that an ordinary woman would have taken, she kills her and Jason's children to show that she could rise above any situation.

In "Becoming Medea: assimilation in Euripides", Deborah Boedeker (1990) notes that throughout the play Medea has been compared to natural elements like rock, waves, storm and sea and wild animals like bull and lioness. These metaphors make one doubt her misery as a homeless and forsaken woman (PP. 129-132).

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Indeed Medea could not be sympathized with because she is, in Sourvinou-Inwood's (1990) word, "a negative polarization of 'bad woman', itself a negative polarization of the notion 'normal woman', in which male fears concerning women and men's vulnerability to women within the family are crystallized" (P. 294).

Sourvinou-Inwood puts forward this image of Medea as "other" by focusing on the "zooming and distancing devices" which portray Medea. She observes that because Medea is represented at "shifting distances" she represents both the "bad woman", and the normal Athenian woman. Her costume, at times Greek and at times oriental, also intensifies this double role. However, the zooming techniques could mean that there is no real difference between this monstrous woman and an ordinary woman (PP. 253-96). She also adds that this double image shows the male fear of the all-encompassing role of evil in the female (P. 295).

Medea wavers between the two poles of good and evil, "self" and "other", if in a narrower sense, "self" is the ordinary Greek woman and "other" the foreign and barbarian woman whose very existence is a threat to the community. However, it is finally as "other" that she establishes herself. When Jason says to her, at the end of the play that "no Greek woman would ever have done such a deed" (P. 61), her difference from the ordinary Athenian woman is stressed. Her foreignness to which many references are made in the course of the play is also stressed by herself and the chorus.

Relying heavily on the evidence of the vases, one source emphasizes Medea's foreignness and strangeness and her final victory as the victory of "other". What is significant about these vase paintings is that Medea appears aloft in a chariot enclosed by the Sun (Sourvinou-Inwood, 1990, PP. 269-70). The same source observes that the addition of Erinyes to the scene suggests that the play's ending as it stood disturbed the audience (P. 272). In Euripides's play, there are no furies and the fact that vase painters added these revengeful figures shows their and the ancient society's dissatisfaction with the ending of the play in which a monstrous woman escapes the mess she has created[5].

Regarding *Medea* as an example of "heroism of 'other'", Albert Wertheim (1995) makes this comment about Medea's victory:

> The unexpected triumph of Medea despite her bloody deeds is the triumph not merely of a woman wronged but of female intelligence and, even more significantly, of the ethnic Other, who is always seen by the hegemonic culture as inherently less intelligent, less rational, barbarous, and literally or more often metaphorically female and hence as an easy target for subjugation and exploitation by a masterful, intelligent, civilized, male 'superior' society (P. 337)[6].

Medea is the victorious "other". And it is her "otherness" that has given her the strange power that she has. Mary Douglas, about the power of "marginal people", notes that whereas military, political, and economical power belongs to the centric part of the society (comprised of the male citizens), there are other types of power accessible to the unimportant members of the society, like women, who have only a marginal role in the community. This power is in the domain of the supernatual, the divine, and the magical (cited in Nugent, 1993, P. 315). Euripides protrays Medea as triumphant, but her very representation shows that she is seen from a male point of view. She only occupies one end of the spectrum of "other". On the other end stands Alcestics. In between are other female characters with various colourings. But the two ends are specified. There is the "good woman" and there is the "bad woman". The "good woman" claims only to meet the needs of others while the "bad woman" renounces any commitments. Both types are seen only in their relation to a male character. The passive angel and the active monster are only productions of a male-oriented system of thought.

Notes

1. In "A Woman Scorned: The Medea Plays of

Euripides, Hans Henny Jahn, and Jean Anouilh," *Classical and Modern Literature:* A Quarterly, (1981): 177-186, Robert F. Bell draws a comparison between Medea and Walt Disney's "Wicked Queen" in *Snow White.*

2. Jasper Griffin in "Characterization in Euripides", Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature, ed. C.B.R. Pelling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 130, points out that Euripides is unique in "blessing" his mythological characters with evil drives. Sophocles, he writes, treats the same characters with the "venom" taken away. Sophocles's portrayal of Phaedra is an example of this characterization: Phaedra's betrayal of her husband finds another meaning in the light of her belief that Thesues who has gone to the underworld is dead.

3. In none of the mythological versions of Medea is Medea responsible for the murder of her children. The infanticide seems to be Euripide's own invention.

4. Robin Sowerby in *The Greeks: An Introduction to Their Culture,* (London: Routledge, 1995, P. 95) argues that this sympathetic representation shows that Euripides could not be a misogynist.

5. Referring to Taplin, in "Medea at a Shifting Distance: Images and Euripidean Tragedy", *Medea: Essays in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art,* (Princeton: Princeton Universtiy Press, 1997, P. 271), Sourvinou-Inwood writes; "The differences between the tragedy and images ... may be due to iconographic changes, the influence of a local restaging or a mixture of both".

6. In this article, Wertheim compares *Medea* with *Demea (1990),* a modern version of the original play by Guy Butler in which Medea is made black. Medea as ethnic "other" has also inspired another modern version in which the title character is made black. The play is entitled *Medea,* by the German Hans Henny Jahn (1962).

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