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A Study of the Archetypal Representations of Medea in Different Ages through Jung's Collective Unconscious

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ABSTRACT

The collective unconscious is a complex database of human experiences since the birth of mankind. It manifests in the form of social values and ideologies which are then passed down from generation to generation through myths, culture, and traditions. Individuals react differently to these aspects of society, resulting in certain behaviours and attitudes. Carl G. Jung segregates these behavioural patterns into different archetypes. A myth can be analysed to identify the symbols and motifs related to a certain character to identify their archetype. This research looks at the archetype associated with Medea, a prominent character in Greek mythology. While the myth was first recorded by Hesiod around 700 BCE, a tragedy written in 431 BCE by the Greek playwright Euripides popularised it. A literary analysis of this play along with four other primary texts will enable the identification of symbols and themes that link Medea to a specific Jungian archetypal image. The other primary texts are Richard Glover's play (1795), a poem by Augusta Davies Webster (1870), a modern retelling by Christa Wolf (1996), and a contemporary novel by David Vann (2017). A comparison of Euripides' portrayal of Medea with that of writers from different periods can help in identifying similarities and differences in her archetypal representation in the context of cultural evolution. Jung's concept of archetypal images can, thus, be significant in identifying any cultural modifications to the archetypal image linked with Medea's character.

Keywords: Archetypes, Jung, Collective Unconscious, Mythology, Medea

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Introduction

We often form certain ideas about an individual based on their behaviour or actions and judge them without having any background information about them. Carl Jung, a prominent

psychoanalyst and theorist, postulated that all humans share a collective unconscious. Jung explains that there is a deeper underlying unconscious, beyond the 'personal unconscious,' which he termed as the 'collective unconscious.' According to Jung, this 'unconscious' is universal, not individual, and consists of thoughts and behavioural modes that are almost the same for individuals across the world. These thoughts and behavioural modes are termed as 'archetypes.' The ideas associated with a myth are a reflection of the collective unconscious of mankind. However, the narrative may have been modified and retold over the centuries. As an advanced society with tools to verify at least some parts of these 'myths,' we have a responsibility to bring forth their underlying meanings.

This study will integrate concepts from psychology, especially those related to psychoanalysis, in the analysis of several primary texts that present Medea as the central character. It will also refer to concepts related to anthropological and cultural evolution to understand the impact of societal changes on the perception of myths and mythical characters. The motive for undertaking this study is to understand how human psychology impacts the way a particular individual or narrative becomes immortalised through myth. The character of Medea can very likely be a tragic heroine of her own story rather than a villain in Jason's legend.

There are several versions of Medea's story but Euripides' version, which highlights her as a murderous woman blind with rage, is the most accepted. Euripides himself is said to have 'revised' a play titled *Medea* by Nephron (Taplin 2013). The play has inspired several versions of Medea's story that present an image of her that is shaped by the conditions in her surroundings as well as her reactions to them.

The study will rely on the theoretical framework presented by Jung as his concept of the collective unconscious will be sufficient to achieve its objectives. As these are fictions written in different periods, they grant insights into their author's unconscious which can be assumed to be a part of the greater 'collective.' The qualitative approach is expected to effectively connect the concepts within the secondary texts and apply them to the contents of the primary texts in this psychoanalytic study of literature. The limitations that exist in conducting this study include the use of 'translated' primary texts instead of the original works. Another limitation of the study

is that a single individual can represent multiple archetypes throughout their life and these can keep evolving.

The current research work is based on the postulation that the representation of Medea in literature has been modified through the ages, but the overall archetype—ideas, symbols, and motifs—associated with her remain the same.

Literature Review

Carl G. Jung (1969) theorised that the human psyche is divided into two major sections, the conscious (or Ego in Freud's terms) and the personal unconscious. While the conscious is aware and perceptive, the personal unconscious keeps records of our memories, experiences, and emotions unbeknownst to us. When the two interact, they form patterns or complexes that guide our behaviours, impulses, and feelings. The 'collective unconscious' is separate from these two sections of the psyche. It is a shared database of universal memories inherited from our ancestors and contains information about universal signs, symbols, and motifs that are found in myths and religious narratives, or experienced through dreams. The signs, symbols, and motifs represent certain archetypes, four in particular as described by Jung. These include the self, persona, anima/animus, and shadow.

According to Samuels and colleagues (1986) the self is formed through the unification of all personality aspects that inculcate both the conscious and the unconscious. The process of individuation occurs when all lived experiences create an identity for the person. The persona is what is presented to the world and is a reflection of societal values, norms, and expectations. Personality transformation occurs when the anima/animus take possession of the psyche, essentially making characteristics associated with the opposite sex prominent. The anima/animus can occur naturally or might be acquired and have positive and negative aspects respectively. Jung described the shadow archetype as the undesired aspects of one's psyche or as the negative psyche. The shadow results from repressed emotions and negative experiences, and when untreated, might abruptly become prominent when subjected to unanticipated loss, fear, or pain.

According to Rowena Mahmoud (2023), the shadow is part of the psyche that protects the individual against trauma. When the person undergoes a terrifying experience, making them feel powerless, the shadow hides the trauma, pretending that the individual is not vulnerable. The shadow essentially acts as a protector against potential persecution by society. If an individual has an absent caregiver who has harmed them in any possible manner, they will tend to distrust any such figures in their life, including themselves. As a result, the individual's shadow psyche will guide their actions and behaviours, making them believe that they are unlovable and untrustworthy. Such individuals find solace in relations that make them feel safe, sometimes resulting in overattachment. When these relationships fail or are lost due to any reason, the shock encourages the psyche to be overtaken by the shadow, commandeering the individual's actions and behaviours. Unless recognised and willingly subjected to transformation, the shadow can overpower a person, driving their desires and motivations.

Jung further defines twelve major archetypal images that are often seen as characters in mythology, religion, and literature. These include the innocent, the orphan, the warrior, the caregiver, the seeker, the destroyer, the lover, the creator, the fool, the sage, the magician, and the ruler. In her book titled *Awakening the Heroes Within*, Pearson (1991) describes different levels of expression of these archetypal images, creating different personality types. Depending on the complexity and level of expression intertwined with gender dynamics and cultural norms, these archetypes are assigned certain meanings.

In *Euripides: Medea* (2003), the editor Mastronarde provides a long general introduction to the play along with other details related to its production during its initial days. Within this, he elaborates on Medea's motivations and decisions as seen in the plot of Euripides' play based on the myth. He describes Medea as portrayed in the play: a barbarian, a witch, and a woman. Most importantly, the significance of the imagery used in the play is explained in the context of the character of 'Medea.'

The article titled "Through a Glass Darkly: Medea as a Reluctant Goddess" by Vasillopulos (2014) was published in the *Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche* (Vol. 8). It discusses the concept of 'myth' in the context of psychology. While Jung himself has provided detailed descriptions

of the concept of myth as a reflection of the collective unconscious, Vasillopulos further connects it to the myth of Medea. Here, the author examines Medea through the perspective of the archetype of the 'mother' as defined by Jung, with elaborations on the concept of the 'Terrible Mother' as discussed by Eric Neumann.

Vol. 1 of *Handbook of Evolution* edited by Wuketis and Antweiler (2004) talks about 'The Evolution of Human Societies and Cultures.' The book discusses various aspects of 'cultural evolution' in humans across geographical and temporal distances. It provides detailed insights into the 'human adaptation for culture' and the 'cognitive evolution' of humans, only to further connect these ideas to the concepts of 'construction of culture' and 'evolution of morality.'

Identifying Medea's Archetype

Medea's actions, attitudes, and behaviours are indicative of a negative, powerful shadow psyche. According to Pearson (1991), the archetype that is expressed as the outcome of a negative shadow is the 'Destroyer.' The actions and behaviours resulting from loss or tragedy a person has experienced give rise to the 'destroyer' archetype. The shadow, made up of repressed memories and experiences, lashes outwards, harming anything in its path, as retaliation for what the individual has faced themselves. This is revenge for all the oppression, hate, and revilement they are subjected to by the people in their surroundings. Medea's actions and behaviour are a result of her insane drive for revenge. The Destroyer is described as having 'the capacity for genuine and passionate love' (Pearson, 1991). Medea, as recalled in several instances during the plot, is passionately in love with Jason. She has ensured Jason's success and safe escape. Denying the existence of the negative shadow, the 'destroyer' grows stronger, often seen battling with its conscience. Medea, in a monologue in Euripides' play (Taplin, lines 1040-1052), displays a similar internal conflict, torn between protecting her children as a mother, avenging herself against her husband, and proving her worth as the progeny of a powerful lineage.

As certain aspects of life become clearer due to unforeseen circumstances, the destroyer sees past the illusions they have created for themselves and gives up false hope. Medea's faith in Jason is shattered by his actions and she gives up any hope of reconciliation as she believes that

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Jason has gone beyond her reach. Pearson (1991) also describes the destroyer as showing addictive tendencies that undermine their relationships and impact their behaviours, causing them to inflict emotional or physical harm or even murder individuals they consider harmful. Medea's addictive tendencies are indicated by her need to hold power over others and her destiny. Her betrayal of her father, the need to follow Jason, the drive for revenge, and justifying the killing of her sons, are all an act of self-preservation. In doing so, the destroyer loses its identity, and transforms into another, taking up guises of other archetypes, and transferring to the persona aspect of the psyche. Medea transforms into an evil sorceress from a loving mother and passionate lover, and later takes up the guise of a helper to seek asylum with Aegeus.

Similarities and Differences in Medea's Portrayal through the Ages

Richard Glover's *Medea: A Tragedy in Five Acts* was written in the late 18th century to be performed on stage. The play stands as an example of the influence of Italian Renaissance literature on English playwrights during the neoclassical period.

Medea's actions are a result of her grief and anger; a tragedy as the title announces. She is seen lashing out at her advisors, her fellow Colchians, and Jason. She does not trust anyone's words and questions everyone's intentions, indicating disillusionment. She drowns herself in self-hatred over Jason's betrayal, filled with regret for leaving behind her family. The key motifs in the play are Medea's anger and contempt for Jason's actions. She despairs and is ashamed of her husband's actions. She is determined that her passion for Jason is the cause for all her misery and divine intervention aided her downfall. She seeks justice for being abandoned, and her children forced to wander and suffer. Medea longs for safety and peace for her soul and begs the gods to end her misery. This is indicative of self-harm underlying her misguided efforts of self-preservation. On the other hand, she is shown to be overcome with emotions and wants to forgive Jason, falling at his feet. This is indicative of a conflicted mind. The plot shows Jason to be apologetic for his actions and thus, salvages his character from criticism, while Medea is portrayed to be unreasonable and her actions as impulsive. She is shown to be a hysterical woman who loses her sanity at the loss of her husband. This is indicative of her shadow coming out of her unconscious and taking hold of her consciousness, driving her actions. However, at the end

of the play, the realisation of her actions dawns on Medea, triggering her transformation from being angry to grieving and remorseful. Her flight out of Corinth is symbolic of her letting go of a situation that she has no power over.

Augusta Davies Webster's poem 'Medea in Athens,' first published in 1870, is a part of her collection titled *Portraits and Other Poems*. The poem is a monologue of Medea after she escapes from Corinth as per Euripides' plot. In the poem's setting, she resides in Athens as Aegeus' wife and has just received the news of Jason's death.

After leaving Corinth for Athens, Medea seems to have let go of her previous life. Her indifference to Jason's death is evident in her moving on to a life of happiness. She replaces Jason with Aegeus and claims to be living happily as his beloved Queen. Medea seems to have undergone a transformation from a dominant negative shadow to a pacified one. However, it does not mean that she let go of her hurt, pain, and anger. It was rather suppressed with great efforts and restarting a new life. This is indicative of the destroyer's other half, that of the creator. The shadow now takes measures for self-preservation by moving away from the past and opening doors to the future, Jason's death fills her with a sense of guilt which is indicative of the shadow-possessed psyche's tendency for self-blame and internalised hatred for one's actions. However, she recovers quickly from this guilt-ridden daze, presenting with the motif of disillusionment. For Medea, Jason and now Aegeus seem to have been mere companions passing through her life, giving her a sense of loneliness.

Medea: A Modern Retelling is a 1996 novel by Christa Wolf. Originally written in German, the novel was translated into English by John Cullen. It rediscovers Medea through the perspective of six main characters, including Medea herself. Each one of these characters or 'voices' tells a different side of Medea's story, bringing forth a story of conspiracy against the heroine by the Corinthians (Cullen, 1998).

Medea is indifferent to Jason's desires or feelings and does not want to get to know him completely. She fears that she'll lose herself and be seduced by him if she lets Jason into her consciousness. Jason was just a means for her to get away from Colchis after learning the

devastating truth about her brother's death. Medea recalls how Jason changed once they were aboard the Argo and the Golden Fleece on his shoulders. He started treating her differently, like an outsider, a refugee, she was called by the Argonauts. Medea was aware of how she was perceived by her people in Colchis for having helped Jason. The Colchians who had followed her also started making stories about her as they started missing their homeland, which they had left willingly, for the same reasons as Medea. All the stories portray her as a vicious witch who is out to seek revenge against Jason and everyone close to him. Medea wants nothing to do with the power struggle within Corinth and is determined to not be unfazed by the ongoings. However, this aloofness causes her downfall and leads her down a path of misery. If she had decided to retaliate, Medea knew that none of Creon's men were a match for her intellect. Yet, she decides to stay away for the sake of her beloved children. Her shadow is only triggered by the end of the plot when she learns about the death of her children. Until then, a series of personas were her accomplices, in Colchis and Corinth. These are not the typical aspects that are expected of a Destroyer archetype.

Ideological Evolution through the Ages

During the 5th century BCE Greece, honour was a significant value that determined one's social standing and influence (Bryant 1996). One was expected to be devoted and loyal to their family. Ritualistic sacrifices were seen as an attempt to connect with divine forces to ensure peace and prosperity (Bryant 1996). However, they also believed that everyone's fate is sealed and cannot be changed. Courage and glory went hand-in-hand, heroes who showed the most courage received all the glory. Anyone who failed to follow these would then be labelled as a rebel and cast out of society and all its narratives. Gender dynamics added to this complex equation. Power of any sort would have been considered the right of a male and any indication of it regarding a female would have been a cause for concern. Women were not to interfere with stately affairs or have any opinions about their husbands' decisions (Ferguson 2016). Greece was divided into various nation–states made up of smaller tribes and possession of land signified power and strength (Bryant 1996). As such, foreigners or immigrants were considered morally and culturally backward.

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During the Enlightenment era, science was gaining popularity. The age of reason proved to be inclined toward logical thinking and the application of scientific phenomena to explain different elements of life, including mythology and religion (Dupré 2008). People started questioning age-old traditions that could not be rationalised, rejecting inherited narratives. Experimentation was emphasised to ensure the development of science, which was believed to be the key to human progress (Dupré 2008). Morality was another aspect that saw a shift during this period. People built ethics and morals based on reason and humanity rather than as dictated by religious texts (Wayand 1996). Free will, individuality, and personal rights for men and women were newly emerging concepts. Studies related to 'hysteria' were gaining popularity and the term was used to describe nervous breakdowns caused by 'emotions such as sadness, fear, and boredom' (Risse 1988). Social contracts like marriage came under certain religious and judicial laws that were designed to protect the rights of the individuals involved (Wayand 1992). Infidelity was a subject of contempt and derision. Ethnocentric studies were gaining popularity and foreign cultures became a topic of fascination (Dupré 2008). Thus, changed the attitudes toward foreigners, they intrigued the natives, but at the same time were considered inferior, marking the beginning of the colonial perspective.

The Victorian era is known for its strict morals and codes of conduct. Conscientious behaviour, chastity, and domesticity were at the centre of the familial institution (Marsden 2014). The Victorian society was divided based on class and ethnicity. Identity and status were marked by race, religion, and livelihood. However, gender was the most important aspect for determining one's position in society. Sexual morality presided over every aspect of an individual's life, commenting on their character and potential as a member of society (Sigsworth 1988). They strongly believed that men and women have different physical attributes and thus, are meant for different positions and responsibilities (Marsden 2014). Women were representatives of domestic morals and ideals, while men represented public pursuits. 'Sex' was crucial for men, while 'reproduction' was to women (Williams 2016). Women were expected to be dependent on their male relatives and did not have any agency or free will in social settings (Digby 1992). Women with ambitions and passions were considered highly immoral and not suited to be associated with. Religious piety regained popularity during this era through the Protestant

Church and social values of humility and obedience were connected with religious ideologies (Sigsworth 1988). Myths became a tool for emphasising and re-establishing values that resonated with Christianity. Personal honour and reputation were of great significance for the Victorians. The late 20th century saw a major shift from religious and social values to global secularism and gender equality (Casanova 2006). Colonial powers had been dismantled by the two World Wars and questions were raised against patriarchal standards and values. People moved towards self-expression and empowerment and demanded agency over their lives, rejecting moral and cultural supremacy (Inglehart 2008). During the same time, talk about gender equality was on the rise with the world having experienced the second and third wave of the feminist movement. Women were now rejecting their historical marginalisation and raising their voices for equal status in society (Maynard 1995). Psychological realism was gaining popularity with new perspectives on emotional and behavioural complexities that found its way into literary texts as well (Mustapha 1994). Female attributes like passionate love and the need for romantic relationships that were significantly explored in the past were now replaced with personal agency and choice (Maynard 1995).

Findings and Conclusion

Euripides' play provided a base value against which the portrayal of Medea by other authors could be effectively judged. Any changes in her archetypal representation can be cross-checked through her identification as a destroyer from Euripides' plot. In Euripides' play, Medea is represented as the destroyer archetype throughout the plot. This destroyer is, however, the creation of the societal norms and religious ideologies prevalent within ancient Greek culture. Her character is portrayed as the destroyer as a cautionary tale for women trying to transgress societal framework. In Glover's play, her destroyer archetype subsides to give way to the seeker within, motivated by the desire for survival. The societal standards prevalent during the Enlightenment period emphasised rationalisation and moral favouring human welfare. As such, Medea is seen transforming from the Destroyer into the Seeker, which is a more rational archetype. She is not vengeful, but just angry, a lucid response to her trysts. Webster's Medea is again villainised to some extent, as seen from Jason's speech in Medea's vision, by the prevalent

social and religious ideologies of the Victorian period. Her Destroyer archetype presented itself in her actions in Corinth. Her behaviour and response to Jason's betrayal were aided by this Destroyer. However, as the Victorian age is also credited with active efforts for human progress, we see Webster's Medea becoming a Creator as her Destroyer archetype transforms. Wolf's Medea differs from all the other three portrayals as none of her behavioural traits and experiences associate her with the Destroyer archetype. She is a Seeker from the very start, with a strong response to any situation by being true to herself. Reflecting on this archetypal representation of Medea in the context of the ideals of the late 20th century, it becomes quite evident that Wolf's Medea is a strong feminist with aspirations that transcend beyond meagre emotional impulses.

This study was undertaken to identify the archetype associated with Medea through a close reading of four primary texts belonging to four different periods in history. The portrayal of Medea was highly influenced by the prevalent social values, norms, and ideologies of each period. Whenever Medea is found guilty of transgressing any of these values, she emerges as an individual with a destroyer archetype. When the ideologies permit rationalisation and empiricism, Medea is transformed into a Seeker who is searching for a better life. When the ideologies permit the progress of humankind and individualisation, she is transformed into a creator not seeking a better life but altogether a completely new identity. Although Medea's myth has been dispersed far and wide, with significant changes to the plot and her plight, the majority of literary records paint her as a revenge-seeker. Only when we get to the late 20th century do we see a completely different narrative of a woman who is simply a victim of patriarchy, and yet maintains moral superiority through authenticity. The similarities and differences in her archetypal representation helped examine the influence of prevalent social norms and values on her archetypal transformation and modification. As such, it can be concluded that Medea's archetypal representation has undergone major transformations through the ages as a result of social values and ideologies playing a substantial external stimulator.

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