

**MURDERING CHILDREN  
AS REACTION OF PSYCOPATHIC PERSONALITY DISORDER  
A Psychological Study of Literature in Euripides' *Medea***

**Hadiyanto**

**Fakultas Bahasa & Budaya Asing Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang**

**ABSTRACT**

*Literature-psychology relationship has given much contribution to development of both disciplines of knowledge. Such relationship enables any methods within psychology to be applied to analyze literary works, and vice versa, psychological phenomenon found in literary works can give feedback to development of psychology. This essay is aimed at analyzing the cause of Medea's failure in marriage, her psychological state, and psychopathic personality disorder reaction so that Medea eventually decides to murder her own children. In this Euripides' literary work, Medea, the sufferer of psychopathic personality disorder, has some psychological disorder indications such as maladaptive behavior and personal distress. Characteristics of psychopathic personality disorder are guiltless feeling and no remorse for every sadistic maladaptive behavior she has committed all her life. She has no conscience, just follows her impulsive drive without considering other's right to live, and has no ability to change her maladaptive behavior throughout her life. Murdering her own children, king Kreon and his daughter, and dismembering her own brother's body into pieces for the dragon are evidence for a psychopath Medea. The importance factors having a role to shape Medea's personality are biological and parental factor. Medea's biological factor is her non-reactive nerve system which leads her to commit a cruel deed aggressively and unable to hear somebody's advice and restriction. Whereas based on parental factor, Medea from childhood to adulthood is reared in killer family and environment, so it also shapes Medea's personality to be a cold-blooded killer.*

**Key words:** *psychopathic personality disorder, murdering, guiltless feeling, maladaptive, personal distress, biological-parental factor.*

**1. Introduction**

Methodological relationship between literature and psychology has given much contribution to development of both disciplines of knowledge. Such relationship enables any methods within psychology to be applied to analyze literary works, and vice versa, psychological phenomenon found in literary works can give feedback to development of psychology. Jung (1970) ever states

that psychology can be applied to analyze literary works, since human's psyche has potential power of all knowledge and arts. Thereby, literature-psychology relationship is actually inseparable.

A great number of depth psychologists discover that excessive love would, at a certain point of time, change into resentment and vengeance beyond measure which eventually beguile people to act cruelly to another since human nature is

basically evil and predatory (Freud, 1974). In Euripides' Greek tragedy drama *Medea*, the woman in the story has consciously committed horrible mischief, cruelty and sadism by murdering her guiltless children with no sense of pity and remorse. This indicates that such a woman horribly suffers from a certain psychological disorder or abnormality which leads her to lose other's lives so easily. A normal person will not commit a sadistic deed easily and even murder others and children easily, unfeelingly. Those who are psychologically normal will never indulge their ego and have the heart to murder their own children. Such a psychological disorder phenomenon is greatly interesting to be a factual case that plausibly emerges in our everyday life as well.

Murdering guiltlessly is an indication of psychopathic personality reaction. A man or a woman who suffers from psychopathic personality disorder would pitilessly torture and even kill others with no feeling of remorse and sinful feeling (Myers, 1986:453). The sufferer of psychopathic personality disorder seems to have a bit sense of responsibility, morality and care towards others. His or her behavior is completely determined by his or her own need. The sufferer, who is better known as a psychopath acts impulsively, seeks for immediate satisfaction and has no ability to be stricken by times of frustration. Although the sufferer understands amoral deeds, he or she does not exhibit concern about it at all. A psychopath commits a cruel crime in adulthood such as fighting, kidnapping, robbing, torturing, raping and even murdering. Murdering is

some kind of a nice habit and something commonplace to a psychopath.

This essay is aimed at revealing and analyzing Medea's psychological state, psychological reason and psychological disorder reaction due to heartbreak, resentment and vengeance toward failure in marriage so that Medea ultimately decides to murder her own children with no feeling of guilt and remorse.

## **2. Murdering Children Guiltlessly as Reaction of Psychopathic Personality Disorder**

### **a. Medea's Maladaptive Behavior**

One can be labeled psychologically disordered if one's behavior is extremely maladaptive, that is, causing worse effect toward individual, himself or herself, others, and society (Atkinson, 1953:404). In connection with this theory, Medea is categorized a psychologically-disordered person, that is, suffering from psychopathic personality disorder since she exhibits maladaptive behavior by easily waving her brutal, sadistic hands upon others. Not merely does she plunge her children into sorrowful death, but also to other persons such as her brother, Pelias, Kreon and his daughter. Undeniably, her behavior for violating human's right will never be accepted by society around, because everybody has the same right to live a life.

A normal person would think over and over again to end children's lives. Such sadistic deed is surely hurting and harming others extremely. Children, anyway, have no fault and sin regarding the things their parents face. Based on this matter, Medea's

behavior is evidently maladaptive since what she has committed brings grief and misery for others. Medea's impulsive willingness to harm her children can be seen below:

Medea : "Oh my heart,... Come my hand and seize the sword, take it... Don't be a coward... Do not think of the children, and how dear they are to you who are their mother. For one brief day, Medea forget your children..."

(Euripides, 61)

#### b. Medea's Personal Distress

Another parameter, which is used to categorize psychological disorder, is one's personal distress symptoms in which the sufferer feels anxious, depressed, agitated, and awfully ill (Atkinson, 1953:405). In accordance with this statement, at this point, Medea is so anxious and depressed to see her failure in marriage and face bitter days for the days of banishment into exile upon Kreon's decree to drive Medea out from the land of Corinth. What there is in Medea's mind is that all of her enemies, the ones she hates, will certainly insult and mock her as a despised exile. She also feels anxious since she will live a long life without anybody else beside her who can give shelter and refuge in banishment. Never before has she imagined that some day bitterness will come her way and lead her to great anxiety. Medea's anxiety can be seen in Chorag statement about her as described below:

Chorag : "Pitiful woman! Oh we pity the sorrow

and anxiety you suffer! Where will you turn now? Who can help you? What home remains, what land is left to save you from destruction? O Medea, you have been hurled by heaven into ocean of despair."

(Euripides, 47)

Medea's anxiety is also viewed when she is in the face of Jason, complaining about anything miserable and unpleasant.

Medea : "...And now I am to be cast off forth into exile, in utter misery, alone with my children and without a single friend! Oh, this will be shameful upon you,... That your own children, and their mother, who saved your life, should go wandering around the world like beggars!..."

(Euripides, 49)

More severely, a depressed person will be inclined to commit suicide if the person can not stand being in such a condition. Similarly, due to being depressed and agitated, over and over again Medea utters some depressing words that imply to death:

Medea : "Lost, oh lost! I'm lost in my sufferings. I wish, oh I wish that I could die..."

(Euripides, 43)

Repeatedly Medea utters frustrating words by hoping immediate death upon her. She thinks that there is no point in living much longer in the world by having to discern the bitter fact of failure in marriage. With death door, she would ease misery and disappointment. To her, life is indeed in ruins as a result of failure in marriage she never wishes to occur. Owing to this matter, she is no longer willing prolonging her life in the world but death.

Medea : "Oh how I wish that a stroke of lightning would fall from heaven and shatter my head! Why I should I live any longer? Death would bring release; in death I could leave behind me the horror of living". "...But this new things has fallen upon me so unexpectedly, my strength is broken. O my friends, my life is shattered; my heart no longer longs for the blessing of life, but only for death!..."

(Euripides, 45)

### c. Characteristics and Evidence of Psychopathic Personality Disorder Medea Suffers

The sufferer of psychopathic personality disorder, better known as a psychopath, seems to have a bit sense of responsibility, morality and care towards others (Atkinson, 1953:468). At this point, Medea has clearly exhibited her psychological disorder by neglecting her responsibility to

give shelter and continuous affection to her children. She has despised the children not to take care of them any more, instead she looks down on the children's right to longer live in the world. They are kids who have no guilt and sin toward what their parents do, yet with what reasons they have to be sadistically murdered. Hatred and anger in Medea toward her two children as the effect of Jason's decision to marry another is remarkably boundless. No longer does she love them, conversely Medea hopes misery and destruction upon her sons. Death is the best thing to the children. This can be viewed when Medea curses them over her suffering as quoted below:

Medea : "Oh, I have suffered enough for all these tears! I call destruction upon you, all, all of you, sons of a doomed mother, and the father too! May ruin fall on the entire house!"

(Euripides, 43)

Based on the quotation above, it implies that Medea has no good morality and sense of mother to her children any more. Medea in this regard acts impulsively just to fulfill her own need and seek destructive immediate compensation over her failure in marriage. She can not think normally that murdering children is losing her own happiness as a mother some day.

The sufferers of psychopathic personality disorder is also not aware of behavior limit which potentially will do someone else harm and neglect how terrible suffering other people bear because of his or her

damaging behavior (Meyer, 1986:454). It is very clear that in this case Medea does not heed her own behavior limit that causes the children to die. No consciousness of moral conscience in Medea, in spite of the fact that she understands the consequence of amoral acts, Medea remains neglecting it a lot. She persistently sets her mind to murder her children. Medea loses ability to control her destructive impulse. She does anything what her impulse wants to without considering that her behavior will lead others to be hurt and harmed. Normal people are actually aware of behavior limit they should not do for the sake of others safety, but Medea does not. What there is in her mind is that she has to be the winner of all others interest and reach her ambition to take revenge and make the ones she loathes such as Jason and Kreon suffer horribly. Whatever comes her way she remains murdering her innocent children, although Chorag has strictly warned her in order to heed the children crying for mercy. The quotation below shows how Medea seemingly has no sense of guilt to murder her children.

Medea : "...O my heart, my heart, arm yourself in steel ! Don't shrink back from this hideous thing which has to be done! Come, my hand, and seize has to be done ! Come, my hand and seize the sword, take it and step forward..." "Don't be a coward...don't think of the children..."

Chorag : "Listen! Do you hear? Do you hear the children crying? Hate-hardened heart! O, Woman born for evil !"

(Euripides, 61)

What happens next is that Medea has to sadistically murder her children. Children can do nothing but take and meet their destiny to die. It is in line with Silverman (1971:456-457), a psychopath in adulthood commits a crime such as murdering pitilessly.

First son : "What can I do? How can I run from mother's hands?"

Second son : "I don't know! We are lost, we are lost, brother, brother!"

Chorag: "Shall I enter the house? Oh surely" I must help! "I must save these children from murder!"

First son : "Help, in the name of heaven! We need your help!"

Second son: "Now, it's coming closer! "The sword is falling!"

(Euripides, 61)

Another impulsive behavior, which reinforces the evidence of psychopathic personality disorder Medea suffers, is her brutal intention to bring Kreon's daughter down with deadly poison. That is the best manner of death Medea chooses to reach her evil will to take revenge with Jason's bride to-be. With or without any help of others, she will go on committing a crime to kill the bride. After all, the bride must die since Medea can not put up with seeing Kreon's daughter

happiness. Related to psychopathic personality disorder theory, she shows her impulsive behavior to satisfy her own need. This can be seen in the following quotation below:

Medea : "...And I can set about this murder in stealth and stillness. And if no help should come from fate, and if death is certain, still I can take at last the sword in my own hand and go forth boldly to the crime, and kill the bride...."  
(Euripides, 48)

Subsequently, as a psychopathic woman which is preoccupied with will to lying to fool down Jason, Medea succeeds with her ruinous plan to send a wedding present in the form of a finely woven dress and golden diadem which have been rubbed with deadly poison. Anybody touches and wears them will absolutely be dying horribly. Pursuant to psychopath theory by Meyer (1986:454), a sufferer of this psychopathic personality disorder is probably smart, enchanting, and warm-hearted in manipulating others and in short, he or she is a good artist. Medea is indeed a great artist for she is good at acting. She is able to pretend and persuade Jason to forgive and accept her evil will to begin a brand new life. Her ability to act nicely, kindly and warmly beguiles Jason in profound remorse. The bride's-to-be has to horribly die in anguish along with her father, Kreon.

Messenger : "...And after that it was a thing of horror we saw. For suddenly her face

changed into color, and she staggered back, and began to tremble as she ran, and reached a chair just as she was about to fall to the ground. And old woman servant, thinking no doubt that this was some kind of seizure, or some other god cried out a prayer: and then, as she prayed, she saw the flakes of foam flow from the mouth, and her balls rolling, and the blood fade from her face. And then it was a different prayer she uttered, a terrible scream ..."  
"...With a dreadful scream, and open her eyes again. A twofold torment was creeping over her. The golden diadem on her head was sending forth a violent stream of flame, and the finely woven dress which your children gave her was beginning to eat into the poor girl's snowy soft flesh. And it was like the drops falling from the bark of a pine tree when the flesh

dropped away from her bones, torn loose by the secret fangs of poison.” “...But then her poor father, who knew nothing of her death, came suddenly into the house and stumbled over her body, and cried out as he folded his arms about her, and kissed her, and said: “...Who has robbed me of you, who am old and close to the grave? O my child, let me die with you! And he grew silent and tried to rise to his feet again, but found himself fastened to the finely spun dress, like vine clinging to a laurel bough, and there was a fearful struggle. And still he tried to lift his knees, and she writhed and clung to him; and as he tugged, he tore the withered flesh from his bones. And at last he could no longer master the pain, and surrendered, and gave up the ghost. So there they are lying together...”  
(Euripides, 60)

A normal person will feel so sad and in grief to hear two persons die horribly over deadly poison by which Kreon and his daughter's bone and flesh are withered and peeled horribly. Nevertheless, Medea has no feeling of horror hearing such a fearful death. Vice versa, she is very happy. Her happiness and excitement, no sense of remorse and guilt, in this regard, indicate that she is a psychopath. Only such a person does not have feeling of pity, regret, and guilt to murder humans. It can be analyzed based on the quotations above that Medea shows no sense of emphatic or concern with other's misery and sorrow. Medea clearly does not think of hard burden of suffering that Kreon and his daughter would certainly feel due to her terrible conduct. Her great satisfaction, cheerfulness and happiness over Kreon and his daughter death can be viewed as follows:

Messenger: “She lies dead! The royal princess, and her father Kreon too! They have died: They have been slain by your poison!

Medea : “You bring me blessed news! Now and from now on I count you among my friends, my benefactors!

Messenger: “What! Are you insane? Are you mad, Medea? You have done an outrage to the royal house: does it make you happy to hear it? Can you hear of

this dreadful thing without horror?"  
Medea : "I too have words to say in reply to yours. Do not be impatient, my friend. Tell me: how did they die? You will make me doubly happy if you say they died in anguish!"  
(Euripides, 59)

Related to the quotation above, it can be inferred that Medea has no sense of empathic and concern with Kreon and his daughter's death, conversely she expresses no feeling of regret and guilt toward what happens to them both. This fully matches the theory that a psychopath has no remorse over her harmful behavior.

Other evidence, which can reinforce Medea as a psychopath, is her sadism and brutality to dismember her own brother into pieces and throw them away at sea. It is told that after betraying her father, king Aeetes of Colchis, with a view to aiding Jason to flee to Thessaly, Medea victimizes her elder brother to retard the pursuit of the dragon toward Jason and her. Such a deed is absolutely brutal and violent. A normal person will not have the heart to kill her own brother, yet Medea does. It implies that she is psychologically disordered, that is, suffering from psychopathic personality disorder. Medea herself acknowledges to have killed her brother as quoted below:

Medea : "...My own country, it was of me to leave you, and to have killed

my brother before I left you!"  
(Euripides, 44)

Jason also justifies the fact that Medea has dismembered her own brother already when he is in times of fury beyond measure for she pitilessly murders the children of whom Jason can take pride. While Jason curses, he reminds Medea of her brother death which is committed cruelly by herself.

Jason : "...On me too the gods have hurled the curse which has haunted you. For you killed your own brother at his fireside, and then came aboard our beautiful Argo."  
(Euripides, 62)

All of the evidence above really reinforces that Medea is a psychopath. She always commits cruelty and brutality that a normal person does not do. In line with theory, Medea is never able to change her harmful, damaging behavior. She has no ability to change her maladaptive behavior. Vice versa, she feels all right and excited to have harmed others, especially murdering her own children. She has no concern and emphatic towards others' right to live a convenient life including her children's right to live in the world.

#### **d. Biological Factor of Psychopathic Personality Disorder in Medea**

A psychopathic personality sufferer with non reactive autonomic nerve is unable to reject a dangerous threat and restriction of others which usually hamper most people to commit a psychopathic behavior (Hare, 1970:235). In connection with this theory, Medea exhibits her hard-



headedness and harmful, destructive impulse to resist what Chorag warns strictly in order that she does not murder her innocent children. However, everything goes badly. How intense Chorag warns and advises Medea, she persistently makes up her mind to murder the children. No point in giving her warning. This explanation can be viewed in the following quotation:

Chorag : “Since you have told us all your plans, let me say this to you: do not do this thing!

Medea : “There is nothing else I can do. It is forgivable that you should say this...”

Chorag : “Woman, can you really bring yourself as well! You will be the most miserable of woman.”

Medea : “Then I will; no matter. No word of warning now can stop me!”

(Euripides, 54)

In spite of the fact that there is no statement in the dialogue that Medea is born with non-reactive autonomic nerve, but based on the reaction Medea shows against warning indicates that she is most likely born with such a nerve. At this point, Chorag request to stop thinking of murdering children does not come to Medea's heart. No need to be in tears for the unfortunate fate of her children.

Chorag : “...O think of the sons you plan to slay, of the blood you plan to shed! We beg, we implore you, Medea. Do not murder your sons! ...Oh how can you look on them and yet not weep, Medea? How can you still resolve to slay them?”

(Euripides, 55)

The quotation above, in terms of theory, also indicates that Medea has low degree of consciousness towards stimulus that obstructs her to do what she is willing to. This is because she is unable to repress impulsive behavior in order not to murder her children. She is never able to curb her impulsive drive to commit psychopathic deed that leads others to be harmed such as murdering and taking revenge with the ones she loathes. As a result of this feeble consciousness, Medea is inclined to find stimulus and sensation by bringing death to her brother, Pelias, Kreon and his daughter as well as the children sadistically. All of these are psychopathic behavior reflecting violation against social norms and upheld morality existing within society. After all, Medea is greatly proud of to be the so-called a monster of extreme sadism for by doing so she manages to compensate her vengeance and resentment towards the ones she is hard-willed to harm.

It comes to analysis that in accordance with evidence elaborated

above, Medea might have a non-reactive autonomic nerve system that differs from what normal people usually react against something upsets and depresses them. This kind of reaction is a clue to label Medea a woman with such a nerve system.

#### **e. Parental Factor of Psychopathic Personality Disorder in Medea**

Growing children naturally internalize their parents' behavior and value which are the reflection of society norms, and children under killer family and environment will most likely turn to be the sufferer of psychopathic personality disorder (Atkinson, 1953:469). This statement profoundly implies that parents have a significant role in affecting children's personality. Environment and the way of how parents rear their children will be well-rooted in children's soul in adulthood. If children are raised with religious values and high morality in a relatively conducive environment, they will tend to be pious, polished persons. Then, if they are raised in educated family and in avid-scientific-reader environment, they will someday become intellectual persons with amazing academic skills. Conversely, if children are raised with cruelty, brutality and sadism in cold-blooded killer family, they will surely become sadistic, brutal murderers that very easily end the life of others mercilessly.

In relation to this, even though there is no specific, detailed explanation about the way of how Medea is raised and brought up by her parents, an implicit statement emerges as a hint to conclude that Medea is raised with such a senseless and brutal manner in barbaric environment. This

can be viewed as explained in the following quotation:

Jason : "...Instead of living in a barbaric land, you've come to Greece and enjoyed contact with a country where justice and law prevail, and not brute force, and what is more, the Greek thought rather highly of you."

(Euripides, 50)

Subsequently, in another statement, Jason also utters words, which portray how Medea family looks like before she leaves for Corinth to live a life with Jason. This can be viewed as follows:

Jason : "...Now at least I see you clearly what I didn't see on the day I brought you, loaded with doom, from your barbarous home to live in Hellas - a traitess to your father and your native land..."

(Euripides, 62)

Of the two quotations mentioned above, it can be inferred that environment Medea lives in and manner of child bringing parents applies to her are undoubtedly at worst and rooted from killer minded environment. The word *barbaric land* and *barbarous home* mean killer environment and killer family Medea every day gets along with. Consequently, this thing potentially

shapes Medea personality to be a cold-blooded murderess or a psychopath who has no feeling of pity and fear to murder others brutally. Although others are not at fault and sinful to Medea, they could be the victims of sadism if her impulsive drive emerges.

With regard to the quotation above, implicitly, Medea's words show that she lives a life near what is the so-called barbarous family. These points become the major reason because of what Medea suffers from psychopathic personality disorder.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Medea*, one of the greatest Euripides' tragedy drama, is a portrayal of a psychopathic woman who is murder-minded in facing life disappointment and unachieved expectations. The central character of the story, Medea, is characterized as a woman who is sadistic, cruel, cunning, stubborn, and avenger. The whole personality of Medea is much affected by family and environment where she is reared and brought up from childhood to adulthood, so that her personality is shaped to be a psychopath.

Owing to greatly loathing her husband decision, Jason, to marry the princess, Medea compensates for resentment and annoyance by murdering her innocent children. Action in murdering guiltlessly is categorized as reaction of psychopathic personality disorder. Normal people will not have the heart to murder her own children with or without any logical reasons. Parameter of a psychologically disordered person covers maladaptive behavior and personal distress. Characteristic of

psychopathic personality disorder Medea suffers covers her irresponsibility attitude in murdering her own children sadistically. Another evidence that reinforces Medea as sufferer of psychopathic personality disorder is her evil will to bring death to Kreon and Kreon's daughter with deadly poison. In addition, by arguing to eternalize beauty, she succeeds to bring death to Pelias, king of Iolchus, with the hands of his daughters. More cruelly, Medea has the heart to dismember her brother into pieces and throw them at sea for dragon meal. These points prove clearly that Medea is but a psychopath.

Biological factor of psychopathic personality disorder in Medea is discovered through her persistent, destructive impulse to harm and murder the ones she loathes. Medea biologically has non-reactive autonomic nerve system which causes her unable to curb her impulsive behavior. Whereas parental factor of psychopathic personality disorder in Medea derives from senseless, sadistic child bringing in barbarous family from childhood to adulthood. This brutal, sadistic environment gradually shapes Medea's personality to be as a cold-blooded murderess.

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