

FAMILY CONFLICT AND THE POETICS OF MEMORY IN L. ULITSKAYA'S NOVEL "MEDEA AND HER CHILDREN"

Abstract. This article explores Lyudmila Ulitskaya's novel «Medea and Her Children» through the lens of family conflict as a mechanism for memory reconstruction. The analysis focuses on the transformation of the mythological figure of Medea into a unifying force within the family, embodying forgiveness, care, and spiritual resilience. The study examines the spatial and temporal structure of the novel, in which Medea's house functions as a sacred center that connects generations and ensures cultural continuity. Special attention is given to the symbolism of memory, the transmission of family stories, and rituals that reflect the characters' identities. The methodology combines semiotic and mythological analysis with the theories of collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs and philosophical concepts by Karl Jaspers. The article concludes that family conflicts in the novel serve not as a destructive force but as a means of strengthening identity and the link between past and present. The study highlights the novel's significance within the context of contemporary Russian literature, mythopoetics, and literary interpretations of memory.

Keywords: Ludmila Ulitskaya, family conflict, memory reconstruction, mythopoetics, collective memory, sacred space, Russian literature, identity.

Introduction. The novel *Medea and Her Children* by Ludmila Ulitskaya occupies a significant place in contemporary Russian literature, offering a profound reinterpretation of the classical myth of Medea. Published in 1996, the novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1997, bringing Ulitskaya to the forefront of literary discourse. Unlike the archetypal Medea, who is often depicted as vengeful and destructive, Ulitskaya's Medea Sinoply emerges as a symbol of reconciliation, forgiveness, and familial unity. This transformation challenges traditional narratives and invites readers to consider new dimensions of myth and memory in the context of modern family dynamics.

The critical reception of the novel has highlighted its mythological and cultural depth. Scholars such as S. Timina (2003)

and T. Rovenkaya (2001) have explored its reimagining of classical myth and its feminist undertones, while T. Prokhorova (2001) and S. Perevalova (2003) have examined its symbolic structure and connection to broader cultural themes. Despite this extensive body of research, a specific focus on the role of family conflict as a tool for reconstructing memory remains underdeveloped. Family dynamics in the novel, including betrayal, reconciliation, and shared experiences, play a central role in reshaping individual and collective memories within the extended family.

This article addresses this gap by analyzing how Ulitskaya uses family conflict not only as a narrative device but also as a means of bridging the past and present. Through the character of Medea and the sacred space of her home, the novel

portrays the complex interplay between memory, identity, and familial legacy. By examining these elements, this study aims to uncover how *Medea and Her Children* transforms classical myth into a contemporary exploration of memory and belonging.

The theoretical framework of this study integrates mythology, philosophy, and cultural theory to analyze how family conflict and memory reconstruction are employed as central mechanisms in Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Medea and Her Children*. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how the novel reshapes classical myth and embeds it within the dynamics of familial relationships and collective memory.

A primary lens for this analysis is Mircea Eliade's concept of myth as a means of reconnecting with fundamental truths through symbolic and cyclical narratives. Eliade's notion of the «eternal return» emphasizes the role of myths in providing continuity between the past and the present, creating a bridge between archaic archetypes and contemporary realities [5]. In the novel, Ulitskaya subverts the destructive image of Medea as a vengeful figure from Greek mythology. Instead, her Medea becomes a matriarch who reconciles and preserves the fragmented history of her family. This transformation reflects Eliade's idea of reinterpreting myths to maintain their relevance in a modern cultural context. By anchoring Medea's role in themes of forgiveness and spiritual transcendence, Ulitskaya constructs a «new myth» that resonates with contemporary issues of familial unity and identity.

Medea's character embodies these existential themes through her acceptance of betrayal and loss, her unwavering commitment to familial duty, and her ability to reconcile with even the most painful aspects of her life. Her spiritual resilience and her capacity for forgiveness

elevate her from a victim of circumstance to a moral and spiritual guide for her family. This existential perspective positions Medea as a mediator who transcends individual grievances to embody a collective sense of purpose and continuity, reinforcing the idea that reconciliation is central to both personal and communal growth.

Another significant theoretical pillar is Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, which posits that memory is a social construct shaped and sustained within group contexts, particularly families. According to Halbwachs, individuals rely on social frameworks to recall and interpret their experiences, and these frameworks are deeply embedded in familial and cultural structures [2]. In the novel, Medea's home serves as a physical and symbolic repository of memory. This sacred space connects generations, allowing family members to reconstruct and reinterpret their shared history. The spatial organization of the home, with its vertical alignment from the cemetery at the top of the hill to the well at the bottom, symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. Medea, as the guardian of this space, becomes a custodian of memory, ensuring the transmission of familial identity across time. This dynamic underscores the interplay between personal and collective memory, as family conflicts and reconciliations shape and redefine the family's shared narrative.

Max Weber's sociology of religion further enriches the analysis by exploring the spiritual and moral dimensions of Medea's character. Weber's concept of charismatic authority, which arises from extraordinary qualities attributed to an individual [3], helps frame Medea's role as a central figure of spiritual unity within her family. Her moral authority is not derived from formal structures but from her personal integrity, compassion, and

unwavering commitment to her family's well-being. This charisma transforms her home into a sacred space where family members, despite their differences and conflicts, find solace and connection. Weber's framework also sheds light on how Medea's actions and values transcend conventional religious boundaries, uniting her family through a shared sense of purpose and identity that supersedes individual beliefs.

The interplay of these theoretical perspectives creates a comprehensive framework for understanding how *Medea and Her Children* reimagines classical myth through the lens of family conflict and memory. Eliade's insights into mythological continuity, Jaspers' existential themes of reconciliation and transcendence, Halbwachs' analysis of memory as a collective construct, and Weber's notions of moral authority collectively illuminate the intricate ways in which Ulitskaya transforms the Medea myth. By weaving these elements together, the novel offers a profound exploration of how memory and conflict shape identity, bridging the timeless truths of myth with the evolving realities of modern life.

The problem addressed in this study lies at the intersection of myth, memory, and family dynamics within Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Medea and Her Children*. Although the novel has been widely praised for its mythological reinterpretations and cultural depth, the specific role of family conflict as a means of reconstructing memory remains insufficiently examined. This gap in scholarship leaves unexplored the nuanced ways in which Ulitskaya employs interpersonal tensions to weave a narrative of collective identity and historical continuity.

At the heart of the novel is Medea Sinoply, a reimagined version of the classical Medea, whose function has shifted from an agent of destruction to one of

reconciliation and unity. This transformation is pivotal, as it allows Ulitskaya to explore how family conflict whether through betrayal, generational misunderstandings, or unspoken grievances act as a catalyst for preserving and reshaping shared memories. Unlike the mythological Medea, who responds to betrayal with violence, Ulitskaya's Medea forgives her husband's infidelity with her sister and chooses to embrace her family despite their flaws. This decision transforms her into a moral and spiritual anchor for her extended family, making her the focal point around which memory and identity coalesce.

The central question this study addresses is how Ulitskaya uses family conflict as a narrative mechanism for reconstructing both personal and collective memory. Conflicts within the novel are not merely sources of drama but serve as moments of revelation and transformation. For instance, the betrayal by Medea's husband, Samuil, and her sister, Sandrochka, creates a profound emotional rupture. However, instead of allowing this betrayal to sever familial ties, Medea reconciles with both, choosing to focus on the enduring bonds that unite the family. Through this act of forgiveness, Ulitskaya emphasizes that memory is not static but is constantly being reconstructed through the lens of understanding and acceptance.

The physical and symbolic space of Medea's home plays a crucial role in this process. Situated atop a hill, the home becomes a sacred site where family members gather, relive their shared history, and resolve conflicts. Its spatial organization featuring the cemetery at the top, the house in the middle, and the well at the base mirrors the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth, reinforcing the idea that memory, too, is cyclical and ever-evolving. Family gatherings in this space often marked by tension and disagreement,

ultimately lead to moments of reconciliation and the reaffirmation of familial identity. These dynamics highlight how Ulitskaya uses physical spaces as metaphors for the emotional and spiritual processes of memory reconstruction.

Another critical example is Medea's role as the family's spiritual guide. Her life, marked by loss and sacrifice, mirrors the struggles of her family members, allowing her to empathize with their pain and guide them toward healing. This empathy enables her to mediate conflicts and transform them into opportunities for reflection and growth. For instance, when younger family members clash over their differing values and aspirations, Medea's wisdom and moral clarity help them find common ground. This process not only resolves individual disputes but also reinforces the family's collective memory, creating a shared narrative that transcends generational divides.

Ulitskaya's portrayal of Medea as a Christ-like figure further enriches the exploration of family conflict and memory. Her selflessness, humility, and capacity for forgiveness echo Christian ideals of compassion and redemption [7]. These traits allow her to transform moments of discord into acts of spiritual and emotional unification. For example, when a family member dies, Medea's rituals and prayers provide a sense of closure and continuity, linking the departed with the living in a shared memory of love and loss. These rituals underscore the sacredness of family bonds and their role in preserving identity across generations.

This study argues that Ulitskaya's novel demonstrates how family conflict, far from being purely destructive, can serve as a powerful tool for reconstructing memory and reaffirming identity. By reframing conflict as an opportunity for growth and reconciliation, Ulitskaya challenges conventional narratives of familial

breakdown and offers a vision of family as a dynamic, enduring entity. This problem is significant not only for understanding the novel's contribution to contemporary literature but also for exploring broader questions about how conflict and memory shape our understanding of identity, belonging, and legacy. Through Medea and her family, Ulitskaya illustrates that even the most painful conflicts can become pathways to deeper understanding and connection, ensuring the survival of familial and cultural memory in an ever-changing world.

Conditions and methods of investigation. The methodology employed in this study is based on an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary analysis, semiotic examination, comparative mythological studies, and sociocultural theory. These methods are specifically chosen to address the narrative, symbolic, and thematic dimensions of Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Medea and Her Children* with a focus on the role of family conflict as a mechanism for reconstructing memory.

A detailed close reading of the text forms the foundation of this study. This method involves analyzing key passages that highlight family conflict and its implications for memory and identity reconstruction [1]. Specific attention is given to pivotal moments of betrayal, reconciliation, and intergenerational interaction, such as Medea's forgiveness of her husband and sister or her role in mediating disputes among younger family members. This technique allows for a granular understanding of how conflict operates within the narrative structure.

Semiotic analysis is employed to uncover the symbolic significance of spaces, objects, and actions within the novel [6]. Central to this analysis is the home of Medea, which functions as a sacred space and a repository of collective memory. The spatial arrangement of the house, the

cemetery, and the well is analyzed for its metaphorical representation of life, death, and rebirth. The study also examines the symbolic weight of rituals, gestures, and familial gatherings, demonstrating how these elements contribute to the reconstruction and preservation of memory.

The study uses comparative mythological analysis to explore how Ulitskaya reinterprets the classical figure of Medea. Drawing parallels between the ancient Greek myth of Medea and Ulitskaya's modern portrayal, the analysis highlights the transformation of the archetype from a destructive force to a unifying presence. This method draws on Mircea Eliade's theories of mythological recurrence and reinvention, providing a framework for understanding how Ulitskaya adapts traditional motifs to address contemporary themes of forgiveness and familial continuity.

The sociocultural context of the novel is examined to understand how Ulitskaya's portrayal of family conflict and memory interacts with broader cultural and historical narratives. This includes situating the novel within the framework of Russian literary traditions that emphasize family and memory as central themes. The study also considers the historical and social backdrop of the 1990s in Russia, a period marked by transition and upheaval, which informs the novel's exploration of identity, loss, and reconciliation.

The study integrates Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory to analyze how family conflict serves as a mechanism for reconstructing shared histories. This method involves examining how memory is socially constructed within the family, using conflicts as moments where individual and collective memories intersect and evolve [12]. Particular focus is placed on the role of rituals and shared narratives in the preservation of familial identity.

Finally, the methodology employs an interdisciplinary approach to synthesize insights from philosophy, sociology, and literary theory. For instance, Karl Jaspers' existential philosophy is used to interpret Medea's role as a mediator who reconciles suffering and conflict, while Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority illuminates her position as a moral and spiritual anchor.

Through the integration of these methods, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of how Ulitskaya employs family conflict in *Medea and Her Children* to reconstruct memory, reshape identity, and redefine familial and cultural bonds.

Research results and discussion.

Ludmila Ulitskaya's portrayal of Medea Sinoply in *Medea and Her Children* is a deliberate reimaging of the classical figure, highlighting attributes of saintliness, forgiveness, and spiritual resilience [15]. Medea's daily life is marked by an unwavering faith and commitment to her family, even in the face of betrayal and personal suffering. Her actions echo the principles of Christian spirituality, where sacrifice and compassion take precedence over vengeance. Unlike her mythological counterpart, who exacts a bloody revenge for betrayal, Medea Sinoply embodies forgiveness, choosing to reconcile with those who wronged her [10; 14].

One of the novel's most poignant examples of Medea's spiritual depth is her response to her husband Samuil's infidelity with her sister Sandrochka. This betrayal, which could have destroyed the family, instead becomes a moment of transformation for Medea. Through deep introspection and an unyielding commitment to her familial role, she forgives both Samuil and Sandrochka, offering them acceptance and love. This act of grace not only preserves the family's unity but also sets a moral example for future generations, reinforcing Ulitskaya's

theme of reconciliation as a pathway to personal and collective redemption [15; 9].

Medea's daily rituals further emphasize her spiritual purity. She begins each day with simple prayers, thanking God for life's blessings and asking for strength to face its trials. Her prayers, though unembellished and often repetitive, reveal a profound connection to the divine. For example, her request to "accept the new day with its labors, sorrows, and evening fatigue" demonstrates a humility and gratitude that transcends her personal struggles [15]. These moments of prayer serve as a bridge between her inner spiritual world and her outward actions, highlighting her role as a mediator between the sacred and the profane [8; 11].

Family conflict is central to the novel, not as a destructive force but as a mechanism for growth and memory reconstruction. The betrayal Medea experiences catalyzes her spiritual journey and reshapes her relationships with her family. Her forgiveness of Samuil, in particular, transforms him into a more introspective and spiritual person. By the end of his life, Samuil acknowledges the depth of Medea's moral strength, recognizing her adherence to a «long-forgotten law» that transcends the chaos and lawlessness of the world around them. This transformation underscores the redemptive power of forgiveness, as Medea's actions inspire those around her to strive for greater moral clarity and understanding.

This dynamic is further explored through intergenerational conflicts within Medea's family. Younger members of the family, who are often at odds with one another over values and priorities, are guided by Medea's wisdom and her ability to mediate disputes. Through these conflicts, family members are forced to confront their own shortcomings and reconnect with their shared history. These

moments of tension and reconciliation reveal how Ulitskaya uses conflict as a narrative device to deepen familial bonds and reconstruct collective memory.

The spatial organization of the novel plays a critical role in its exploration of memory and identity. Medea's home, situated on a hill overlooking the surrounding area, serves as a symbolic anchor for the family. The vertical structure of the setting with the cemetery at the top, the house in the middle, and the well at the base represents the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. This spatial hierarchy mirrors the interplay between sacred and profane spaces in the novel. The cemetery, where the family's ancestors rest, symbolizes the sacred connection to the past. The well, a source of life, represents renewal and continuity. Between these two spaces lies Medea's home, the heart of the family's spiritual and emotional life.

Medea's home is more than just a physical structure; it is a sacred space where family members gather, remember, and reconcile. The rituals and traditions that Medea upholds within her home reinforce its symbolic role as a temple of memory. For example, her insistence on the placement of objects and adherence to specific routines mirrors the order and sanctity of a religious space. The home becomes a mediator between the family's past and present, a place where conflicts are resolved, and shared histories are preserved.

Ulitskaya's reimagining of Medea transforms her from a destructive archetype into a human mediator [4], characterized by empathy and spiritual resilience. This demythologization is evident in Medea's rejection of vengeance, her embrace of forgiveness, and her role as a custodian of familial memory. In doing so, Ulitskaya aligns Medea more closely with Christ-like figures, emphasizing her capacity for selflessness and redemption.

The novel juxtaposes sacred and profane spaces to reflect the duality of Medea's role. The sacred realm, represented by her home and her rituals, is where she exerts her influence as a unifying force. In contrast, the profane realm, inhabited by secondary characters and their struggles, is marked by discord and fragmentation. Medea's ability to bridge these realms highlights her unique position as a mediator, connecting the temporal and the eternal, the individual and the collective.

Through the character of Medea and the intricate dynamics of her family, Ulitskaya explores the transformative potential of conflict and the power of memory to sustain identity. The sacred space of Medea's home serves as a microcosm of her role as a mediator, where forgiveness and reconciliation are not only personal acts but also communal ones that bind the family together. By reinterpreting the myth of Medea, Ulitskaya offers a narrative that transcends its classical origins, addressing universal themes of love, betrayal, forgiveness, and the enduring power of familial bonds.

Conclusion. Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Medea and Her Children* reimagines the classical myth of Medea, transforming the destructive, vengeful figure into a symbol of forgiveness, resilience, and spiritual unity. This transformation serves as the foundation for a profound exploration of the role of family conflict as a mechanism for reconstructing memory and preserving identity. Through the character of Medea Sinoply and the sacred space of her home, Ulitskaya examines how familial relationships, even when marked by betrayal and tension, become opportunities for reconciliation and growth.

The study demonstrates that Ulitskaya uses family conflict not as a narrative endpoint but as a process through which characters confront their shared history and

reshape their collective identity. Medea's forgiveness of her husband's and sister's betrayal, as well as her role in mediating intergenerational disputes, highlights the redemptive power of compassion and understanding. These acts of reconciliation enable the family to move beyond individual grievances, creating a shared narrative that bridges the past and the present.

Medea's home emerges as a central symbol in the novel, representing both a physical and spiritual anchor for the family. Its spatial organization, mirroring the cycle of life, death, and renewal, underscores its role as a repository of memory and a site of sacred connection. Within this space, rituals, traditions, and interpersonal interactions intertwine to preserve the family's legacy, ensuring that its history is not lost but continuously reconstructed and reinterpreted.

Ulitskaya's portrayal of Medea as a Christ-like figure further enriches the narrative, imbuing the novel with spiritual and moral dimensions. Medea's capacity for forgiveness, her adherence to routines of prayer and ritual, and her selflessness position her as a mediator between the sacred and the profane, connecting the temporal world of her family with the eternal truths of love, sacrifice, and redemption.

The results of this study highlight the novel's innovative approach to integrating mythological and familial narratives to address universal themes of belonging, legacy, and human resilience. By redefining the archetype of Medea, Ulitskaya offers a vision of family as a dynamic and enduring entity, where conflict becomes a source of strength and memory serves as a bridge to the future. *Medea and Her Children* ultimately reveals that even the most painful conflicts can be transformed into opportunities for connection and growth,

ensuring the survival of familial and cultural identity in an ever-changing world.

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Л. УЛИЦКАЯНЫҢ «МЕДЕЯ ЖӘНЕ ОНЫҢ БАЛАЛАРЫ» РОМАНЫНДАҒЫ ОТБАСЫЛЫҚ ҚАҚТЫҒЫС ЖӘНЕ ЖАДЫ ПОЭТИКАСЫ

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада Людмила Улицканың «Медея және оның балалары» романы отбасы ішіндегі қақтығысты жадыны қайта құру механизмі ретінде қарастыру арқылы талданады. Зерттеу барысында мифологиялық Медея бейнесінің отбасы мүшелерін кешірім, қамқорлық және рухани төзімділік арқылы біріктіруші тұлғаға айналуы қарастырылады. Романдағы кеңістік пен уақыт құрылымы зерттеледі: Медеядің үйі — ұрпақтар арасын байланыстыратын, мәдени жалғастықты қамтамасыз ететін

қасиетті орталық ретінде бейнеленген. Ерекше назар жадының символикасына, отбасылық хикаялардың берілуіне және кейіпкерлердің болмысын бейнелейтін рәсімдерге аударылады. Зерттеу әдістемесі семиотикалық және мифологиялық талдауға, Морис Хальбвакс ұсынған ұжымдық жады теориясына және Карл Ясперс философиялық тұжырымдамаларына негізделеді. Мақалада роман кейіпкерлері арасындағы отбасылық қақтығыстар жоюшы емес, керісінше, тұлғалық болмыс пен өткен мен бүгіннің арасындағы байланысты нығайтушы құрал ретінде сипатталады. Зерттеу романның қазіргі орыс әдебиеті, мифопоэтика және жадыны әдеби тұрғыдан түсіндіру салаларындағы маңызын көрсетеді.

Тірек сөздер: Людмила Улицкая, отбасылық қақтығыс, жадыны қайта құру, мифопоэтика, ұжымдық жады, қасиетті кеңістік, орыс әдебиеті, сәйкестілік.

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СЕМЕЙНЫЙ КОНФЛИКТ И ПОЭТИКА ПАМЯТИ В РОМАНЕ Л. УЛИЦКОЙ «МЕДЕЯ И ЕЁ ДЕТИ»

Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию романа Л. Улицкой «Медея и её дети» через призму семейного конфликта как механизма реконструкции памяти. В центре анализа — трансформация образа мифологической Медеи в фигуру, объединяющую семью через прощение, заботу и духовную устойчивость. Рассматривается пространственно-временная организация романа, в которой дом Медеи предстает как сакральный центр, связывающий поколения и формирующий культурную преемственность. Особое внимание уделяется символике памяти, передаче семейных историй и ритуалам, отражающим идентичность персонажей. Методология исследования опирается на семиотический и мифологический анализ, теории коллективной памяти Мориса Хальбвакса и философские концепции Карла Ясперса. Делается вывод о том, что семейные конфликты в романе служат не разрушению, а укреплению идентичности и связи между прошлым и настоящим. Исследование подчеркивает значимость романа в контексте современной русской литературы, мифопоэтики и литературных интерпретаций памяти.

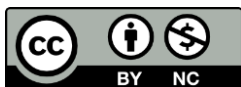
Ключевые слова: Людмила Улицкая, семейный конфликт, реконструкция памяти, мифопоэтика, коллективная память, сакральное пространство, русская литература, идентичность.

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