
**SOPHOCLEAN TRAGEDY: A WINDOW TO THE CLASSICAL ATTIC CULTURE
AND ETHOS**

Dr. Vandana Sharma,

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, J.K.P.P.G. College, Muzaffarnagar, India

Abstract:

Literature always provides a key to the culture of the time in which it is produced. Chaucer's poetry is a looking glass for the later fourteenth century English society; Alexander Pope provides a satirical picture of the eighteenth century and Tennyson produces a real picture of the Victorian compromise between science and religion. Similarly, Sophoclean tragedy presents a mirror to the culture and Ethos of ancient Greek society. Culture of the country is the reflection of men and women, who form the essential unit of a civilization. In Indian context the case of Manu or Manu Smriti is considered to be the prime book of wisdom to govern the Ethos; similarly, in ancient Greece it was Hesiod, the author of the '*Works and Days*' who is reputed to have sown the seeds of Ethos in Hellenic land. Sophocles has been considered as a great innovator in the field of Greek tragedy, the first by introducing the third actor on the stage and thus making his tragedies more complex and psychological. The Sophoclean tragedy rotates around two royal houses of Labdacus and of Atrius. The dynastic presentation provides a peep to their cultural history in all the seven tragedies of Sophocles. In the present paper my purpose is to give a study of the ancient culture Ethos rituals and superstitions as well as beliefs that were present in the ancient Hellenic land and exhibited by the seven tragedies of Sophocles.

Keywords: Ethos, Rituals, Superstitions, Spirits, Libations, Religious Practices,

Usually a writer has a deep attachment for his native land and whenever he writes about his native place or its inhabitants, he puts his heart and soul together in describing or representing that locale. Thomas Hardy is at his best while presenting the *Wessex Chorus* and R. K. Narayan is comfortable in his *Malgudi*. Similarly, Sophocles was born at Colonus and when he was writing his plays with the same background, the descriptions become live. The Sophoclean tragedy rotates around two royal houses as the Hindu scriptures rotate around two *Kulas: Raghu and Kuru*. The legend of the house Atrius becomes essential to have an acquaintance with the base outline in Sophoclean tragedy. In the same way the house of Labdacus has been presented in the three great tragedies of Sophocles; Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone. Oedipus has been popularized by Sigmund Freud as a complex for mother fixation of a son. This play also presents a clear picture of the culture of Greece through various objects like Oracle, predictions, rituals, burial practices etc.

Oedipus rex or Oedipus Tyrannus has been considered as the greatest tragedy of Sophocles. It is the story of the unfortunate Oedipus who becomes a victim of his hamartia. The play has plenty of the references of ancient beliefs and superstitions. Laius and his wife Jocasta were expecting a child but before their child was born; his life was clouded with the disaster. Apollo's Oracle had made an ill prophecy about him that he was destined to kill his father and to marry his own mother. Could any parent be so presumptuous as to try to thwart it? Laius and Jocasta would so presume. One way alone was left and that the child should not live. They would deliver the child to a shepherd to leave it on the mountain side with his feet cruelly tied with a wire. This was done but still the word of Apollo prevailed.

The shepherd entrusted it to a fellow, a Corinthian shepherd to take it away from the borders of Thebes. That Corinthian shepherd brought the child to Polibus, king of Corinth who adopted it giving it the name of Oedipus (swollen foot). Oedipus grew but by chance he came to hear the Apollo's terrible prediction about him. He fled from Corinth and his wanderings brought him to Thebes. King Laius had been killed by an unknown traveler on a lonely road and the city was in the grip of a terrible monster the Sphinx. Oedipus answered her riddle and Thebes joyfully welcomed him as her king and heir to the throne. He married Jocasta without knowing his fate. After some fifteen years of seeming prosperity, the Gods could no longer remain in silence and infamy lay Oedipus' unwitting sins. Pestilence and famine brought Thebes once more to the verge of utter destruction. In their despair the elder citizens of Thebes cried to their king for help. From here the story begins. Apollo was significant Deity and he was worshipped with libations so that he might exorcise the curse out of the suffering family. In Oedipus Tyrannus Jocasta, after watching that Oedipus was in a state of mental agony, visits the temple of Apollo to request the god to remove the curse of uncleanness and to save the entire house of Labdacus.

(Enter Jocasta from the palace, carrying a garland branch and incense)

JOCASTA: My Lords, I am minded to visit the holy temples.

Bringing in my hands these tokens of supplication

.....

We are afraid, seeing our master pilot distraught.

(king Oedipus Tyrannus, p.50)

In Theology, ritual is a particular methodology of performing certain sacraments, for they believe that the soul gets its salvation only when the rituals are properly performed. One of such a significant ritual is the burial of the dead, the importance of which has been presented in Antigone of Sophocles. The entire play is based on this important ritual which must be performed at any cost. For Antigone it becomes a necessity that her brother Polynices should be given a proper burial. The daughter of Oedipus is not afraid of anything and she takes the risk of her life for a proper burial of her brother. The Sentry tells Creon, how Antigone performed the ritual of giving a proper burial to Polynices and says:

When at last it stopped

There was the girl screaming like an angry bird,
.....

She was not at all – frightened.

(Antigone 137-138)

A Sophoclean tragedy provides sufficient examples of ritual, Ethos and the supernatural appearances. The figure of Sphinx, representing woman, animal and bird is based upon mythical superstitions. Besides the physical features, Sphinx has its own symbolic significance also. The face of a woman is suggestive of a strange maternal instinct, sometimes is cursed to be carnivorous also. The body of a lion is the symbol of the patriarchal supremacy while the wings of the bird suggest the flight of imagination or soul from earth to heaven.

Sometimes certain rituals are also practiced as an Ethos, in relation to superstitious beliefs. We have the following dialogue between the Chorus and Oedipus in the play Oedipus at Colonus:

OEDIPUS: Dear friend,

Stand by me and I will do all that you advise.

CHORUS: Then make amends at once to the divinities

OEDIPUS: Instruct me. What are the rites that I must use?

CHORUS: Bring holy water from where a fresh spring flow.

In clean hands bring it.

OEDIPUS: A pure libation. Then?

CHORUS: There are vessels there, of delicate workmanship.

Cover their brims and handles on either side.

OEDIPUS: With springs of leaf, or woolen stuff maybe?

CHORUS: With lamb's wool newly shorn that will be given to you

OEDIPUS: I understand. And then to complete the rite?

OEDIPUS: From the vessels you spoke of?

CHORUS: Ay, in three libations.

Of which only the last you empty wholly.

OEDIPUS: What will this last contain?

CHORUS: Water and honey.

OEDIPUS: I understand.

The sunless earth will drink it up. And then?

While you thus pray.

(Oedipus at Colonus, 85-86)

In this way in a Sophoclean tragedy superstitions and ritual ethos have been brought together that governed the external behavior and the internal peace of mind which the performer was expected to get by performing them. The most powerful and popular superstition governing human psyche is the appearance of the spirit of a person after his death. In Electra, there is a reference to the appearance of the spirit of Agamemnon, as Cyrsothemis narrates to Electra that her mother Clytemnestra had seen the vision of her first husband. Clytemnestra narrates her dream in which some ritual was performed to the Sun :

I was told she saw our father returned to life,
Standing beside her; and he took the sceptre
That once was his, which now Aegisthus carries;

Into a leafy bough, casting a shadow
Over all Mycense. This much I was told
By someone who heard her telling the
Sun her dream. (Electra 811)

The interpretation of the dream of Clytemnestra has been taken as an omen to some change of fortune. It shows two fundamental aspects of Hellenic superstition, the first is the appearance of the spirit of a husband, wronged by an adulterous wife and the second is the purpose of such an appearance in deciding the future course of action. If morality furnished the background to the analysis of Oedipus, it is the challenge of passion that forms the foundation stone to the events of Electra. When Clytemnestra defends herself to Electra, she refers to some offence committed by Agamemnon against Artemis. It also refers to the sacrificial practices in ancient Greek culture:

I have heard how my father, in an idle moment
.....
So, she was sacrificed; there was no other way
To get the ships afloat, either for Troy
Or homeward. (Electra 85)

In case of Orestes, after taking revenge of his father's murder, he has to face the punishment of the Furies or Eumenides. Clytemnestra was warned of the impending disaster after murdering her husband with the help of her lover, Aegisthus. Orestes took the revenge by killing his mother Clytemnestra and Aegisthus but for the crime of matricide he was haunted by the Furies after her death. These Furies is a trio of goddesses known to be the instrument of justice or Eumenides (The gracious ones). They relentlessly pursue Orestes for the murder of his mother, Clytemnestra. Orestes is able to escape only after the intervention of Apollo and Athena.

Trachiniae or the Women Troy is again an example of Sophoclean tragedy which presents the picture of Greek culture and superstitions. Heracles has been absent from his house for a military expedition. His wife, Deianira discovers that her husband transferred his love to Iole, one of the captive women and the daughter of Eurytus. Dishearted Deianira sends Heracles a charmed robe dipped in the blood of the centaur Nessus. In fact, Nessus told her while he was dying that his blood is a love charm which has the power to make Heracles devoted for Deianira but that fatal robe has poisoned Heracles and he died. Upon realizing what she has done Deianira kills herself.

Ancient Greek culture was highly influenced by religion and gods and goddesses have been considered very important in the course of human action. Gods have predominant power over mortals and must be obeyed and respected. To mock their laws means invoking their wrath. In *Antigone* as well as in *Oedipus Tyrannus* the sin of *Hubris* or the foolish pride becomes responsible for catastrophic end of human-beings. The cultural concept of family justifies *Antigone's* action of an honorable burial of her brother *Polynices* but her defiance shows her stubbornness like her father *Oedipus*. Burial is sacred and without a proper burial the dead wouldn't be able to have an afterlife. These rituals would keep the culture of the family and society alive and in good faith with the gods. If someone fails to abide by these holy rituals, it would bring disgrace and bad luck to the family and the whole country as well. In the same way when *Oedipus* summons the blind prophet *Tiresias* to find answers to his quest, he advises him to stop the search. But *Oedipus* who is over-confident and short-tempered accuses *Tiresias* of a conspiracy hatched by *Creon*, to undermine him. The fact that *Oedipus* has sight while *Tiresias* is blind so he cannot see has been reversed by the *peripetia* in *Oedipus*. In the play, there is a line which shows the deficiency of *Tiresias* (or of *Oedipus* himself) to see the truth, when he insults the blind prophet:

This tricksggar-priest, for gain alone
Keen-eyed, but in his proper art
Stone-blind. Say, sirrah, hast thou
Ever proved thyself a prophet? (Oedipus Tyrannus pg. 11)

After the discovery of truth, *Oedipus* sees clearly his downfall- the 'fate' which he has been assigned. *Oedipus* is figuratively blind to the true nature of his character- he does not know who he is. At the moment of transition, the whole progression of *Oedipus' character* can be understood.

The entire plot of *Ajax* is constructed on the Greek myth about the mighty hero of the Trojan war, whose pride drives him to treachery and finally to his self-destruction. *Ajax* is deeply offended at the award of the prizes of valor which was actually the armor of the dead *Achilles*, which was not given to the *Ajax* but to *Odysseus*. *Ajax* revolts against the Greek commanders and he himself is frustrated by the intervention of the goddess, *Athena*. But the wise *Odysseus* persuades the Greek commanders to give *Ajax* an honorable burial. *Robert Bagg* and *James Scully* point out that the play is composed in two parallel parts; the first steeped in the ancient world, representing kings and heroes whereas the second part resembles a democratic world of *Sophocles' Greece*, and is thus marked by a continuous and never-ending debate of contending ideologies.

The play can be viewed as an apprehensive epoch-spanning work that raises some complex questions, including: the advancement of ancient Greek to its modern and democratic version. Especially considering Greece, as a in its stories and thoughts that clings to its ancient ethics and clinging to the past, Greece considers that its new, democratic order

is important and vital. As Bagg and Scully apprehend, Ajax, with its brute force as a heroic representation of a god worshipped in the ancient world. But the Trojan war itself evolved and became a quagmire; thus, raising the need of a warrior with blessed intelligence, that is, someone like Odysseus. Ultimately, Bagg and Scully interpreted that Ajax must still be respected and by the end of the play, it demonstrates human decency and an appreciation towards human ethics towards family by the promise of a proper burial.

Odysseus, having known that Troy could not be captured till Philoctetes keeps that mighty bow for himself, uses Neoptolemus to get that weapon by hook or by crook. In Philoctetes, Oedipus says;

No; this is our only chance

.....

A paragon of virtue. (Philoctetes 166)

A dilemma between gratitude and ingratitude is the source of conflict, internal and external as well. As the Oracle had revealed, "That the bow, and Philoctetes with it must come to Troy, if the town is to be taken." Shrewd Odysseus keeps himself behind the curtain and makes the young soldier, Neoptolemus, his tool to get the bow. He wins entirely the confidence of the old, wounded, broken-hearted and solitary Philoctetes. At the last moment, he confesses the truth before Philoctetes. Philoctetes has taken him for his single friend, he is really a tool in the hand of his cruelest enemy. The end of the play is suggestive of a type of homesickness and desire to return to his native land which is expressed by the chorus in their song which is a call to assemble for a prayer;

Come all, and let us pray

.....

Upon our homeward way (Philoctetes 212)

The country and the culture of ancient Greece has been truthfully represented by all the seven existing tragedies of Sophocles. The house of Atrius was accursed to a chain of incestual relationships and subsequent killings. Sometimes, the innocent are also crushed on account of the sin of their parents. It is the demand of such an ancient culture that a barbarian should beget a barbarian. This cannibalistic attitude was of a primitive nature, whether in Greece or in any other part of the world. This is a negative aspect of a family culture which is presented in many of the tragedies of Sophocles. In fact, a Sophoclean tragedy successfully presents psycho analysis of the members of a family and their ancient culture history which echoes in human minds, oriental and western as well. The Sophoclean tragedy in this way presents an analysis of the Greek culture, not only it elucidates the subsidiary concepts of the Greek culture and ethos, it also presents a religion of faith for European and global spirit of co-existence as well. The instincts of worship, religious practices, beliefs and superstitions and the supremacy of the feeling of humanity supported by the discriminating faculty of intellect in controlling the human passion with the help of religious and moral culture- all this has been clearly manifested by the tragedies of Sophocles.

References:

- Sophocles Ajax, Electra and other Plays, translated by E.F. Watling (Penguin Books 1967)
- Women of Trachis, translated by E.F. Watling (Penguin Books 1967)
- King Oedipus, The Theban Plays, translated by E.F. Watling (Penguin Books 1967)
- Oedipus at Colonus, translated by E.F. Watling (Penguin Books 1967)
- Murry Gilbert, A History of Ancient Greek Literature (Surjeet Publications, New Delhi, 1998)
- Bagg, Robert and James Scully, eds. 2011. The Complete Plays of Sophocles: A New Translation. By Sophocles. New York: Harper. ISBN 978-0062020345