

A Postmodern Interpretation of *Oedipus Rex*

Ashaq Hussain Parray, M.A., M.Phil., NET/SET

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Ambiguous and Paradoxical View of *Oedipus Rex*

This paper attempts to review and critically examine the accepted interpretations of *Oedipus Rex*, which considers Oedipus as a guilt ridden soul responsible for the murder of his father and marrying his mother. My contention is that given the way Oedipus's character has been delineated, his state seems to be highly ambiguous and paradoxical that this, in turn, generates a serious controversy with respect to his actions, morality and ideological stance.

Why the readers have become so skeptic of the interpretation process? It is especially because in the post-modern age the readers have become so much obsessed with the close textual analysis that they go down to the letters, the signs, of which they are constituted. Insistence on textual analysis is due to the influence of trend-breaking literary giants like Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and Michael Foucault, who undoubtedly are the chief spokesperson for post-modernism.

Grammatology

Derrida labelled his critique a “grammatology,” as a play on *gramme*, which refers to an arbitrary mark, an insignificant letter, the trace of a sign. Meaning is a network of traces, like a text; there is no arch-trace, no place in which language finds its own ground. It is “constant flickering of presence and absence together”. Deliberating about the nature of anthropology takes one into the matrix of theology; thereby one encounters the need of a transcendental signified (logos/God). Derrida contends that humankind cannot go beyond texts to those authoritative centers which ground them in stable meaning. Therefore the interpretations of the text under consideration are open to be challenged that I will explore a bit later.

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Power/Colonization

Michael Foucault's dictum "Knowledge is power/colonization" has revolutionised the understanding of discursive practices. If one has enough knowledge, he can manipulate the existing systems. Moreover, can create new systems that suit his intentions as for as one understands Michael Foucault's dictum "knowledge is discourse". This assumes serious dimensions when related to Creon and his actions in the play under discussion. Since it is a misconception to believe that the Greeks were less in any respects to the moderns, therefore Creon's role becomes the focus of attention of my discussion.

Hyper Reality of Signs

Baudrillard's hyper-reality of signs has infused an attitude of skepticism towards each and everything. The importance of exchange of signs is known to everybody. An illusion can be created easily in the minds of public. The manipulation of signs can easily take place. This is aptly brought to limelight when Creon's words that he purportedly believed to be the word (sign) of Apollo and Tiresias's word (sign) becomes crucial in the unfolding of serious events in Oedipus's life.

Challenging the Traditional Interpretations of Oedipus

Taking cognizance of such arguments, the myth of Oedipus and the interpretations related to it can be drastically challenged. Since this and other myths are recurrent in the Greek culture, Sophocles reorganizes the events of Oedipus myth, and lets his play open after seventeen years of Laius's murder; meanwhile Oedipus has got married to his mother and has begotten four children. A plague has struck Thebes and Oedipus has instructed Creon to go and consult the oracle of Delphi and bring information about the cause of this plague. Creon brings the information that there will be no relief until the murderer of Laius is expelled from the city. But the murder mystery slowly becomes a quest for Oedipus' identity. The question 'who did it?', 'who am I?', 'who speaks truth'? And many more suspicious questions make it no less than a brilliant piece of detective fiction.

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Sophocles and Oedipus: A Symbol of Rationality

Sophocles has intentionally played with Oedipus's identity. For example, he does not give any clues as to why he is so much afraid of his son's existence. Sophocles provides no information about its reason, but as the myth goes Laius was staying with King Pelops when he kidnapped and raped Pelops' son, Chryssipus. Chryssipus could not tolerate this humiliation and kills himself. Laius is cursed —his own child will assassinate him.

Sophocles has the knack of manipulating the material already known to the public to suit his artistic designs. He is adept at human psychology. He was a great innovator. He converts the myth of Oedipus Rex into a human-centered tale, for it suits the artistic goals of Sophocles. He wanted to project Oedipus as a symbol of rationality. He presents Jocasta as skeptic of the word of Apollo. She advises Laius not to take the word of Apollo seriously, as they have killed their son and averted the curse. Oedipus's rational spirit is firmly established in his victory over the Sphinx by solving her riddle. He is puffed up by this victory, and there is smell of pride that pervades in his boasting reproach when he not only reprimands Tiresias, the blind prophet but he is also deeply irreverent towards the gods:

“When the Sphinx, that chanting Fury kept her deathwatch here...

Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,

You and your birds, your gods—nothing.

No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,

I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,

The flight of my intelligence hit the mark”. (*Oedipus the King*, ll. 445-53).

But this rationale temperament over which Oedipus was fuming gets cooled off in the later part of the play, when Oedipus is compelled to seek the help of Tiresias.

Guilty of the Crimes?

The drama of *Oedipus Rex* no doubt revolves around whether the king is actually guilty of the crimes that purportedly lie behind the Theban plague. The blind prophet Tiresias in anger clearly tells the king Oedipus, "I say that the killer you are seeking is yourself" (*Oedipus Rex* 55). But in the end, even a great playwright like Sophocles bends to anthropological pressure and finds Oedipus guilty. The scapegoat is punished and expelled.

In such a scenario Oedipus was the perfect choice for a sacrificial scapegoat. Under such circumstances the role of Creon becomes suspicious. This gets amply reflected in Oedipus's thoughts as:

Ah, riches and royalty, and wit matched against wit
In the race of life, must they always be mated with envy?
Must Creon, so long my friend, my most trusted friend,
Stalk me by stealth, and study to dispossess me
Of the power this city has given me-freely given-
Not of my asking-setting this schemer on me,
This pedlar of fraudulent magical tricks, with eyes
Wide open for profit, but blind in prophecy?

Role of Tiresias

Tiresias could be just an agent of Creon presumably as Oedipus says regarding the robbers who were supposed to have killed Laius, "Robbers would hardly commit such a daring outrage-unless they were paid to do it by someone here". Anything is possible. Why to believe the word of Tiresias when one knows he deceived the gods by stealing secrets from them? His very nature is witness to this. Is it just the power of cultural ritual that forces Oedipus to consult Tiresias.

Everything was in perfect order, but by removing the carpet of happiness from below the center (Oedipus) Creon culture has resulted in barrenness. Creon who replaces the centre, can be considered the director of this entire script. This view seems to be getting justified in *Oedipus at*

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Colonus and *Antigone*, where Creon behaves arrogantly and has become corrupted to the core of his heart, rather it can be said his hypocritical nature gets exposed. The way he treats Antigone and Ismene (the daughters of Oedipus) is sufficient proof in itself of his demonic nature. His denying the funeral of Polynices (Oedipus's son) speaks volumes about his dubious tactics.

Impact of Absolute Power

Lord Acton comments, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" aptly fits Creon's character. Creon loses his son Haemon in the process, who had gone to rescue his Antigone who was kept in a cave by Creon. On finding Antigone dead, Haemon tried to stab his father, but misses the mark and later kills himself. This elicits satisfaction in the readers, which in itself suffices the argument that Creon undoubtedly is a dubious character.

Aristotle's Model Protagonist

According to Aristotle's model of tragedy the protagonist of a tragedy must be good; otherwise it is not a tragedy at all. If Oedipus is guilty, then whatever has happened to him at the end elicits satisfaction, thereby making the play a controversial one.

Functions of Linguistic Signs

The language and linguistic signs are a means of expression of the vital information, but also can conceal the true nature and origin of human community as rooted in sacred violence. What is the fault of children born to Oedipus and Jocasta? What is the fault of Oedipus if his father Laius had raped Chryssipus. Why Oedipus has been made a scapegoat. Is it not the culture that will transmit the knowledge of bastard nature to the children born to Oedipus and Jocasta? Is it not the power of cultural/linguistic signs that enforces the tragedy on them?

But how do we know, a post-modern disciple of Derrida might ask, that this version of "knowledge" and "ignorance" is not just another binary opposition of yet another version of logocentric theory? If the children would have been kept ignorant about their bastard nature, they

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might have lived a normal life, but the power of linguistic culture doesn't allow that to happen, thereby letting us believe that human culture believes in the logos of violence and not love. If anything happened in ignorance, why culture demands retribution and is not able to generate a humane logos. This make its own basis mythic, i. e., the culture operates in its own realm and is found everywhere, thus is superior to the nature or the divine. If the divinity plans anything, the culture dances to its tunes and at times becomes so powerful that it is able to overthrow divine decree.

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Ashaq Hussain Parray, M. A., M. Phil, NET/SET
Assistant Professor in English
IUST
Awantipora
Jammu & Kashmir
India
ashaq533@gmail.com