

Striking Facets of the Ancient Greek Tragedy**Bhupendra Kumar N. Dhimar**

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Abstract

The ancient Greek Tragedy (Drama) has been a source of inspiration and creativity for innumerable upcoming literary contributors of the world. It serves as (what Arnold describes as) touchstone method for many writers of the globe. It has got many identifying features.

Key Words: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Prologus, Parodos, Episode, Stasimon, Exodos, Chorus, Dialogues, Tragedy and Stage

Introduction:

Drama of each country has its own characteristics. Ancient Greek drama differs from ancient Roman drama and 17th century French drama differs from the Elizabethan and Restoration drama. Ancient Indian Sanskrit drama has its own tendencies. The birth place of tragedy is unquestionably ancient Greece. It would be literary interesting to discuss its striking facets.

Striking Facets of the Ancient Greek Tragedy:

It is true that there are innumerable definitions of drama, so there should be a stop somewhere regarding quoting it. But it would be an unjustifiable miss if I don't refer to "The poetics" of Aristotle, one of the great pioneers of literary criticism. Defining tragedy he has said

"Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative;

through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."

(R.A. Scott James: 2001. P.61)

It is an extremely heavily loaded definition of tragedy. Each and every noun and adjective comprises many theories and ideas. Whenever and wherever I get an opportunity to explain and throw light on the words of this definition, in relation to the topic of this research work, I will be pleased to do that and show how important this definition is, not only in relation to the Greek but the English tragedy too.

Majority of the Greek dramas were performed during the 5th century B.C. the contribution of the Greek tragedians took place in the 5th century. So it is known as the first dominating age (period) regarding tragedy. There was a highly inspiring atmosphere during this century. Victorious literary writer was given many gifts and prizes. Along with that he could also gain tremendous social reputation. Because the than Greek theatres could accommodate more than 13000 viewers. The spectators spent the whole day in observing the performance of trilogy to be followed by a

‘satyr’ play – a comedy. Commenting on the gradual development of the Greek tragedy, Aristotle, (384 B.C. to 322 B.C.) a great Greek critic, has said, in his “poetics”

“Tragedy was at first improvisation originating with the leaders of the dithyramb. It advanced by slow degrees; each new element that showed itself was in true developed.”

(T. W. Hatlen: 1967. P.3)

Greek tragedy of the 6th and 5th century B.C. achieved tremendous glory in the literary world. It is known as the golden period of literature in the history of Greece. The tragedians, belonging to this era, contributed such dramas that it has made the period a classical period. It is from Greece that it spread to the European countries. So the Greek tragedy is known as the mother of drama. It has influenced and inspired writers of all the countries. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides has written many dramas, unfortunately, all the dramas are not available, but whatever number is available is in such a number with a marvelous literary quality that has made the 5th century B.C., in Greece, a classical period. Even today, that is, after 2500 years too, its credit is intact. So we would be curious to know about the literary facets of the Greek tragedy that has achieved the label ‘classical’. These classical tragedies have a typical structural design. It was for the first time that we witness uniformity among the Greek tragedies written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, regarding the framework of the structure. The three Greek tragedians had practiced this framework in the tragedies like “Agamemnon”, “The seven against Thebes”, “Antigone”, “Oedipus

Tyrannous”, “The Trojan women”, “Medea’ and “Hippolytus”.

The structural framework comprises certain divisions. Aristotle, later on, combines these aspects and provided a universally accepted definition of tragedy. The divisions are (1) Prologus (2) Parodos (3) Episode (may differ in number, but generally three are five – same can be said about (4) Stasimon and (5) Exodos. Apart from these there are chorus and mask which can be considered as typical elements of Greek tragedy. These main elements of typical Greek tragedy are like foetus from which we get specific elements of drama like plot, character, thought, conflict, diction, music, spectacle and theme.

Prologus:

This is the opening scene of the play. Every story has its background. In this part – prologus – the background of the story is established. It is necessary for the audience, as, with the help of this explanation, they would be able to appreciate the incidents of the drama. It is done, usually by one actor, sometimes in form of a dialogue between two actors. For example, in “Agamemnon” of Aeschylus, a watchman sees a signal fire and runs to announce that to Clytemnestra. Sophocles’ “Oedipus Tyrannus” opens with a prologue. It is in form of a dialogue. In this prologue the information about Laius murder is provided. It prepares a way for the further development of the play.

Parodos:

Through this, there is an entry of chorus. We will discuss later, how much important was the role of chorus. Usually chorus enters

chanting or singing. The entrance of chorus marks the end of prologue. The choral ode (the song of chorus) present details related to the further development of drama. It informs the audience about the role and identity of the chorus. It contributes considerably in providing the momentum. In 'Agamemnon', the watchman departs and the chorus of Argive Elders enters, singing a song

"Ten livelong years have rolled away,
Since the twin lords of sceptered
sway,
By Zeus endowed with pride of place,
The doughty chief of Atreus' race,
Went forth of yore,
To plead with Priam, face to face,
Before the judgment seat of war!"

The song is a long one, providing details related to the development of drama. It is a typical characteristic of the Greek tragedy. In Sophocles' "Oedipus Tyrannus", after some dialogues, there is an entry of Theban Senators as chorus.

Act 1 – scene 1

"O Prophecy of Jove, whose words are
sweet,
With what doom art thou sent
To glorious Thebes, from pythos
gilded seat?
Offspring of golden hope, immortal
oracle,
Tell me, o tell?"

In act – 11 – scene 2 – chorus speaks –

"In countless hosts our city perisheth.
Her children on the plain
Lie all unpitied – pitiless – breeding
death." (George Young: 1941. P.133)

Here, chorus performs its dramatic duty by developing the story as it raises the major issue of the tragedy.

In "Prometheus Bound", (Aeschylus) after a dialogue between power (divine agent of Zeus) and Hephaestus, (divine son of Zeus) there comes the chorus of nymphs in a winged chariot says,

"You need not fear us. We are your
friend. The rapid beating of these
eager wings has borne our company to
this sheer Clift, we works to get our
father to agree."

Lines 166 to 169.

The lines throw additional light to the movement of the drama.

Episode:

It is like scenes of the modern drama. There are usually five episodes. It marks the commencement of action. There may be one or two or three characters. It forms the major part of the drama. Here, the plot is developed through action and dialogue between the actors. This is one kind of exposition and the plot develops with a different turn. For example, in Sophocles' "Oedipus Tyrannus", Tiresias' arrival on the stage and his certain declarations provide a terrific momentum. He throws light on the real culprit, his sin and mystery related to his identity. Tiresias, a blind prophet, says,

"I say that you are Laius' murderer –
he whom you seek." (George Young:
1941. P.139)

After some dialogues he says –

"Also to his (Oedipus') own sons he
shall be found related as a brother,

though their size, and of the woman from whose womb he came both son and spouse; one that has raised up seed to his own father, and has murdered him.” (George Young: 1941. P.142)

Every episode (exposition) ends with ‘Stasimon’.

Stasimon:

Stasimon – means a choral ode. It marks the end of the episode. It separates two episodes. It is performed by chorus. There may be one character or sometimes more characters. In this part some comments are presented by the chorus on specific occasions, there may be ‘commus’. It is a lyric passage. It is sung by character/s with the chorus. The number of ‘stasimon’ is in tune with the number of episode.

An example of ‘stasimon’ from Sophocles’ “Oedipus Tyrannus”

Chorus –

“Who is he, who was said
By the Delphian soothsaying rock
To have wrought with hands blood –
red

Nameless unspeakable deeds?”

Exodos:

It is the final stage of the play. It comprises the ultimate statement of the play. It brings the outcome of the tragedy. In Aeschylus’ “Agamemnon” the exodus is about the final situation and Clytemnestra. Aegisthus appears on the stage. He takes credit of planning the murder of Agamemnon. But chorus disapproves it and Aegisthus threatens to murder the chorus. At that juncture Clytemnestra says that now there should be peace because enough blood is wasted.

Conclusion:

I would like to conclude the article by mentioning that it is due to all these fantastic features that the ancient Greek tragedy is known as ‘classic’. The modern drama owes many things to the ancient Greek tragedy. In the field of art of plot construction the contribution of the ancient Greek tragedy is immense.

Guided by: Dr. Subhash Sharma, Associate Professor and Guide, Paher, Udaipur

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