

Oedipus Tyrannos : In the context of 5th Century Greece

An Insight Into Socio-Political & Ritualistic Aspects

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Abstract : Oedipus Tyrannos is one of the most celebrated and controversial plays of all times. Sophocles wrote the play in 5th century Athens with a probable reflection of the then socio-political scenario. Multiple elements in Oedipus Tyrannos including the shrine at Delphi, the deadly plague, the position of a leading citizen as the ruler etc. had their basis in that period. Oedipus Tyrannos shows a heavy presence of rites and rituals prevalent during those times. The playwright must have been sufficiently influenced by his immediate surroundings and the pressing issues of his age. Religion and society have a deep impact on the literary works of any age. Within the play, one may also read the ancient Greek manifestation and conceptualization of the oikos (οἶκος) and polis (πολις). The character of King Oedipus and his power may be studied in the context of the polis of Athens. This research paper aims to put the play in the 5th century BC perspective. It ventures to portray that the backdrop of the play is essentially based on the then prevailing conditions. It also aims to show the modification of the ancient Theban myth according to the socio-economic and political scenario of Sophocles' age. Documentary research as well as textual analysis has been adopted as the principal methodology of this research paper.

Keywords- 5th century BC, Greece, Oedipus Tyrannos, Sophocles.

INTRODUCTION

Fifth century BC was an eventful era of cultural brilliance and political significance for Greece. The first theatre of Dionysus was built in circa 500 BC. Sophocles was one of the three eminent dramatists of the fifth century, the other two being Aeschylus and Euripedes. He was born in circa 496 BC. Professor Kitto describes Sophocles as an artist whose art was perfect. Sophocles defeated Aeschylus, who was older than him, in his first entry at Dionysian festival. Sophocles had great command over religious and political affairs – which got reflected in his plays. It was Sophocles, as Aristotle noted, who introduced the third actor and Skenographia or scene painting in Greek Tragedy.

Oedipus Tyrannos was written after Antigone. It may be mentioned here that as per chronological order of events in the Theban Plays – Antigone comes last while Oedipus Tyrannos comes first. The Theban Plays are based on the legends surrounding the Royal House of the Thebes. Sophocles wrote Oedipus Tyrannos roughly in the year 429 BC. It won the second prize in the Dionysian festival. Aristotle regarded it as the perfect type of tragic composition. The play is a chilling portrayal of human helplessness in front of the supernatural forces. In this play, both religious and socio-political elements have a crucial role. A proper reading of Oedipus Tyrannos should be done by placing the play in the socio-ritualistic context of 5th century Greece. The earliest mention of the Theban legend involving King Oedipus is found in Homer's Odyssey. Therefore, the facts of the age including the Theban myths were abridged by Sophocles to suit his purpose and art. Even Sigmund Freud notes this "further modification of the legend". Josh Beer aptly sums up the 5th century contemporary influence on Greek tragedy as – "Although the setting of most tragedies is mythical, because the plays are set in a legendary past, the concerns of tragedy arose from the moral, political, and religious issues of the contemporary polis".

II. FACTUAL ELEMENTS OF 5TH CENTURY BC

We find the mention of a devastating pestilence in Oedipus Tyrannos. There was indeed a great plague at Athens close to the time when Sophocles wrote the play. Dr. Antonis A. Kousoulis and his colleagues have substantiated the historical nature of the plague described in the play, by discovering multiple textual evidences about the exact nature of the plague including the probable pathogen responsible for the outbreak of the zoonosis.

There was a hallowed temple of Apollo at Delphi. It was famous in ancient Greece as the seat of the Pythia. The Pythia was the name of the High Priestess of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi who also served as the oracle. The shrine was reconstructed in circa 525 BC.

Athens did have tyrants who wielded absolute power over the polis. Peisistratos, son of Hippocrates, became the first Athenian tyrant in 546 BC. Much like Oedipus, the position of tyrant was awarded to Peisistratos purely based on his personal ability and popularity. However, according to historical evidences, Peisistratos was not despotic.

The three major places mentioned in the play, namely, Thebes, Corinth and Delphi are all located in present day Greece. They were important centers of activity during the times of Sophocles. The legendary meeting point of three roads where Oedipus slayed Laius can still be seen near the mountains of Parnassos in Greece.

By incorporating these specific aspects of the fifth century BC into the Theban legend, Sophocles has left an indelible mark of the ancient Greek world over the play.

III. SOCIAL SCENARIO

In Oedipus Tyrannos, we find a reflection of ancient Greek social structure and beliefs. The oikos of King Oedipus's royal household is important to the plot. Oedipus's parricide and incest are assaults to the oikos. The oikos was related to the larger political matters. According to Josh Beer, each polis was built at root on a collection of oikos. The fate of Thebes largely depended on the fate of the Theban royal family. Jocasta reproaches her husband King Oedipus and her brother Creon for quarrelling over personal issues when the polis is in great danger –

“Stop! Why have you embarked

upon this war of words, you foolish men?

Have you no shame, that, though our land is sick like this, you start upon some private feud?”

The societal prejudice against incest is also emphasized in the play when the Chorus refuses to touch the blind Oedipus, guilty of parricide and incest. Oedipus is shown to be cursed in Oedipus Tyrannos because of his incestuous marriage. This is a pollution or curse by which an entire family faced ruin as in the case of Laius, Jocasta, Oedipus himself and later even Oedipus's children. This was regarded as miasma by the Greeks.

The faith in the oracles may also be interpreted as something ingrained in the 5th century Greek society. We find that great importance is given to the oracle of Delphi. When Oedipus is approached by the Thebans for help, he tells them that he had already sent his kinsman Creon „to the Pythian house of Apollo“. The oracles at Delphi and elsewhere indeed commanded great influence and faith among the Greeks who used to approach them in the face of disasters or what seemed inexplicable.

The respect enjoyed by Teiresias from Creon and the Chorus in the play illustrates the predominant position of prophets and other holy men in the ancient Greek society. People relied on the words of these prophets whom they believed to be closer to the Gods.

In the play we encounter both elite, highly privileged characters like Oedipus, Jocasta and Creon as well as peasants, or slaves in the form of the Corinthian messenger and the herdsman who served King Laius. In the ancient Greek world, the peasants usually resided in the rural areas close to the periphery of the polis and did not enjoy its membership. The herdsman who is summoned by King Oedipus in the play is also shown to be working at the countryside away from Thebes.

IV. POLITICAL SCENARIO

The political scenario of Greece was volatile in the 5th century BC. Institutions like Kingship or Tyranny were challenged and replaced by more democratic systems. The polis remained at the center of the political narrative. To quote James Mark Shields – “The world of the polis contains both the oikos and the polis spheres, each with separate claims on personal and public duties”. Oedipus brings misfortune to the polis both for the regicide of Laius, an assault on the polis as well as for his incestuous relationship with Jocasta, a disgrace for the oikos. The position and role of the tyrant is quite evident in the play. Oedipus becomes the ruler of the polis by solving the riddle of the Sphinx. He, as the King, has the responsibility to save the polis of Thebes when it is faced with a dire crisis. He also, on the other hand, being a Tyrant has the power to act as per his own whims and fancies. King Oedipus refuses to listen to the warnings of either Teiresias or Creon – which later prove to be valid. Tyranny as a form of Government had been abolished in the 5th century BC. In the emerging democratic setup of 5th century BC, every citizen had a right to free speech, as echoed by the blind prophet Teiresias to King Oedipus during their altercation –

“King as thou art, free speech at least is mine

To make reply; in this I am thy peer.”

When Oedipus asserts to Creon that „Kings must rule“, Creon replies - “Not if they rule ill“. The need for the King to rule justly and the growing significance of democracy in fifth century BC Greece is emphasized by Creon's answer.

V. RITUALISTIC ASPECTS

Oedipus Tyrannos opens with the suppliants approaching King Oedipus's palace with branches and garlands. The suppliants are led by a priest, which reinforces the religious significance of these rituals. These branches had a ritualistic connotation in the Greek society. In the ancient Greek ritual of eiresione (εἰρεσιώνη), branches of olive or laurel, bound with purple or white wool, round which were hung various fruits of the season, pastries, and small jars of honey, oil and wine. This was done as a thank-offering for blessings received or to seek similar blessings and protection against evil in future. Jocasta also offers garlanded branches and incense to the Gods as „tokens of supplication“. The play is replete with such ancient rituals which often perplex the modern reader. The religious & ritualistic density of the text may be illustrated by this excerpt from Oedipus Tyrannos –

“More sit in the market-place, carrying boughs like these,

And around the twin altars of Pallas and the sacred embers

Of divination, beside the river of Ismenus.”

Pallas was the Titan God of battle and warcraft whereas Ismenus was the river-God. The chorus used to stand around the altar on the stage during the performance of a Greek tragedy. Therefore, it may also be noted here that the 5th century Greek audience viewed the chorus in a tragedy as a „group of ritual performers“.

CONCLUSION

Oedipus Tyrannos is an immaculate presentation of the Theban myth modified to suit the needs and issues of 5th century Greece. The socio-political and ritualistic ambience of the ancient Greek world can be felt throughout the play. All the locations mentioned in the play can be geographically located. Mt. Cithaeron, to mention an example, is located in central Greece. The play can be best described as a wonderful

concoction of myths, social folkways, political ideology and religious rituals with a fair share of dramatic fiction and exaggeration. The presence of 5th century contemporary issues and objects must have made the ancient Greek audience relate better with the play.

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