

OEDIPUS THE KING AND CILAPPATIKARAM ARE UNIVERSAL TRAGEDIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOPHOCLES AND ILANGO AS TRAGEDIANS

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Abstract:

Tragedy is an indispensable aspect of human life. Great thinkers and writers have been obsessed with questioning this worldly phenomenon and attempted to address this in their own ways. Sophocles and Ilango, towering personalities of Greek and Tamil literatures respectively, have dealt with tragedy of mankind and presented their views emphatically through their literary works Oedipus the King and Cilappatikaram.

Keywords: *Tragedy, tragedians, oedipus the king, cilappatikaram, sophocles, ilango, and aristotle.*

Introduction

Tragedy in any form, physical or mental is painful. It is an integral and inevitable part of human life. Even Gods incarnate are not spared from this worldly phenomenon. “Why do men suffer?”, and “Where do sufferings come from?” have been the prominent questions lingering in the minds of great thinkers all over the world since time immemorial.

Many times innocent people fall victims to tragedy or misfortune for no fault of theirs. Is tragedy god-given? Is tragedy a scheming of Nature against humanity? Or is it the game of the Providence using Nature a character to cause tragedy to human beings? Classical writers namely Sophocles of Greece and Ilango Adigal of Tamilnadu have essayed to find reasons for these questions through their literary masterpieces Oedipus the King and Cilappatikaram respectively.

Sophocles

Sophocles was born at Colonus in Greece and lived on the outskirts of the capital city of Athens. He lived (496 B.C. to 406 B.C.) during the fifth century B.C. almost in its entirety. He was a multi-faceted personality, a virtuoso playwright, a portraitist, a pious man, and an acceptant human being but sometimes arraigning the gods through his characters. Aristophanes describes the character of Sophocles as “contented among the living, contented among the dead.” Sophocles was known for his good temper and charm.

Literary career of Sophocles

Sophocles is said to have authored 120 plays out of which only seven tragedies have survived. Three among these deal with legendary narratives of the royal house of Thebes, the city state in ancient Greece. Though the story of Oedipus has attracted many dramatists before and after Sophocles, it is only Sophocles whose name is associated with the legend and the name of Oedipus.

Story of Oedipus the King

There is no equal to the horror of the tale of Oedipus in world history or literature. The plot is simple. An oracle foretells that Oedipus shall kill his father, get married to his mother and beget children born of his own mother. He fulfills his destiny against his own will and knowledge. A man who was hailed

as Solomon for his wisdom and as Job for his flawless character is thrown into an abyss of despair and misery by a sudden change of fortune and no fault of his own.

Being a great admirer of Sophocles' Oedipus the king, Aristotle considered it the perfect tragedy. The play fits most perfectly into his definition and the analytical framework of a tragedy. "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in the language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in several parts of the body; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation catharsis of these and similar emotions."

The Chorus narrates much of the action before the first scene. Though most of the audience has prior knowledge of the story of Oedipus, they are eager to see it in action on the stage. The first scene sets the complication of the story as to find the culprit who had earlier murdered the king of Thebes and thereby caused a curse falling on the city. The irony that the present king Oedipus is the real murderer is revealed to him in the end. He curses himself and Fate. When he comes upon the dead body of Jocasta, he cries pathetically and furiously, brings her body down, removes the long golden brooch from her clothes and in unabated despair plunges it into his eyes.

Oedipus has all the characteristics of a good character supporting the plot as per Poetics. He is true to his self, true to his type, true to life, and his character is probable yet more beautiful than life itself. The 'hamartia' or tragic flaw in the case of Oedipus is his arrogance of knowledge and power. However after he realizes his misdeeds and repents for his sins 'all human filthiness in one crime compounded!', he shows his heroic nature by punishing himself and greatness in facing the most cruel crisis any man can ever face.

Further, his determination that he should be banished from Thebes shows that he wants always to be righteous whatever misfortunes befall on him. He appeals to Creon repeatedly to execute this proclamation earlier made by Oedipus himself as the penalty for the murderer of Laius. The tragic condition of Oedipus in the end of the play moves the audience deeply. This instills pity and his self-blinding instills horror, thereby purgates the emotions of pity and fear which is a crucial function of a tragedy according to Aristotle.

Ilango

Also called Ilango Adigal, he belonged to the second century CE and was the younger brother of Cenkuttuvan, the renowned Cera King. It is believed that he became an ascetic in order to disprove a prophesy that Ilango would overtake the throne from his elder brother Cenkuttuvan. As a royal personage he was taught all forms of martial and aesthetic arts, more particularly Poetry, Music and Drama, termed as Iyal, Isai and Natakam by Tamil scholars. Kulavanigan Cattamar, the author of Manimekalai, was his contemporary.

Cilappatikaram in a nutshell

Kovalan, the son of Macattuvan, an affluent merchant of Kavirippumpattinam, is married to Kannaki, the daughter of Manaykkan, another merchant of the same town. The handsome Kovalan earned fame as a trader even when he was quite young. He is also an ardent lover of all forms of arts. Kannaki was a beautiful girl like a golden creeper and was extolled by the city men for her virtuous qualities.

Their nuptial life begins and continues happily until Kovalan gets enticed by the charm of Madhavi who is the daughter of a courtesan dancer. He deserts Kannaki and spends all his time and wealth for Madhavi. But Kannaki's devotion to Kovalan is not at all diminished as she willingly sacrifices all her jewels for Kovalan except a pair of anklets.

Kovalan and Madhavi beget a child also. However their relationship does not last long. On misunderstanding Madhavi, Kovalan returns to Kannaki who has been eagerly waiting for this moment. As Kovalan does not want to live in the same town, he decides to start the new life afresh in Madurai, the Capital of the Pandya kingdom.

In Madurai, Kovalan goes to the market place to sell one of the pair of anklets of Kannaki and to start a new business venture from the proceeds of the sale. But he is cunningly trapped by the Jeweler of the Palace and is accused of stealing an anklet of the Pandya Queen. The King orders, without proper trial, Kovalan to be beheaded.

On hearing the most shocking news of her life, that is Kovalan having been killed on a false charge, hurries to the palace and appears before the King to vindicate the innocence of her husband. When the king justifies that her husband was killed for the charge of stealing the anklet of the Queen, Kannaki crashes on the floor the anklet remaining with her. The king finds that Kannaki's anklet is studded with rubies, while queen's had pearls in them. Stricken with grief at his unjust judgment resulting in the killing of an innocent man, the king falls down dead. The anxious queen, watching all these incidents, laments over the death of the King and swoons to death.

Kannaki's wrath is still unabated. She spells a curse and sets the city of Madurai ablaze. The Lady of Benevolence and Virtue has turned a Lady of Indignation incarnate. The guardian deity of Madurai appears before Kannaki and appeases her by briefing that Kovalan's death was a part of fulfilling a curse cast on him by a woman widowed by him in his previous birth. Realizing that the string of events happened till now has been the game of Fate, Kannaki gets pacified, states that the Pandya king has not been at fault and that she is his daughter, leaves the town, and wanders along the banks of Vaigai river. She walks towards Chengunram or the Red Hills in the Chera kingdom. A band of Kuravas, a hill tribe, sees her like a ghost but soon transforming into a goddess to be taken to heaven in a chariot with Kovalan seated in it descending from the sky. Kannaki is venerated as 'the Lady of the anklet' and 'the Goddess of Chastity' and worshipped by kings of all lands.

Concept of Tagedy in Cilappatikaram

According to Chellappan, it is not correct to conclude that Ilango conceived the origin and the development of tragedy at the individual or social level. He understood it as an eternal moral problem and an unsolvable riddle of the world order. Because there is no guarantee of the abrogation of human tragedy in this world, even when all the individuals and the societies become good. Human tragedy is inextricable from the world order.

Tragic hero in Cilappatikaram

According to Aristotle, the ideal hero should be a man of eminence. He may not be an absolutely virtuous man, but should basically be a good man. He may not be an utterly wicked man, but should be susceptible to wrong-doings. In other words the tragic hero should be neither too good nor too bad. Kovalan in Cilappatikaram has been characterized as a tragic hero. The tragic flaw in Kovalan is said to be his weakness for infatuation and hasty and wrong judgment of Madhavi as a woman of infidelity. Though he has many exemplary qualities in him, his fall begins from his separation from Kannaki first and Madhavi next.

'Catharsis' in Cilappatikaram

A tragedy should effect 'Catharsis' or purgation of the strong emotions of fear and pity in the minds of the audience. It is mainly to refine them as better human beings. Ilango has created the character of Kovalan as a man of great virtues. This is revealed by Madalan, another character before Kovalan gets killed. That precipitates brimming pity in the audience. Immediately after feeling pity for Kovalan, the audience undergo fear. The fear in their minds is cast by the awful activities of Kannaki after her husband Kovalan has been killed unjustly. The havoc she brings to the city of Madurai by way of setting it ablaze and the kingdom by the death of the king followed by that of his queen shaves the audience to be frightened spectators.

'Complication' and 'denouement' in Cilappatikaram

'Complication' and 'denouement' are the two elements with which the tragic action in a tragedy

takes off and ends. The complication in Cilappatikaram unfolds with Kovalan's separation from Madhavi, intensifies when he is being trapped by the Goldsmith at Madurai trailed by his untimely death, and ends with Kannaki's wrath and then her appeasement by Madurapati, the Guardian deity of the city.

Though Cilappatikaram stands as a perfect tragedy going by the characteristics prescribed by Aristotle, it goes one step ahead on the line of Eastern culture. In the eastern tradition a tragedy may be crowded with many deaths, but it ends always in a note of peace and reconciliation. Kannaki who is portrayed to be a woman at the most intense wrath to the extent of destroying Madurai city, is pacified, gets reconciled and proclaims that the Pandiya king has not been at fault and that she is his daughter.

Conclusion

Feeling the sufferings of people, whether they were royal personages or common and poor masses, Sophocles and Ilango attempted to interpret the nature of human tragedy through their writings. By showing the events in Cilappatikaram appearing to be casual occurrences, Ilango clearly points out the force of tragedy and its indefinable nature. Though Greek tragedies purport the concept that human tragedy is caused by Fate and nothing more can be done against it, Ilango implies that beyond the havoc the tragedy can bring, something more can be done towards building a better humanity. By any measure, Cilappatikaram and Oedipus the King are great universal tragedies which will hardly be sequelled in the millennia to come.

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