

Review Article

## A Short Analysis of Greek Tragedy and its Causes

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**Abstract:** This paper is built on this assumption that tragedy is the result of human suffering. Human suffering has many faces and causes. No one can ignore any cause due to its effect on the subject. This paper provides analysis of few Greek plays that comments on the background, core and cause of tragedy. In this compact analysis, the paper concludes that Greek beliefs and myths are a key to their tragedy; also serious imitation of life.

**Keywords:** Greek tragedy, belief, myth, suffering.

### INTRODUCTION

Arnold says about Chaucer, "with him is born our real poetry" [1]. *The Canterbury Tales* is a perfect example of Chaucer's art of dramatic realism. He provides detailed description of characters and dialogues. His characters reveal themselves through their own words and actions. Moreover, costumes, gestures and scenery all are his skills like a dramatist. Similarly, he is also a skillful plot constructor and tells the tales of all characters with 'links' as characters are connected together. Although, his poetry deals with humanism and he worked like a dramatist but his work lacks in the following areas.

- The gradual development and decline of characters
- Their influence and the sudden awareness of tragic life
- Psychological development of the characters
- Influence of circumstances on characters
- Revelation of inward and outward world
- The height and depth of pathos and passions,
- And the overpowering sense of tragic flaw and hubris [1].

Undoubtedly, his poetry is excellent in style and manner but he is not as classic poet as Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare thus lacks in high poetic seriousness which according to Aristotle is the highest form of superiority [1]. Poetic seriousness relates to the tragic events of life. In the following, poetic seriousness by Aristotle with Greeks' beliefs is documented [2].

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Tragedy is the serious imitation of life. It is Greeks' belief. According to Greeks, tragedy is the highest form of drama. As a matter of fact, Greek drama is the origin of tragedy and Aristotle after the production of Greek dramas comes up with the definition of tragedy. Aristotle's definition of tragedy is based on Greeks' beliefs. The definition is as under,

A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language; in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, where with to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions (From the *Poetics* of Aristotle, 384-322 BC).

In Greek tragedies, the protagonists fall from the high status and become a common human being. The examples are seen in the dramas like *Oedipus the King*, *The Persians*, *Prometheus Bound*, *The Capture of Miletus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone* and *Medea* [3]. In these dramas, the protagonists and State suffer from great tragic events. As Aristotle said that tragedy is the imitation of

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an action that is serious, it shows that tragedy must deal with a *serious issue* and the issue must not be trivial. The more issues are serious and elevated the more a drama is tragic. The serious issues are noticeable in the above mentioned dramas.

To illustrate, *Oedipus the King* encountered with a serious issue that is the results of oracle's prophecy. The murder of his father by him, his marriage with his mother and he was the father and brother of his children caused his ruin. However, these issues were unveiled after discovering the truth. The discovering of truth is also mentioned in the above Aristotle's definition that actions must have magnitude. For example, if the issue is serious then it must have great importance. In Oedipus' tragedy, no one can deny the fact that the conversation between Tiresias and Oedipus and the news by the Corinthian messenger had great importance to Oedipus. He could not avoid what Tiresias and messenger have said.

In addition, the issue must be *complete* in itself. It is also evident in Oedipus' tragedy that at first hand he did not believe Tiresias however the messenger's news justified the statement of Tiresias and leads *Oedipus to Colonus* [4]. Comparatively, *The Persians*, *Prometheus Bound* and *The Capture of Miletus* also significantly deal with a serious issue. Like the defeat of the Persian, the capture of the Miletus and Prometheus' seize reveal that the protagonists of the dramas faced serious issues.

In tragedies, language must be *appropriate and pleasurable*. How language can be appropriate and pleasurable? It is appropriate and pleasurable in the speeches of chorus. The role of chorus is to shed light on the ongoing events of the drama. Aristotle also said that language must be easy to listen. Chorus' language in Greek dramas always attracts the audience. As in *The Persians* [5],

Faithful to them that sailed o'ersea  
To Grecian lands our name we hold,  
"The Persians' Trust"; true guardians we  
Of many a temple rich in gold  
And holy, whom our Lord and King,  
Xerxes, Darius-born. (Scene 1)

The audience notices that how beautifully chorus informs the audience about Xerxes. Similarly, in *Prometheus Bound*, after the lamentation of Prometheus, chorus beautifully consoles Prometheus in the following,

Fear nothing; in friendship and eager  
With winged contention of speed  
Together we draw near thy rock.  
Scarce we persuaded our father,  
But now at last the swift breezes  
Have brought us (*Chorus, strophe i*)

While in *Oedipus at Colonus*, chorus comments [4],

Alas! wast thou sightless e'en from thy birth? Evil have been thy  
days, and many, to all seeming; but at least, if I can help, thou shalt  
not add this curse to thy doom..... (*antistrophe 1*)

Furthermore, language must be *dramatic* rather than *narrative*. It means that the events and story must be dramatized and must not be simply narrated. The evidence is obvious in the above mentioned chorus speeches that how chorus dramatized the event, shed light on the passed, ongoing and future events and fears in dramatic style and narration.

The depiction of incident must *arouse the feelings of pity and fear* to accomplish *catharsis*. Chorus' commentary on the events, gradual fall of Oedipus, defeat of Persian, capture of Miletus and the seize of Prometheus aroused the feelings of pity and fear in the audience. Specifically, the tragedy of Oedipus, his blindness, Prometheus' seize and king Darius' ghost's prophecy terrified the audience. However, Oedipus' exile, his dependency on other people and daughter and his death made audience cried while the accomplishment of catharsis is always done by the hero by releasing emotions.

Talking about Medea, Bates (44) says, "in the character of Medea...the tragic genius of Euripides reaches its highest pinnacle. In none of the other plays is there a character which can approach Medea as a tragic figure" [6]. As far as the tragedy of Antigone is concerned, Scodel [7] says that the heroine of Sophocles' *Antigone* certainly has a difficult personality, and if she were less fierce, she would probably not bury her brother and so bring about her death; but she is doing the right thing, not making a mistake". However, Scodel further says, "Antigone is one of the most influential and popular of tragedies" [7].

It is evident in the above mentioned arguments that Greeks strictly believe that tragedy is serious imitation of life. Greeks' beliefs about tragedy are strictly based on the incidents of the life. As Scodel [7] argues, "the tragedians evidently did not have any moral objection to portraying suffering characters who have done nothing at all to cause their own suffering". Similarly, Greek tragedies also suffer from incidental events involving innocent victims as happened with Antigone. Tragedians are interested in human

actions and choices. And when characters suffer because of misfortunes and do not bear any responsibility then the tragedy is about how they respond. Here, Scodel's [7] statement is in accordance with the above mentioned Greek tragedies.

Greeks' beliefs are also based on myths which made them realize that tragedy is the serious imitation of life. As myths provide a revered form of validation for cultural institution, practices and beliefs, they explain the religion; convey the beliefs about gods, exemplify positive and negative behaviors which reflect upon human life and explore human joys and sorrows [8]. Likewise, Greek tragedy also involves the competition festivals of gods specifically Dionysus and celebrate Athens who are highly authoritative and culturally relevant and publicly endorsed articulation of myth [8].

Thus, believing in myths, obeying gods and their prophecies and not obeying any of these is another factor that causes tragedy. Keeping the concepts of myths and obeying gods in mind, one can find in Greek tragedies that if the hero does not obey gods or their prophecies he falls from his status and suffers misfortunes. The example is clear in *Oedipus Rex* as he does not obey gods and prophecies, he suffered great misfortune. Opposite to this, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus obeyed the gods and believes their prophecies and in result he got a prophetic vision and becomes a pious figure for/at Colonus.

## CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, based on the above arguments and evidences from the dramas, it is concluded (and evident) that Greeks beliefs are based on the actual events of life. It is also evident in the Greek tragedies that all the characters suffer a misfortune, reactions to a prophecy or conversation, disobeying of gods, hubris and hamartia from the real life events. Thus, these real life events become Greeks' beliefs and myths that emphasized that tragedy is the serious imitation of life.

### About the Author

Farah Qamar has done M.Phil in English Literature from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore and M.Phil in TESL from Beaconhouse National University, Lahore. Her interest is in English literature, creative writing, critical thinking and ELT. She has been teaching English (in Lahore) as part time faculty at prestigious institutes since 2010.

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