SOPHOCLES’ ‘OEDIPUS REX’: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Sophocles, born in 496 B.C. in Colonus on the outskirts of Athens in Greece, is one of the main ancient Greek dramatists known for his great tragedies. His Oedipus Rex is considered to be his masterpiece. This play is the tragic tale of Oedipus, the king of Thebes, who was destined to kill his father and marry his mother and father her children. A man of great physical and mental strength, Oedipus is shown suffering because of the role of destiny in his life. At the end of the play, Sophocles is shown profusely bleeding, begging for death and trying to get rid of the unbearable physical and psychological agonies.

Key Words: Sophocles, Oedipus Rex, Greek tragedy.

Introduction :

Sophocles was born in 496 B.C. in Colonus on the outskirts of Athens in Greece. As a child, Sophocles could get good education which helped him become a man of great intellectual capacity. He was the winner of many dramatic contests held in Greece in his time. His long career of almost 60 years established him as one of the most successful and influential writers of his time. He died in the year 406 B.C. leaving behind him a great legacy of 120 plays. Out of these plays, Antigone, Oedipus Rex, Electra, Ajax, Trachinæ, Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus are the only plays that have survived into modern times.

Sophocles’ play ‘Oedipus Rex’ is also called as ‘Oedipus Tyrannus’. It is considered as the masterpiece of the master-craftsman, Sophocles. It deals with that period of the life of King Oedipus when he became the King of Thebes and husband of Jocasta. It is at this time that he comes to know that he has murdered his father, Laius and married his mother, Jocasta. The disclosure of this hideous truth leads him to blind himself and Jocasta to commit suicide.
The protagonist of the play, Oedipus Rex, is Oedipus who was the King of Thebes. He is introduced to the audience at the very beginning of the play. He was:

“The son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes. After Laius learns from an oracle that “he is doomed/To perish by the hand of his own son”, he tightly binds the feet of the infant together with a pin and orders Jocasta to kill the infant. Hesitant to do so, she orders a servant to commit the act for her. Instead, the servant takes the baby to a mountain top to die from exposure. A shepherd rescues the infant and names him Oedipus (or "swollen feet"). The shepherd carries the baby with him to Corinth". (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus_the_King)

Oedipus was being brought up in Corinth as the son of the King Polybus and Queen Merope. He was an obedient son who made his parents proud of by his manly qualities. However, he could not continue to lead his happily with his parents as one day he:

“hears a rumour that he is not the biological son of Polybus and his wife Merope. When Oedipus questions the King and Queen, they deny it, but, still suspicious, he asks the Delphic Oracle who his parents really are. The Oracle seems to ignore this question, telling him instead that he is destined to "Mate with [his] own mother, and shed/With [his] own hands the blood of [his] own sire". Desperate to avoid his foretold fate, Oedipus leaves Corinth in the belief that Polybus and Merope are indeed his true parents and that, once away from them, he will never harm them". (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus_the_King)

With this firm resolution, Oedipus marched on his path, leaving behind his town along with his fate. However, the destiny took him towards the predetermined course and he came across:

“Laius, his true father. Unaware of each other's identities, they quarrel over whose chariot has right-of-way. King Laius moves to strike the insolent youth with his sceptre, but Oedipus throws him down from the chariot and kills him, thus fulfilling part of the oracle's prophecy. He kills all but one of the other men”. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus_the_King)
The man who was saved from the wrath of Oedipus, reached to Thebes and narrated the whole story to the Queen Jocasta. But she paid not much attention towards the investigation of her husband’s murder. Meanwhile Oedipus reaches Thebes and:

“Solves the riddle of the Sphinx, which has baffled many a diviner: "What is the creature that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening?" To this Oedipus replies, "Man" (who crawls on all fours as an infant, walks upright later, and needs a walking stick in old age), and the distraught Sphinx throws herself off the cliffside. Oedipus's reward for freeing the kingdom of Thebes from her curse is the kingship and the hand of Queen Dowager Jocasta, his biological mother. The prophecy is thus fulfilled, although none of the main characters know it".

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus_the_King)

When Oedipus comes to know about the truth that he had murdered King Laius, he was terribly shocked. He realized that he had killed his father, that is, King Laius and married his mother, that is, Jocasta and fathered her children. This truth ruined him completely. Then he went to meet Jocasta. When he arrived at her palace, he found her hanging by a rope. He was shocked to see her dead body. His grief knew no bounds. As he did not want to see such a terrible sight, he blinded himself with pix. Blood began to flow profusely. Like a mad person, h started to move around aimlessly. He came across Creon and requested him to banish him from Thebes. But Creon could not fulfill his wish as he wanted to know the will of the God first. Finally, the play ends with a moral that human happiness is transient and that it can never last till the last day of a man’s life.

King Oedipus is the tragic hero of the play. Aristotle considers tragic hero as a person holding high position in life, who falls into misfortune because of some weakness or fault in his character. Aristotle says that a tragic hero should be a ‘good’ person, but not a ‘perfect’ one. Similarly, he should also not be an utter villain. It means a tragic hero is neither a paragon nor a scoundrel.

Oedipus is a king who possesses good qualities of character. He is a good king, a great well-wisher of his people, an honest and great administrator and an outstanding intellect. So he is very fit to be a hero of tragedy. He has a great respect for his family. He is always ready to sacrifice himself for the well-being of his family. He is a good son, good
husband and a good father. Similarly, he believes in the prophecies of gods and prophets. As a king, he is always ready to serve his people and helps them in all possible means.

Oedipus’ Faults: However, Oedipus is not a ‘perfect’ person; he has his faults. He is hot-tempered, hasty in his judgment and very proud of his intelligence. We see him quickly getting angry with Teiresias because he thinks that Teiresias had conspired against him. Such kind of hasty behavior is unbecoming for the king like Oedipus. Even his treatment of Creon is not acceptable. He hurriedly reaches to the conclusion that Creon, his brother-in-law, must have planned to dethrone him by calling him the murderer of King Laius. Oedipus is also a person of excessive pride in his own wisdom. That is why he looks down upon Teiresias for his failure to solve the riddle of Sphinx. In fact, it is because of his pride that Oedipus losses much of the sympathy of the audience.

Oedipus has already committed the crimes which make him sinner in the eyes of the gods, in his own eyes, and in the eyes of other people. It was so because he had killed his father and married his mother. But it would be wrong to say that Oedipus suffered because of his sin of pride. When he came to know about his fate from the oracle, he tried his utmost to avoid the fulfillment of the prophecies. It was completely in a state of ignorance that he killed his father and married his mother. His tragedy is a tragedy of error, not of any willful action. However, if he would not have been so proud and behaved a little more carefully, it would have been possible for him to avoid his quarrel with King Laius. But his pride did not allow him to think calmly and made him commit the great sin.

It is certain that his pride plays a vital role in the tragedy of Oedipus. But it is also true that chance was equally responsible for his tragedy. From the beginning, it is seen that Oedipus was driven by chance. For example, it was just by chance that he came to the place where three streets met and got involved in a quarrel with King Laius. This chance meeting resulted in the murder of Laius. Further, it was again by chance that Oedipus comes to Thebes and solves the riddle of Sphinx. As a result, he was offered kingship of Thebes and then he married to Jocasta. All these chance happenings led him to commit the greatest of all crimes. Naturally, he was destined to be punished for his crimes.

Thus King Oedipus has all the qualities to be the hero of a tragedy. He is a character which falls prey to his pride and also to the powerful hands of destiny. The error he commits due to his excessive pride leads him hurriedly towards his downfall. But it should also be
remembered that Oedipus was more a puppet in the hands of his destiny who takes a vicious turn that destroys him completely.

Jocasta is an important character in the play ‘Oedipus Rex’. She is the Queen of Thebes. She plays an important role in the tragedy of Oedipus. She is skeptical about the prophets and their prophecies. It is seen that she does not believe in the prophesy of Teiresias. She tries to convince Oedipus that the prophecy regarding her former husband Laius has proved wrong. Therefore, Oedipus should also neglect the prophecy.

Jocasta helps Oedipus in the investigation of the murderer of Laius. It is because of her calling the messenger shepherd to the palace that discloses the mystery of Laius’ murder. She believes that chance plays an important role in human life. When she came to know about the truth of Laius’ murder, she tried to keep Oedipus away from it. She wanted that Oedipus should not suffer from knowing that he had married his own mother. At the end, she hanged herself in a fit of intense grief. Her tragic death is the result of a very terrible stroke of fate. But from a moral point of view, Jocasta is neither guilty nor innocent.

Creon is the brother of Queen Jocasta. He is very faithful servant to the throne of Thebes. At the very beginning of the play, Creon is introduced to the audience. He had come to know the reason for the sufferings of the Theban people. It was because the murderer of the King Laius was living in Thebes. He was not punished for his crime. Creon was also a true friend and well-wisher of King Oedipus. He told Oedipus the circumstances in which King Laius was murdered.

When Teiresias announced that Oedipus was the murderer of Laius, Creon tried to understand the real circumstances. But Oedipus misunderstood Creon and blamed him. Yet Creon remained firm in his stand. His sister, Queen Jocasta had deep faith in him. She tried to put an end to the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon. At the end of the play, Creon is shown in the company of blind Oedipus. Here, he told Oedipus that he had come there not to blame him. On the contrary, he wanted Oedipus to meet his daughters so that he would get some comfort in their company. After the downfall of Oedipus, he became the King of Thebes. Yet he was a moderate and self-controlled man who is admired by all.

Teiresias is the blind prophet in the play, ‘Oedipus Rex’. He is introduced at the very beginning of the play. He is an honourable person of Thebes. He was invited by Oedipus to
his palace because he wanted to know the reason of the sufferings of his people. He was sure that Teiresias will help him to solve the problem of the state.

When Teiresias declared that Oedipus was the murderer of King Laius, Oedipus became very angry. Oedipus blamed Teiresias that he must be blaming him because of Creon. When Teiresias heard these words, he became angry. Though he was a great person known for his wisdom, he lost his self-control and threatened the King Oedipus of serious consequences. Such threats of Teiresias surprise the readers. Teiresias played an important role as he announced the fate of King Oedipus. He knew everything, whereas Oedipus was completely ignorant about his fate. Thus, as a prophet, Teiresias plays an important role in making the audience know the real culprit in the tragedy of King Oedipus.

**King Oedipus as the Tragic Hero:**

Aristotle considers tragic hero as a ‘distinguished person occupying a high position or having a high status in life and in very prosperous circumstances falling into misfortune on account of a “hamartia” or some defect of character.’ In other words, a tragic hero should have high standing in the society. He should neither be a perfectly good nor utterly wicked person. He should be of intermediate type. The fall of this person from happiness to misery is the result of his tragic flaw.

King Oedipus of the play ‘Oedipus Rex’ has some of these qualities. Firstly, Oedipus is the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta. He is brought up by King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth. Afterwards, he became the king of Thebes. Thus from social point of view he is an eminent person indispensable for the city of Thebes. Secondly, he is also a man of good moral character, though not a paragon of saintly virtues. There are certain defects in his character which, along with his fate, lead him towards his downfall.

As a king, Oedipus was a perfect example of a dutiful king. He is a well-wisher of his people. He is a great administrator and intellectual. It is because of his dutifulness towards Theban people that he is highly respected by them. All the time he is ready to help his people. For example, he had saved Thebes by conquering Sphinx. He had already sent Creon to find out the cause of the sufferings of his people. When Creon announces the reason, he declares that he would find out the criminal and punish him.
He is presented as a man who believes in oracles. Actually, his belief in prophesies is the very basis of the play. He is a man of family. He is a devoted husband to Jocasta and a loving father to his daughters. Even his relations with other people are also cordial.

However, it doesn't mean that he is a faultless person. He certainly has his own faults. He is a hot-tempered person. He quickly becomes angry first with Teiresias and then with Creon. He blames Creon of conspiring against him. This shows his arbitrariness and dictatorial tendency. His disbelief of Creon is presents him as a thoughtless person who prefers to behave as per his own whims.

Another aspect of Oedipus’ personality is his absolute pride in his wisdom. This feeling of pride is nourished as he solves the riddle of Sphinx. He boasts of his wisdom even in front of the prophet, Teiresias. It is his sense of pride that alienates some of the sympathy of the audience. His attitude of intolerance towards both Teiresias and Creon undoubtedly leads him towards his downfall. But his pride is not the direct cause of his tragedy. As he is already aware of the oracle, he is seen trying his best to avoid the fulfilment of the prophecies. There is no any fault of his in his killing his father and marrying his mother. It was completely in a state of ignorance that he committed these crimes. But there is a scope to think that Oedipus could have avoided it if he would have behaved a little more carefully. Actually, it seems that it was possible for him to avoid the quarrel on the street. But it was because of his hot-tempered nature that he got involved in the quarrel which led to his killing King Laius and then getting married with Jocasta. But it would be wrong to say that it was only because of his hot-tempered nature that his tragedy occurred.

But Oedipus’ character proves that his tragedy lies in the discovery of his crimes. It seems that there was something in him which drove him towards discovery. Actually, Teiresias had refused to disclose the name of the murderer but Oedipus forced him to disclose it. We see Jocasta discouraging him from finding out the truths regarding the prophecies. But he did not pay any attention towards her. It is this insistence on the truth that leads to the discovery in which lies the tragedy.

In this way, Oedipus is a perfect tragic hero because his tragedy is as much due to his own faults as to the external forces. But we admire him for the way in which he endures his sufferings.
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