

The Theme of Revenge and Justice in The Oresteia by Aeschylus

Dr. Parul Singh, (Associate Professor)

Department of English. R.G. (P.G.) College, Meerut

The Oresteia , a trilogy of Greek tragedies , was written to be performed at the annual festival of Dionysus by Aeschylus in the 5th century BC and it won the first prize . It talks about the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, the murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes, the trial of Orestes, the end of the curse on the House of Atreus and the pacification of the Erinyes. It comprises three plays; Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, and The Eumenides. The aim of the present paper is to highlight the theme of revenge and justice in the trilogy. Some other themes also have been discussed like, the tension between tyranny and democracy, suffer and learn, justice and judgment. But the main focus of this paper would be on talking about the central theme of the plays revenge and justice by making a clear distinction between revenge and justice, and to dig up the answer to the question why revenge drives the characters throughout all three plays.

The Oresteia tells the story of the house of Atreus bearing a hereditary curse, plaguing the family for five generations with a vicious cycle of murder and revenge demanding blood for blood. This was a curse of the House of Atreus which began when its founder, Tantalus, offended the gods by serving them a feast made of the dismembered remains of his own son, Pelops, in an attempt to test their omniscience. The first play, "Agamemnon", begins with the return of Agamemnon , the king of Argos, shortly after the fall of Troy . He is first welcomed and then murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus, in revenge for sacrificing Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia. Both the lovers set themselves up as the new rulers of Argos after the murder of the king, Agamemnon.

By killing her husband Clytemnestra also becomes the agent of the family curse. Agamemnon makes the choice to kill his daughter just so he could lead his troops to Troy and Clytemnestra kills her husband, not just for revenge, but for his position and power as king of Mycenae. They believe that their actions are justified but the actions of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are not justified because they are caused by their blinding hubris and desire for power. They make selfish choices and do not believe they will be punished for them. By exposing their true motives, Aeschylus makes it clear they are not justified in their actions.

Agamemnon kills his daughter, Iphigenia, for power and respect. Power is more important to him than his daughter, so he sacrifices Iphigenia instead of stepping back and letting someone else lead the armies to battle. The Chorus emphasizes this when they recall his words

before he sacrifices Iphigenia “However he did not shrink from slaying a victim's daughter in aid of war raged”. He is more worried about losing respect than his own daughter. His lust for power and respect made him insensitive to fair judgment. He tries to justify himself by saying there is no other way but to sacrifice her. He does anything to fulfill the public’s desires to win him their praise .

After Agamemnon’s death, Aegisthus is next in line to become king and Clytemnestra is his queen. Her desire for power is hidden by her claims of justification. She challenges anyone to take her power. “He who conquers me in fair fight shall rule me”. She threatens the Chorus to a fight for power. She knows she has all the power now the king was dead and she is his queen. So it can be said that Clytemnestra is not justified in killing Agamemnon and is therefore not a martyr, because her murderous act does not end the cycle of violence which included the death of her daughter Iphigenia. Clytemnestra is certainly entitled to feel hatred towards her husband for sacrificing the life of their daughter but her act of getting justice by retaliation keeps on the violence within the family.

The family curse continues in the second play, The Choephoroi. It takes place a few years later and talks about matricide . Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra , has grown up in exile in the nearby kingdom of Phocis. Orestes returns to Argos to avenge his father's death on the command of god Apollo and pays respect on the grave of Agamemnon. His sister Electra also visits the grave with a group of slave women to offer libation. Orestes comes forward and reunites with his sister. They pray together to their father and make a plan to avenge his death. Then Orestes gains admittance to the palace by disguising himself and kills Clytaemestra and her lover Aegisthus. Orestes tries to justify the murder of his mother, but in the final scene of the play he is afflicted with madness and flees in terror from the Furies, hideous spirits who hunt down and punish murderers.

The third play, the Eumenides, opens with Pythia, the priestess of Apollo, who is interrupted in her prayer by a blood stained refugee no other than Orestes himself. He is haunted relentlessly by the Furies, the chthonic goddesses of vengeance. They seek to kill Orestes, the murderer of his own mother. So it can be said that not only human beings have vengeful attitude towards the wrongdoers but the gods and goddesses also act in the same way. The appearance of these Erinyes shows the direct interference of supernaturals in human affairs. Its not for the first time in the trilogy that human beings are effected by them. Initially Orestes was also commanded by the god Apollo to take revenge of his father's murder. So, the gods and goddesses also play a crucial role in continuing the revenge, crime and violence.

Now the question is that if Clytemnestra murders her husband in order to get justice for her daughter, Orestes kills his own mother for the so called justice, why Orestes should not be punished in the same way as the previous murderers have been punished? This play is very (important) to the first two plays because it puts to end the chaos of the first two plays and tells

why the noble act of forgiveness is far more better than the hideous act of vengeance. At the end of the trilogy, Orestes is seen to be the key, not only to end the curse, of the house of Atreus, but also in taking the path breaking step for the betterment of humanity. The Furies seek only to punish a wrongdoer—Orestes—by whatever means necessary. They do not even attempt to explore the nuances of Orestes' crime of matricide. This must be understood that acts of vengeance fail to achieve true justice because it only creates disharmony in society. The Furies' understanding of the facts stands in contrast with Athena's logical ability to comprehend the situation before her. Impartial and evenhanded, she seeks to hear all sides of an issue before making her decision, clearly displaying the power of justice. Athena herself shows up, in answer to Orestes' prayers. She suggests that they put the matter to a trial. The Furies and Orestes both agree. Athena says that this matter is too complex for a goddess to decide that's why she gather a jury of twelve Athenian citizens to hear the trial, she herself sits as a judge. While Athena goes off to round up the jurymen, the Furies sing a song expressing their anxiety about this whole trial business. Apollo shows up, and announces that he will act as Orestes's defense attorney.

Then, after Athena makes a speech about how the law-court she is now establishing will last for all time, the trial begins. First, the Furies cross-examine Orestes. Orestes admits his crime and gives reasons of his crime of matricide stating that his mother blinded by her passion and hunger for power had committed the crime of killing his father, Agamemnon.

All the jury members vote, some in favor of Orestes and some against Orestes, but Athena's vote is the tie-breaker, meaning Orestes is acquitted. The Furies aren't too pleased about this outcome, but after a lot of persuasion, Athena convinces them to accept it. In the end, the Furies, now known as "The Kindly Spirits" (Eumenides), accept Athena's offer and replace their black robes with reddish-purple ones. Although they will still seek vengeance against evil-doers, they will now also aid the good people of Athens.

Once the trial concludes, Athena proclaimed the innocence of Orestes and he was set free from the Furies. The cycle of murder and revenge had come to an end while the foundation for future litigation had been laid. Aeschylus reveals a final verdict in court and proclaims the best way to achieve justice for societies that they take lesson from the lives of Orestes, Clytemnestra and Electra and not take justice in their own hands rather solve their conflicts through courts of law.

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