

A Critical Study of Oedipus Rex and the identity of Women in Ancient Greece

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Abstract— *Oedipus Rex*, is an Athenian tragedy by Sophocles and was performed first around 429 B.C. Role of gender in society is as old as human society itself. In *Oedipus Rex* a woman named Jocasta is the main character and experiences all the complicated events of the female gender from her childhood throughout her life. She begins life as daughter of Menoeceus of Thebes and becomes the queen of the king (Laius). Moved by number of events like proclaiming and human weakness the play crosses the climax. Besides the role of women in Greece is defined. Where the gender biasness is explained by certain events.

Keywords— *Gender, Biasness, Society, Ancient Greece.*

Gender plays a basic and most important role in the lives of human beings from the time of their inception all through their lives on earth. Right from their first breaths on this earth, humans learn to understand gradually and slowly a code of conduct regarding their sex. A patriarchal society, conveys that males will lead better lives in which they are regarded as dominants and standards for human experience (Sultana, 2012). While as a woman will tend to lead subjugated, suppressed and subservient lives in which they are defined and controlled by masculine. Forcing men and women to operate within the constraints and confines of gender. Gender roles have a negative influence in their lives since it leads to the perception that these roles are a symbol and representation of the truth, which in turn results into gender stereotypes. It also restrains humans to experience life from a limited point of view. These constraints and conjugate restrict both the genders in which men will experience the world purely as men and women will experience the world as strictly as women.

Jocasta is the only important female character in the play, who is the mother and wife of Oedipus. This was not her choice but rather was the result of a complicated event. She began her life as the daughter of Menoeceus of Thebes, and the sister of Hippocleia and Creon.

Young Laius was of the line of Cadmus and was in Thebes when Amphion and Zethus usurped the throne of Thebes. Carried away by some adventures in the Peloponnesus he

became king of Thebes when Amphion and Zethus died. The marriage of Jocasta to Laius seemed advantageous because both Jocasta and Laius were of the line of Cadmus. But Jocasta was not able to become pregnant and carry on the line. So Laius consulted an oracle. The oracle proclaimed that their child would murder Laius. In view of this decree Laius rejected Jocasta and all women henceforth and moved off by himself. Jocasta did not agree to this and conspired to get Laius drunk and slept with him. She became pregnant and obviously Laius became very angry. A son was born to them, Laius the father snatched up the child, pierced his feet and exposed him. This distressed and displeased Jocasta up to a great extent.

Unknown to Jocasta and Laius, the baby is rescued by a shepherd and given to Polybos and Merope of Corinth. There, the baby, was named Oedipus, grows into a man and learns of the prophecy that was once told to his biological parents, although he still knew nothing of them. Thinking about the prophecy implies the murder of Polybos and marriage with Merope, Oedipus ran away from Corinth and travels to Thebes, killing a man along the way. When he arrives in Thebes, he married the widowed Queen, Jocasta.

When the play opens, the people of Thebes are distraught over the murder of their former King Laius. Oedipus, their new king promises that he will find out the man guilty of committing this crime and will bring him to justice. Through the enlightenment of prophets and witnesses, it is exposed

that Oedipus himself is the murderer he has been searching for, and the son of Jocasta and Laius. Upon learning this news both Jocasta and Oedipus were in distress. Jocasta hangs herself for the sin of sharing the bedroom with both her husband and her son. While as Oedipus takes two brooches from Jocasta's dress and uses them to blind his eyes.

One interpretation advanced by critics writers and readers is that Jocasta has been aware of the fact that Oedipus is her son from the very beginning. There are many points during the play where Oedipus talks of his past and tells Jocasta of the prophecy that his parents received when he was a baby, which, is the same prophecy she and Laius received when Oedipus was born. This makes Jocasta aware that Oedipus is her Son. The things are also obvious to the audience or the reader, Jocasta seems to be entirely unaware to the unambiguous similarities between the two situations. This could be a disguise for the truth that she is fully aware of. The question of here pretending does not arise and she is completely in knowhow of the things

One of her lines possibly infer Jocasta's acceptance of incestuous mother-son marriages. When Oedipus admits that he has always been afraid of the truth in the prophecy of marrying his mother, Jocasta arguments the fear aside, saying, "Why should the thought of marrying your mother make you so afraid? Many men have slept with their mothers in their dreams" (p. 66, lines 1236-1237). This is also true in contemporary society, as sexual dreams suggest a feeling of strong love and bond that is not necessarily sexual. Sexual dreams certainly do not represent always one's subconscious desires but could be a symbol of affection and intimacy. She also concludes by saying, "See your dreams for what they are-- nothing, nothing at all" (p. 67, lines 1238-1239). These lines are intentional to be encouraging, more than likely simply Jocasta's way of trying to allay and assuage Oedipus's fears instead of stating her acceptance of incest.

Jocasta also discourages and daunts his search for the truth about his past, especially in lines 1331-1351 of Oedipus the King. This is Jocasta's final scene of the play, in which the messenger (the second shepherd) comes to Thebes to tell Oedipus of how he was found as a baby. This is the climax of the play, when the truth begins to be revealed and exposed .At first Jocasta implores Oedipus to forget about what the messenger has said, trying to persuade him that "It's not worth talking about" (p. 71, line 1332). As he keeps pressing and insisting the matter, Jocasta becomes more

adamant and resolute , saying "No Oedipus! No more questions. For Gods sake, for the sake of your own life!" (p. 71, lines 1335-1338). In Ancient Greece there are many things to tell and one of the important thing is the role of its women. Ancient Greece had a history of favouring men over women. Women were considered mediocre in ancient Greece and were not given rights and privileges once the woman was married. she remains completely under the control of her husband. Because of all these facts she was considered inferior and thus did not play a major role in ancient Greece.

When we talk about feminism and the role of women in ancient Greece, two of the regions of Greece are taken in account, the Athenian Greece and the Spartan Greece. If we talk about Athenian Greece, women were not envisaged with the basic rights of Greece, like being a proper citizen and owning a property. Whereas looking at the other hand, Spartan Greece was totally opposite and in contrast of Athenian Greece. The Spartans men were the warriors and soldiers they were mostly away from their homes for a long time due to wars, therefore making women the in-charge of the houses. Women of Spartan Greece were also given the all basic rights which include being a citizen and owning properties too. Talking about Athenian Greece, women were confined and not allowed to wear short dresses and were only allowed to leave their house fully covered. Whereas, women of Spartan Greece, they were wearing skirts and short dresses and do other things like men.

The way women were treated in Athens was considered to be typical by the other regions of Greece. The women of other regions of Greece were not treated like those of Athens but they were more likely treated in the manner as women of Sparta. The Highly Prized democracy was the basic reason behind this. The men of Athens believed that controlling their women will prevent them from extra marital affairs and that would result in their children being highly civilized and it would be easy in making them good citizens. In Ancient Greek culture, women were considered as a materialistic object by men and they were given to the groom in marriage by the women father and hence it was considered as a transaction between two men. Talking about owning properties, if the woman was owning a property, it was considered separate from that of husband's property but the husband had full control of the property. In case a relative or child died, their property was given to the husband rather than distributing equally between husband and wife. With regard to the social events, women were prohibited and restricted from attending social events that included men in it.

The reason of this was very obvious protecting the women from the evil men who would rape or seduce them. Women were not allowed to step outside the house and wonder around, because it was believed to be safe for them. But that was not the complete truth. Women were raped inside the house too by their husbands. Women of ancient Greece were restricted from living a social life in real manner.

Child marriage was favoured and most common in ancient Greek culture and the girl of nearly 14 years of age was married to a man of around 30 years of age. Ancient Greek men approximately lived an average life of 45 years around and died leaving behind their young wife either pregnant or with a new born. The death of the woman were mostly occurring due to the pain while giving birth. Due to these reasons, there were many infants left orphan and nearly 50 percent of the infants died reaching the age of around one year. Many women died in Greece due to early age pregnancy. The number of deaths of women was parallel in ancient Greece to the number of deaths of Greek men died in wars. Women of ancient Greece were given the duties of domestic work and raising the children. The outside work was carried by men were considered to be superior over women in ancient Greece.

CONCLUSION

From the above study the conclusion can be drawn as like other female gender in the city of Greece, Jocasta the main character in the study right from her childhood was expecting the same treatment to be meted to her as to others. She is a passive character willing to be supportive and caring of her husband in all situations. She also desires a right place in the society of Greece. Besides she wishes to be treated like others. The human weaknesses have been also well explained in the study. It is as when the truth begins to be revealed and exposed at the end and she got to know about her dual character mother as well as wife she commits suicide.

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