

Sophocles, an Unsurpassable Legend.



R. Shobhana Sree

Assiatant Professor

Department of English

Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts and Science

Coimbatore

Tamilnadu.

Abstract

Sophocles, a greek writer who plays a vital role in the history of literature. He is known for his tragedies. He has unique style of writing with a mark of resolute. He expresses the social and cultural life he leads during his time. The characters he produces are mostly the mythological type. Through those characters he brings out the human struggles & sufferings. The illiterate people on those days get awareness about the virtue and the vice through the stage dramas of this legend. The characters he produces are known for nobleness and mannerisms. He is known for his uniqueness in using elegant style and creating characters and themes with glory.

Key Words: Greek, ancient, tragedy, contemporaries, literature.

Sophocles, An Unsurpassable Legend.

The ancient Greeks called themselves Hellenes. The people in Greece were of common nature. They had their own style of living, found unique civilization on their own, spoke a single language and they differentiate themselves from Barbarians. They differ not only in the cultural behaviours and customs, they also marked a unique style in art and literature. They excelled extraordinarily in all the sectors. This was possible because of the influence of different culture and civilization from various regions into a single entity as the Greece. The geographical landscapes of the Greece added an extra flavor to it. As a result, they indulged in many innovative activities and excelled in different fields. The mixture of people from various lands put their ideas together intelligently and made such extraneous achievements. This is the reason why the poet, dramatist, artists, painters, sculptors, historians and philosophers of various countries took the Greeks as their forerunners.

The people of ancient days who followed different civilization tried to identify themselves with some gods. Similarly the Greeks traced out their origin with some gods and demi gods, who were originally heroes in the remote past. Many of ancient Greek clans followed some myth and connected themselves with gods. The myth produced by the Greeks were mostly imaginary and those imaginations serve as the source of their knowledge. They passed the source from age to age and generation to generation. Later the myths were written down. Those written copies describe about the occupation of the ancient Greek people, their customs, manners, habits, foods and their contacts with neighbour countries. These mythological sources trace a very significant place in the history. It includes the time before the Dorian invasion. It also includes the life history of Trojan war heroes and their adventures. So, historians call this age as 'heroic

age'. This age is prior to the historical age of which evidences or records are available. This become the source material for the creation of literature of first order.

According to a legend a Phoenician named Cadmus founded a city called Thebes, which was later renamed by Boetia. He thought the Greeks the art of writing and also the process of working in mines. Pindar (521- 441 BC) is said to be one of the greatest writers of the classical period. He wrote many literary works and all his works were in Dorian dialects. The Alexandrians compiled his works into seventeen books. He learned the arts from Athens. He interwove myth into his literary works so as to produce monotonous theme of Athens. He also used more metaphors. His view of life placed in between optimism and pessimism. He was by profession mystic teacher and one of his odes explain the doctrine of life after death and reincarnation. Horace, another notable classical writer, praised Pindar in all his opening stanzas. He followed the style of Pindar in writing Ode. Later, the style is called in the name of Pindar as 'Pindaric Ode'. Many English writers like Cowley, Dryden, Thomas Gray followed this style. The famous examples were Thomas Gray's *Thermodia Augustallis*, *The Progress of Poesy* and his other poems.

Sophocles, a notable and remarkable writer of the 'golden age'. He was born in 495 BC. According to some scholars, he was born in 496 BC. He was popular during his lifetime and had occupied a unique place among the writers in the world order. Even Plato, another significant classical writer, who banished dramatist from his ideal mind was graceful and gentle in his evaluation of Sophocles. Aristotle, follower of Plato, also expressed in a positive way towards Sophocles. He said the drama of Sophocles brought the genre of tragedy. Unlike his contemporaries, Sophocles had a unique character with a resolute mark of awesome qualities. The characters of Sophocles had no connection with his real life. In his youth, he was very

skilled in dance and music. He was also trained in the leading branches of Greek education such as music and gymnastics. The life of Sophocles contains numerous details which were delightful to believe. He was a man of good charm and rich like an aristocrat. His best friend was Herodotus, father of history from whom he borrowed motifs for his notable works, *Antigone*, *Oedipus at Colonus*. He was also trained in the leading branches of Greek education such as music and gymnastics.

Sophocles was famous in Aristophanes' *Frogs* which was finished after the death of Sophocles. He is referred to as 'he was amiable here'. This shows the respect and that love Aristophanes has for Sophocles. He wrote 120 plays among which only 7 of his plays are in survival. In his days, they had a practice of conducting competition between the writers, in which Sophocles won 18 times for his tetralogies. But, according to recent research, it was nearly 20 times. Sophocles had won the competitions and also he never came last in any of the competitions. This was a remarkable achievement in the life of Sophocles. This achievement was made by the richness of free social life they led. Sophocles expressed such cultural life on the stage and that was unrivalled.

Tragedy literally means 'goat-song'. This was because the actors who perform on the streets and the stages wore goat skins. Those tragedies would have the base of ancient myths. The main notion of the tragedies wanted to make people believe that man is mortal and god is immortal. The protagonist of those tragedies were gods and heroes of the myths. They showed the acute struggle between the humans, their sufferings and death. In 468 BC, Sophocles got his first victory in tragedy. He proved that he was a good ball player through the characters of Nausicaa and as a player of lyre through another character named Thamyris. But because of his weakness in voice, he gave up acting. But he proved himself with the skills he got in music and dance.

According to some scholars, 96 plays of Sophocles had won first. But now only 7 of his plays remain. His other plays were in the form of quotation and on scraps of papyrus. But these lines are not so clear for prescription and for translation also. His plays were staged in the Athenian theatre festivals along with the religious rituals and customs. This was done for the competition when the tragedies and comedies were enlisted and enrolled. The Athenian literature was luck with the contribution of the works of three tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and another comedian Aristophanes.

An eminent scholar of Greek tragedies E. F. Watling says, "The Greek theatre was not a place of daily or nightly resort and entertainment. It was not a medium in which any ingenious story teller could thrive or make a living. But it was a place of high order of drama presentations where it so happened during festive occasions or on remarkable days". Sophocles was believed to be more pious during his life time and so he lived for more than ninety years. He attained priesthood himself and made his home a temporary temple. All his religious ideas were reflected in his plays which would not go beyond the divine principles. The audience of those days were known pretty well that whatever Sophocles see and want to see, he would create or recreate such things in his works. Chorus played a main role in the stage dramas. It redefined the conversations in the play and also generalized the world by manners, habits and laws.

The structure of the Greek plays were in the developed form of Doric temples. There were ten written laws in which had to be followed by the Greek tragedians. It was also the duty of tragedians to make the laws to reflect in the life of the Greek citizens through the characters they produce. Most of the Sophoclean characters are noble and well mannered. But one or two of his characters violate the law and tradition of the Greek society. He limited himself in the creation of the twists and turns in his dramatic plot. Tragedy became a part of the spring festival of Dionysus

in Greece. It originated during 5th century B. C. The word ‘tragedy’ was believed to be derived from ‘tragodoi’, which means to dance either to win a goat as a prize or around a goat to sacrifice god. Later, the term developed as ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’ which denotes the melancholic characters of the plays known as tragedies.

Generally, Greek tragedy contained two elements namely choral and dramatic. The choral in the tragedies played a significant role. It was expressed in a variety of lyrics and arranged in Strophes and Antistrophes. Initially there was twelve members in the chorus. It was Sophocles who increased the number to fifteen. The chorus were stopped in the middle of 4th century B. C. for the reason was not known. Sophocles used different style and language in his works. He stood unique from his contemporary writers. Many scholars found it hard to discover the meaning of him and his works. His works are generally classified into three groups based on his styles. First he followed the bombastic and elegant style of Aeschylus, his contemporarian. The second was which his own artificial style of writing. His third style is in creating characters with sympathetic nature and themes with highest prime of glory. He was the one who increased the number of members in chorus. In Greek plays, the usage of music were at high rate and hence the audience find it difficult to understand. It was Sophocles who reduced the usage of long speeches or song or music. He made his dramas more attractive and impressive with his vast experience and knowledge. Because his tragedies were about human emotions and customs. So, obviously both the audience of Athens and the readers will have an attachment with his characters. He also used trochaic tetrameters for the dialogues and followed some poetic orders and rhetoric styles which were popular during his age. He used the moral and ethical codes through his characters.

Sophocles' language was free and fair with good use of vocabulary. His women characters were known for gentleness and courage. His heronies Antigone and Electra were the center of attraction since 5th century BC for other playwrights. His lyrics were simple and harmonious, which earned less important place. But his presentation of the storyline marked an eminent place in the history. He might be physically nowhere on the earth at present, but he lives through his characters all time from literature to psychology.

Work Cited

- Damodaran. *Stalin's Sophoclean Plays – A study*. Udumalpet: Ennes Publications. Coimbatore: Asian Printers, 2004. Print.
- Beer, Josh. *Sophocles and the Tragedy of Athenian Democracy*. London: Greenwood Publishing, 2004. Print.
- Freeman, Charles. *The Greek Achievement: The Foundation of the Western World*. New York: Viking Press, 1999. Print.