

Role of the fate as omnipotent in Oedipus Rex by Sophocles

Arpita Pal*

*Department of English, Raja Birendra Chandra College, Kandi, West Bengal, India;
e-mail: surpita@gmail.com

Abstract

In Greek society in general and in Greek literature in particular, the belief that fate is omnipotent prevailed. However much a person tries to escape the clutch of destiny, fate decides what will happen to that particular person in spite of all his endeavours. This futility of human endeavour and omnipotence of fate was seen in many Greek dramas. For example, "Oedipus Rex" by Sophocles shows how human life is influenced and controlled by fate and gods. As gods, quite cruelly, had pre-set the destiny of Oedipus, he could not break the cage of invincible fate though he tried very hard. Thus he ended up being the puppet in the hands of fate.

Keywords - Destiny, Fate, Gods, Greek, Human endeavour.

Introduction

"Oedipus Rex" was written by the ancient Greek tragedian, Sophocles, around 450 B.C. This play revolves round the tragic life of Oedipus who tried his best to avoid the ordeals of fate but destiny proved all his endeavours futile, thus proving the omnipotence of fate. This play has been referred to in the "Poetics" by Aristotle as the tragedy which best exemplifies the genre of tragedy. This play deals with the theme of uncontrollable fate which is being triggered by the gods while the tragic flaw of the protagonist only accelerates the downfall.

Here, in this research paper, it will be examined how human beings are mere helpless creatures against the cruel claws of pre destined fate. However much one wants to escape destiny by one's free will, one can never be able to alter the fate that the gods have stored for him. Here in this paper it has been told how a man's free-will proved to be the tool to make his fate come true. Fate plays the all important role in this play.

Methodology

For writing this research paper, Qualitative Textual analysis has been used. While textual analysis refers to a data-gathering process for interpreting textual data, the qualitative methodology refers to the judgment of the structure and content of a text.

Discussion

The question discussed in this research paper is the role of fate upon determining the life of man. In order to examine fate's role first the concept of fate in Greeks has to be understood. For the Greeks, fate was the

supernatural phenomenon outside the controlling power of human beings. Fate determined the course of life of individuals and also fixed the date for their death.

Fate as pre-destined hand can never be changed, however hard a human being tries. All his plans to change the course of fate is sure to be fruitless. As the Greek people were fatalists, fate, for them was a terrifying, unstoppable, blind power engineered by the gods who themselves were sometimes helpless against the unchangeable force of fate. The ancient Greeks thought fate to be the most ruthless and unheeding phenomenon and the frightening fact was that there was no escape from it, however hard one tried. For them, the three Moirai were the three goddesses of destiny who controlled the life and death of everyone and they were even capable of destroying an immortal. That is why even the gods could not control fate. The Moirai were Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Clotho spins the thread of life, Lachesis measures the life and Atropos cuts the thread, thus summing up the beginning, journey and ending of a human life. Even Zeus, the ruler of the gods, has not control over them. The Greek people in general, and Greek writers in particular accepted this omnipotent power of fate unquestioningly, Sophocles, in particular, had imbibed the role of fate whole-heartedly as has been exemplified in the Oedipus Trilogy. In the play "Oedipus Rex", King Oedipus is the protagonist who is a man marked to suffer for the sake of suffering. He tried to escape his fate by exerting his free will but at the end his own actions prove to be agencies to fulfil his destiny. His terrible suffering mocks at the free will as an illusion whereas destiny is all-powerful. In this play, while King Oedipus is the protagonist, fate is the antagonist who disrupts all the plans of Oedipus to overcome fate. Just after the birth of Oedipus, his parents namely Luis and Jocasta in order to avoid fate, made a plan to kill him. So, Oedipus was handed over to the Shepherd of Thebes who was instructed to kill the infant. But the shepherd, being merciful, gave the newly born baby to another Shepherd who came from Corinth. The second shepherd gave the baby to king Polybus who raised Oedipus as his own biological son. When he grew up, a drunken man informed Oedipus that he was only the foster child of Polybus and Merope. Though Polybus denied it, Oedipus, being sceptic, went to the temple of Apollo to know the truth. Here fate again encircled him with ruthless cage as Apollo did not enlighten Oedipus with a straight answer but rather misguided him by telling him that one day he would kill his father and marry his mother. Being thus misguided, Oedipus had no other way but to leave Corinth immediately in order to escape the heinous crimes. This is the first of a chain of actions undertaken by Oedipus in order to step away from the prophecy which ironically makes him encircled within the tight grasp of cruel, heedless fate.

It is also irony of fate that after leaving Corinth, Oedipus meets his father and in the turn of events kills him. Thus, even without knowing that he is fulfilling predestiny, Oedipus has made half of the prophecy come true. Oedipus thinks that by leaving Polybus and Merope he can avoid his destiny while actually he is fulfilling the dictums of fate.

After reaching Thebes, Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx. While no other person could solve the riddle, why could Oedipus? That is also the trick of fate that by answering the riddle, Oedipus would relieve the city of the Sphinx and as a becoming gesture, would be married to Jocasta, thus fulfilling the latter part of the prophecy. Jocasta herself was aware of the prophecy that her own son would marry her. But she, in good faith, thought her son to be dead and did not oppose to the marriage with Oedipus, an outsider. Thus, fate played the supreme role, leading Oedipus to his destiny blindly. The irony is that, though Oedipus took every possible step to distance himself from fulfilling the prophecy, in reality those very steps brought him closer to his pre-decided destiny. Fate is inscrutable, heedless, blind and can never be swayed.

Thus, fate plays the supreme role in bringing out the downfall of Oedipus. Actually, he has been pitted against blind fate and however much he tries to determine his own course of life, his attempts becomes fruitless. In the beginning of the play, Oedipus tries to save the people of Thebes from a devastating plague but gradually it becomes clear that he is fighting against himself. His conversation with Tiresias reveals that it is actually Oedipus himself who is polluting the city by committing the sins of parricide and incest. When finally Oedipus realises the truth, he also has to admit that fate has defeated him by beguiling him to take apparently wise decisions which were actually steps to bring him closer to his destiny.

Conclusion

The tragic fall of Oedipus depicts the supremacy of fate in a world where the intervention of gods by the tools of fate make human life distorted. While Oedipus himself can be called to some extent responsible for his own demise, yet his self-investigation can be seen as a means provided by fate so that he can realise how stupidly he has been used by fate. In order to escape fate, Oedipus has turned himself into a mere puppet in the hands of fate. Such is his plight that even the earnest beseeching of his beloved queen Jocasta could not stop his curiosity for self-identification. He did not deserve the burden of shame and guilt. He is not a corrupt character. But his circumstances, proclivity acts as the means through which Oedipus is steered to his fate.

References

1. Dodds, Erec Robertson, "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex". null (Second Series) 13.01 (1966): 37-49.
2. Yuehua, Guo, " Oedipus Rex: Fate, Truth and Self-will/ Oedipus Rex: Destin, Verite, Entetement." Canadian Social Science 2.4 (2006): 45.
3. Ashaq Hussain Parray, "A Postmodern Interpretation of Oedipus Rex." (2013)Robert C. Solomon. "On Fate and Fatalism." Philosophy East and West 53.4 (2014)