

GENDER POLITICS IN GREEK TRAGEDY – A SELECT STUDY

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Abstract

The research paper analyses two seminal Greek tragedies Agamemnon by Aeschylus and Medea by Euripides in order to ascertain how women have been represented in the Greek tragedy and on the basis of this analysis aspires to decode gender politics in these classical literary works. This study becomes all the more interesting because of the fact that in both these tragedies apparently the centre-space is occupied by the female characters and the male characters have minor roles in comparison.

Keywords: Gender politics, patriarchy, Greek tragedy, marginalization, subjugation, feminism

Gender has always been a significant factor in the determination of human identity as since almost the beginning of life on this planet, the scales of power have more or less remained tilted in favour of man and there have been deliberate and sustained efforts to make man the measure of everything by placing him at the centre and push woman to the periphery by way of subjugation, marginalization or stigmatization. It is therefore that how men and women perceive, define, portray and position themselves and each-other in society has been a dominant researchable issue in sociology and cultural studies. The different products of culture have been closely studied and scrutinized to locate the representation and

misrepresentation of men and women both through verbal and visual means. Literature is no exception in this regard. A variety of studies grounded in varied theoretical frameworks (Weitzman, et. al. 1972, Bamber 1982, Moi 1985, Francis 1992, Chance 1996, Gold et. al. 1997, Zelenak 1998, Keith 2000, Moglen 2001, Fisher and Silber 2003, Hamilton et. al. 2006, Paynter 2011,) are devoted to the task of decoding what may be termed as gender politics in literature. In harmony with these critical enquiries into the literary texts situated in varied temporal and spatial terrains, the present research paper analyses the representation of women in the Greek tragedy and in so doing endeavours to ascertain gender politics, if any, in certain literary texts which are regarded as one of the oldest in world literature and also as a model for different literary genres in the ancient, medieval and modern periods.

Data

The data for the study comprises two Greek tragedies, *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus and *Medea* by Euripides. For the purpose of analysis, Ian Johnston's translations of these texts have been selected. A common feature in both these texts is that each of them appropriates a popular myth for the purpose of tragic pleasure. *Agamemnon*, written around 458 BC, dramatizes the arrival of Agamemnon at Argos after a decisive win in the ten-year Trojan War, the celebrations in the land ordered by his wife Clytemnestra to mark his arrival and his subsequent murder by the same wife. *Medea*, first produced in around 431 BC, dramatizes the reaction of Medea to her husband's act of marrying another woman, the daughter of the King of Corinth.

Discussion

Though Aeschylus names his tragedy after Agamemnon, yet the most outstanding character in this play is a woman. She is Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra. Besides Clytemnestra, there are three other female characters in the play – Helen, Iphigenia and Cassandra. But Helen and Iphigenia never appear on the stage. They are only talked about in the speeches of other characters. So far as Cassandra is concerned, she does appear on the stage towards the end of the tragedy. Taken one by one, as the play begins, we see Clytemnestra as the queen of Argos. She is represented as a strong woman, and not timid and submissive as a woman is

supposed to be in a patriarchal society. At the surface level, she seems to be a representative of what the feminists call 'New Woman'. But there is another face beneath the surface. This is how the Watchman describes her:

She has a fiery heart,
the determined resolution of a man.

(Lines 13-14)

And this is how the Chorus praises her:

You speak wisely, like a prudent man.

(Line 425)

Obviously, in both the descriptions, man is the standard of measurement and Clytemnestra is measured accordingly. Further, she is portrayed as an incompetent ruler. The Watchman comments at her regime:

I lament what's happened to this house,
where things are not being governed well,

(Lines 22-23)

Despite the fact that Clytemnestra stays more on the stage than any other character in the tragedy, she cannot be called a tragic heroine because she is not made to possess those features that Aristotle specifies as something essential for a tragic hero. Aristotle specifies that a tragic hero/heroine may not be a saint, but he or she must not be a villain as well. But in the larger analysis, Clytemnestra is painted as a wicked fellow. She accuses her husband of killing their daughter Iphigenia and having extra-marital relations with the women of Troy, but in reality she herself develops an adulterous relationship with Aegisthus in the absence of Agamemnon. Another trouble with Clytemnestra is that she is not likeable. She is not that sort of woman with whom a spectator can easily identify. The reason is she does not think and feel and speak and act in the way as anyone would do in the similar situation. On the contrary, she goes to the extremes in her thoughts, words and actions. Beyond doubt, she goes to the extremes in her pursuit of revenge against her husband. The way she plans and executes her conspiracy is beyond the imagination of a common man as at no stage in her

pursuit of revenge she lets human feelings overpower the beast within her. Specifically speaking, outwardly Clytemnestra welcomes Agamemnon. As she gets the news of his homecoming, she orders sacrifices to the gods. She pretends to be in a great love with him. She is heard saying:

.....it's unmitigated trouble
for a woman to sit at home alone,
far from her man

(Lines 1013-1015)

Like a shrewd woman, she tells lies about her condition in the absence of her husband:

Many long nights I wept
until my eyes were sore

(Lines 1044-1045)

Not only this, she makes false claims about her faithfulness to her husband. She tells the chorus:

In this long time, I've not betrayed our bond—
I've known no pleasure with another man,
no breath of scandal.

(Lines 733-735)

But this outward appearance of Clytemnestra is misleading. Obviously, in her case all that glitters is not gold. Actually, she is burning to avenge her daughter's murder by killing Agamemnon. She herself says:

Before this moment I said many things
to suit my purposes. I'm not ashamed
to contradict them now.

(Lines 1622-23)

In order to execute her plan, she, first of all, turns the gods against Agamemnon by making him walk on a red carpet like a victorious hero and thereby commit an act of *hubris* or

excessive pride. Later she kills Agamemnon with her own hands. After committing this crime, she justifies herself:

His suffering
matches exactly what he did himself.
Remember my own Iphigeneia,
his daughter, that sweet flower whom we mourn.
So let him not boast out loud in Hades.
He was the first to draw his sword,
and by the sword he's been repaid.

(Lines 1798-1804)

But in reality it seems that avenging Iphigenia's murder is only a pretence and in reality Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon only to keep her adulterous relation with Aegisthus intact. Thus, in the larger analysis, Clytemnestra is represented as an incompetent ruler, a deceitful wife and an adulterous woman. There is practically no evidence in the text to justify what she does.

Cassandra is another female character whom the audience meets on the stage in *Agamemnon*. She is a Trojan princess whom Agamemnon brings to Argos as his slave after winning the ten-year Trojan War. Once she was the beloved of Apollo who gave her the gift of prophecy. But since she refused to give him a child, he cursed her that nobody will believe her prophecies. Towards the end of *Agamemnon*, we see the dramatization of this curse. Here she prophesizes the murder of Agamemnon at the hands of Clytemnestra, but the chorus does not understand her words and does nothing to prevent this tragedy. To make matters worse, Clytemnestra insults her badly. She says about Cassandra:

She is mad, too busy listening to her troubled heart.

(Line 1254)

Finally, Cassandra kills herself and releases herself out of the prison of life. At the metaphorical level, Cassandra actually symbolizes the typical condition of an enlightened woman in the patriarchal society. She speaks, but nobody listens to her. She is denied

individuality and humane treatment. She is called mad and condemned to isolation, neglect and death.

The next female character in the tragedy is Helen. She is never brought on the stage. From the speeches of Chorus and other characters, it is learnt that Helen was the sister of Clytemnestra. Like her, she was born out of the union between the human and the divine as she was the daughter of Leda and Zeus. Later she was married to Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus. But she eloped with the Trojan Prince Paris. As a result, the Trojan War took place. Thus, Helen is painted as a fickle woman who became the reason for all the death and destruction that takes place in the ten-year Trojan War. Throughout the tragedy she is blamed by different characters for her destructiveness. For instance, the chorus says about her:

that woman wed for warfare,
the object of our strife?
For she has lived up to that name—
a hell for ships, a hell for men,
a hell for cities, too.

(Lines 823-827)

Nowhere in the text of the tragedy is Helen made to utter a single word to voice out her side of the story. There is also not any voice in the tragedy speaking on her behalf. Thus, Helen is a voiceless woman in the tragedy who is blamed, condemned and painted all black.

Iphigeneia, another female character in absentia, is also denied any individual identity and voice in the tragedy. Her only identity is as the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. She was killed by Agamemnon under compulsion before the action of the play actually begins on the stage. The rough weather in the sea was not allowing Agamemnon and his army to sail to Troy. At that point, somebody suggested that Iphigeneia needed to be sacrificed in order to please goddess Artemis. Like any father, it was not easy for Agamemnon to make this sacrifice. The chorus tells us:

Then, Agamemnon, the older king spoke up:
It's harsh not to obey this fate

But to go through with it is harsh as well,

To kill my child, the glory of my house

(Lines 241-244)

But ultimately the father within Agamemnon is won over by a desire to seek revenge and protect 'honour': There is a vivid description of Iphigenia's murder:

In their eagerness for war, those leaders

paid no attention to the girl,

her pleas for help, her cries of "Father!"—

any more than to her virgin youth.

Her father offered up a prayer,

then ordered men to seize her

and lift her up—she'd fallen forward

and just lay there in her robes—to raise her,

high above the altar, like a goat,

urging them to keep their spirits up.

They gagged her lovely mouth,

with force, just like a horse's bit,

to keep her speechless, to stifle any curse

which she might cry against her family.

(Lines 266-279)

This is indeed the commoditization of a human being. Iphigenia is considered just a beast of sacrifice. Her representation as an innocent being for the sake of inspiring pity and sympathy also paint her as powerless, helpless and passive, again the typical binary oppositions that the patriarchy attributes to women in its endeavour to subjugate, marginalize and stigmatize them.

Medea is a powerful study on women, their nature, their psychology and their issues. It is a tragedy that brings a woman at the centre-stage and this is what makes Euripides distinct from Aeschylus. But it is a debatable question whether *Medea* is a feminist text,

whether it advances the political agenda of feminism, and whether it goes against patriarchy or rather serves its purposes by misrepresenting women.

It is true that in so many ways Medea seems to be the first representative of what the feminists call 'New Woman'. She declares:

I'd rather stand there
three times in battle holding up my shield
than give birth once.

(Lines 289-291)

She comes out as the champion of the women cause. She highlights their miserable plight in the male dominated society. We hear her saying:

We women are the most unfortunate.

(Line 264)

In the patriarchal society, it is believed that women must marry and whether her husband is good or bad, she must live with him. If she does not do so, she is denounced by the society. Medea exposes this anti-women attitude when she says:

First, we need a husband, someone we get
for an excessive price. He then becomes
the ruler of our bodies. And this misfortune
adds still more troubles to the grief we have.
Then comes the crucial struggle: this husband
we've selected, is he good or bad?
For a divorce loses women all respect,
yet we can't refuse to take a husband.

(Lines 265-272)

What is more, it is only woman who is expected to compromise to make a marriage successful. It is only she who has to adjust and adapt. Medea voices this discrimination against women:

Then, when she goes into her husband's home,
with its new rules and different customs,
she needs a prophet's skill to sort out the man
whose bed she shares.

(Lines 273-276)

Not only this, Medea regrets the patriarchal norms which position man and woman in terms of the binary oppositions exposed by the French Feminist critic Helene Cixous by which man is set free and above the matrimonial bounds and woman is supposed to be restrained and live within the four walls of the home.

When the man tires
of the company he keeps at home, he leaves,
seeking relief for his distress elsewhere,
outside the home. He gets his satisfaction
with some male friend or someone his own age.
We women have to look at just one man.
Men tell us we live safe and secure at home,

(Lines 281-287)

But this visible representation of the women cause in *Medea* is misleading. At the closer analysis, *Medea* is just any anti-feminist text as it misrepresents women and justifies all that patriarchy says about women. In other words, this tragedy assigns Medea all that is negative in binary oppositions which are constructed by the male dominated society because here Medea is shown as rash, wicked, headstrong, violent, jealous and revengeful. We are told that she deceived her father and stole his golden fleece to give it to Jason. Not only this, she murdered her own brother, cut his body into pieces and threw these pieces into the sea so that her father may remain busy in collecting these pieces and she and Jason run away safely to Iolcus. And in Iolcus, she got Jason's uncle, Pelias, murdered by his own daughters in

order to make Jason the king of the land. And when Jason jilts her and marries princess Glauke, Medea goes to the extremes in her pursuit of revenge. This pursuit of revenge dehumanizes her so much so that she does not remain fit to be called a wife, a mother or even a woman. The Nurse comments upon her:

She's a dangerous woman. It won't be easy
for any man who picks a fight with her
to think she's beaten and he's triumphed.

(Lines 56-58)

We are further informed by the Nurse:

She's like a bull,
or lioness with cubs—that's how she looks.

(Lines 215-216)

Likewise, Creon, the King of Corinth foregrounds the evil within her while pronouncing a decree to exile her:

There's a good chance
you might well instigate some fatal harm
against my daughter. Many things lead me
to this conclusion: you're a clever woman,
very experienced in evil ways;

(Lines 328-332)

All the more interesting are the words that are put into Medea's own mouth regarding the general nature of women. Obviously, this sort of generalization regarding women and that too by nobody other than a woman character brutally exposes the sustained literary efforts of the mainstream male authors to naturalize and institutionalize the agenda of patriarchy as it is a manipulative endeavour to validify what the patriarchal order has been trying its best to impress upon the world since ages.

In other things
a woman may be timid—in watching battles
or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love,
her marriage violated, there's no heart
more desperate for blood than hers.

(Lines 303-307)

The way she plans and executes her conspiracy is beyond the imagination of a common man as at no stage in her pursuit of revenge she lets human feelings overpower the beast within her. First she arranges a safe place for herself to which she can fly after executing her conspiracy. Then she sends a gown and a crown smeared with a deadly poison for his husband's newly married wife as gifts. The moment Glauke wears these gifts, her body is on fire and she dies a horrible death. King Creon runs towards her and holds her in a tight embrace. By doing so, he too comes in contact with the poison and meets the same fate. Medea is shown so mad with the feelings of revenge that she derives a sadistic pleasure out of the horrible deaths of these poor creatures. She asks the messenger:

Tell me of their deaths. If you report
they died in pain, you'll double my rejoicing.

(Lines 1339-1340)

But all this does not satisfy Medea's fire of revenge. She wants to break Jason completely. To do so, she decides to kill her own children. For a moment, she does hesitate. We get a peep into her inner conflict.

my heart gives way when I see those eyes,
my children's smiling eyes. I cannot do it.
Good bye to those previous plans of mine

(Lines 1226-1228)

But ultimately, the thirst for revenge overpowers the mother within her and she colors her hands with the blood of her own children.

Thus, *Medea* is exactly the kind of text against which the modern feminists caution the readers as in it all that glitters is not gold. Apparently, it pretends to expose patriarchy and champion the women cause, but inwardly with its thorough negative representations of women it justifies patriarchy.

Summing up

This research paper that began with the objective of decoding gender politics in Greek tragedy through a close scrutiny of the representation of women in the two seminal Greek tragedies viz. *Agamemnon* and *Medea* explicitly shows how the dominant patriarchal ideology colors and conditions the portrayal of women in some of the oldest dramatic works to augment its own agenda. As such, the paper aspires to place itself in the ever-expanding domain of Feminist Literary Criticism as it contributes to what Toril Moi specifies as the task of feminist critics and theorists i.e. “to expose the way in which male dominance over females constitutes what Millet calls ‘perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture’” (“Feminist, Female, Feminine.” 118).

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