OEDIPUS AS A TRAGIC HERO

One of the greatest measurements we find for the recognition of a tragic hero is the criterion set by a great thinker Aristotle. He believes that a tragedy must be an imitation of life but it must be a serious story having strength of being complete in itself. In other words, we can say that a tragedy must be realistic in its approach and narrow in its focus. It must have the ability to awoke ‘Pithy and fear’ as well as the feelings of ‘Catharsis’ in the readers.

Aristotle believes and considers ‘Oedipus Rex’ the model tragedy. In his ‘Poetics’, he appreciates it because of its exemplary well-constructed plot which is absolutely perfect in inspiring fear and pity not only in its audience but even in those who just hear the story. According to Aristotle, the important elements of a tragedy are following. One of the major elements for a tragedy is ‘The Tragic Hero.’ He finds in Oedipus all the necessary qualities of being a tragic hero. It is not beyond the extent of saying that Oedipus is the classical example of the most tragic heroes of Greek literature. Richard B. Sewell says: “Oedipus of Sophocles can be judged by Aristotle’s criteria. He answers to all the Aristotelian requirements.”

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero should be a high-minded, renowned and a prosperous person who is neither superlatively good nor wholly vicious corrupt. He undergoes sufferings and ‘Anagnorisis’ which means realization of the truth or a change from ignorance to knowledge. But this ‘Anagnorisis’ is not because of any depravity in his character but from ‘Hamartia’ which means tragic flaw or error of judgment or horrible acts of ignorance leading to tremendous suffering and a fall from his high status and his punishment should exceed his faults. Moreover, the ‘Peripetia’ which means the downfall or reversal of fortune of a tragic hero should arouse feelings of ‘Pithy and Fear’ among the audience.

Aristotle’s concept of a tragic hero shows that Oedipus is a tragic hero because he is a born prince and also saves a kingdom from Sphinex. He is a popular king and has many great qualities. He is a well-wisher of the people of his nation.

“Not one is as Sick as I,
Each of you suffers in himself alone,
But my spirit groans for the city
For myself, for you.”

He is a man of integrity, an honest and great administrator and an outstanding intellect. His self-importance and narcissism is a symbol of grandeur. No doubt, ‘Fate and Circumstance’ play a very important and negative role in moulding his life and take him to his tragic end, but there is more than one tragic flaw in his character.
Oedipus’ first tragic flaw is his ‘Pride.’ He gives too much value to his own intelligence. The Greeks had a distinct word for such a situation and that is ‘Hubris.’ It means a heroically foolish defiance. It is the feeling that is beyond the reaches of divine authority. His excessive pride and strong ego result in ignoring the fate designed by the gods, and his belief that he can overcome his fate. Oedipus is a clever and intelligent man, but he is blind to truth and refuses to believe Teiresias’ warnings. Teiresias is simply trying to make him see realize the truth but Oedipus is too proud to realize any truth. He is not ready to accept that he can be the responsible for such a heinous crime. He is charged emotionally and although he is clever, yet he does not stop questioning without caring or understanding what Teiresias is talking about.

He never sees the things as they really are. Rather he only sees them as how he wants to see them. He thinks that he can change his fate but does not realize what fate has in store for him. This pride leads Oedipus to believe that he can outwit the oracle by not going back to Corinth. This illustrates how his fatal flaw results in Oedipus causing his fate to become a reality. Walting opines “Oedipus brought his fate upon himself by a combination of pride, ignorance and determination.”

Another flaw of his character is his unrelenting quest for the truth. Quest for truth is a quality of a great character like Oedipus but here unluckily it becomes a flaw of his character. Tiresias, Jocasta and the herdsman try to stop him from pursuing truth but he does not pay any heed to them. Then after realizing that the prophecy has come true, Jocasta begs him to let the mystery go unsolved. Here, she remarks: “Stop-in the name of God, if you love your own life, call off this search! My suffering is enough.” But at this remark by Jocasta, Oedipus replies: “No! By the gods, no; Leave it if you care for your own life. I suffer. ‘Tis enough.’ I cannot yield my right to know the truth.”

There is another flaw in his character. It is said that he fails to take the logical steps or precautions which may save him from committing the crimes. As we see him getting more complicated in the situation he is faced with and things not working out as he has imagined they might, Oedipus does not adapt the change and learns anything. We see that he becomes increasingly inflexible. He himself takes on the full responsibility of his own punishment. First, he stabs out his own eyes and then he insists on banishment. There is no situation in the play to show that he is ready to compromise. A critic has said: “What needs to be done is what he decides needs to be done.”

“Irony of Fate” cannot be ignored in Oedipus’ case. In all this, the question of justice------ the injustice of Oedipus fate is not once directly raised, even by Oedipus himself, who of all the people would seem to have had the right to raise it. Twice he comes close. Early in the play, when he first becomes aware of his vulnerable state, he says:

“Can it be any but some monstrous god
Of evil that has sent this doom upon me.”

And in the final scene, when the Chorus asks him why he puts out his eyes, his answer is, “Apollo laid this agony upon me.” But there is no such defiance of the heavens as in Job’s complaints or in Prometheus’
quarrel with Zeus. Instead of Prometheus’ thundering, he accepts his fate and says, “Be it so.” He is like all the others in the play in feeling the futility of verbal protest. G.M. Kirkwood says about Oedipus, “Human power; and in Sophocles’ view, human power is inadequate armour to protect against suffering.”

Most of the critics agree that Oedipus is morally innocent. If we link this to the fact that the doom overtakes him is inescapable, it would appear that Oedipus is no better than a puppet in the hands of fortune. And this makes the play definitely a play of destiny. But we have another authentic argument and a reason to think that Sophocles presents the story of Oedipus as a tragedy of destiny. Even Freud has fallen a victim to this mistaken view. It is right that some of the actions committed by Oedipus in the past are determined by fate but everything he does in the play itself is done by him at his own initiative and as an absolutely free agent. Even a divine prediction may be fulfilled by an act which is the result of free choice rather by something which the person is committed to do. A renowned critic says: “The gods know the future, but they do not order it.”

A tragic hero should learn a lesson from his errors and become a unique example and a role model for the audience. He should be able to make the audience realize that what happens to those who enjoy high status or political positions. Such actions come about when the herdsman tells Oedipus who his mother is, and Oedipus replies, “Oh, Oh.” and then everything has come out true. He yells in the pangs of agony, “Light, I shall not look on you again. I have been born where I should not be born, I have been married where I should not marry, I have killed whom I should not kill; now all is clear.”

We can say that Oedipus’ tragedy is the result of his good qualities than his bad ones. His love of Thebes, his love for his people and his love of truth lead him to tragedy. He is so honest with himself that he inflicts the punishment of self-blinding. He says, “What use of my eyes to me, who could never see anything pleasant again?” He even insists Creon to banish him from the city. E.R. Dodd says, “Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively most horrible, though subjectively innocent.”

To conclude, the character of Oedipus leaves a powerful and everlasting impression on the mind of readers. We admire him for his unceasing and relentless pursuit of truth. In the Aristotelian sense and point of view, he is truly an authentic tragic hero due to his wrong actions he does and his initiatives in finding out the truth. Modern readers also regard Oedipus the true and authentic tragic hero. In Oedipus, we see the helplessness of man in the face of the circumstances and we see at the same time man’s essential greatness. We fully agree with the remarks of Richard who comments: “Oedipus’s ultimate fate produces cathartic effects and fulfills the requirement of Aristotelian tragedy.”

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