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The Oresteia: A journey from savagery to civilization.

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Abstract:

Aeschylus was born in 525 BC. He wrote almost 90 plays but only 7 of them have survived. Aeschylus' famous and only surviving Greek trilogy 'The Oresteia' is one of the most read, illustrated and critically examined work. 'The Oresteia' consists of three plays- 'Agamemnon', 'The Libation Bearers' and 'Eumendies'. The work deals in background the famous war between Troy and Greece and the curse on the House of Atreus. It was a trend during the 5th Century that each tragedy writer who were competing at the festival of Dionysus to perform a trilogy on some relative theme which was often followed by a satyr-play. Fortunately 'The Oresteia' is the only surviving trilogy amongst the Greek tragic trilogies. Though each play of this trilogy has the potential to stand on its own with significance approach but reading them together embarks the reader on a voyage from savagery to civilization.

The action of the first play 'Agamemnon' begins after Greek has registered the victory over Troy and the return of King Agamemnon to his city Argos, and his murder by his wife Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The Second play 'The Libation Bearers' deals with the reunion of Orestes and Electra, his sister by Agamemnon and how they plan to murder the murderer Clytemnestra. The final play 'Eumendies' depicts how Orestes was tormented by the Furies for the murder of his own mother, the trial of Orestes and how actions of Orestes helps in getting rid of the curse on family and how civilization is established.

This article highlights on how Aeschylus through his trilogy 'The Oresteia' has used the House of Atreus and the curse as the raw material to incorporate some major them like establishment of civilization, the relationship of justice to vengeance, the importance of concern of God and thereby has shown the movement from savagery to civilization, from darkness to light, from innocence to experience and from ignorance to knowledge.

Key Words: Civilization, Tragedy, savagery

The most famous series of ancient Greek play is 'The Oresteia' written by Aeschylus. It is a trilogy consisting of three plays- 'Agamemnon', 'The Libation Bearers' and 'Eumendies'. 'The Oresteia' is the only surviving trilogy that was performed at the festival of Dionysus in 458 BC in Athens. This trilogy won first prize at the festival.

‘The Oresteia’ moves from the savagery of past wars and feuds in the hope that a new harmony – religious, political and personal might be created. The action of ‘The Oresteia’ begins just after the fall of Troy and is the only complete Greek trilogy we have. Aeschylus referred to his work as a slice from the banquet of Homer as the story sweeps from the Iliad to the Odyssey, from war to peace. As a tale of bloody chain of murder and revenge within the royal family of Argos, the entire drama is one long procession that moves from darkness to light, from a tribal society to a new democratic state. The Oresteia is our rite of passage from savagery to civilization.

The three plays of ‘The Oresteia’ deal with the murder of Agamemnon by his queen Clytemnestra on his return from Troy with the captive Trojan princess Cassandra; the murder of Clytemnestra by their son Orestes and Orestes’ subsequent pursuit by avenging furies and eventual absolution.

Savagery is the irrationality of the law. There is murder after murder. God continued to favour the laws and man can’t challenge the laws that is savagery. The house of Atreus is the embodiment of savagery because it tells the story of an enormous family curse, full of violence, horrible deaths that are going on for generations. The Oresteia tells the story of a resurrection of an ancient family tragedy- the blood guilt of the House of Atreus. This conflict started with the two sons of Pelops- Atreus and Thyestes. Thyestes seduces Atreus’s wife and to avenge the seduction, Atreus kills his brother’s children and invites his brother Thyestes to a feast at which he serves him flesh of the two little boys. When Thyestes comes to know about the whole episode, he cursed his brother Atreus. The third son of Thyestes named Aegisthus, escaped and grew up in a foreign land, to seek only one thing: revenge for his father. Atreus had two sons – Agamemnon and Menelaus. They married with two sisters- Clytemnestra and Helen. Menelaus married Helen and Agamemnon married Clytemnestra. Agamemnon became the commander in chief of the Greek force that attacked Troy to avenge the abduction and seduction of Helen by Paris, son of Priam-King of Troy. The curse worked itself out through Agamemnon who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia in order to win favourable winds to sail to Troy. Clytemnestra wants to murder Agamemnon because he sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia ten years ago.

The action of the Oresteia begins after ten years of the greatest war in history and after the fall of Troy and Agamemnon’s return to Argos at night, which itself symbolises darkness. The play ‘Agamemnon’ describes how Clytemnestra kills her husband for the death of their daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon after victory of Troy returns to Argos and goes for bath and there itself Clytemnestra and Aegisthus threw a cover over him and hit him with an axe and murder him. This is not the last murder it will be followed by more in order to avenge his death. After the episode of killing Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus rule Argos. Clytemnestra didn’t kill Orestes on the contrary the motherly affection wins and she sends Orestes to foreign land. The real issue is curse and murder is not able to solve the problems of this household and that is the main point of this trilogy. Murder only begets murder; setting up a court of law is the only way to stop the series of bloody feuds. This is a message about the need for civilization. But it is not yet made in Agamemnon, so we are left with only darkness and death.

In the second play of the trilogy, ‘The Libation Bearer’ the only son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Orestes obeys the command of God Apollo and kills the murderer of his father, his mother as revenge. A great deal of the second play is taken up with Orestes’ preparation to carry out his vision of guilt. This change from revenge to justice marks the beginning of new civilization. Civilization means the old world is replaced by the new world. This is a movement of transition. Orestes is trying to purge himself of those emotions which drive Agamemnon and Clytemnestra to their acts rather than serving his own blood. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra tragically passionate egotist answer only to their own immediate desires. The cycle of killing will go on forever and cities will destroy themselves in the blood feud. Shedding blood with a maximum of personal savagery without any limit gratifies each of them intensely so much. The only way out is that someone like Orestes purifies the blood guilt of the House of Atreus. He remained in consultation with

God after killing his mother. He has undergone suffering and it brought him knowledge and experience. From the beginning of the play 'Agamemnon' there is darkness and death, but the second play moves towards the birth, regeneration and light. Being a man of new generation, he has a conscience so he starts a new beginning.

A human trial is to decide Orestes's guilt or innocence. Orestes deserves to be declared innocent unless we attend very carefully to the difference between his motives and those of his parents. In the last play of the trilogy Eumendies, Orestes is pursued by the furies, therefore he went to God Apollo for help. Apollo advises him to go to Athena. Athena sympathises him and arranges a trial for Orestes. The Furies agree to obey whatever the decision of the jury is. They claim that Orestes is the son of Clytemnestra so they have rights to kill Orestes for his disrespect of her mother. Athena forgives him by saying that the man gives the seed to the woman which she keeps in her womb for nine months. So the real parent of the child is father. In this way murdering mother is not a crime. At the end of the play Furies also agree with the judgement. In this way God brings end to the law murder for murder by the help of Orestes. This is the founding act of civilization. The sign of civilization is to stop murdering bloodshed and cursing.

Orestes is aware of the curse on his house and he hopes that in killing his mother, he will put an end to the cycle of violence. By the end of the second play 'The Libation Bearer', we know that getting rid of the curse for Orestes and the family would not be that simple, but by the end of the trilogy Orestes not only has been the key person in putting an end to the curse but also is a the pioneer in laying the foundation for a new step in the progress of humanity. The Gods have a great part in his progress and their plans make possible a more civilized future. Finally in this play the curse on the House of Atreus is washed away. The transition of Orestes from a nameless shameless exile boy into a man in tune with his destiny and his life, is the major turning point of the trilogy. He represents the transition from youth to maturity, from disorder to order. This way Orestes regains the golden age. Man and God join hands again not in their ease but in their labour to create a brave new world.

Thus in this trilogy of Aeschylus we travel from darkness to light. The message that Aeschylus gives us is that we cannot leave the dark behind because the darkness is very useful for bringing the light. Darkness in the play symbolises savagery and bloodshed while consulting God and moving on by Orestes symbolizes his concern to get rid of the curse and establish civilization.

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