

Oedipus as Victim of Fate and Human Psychology: The Fatal Curiosity

Soham Das

Department of English, Presidency University, India.

Abstract: Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* is necessarily a victim of fate and his own psychology. His curiosity brings about his downfall. Ancient Greek plays weren't just portrayals of some obscure tale, but were insights into human nature. Oedipus, although a victim of circumstances, digs his own grave by curiously unravelling his past. Jocasta foresees his doom and begs him to stop, but to no avail. The curiosity of Oedipus forces him, almost like a drug, to explore the mystery regarding his birth. This curiosity is not something extraordinary in Oedipus - it is an intrinsic attribute of human nature. Knowledge is not always desired - whether it is Adam or Oedipus, their curiosity caused their eventual downfall. Oedipus was ill-fated since birth. He did not know that Laius was his biological father and therefore killed him. He arrived at Thebes, solved the riddle of the Sphinx, and married Jocasta without knowing that she in fact was his biological mother. He begot children and was living happily with his family when a sudden calamity struck Thebes. The calamity, though at first seemed public in nature, but later proved to be very personal for Oedipus. It drives home the fundamental truth about uncertainty of human life. That Laius was slayed by his own son, even after much precaution, proves the helplessness of humans in front of the designs of fate. Oedipus's mutilation of his eyes is also fated. It was committed by him in the heat of the moment and was certainly not a rational decision. It is evident to any

modern reader that Oedipus does not have justice. Destiny treats him unfairly. Oedipus, in fact, defends his actions in *Oedipus Rex* in its sequel *Oedipus At Colonus*. The research paper discusses the unhappy fate of Oedipus and the role of destiny and his own curiosity in achieving it. Textual analysis has been adopted as the principal methodology in this research paper.

Keywords—Ancient Greek Drama, Oedipus Rex, Sophocles, Destiny.

Introduction

EDIPUS Tyrannos or *Oedipus Rex* or *Oedipus the King* or *King Oedipus* is the first part of the *O*trilogy of dramas by ancient Greek dramatist Sophocles regarding the myths and legends surrounding the Royal House of Thebes. Oedipus is a Latinized form of Greek [1] which means swollen foot from ‘_____’^[1] which means to swell and ‘_____’^[1] which means foot. Oedipus carries his past in his very name. He is actually the biological son of King Laius of Thebes. However, hearing a divine prophesy about her soon being destined to slay Laius, King Laius’s wife Jocasta hands over the new-born to her servant to kill the baby. However, Oedipus is rescued by another man from Corinth, who finds him with his ankles riveted. He carries Oedipus to Corinth, where King Polybus of Corinth who had no children, adopts Oedipus as his own son. Oedipus grows up believing Polybus to be his father. However, the old terror returns as Oedipus gets to know the

divine prophesy by the Oracle of Delphi regarding him. He flees from Corinth in order to escape the terrible prediction. He reaches Thebes and finds it to be in absolute disarray with its King Laius been murdered by unknown assassins. Oedipus is successful in solving the problem of the Theban people by answering the riddles of the deadly Sphinx and destroying its power. Oedipus receives a hero’s welcome. He becomes the king of Thebes and also marries the widow of King Laius, Jocasta. They live happily for several years until tragedy strikes Thebes again. It is at this point that the play *Oedipus Rex* begins. The play begins with the people of Thebes, led by a priest, appealing to King Oedipus to save them from the terrible calamity all around in Thebes. King Oedipus pledges to help them in every possible way. Creon, Oedipus’s brother-in-law, comes back from the Pythian shrine of Apollo with the divine directive that the killer of Laius must be found out and banished from Thebes in order to end the ongoing tragedy in Thebes. Oedipus promises to solve the mystery of Laius’s murder. Teiresias, a revered blind prophet who had been summoned to Oedipus’s palace, declares Oedipus as Laius’s murderer, much to Oedipus’s fury, disgust and suspicion. Oedipus embarks on a rash interrogation-based investigation in order to find out the truth about Laius’s murderer and his own birth.

Chorus as Human Conscience

The chorus is a unique feature of ancient Greek plays. The chorus has a crucial role to play in *Oedipus Rex*. The chorus provides insightful commentaries on the statements made by the major characters and the events unfolding on stage. The chorus also often acts as a mediator and interjects with very important comments. The chorus expresses its view in one voice – it is a symbol of collective public opinion. The composition of the chorus is specified in the drama –

mostly Theban elders. The major characters, Oedipus, Creon and Jocasta, often engage in a conversation with the chorus. The chorus provides perspective to the incidents happening on stage. The chorus is the companion of Oedipus in his venture to unravel the mystery of King Laius's death. Oedipus is often advised by the chorus during the investigation, like the idea to summon the blind prophet, Teiresias. It tries to intervene when Oedipus gets into a verbal duel first with Teiresias and later with his brother-in-law, Creon. Oedipus comments that –

“A fine peacemakers’ part your worships would have played!”[2]

The chorus is confused when Teresias declares that Oedipus is the killer of Laius. They are in a dilemma between their allegiance and respect for their King and the straight allegations raised against him by their revered prophet. They say –

“We cannot believe, we cannot deny; all’s dark.

We fear, but we cannot see, what is before us.”[2]

It is the chorus that enquires about Jocasta and Oedipus’s fate at the end of the play. The chorus makes very important observations regarding various dramatic situations on stage. After the mystery of Oedipus’s birth is solved, the chorus makes the following observation –

“All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing!

Show me the man whose happiness was anything more than illusion

Followed by disillusion

Here is the instance, here is Oedipus, here is the reason

Why I will call no mortal creature happy.”[2]

It is interesting to note that the chorus is never judgemental about Oedipus but rather blames his destiny for his eventual ruin.

Role of Destiny

Destiny or fate is the most important theme of *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus becomes the King of Thebes by his own ability. But he is shattered completely by the designs of fate. There is no rational explanation as to why the curse was imposed upon him. Oedipus tries his best to evade his predicted destiny, but in spite of his efforts, he fails. Oedipus believed he could survive, given his resourcefulness and power. He declares to Creon that –

“Kingdoms are won by men and moneybags.”[2]

Oedipus is proved wrong at the end of the play. Creon becomes the King without having either men or money and Oedipus loses everything. Jocasta makes an apt observation –

“Chance rules our lives, and the future is all unknown.”[2]

That Oedipus should suffer thus all his life, bearing the dangerous predictions regarding him, seems pre-destined. Oedipus is a happy man in the beginning of the play. He is loved and respected by fellow the Thebans. He has good relations with his brother-in-law Creon. There is

also marital bliss between Jocasta and Oedipus as is evident when Oedipus tells Jocasta – “You are more to me than these good men”. The ultimate tragedy of Oedipus is shaped by coincidence and his own destiny. Oedipus is hailed as ‘the greatest of men’ by the chorus at the end of the play. Yet such a great man had such a lowly fall. The role of fate is aptly summarised in these concluding lines of *Oedipus Rex* –

“Behold, what a full tide of misfortune swept over his head.

Then learn that mortal man must always look to his ending,

And none can be called happy until that day when he carries

His happiness down to the grave in peace.”[2]

Oedipus is a miserable victim of Fate’s fancies. It seems as if the unseen forces of destiny have plotted against Oedipus to bring about his downfall. It is indeed by a very cruel coincidence, that Oedipus murders his father, marries his mother and begets children – without himself having the slightest hint about his own misdeeds. A modern reader would never blame Oedipus for his ‘sins’. Oedipus is an unconscious offender. He is like an alien in a foreign city, who is caught for breaking the rules that he himself was not aware of. Indeed, it is a moment of great dramatic irony when Jocasta exclaims upon hearing of the news of King Polybus’s death –

“Where are you now, divine prognostications!

The man whom Oedipus has avoided all these years,

Lest he should kill him – dead! By a natural death,

And by no act of his!”

At this point, Jocasta and others on stage are not aware that King Polybus was not the biological father of Oedipus.. Oedipus actually unknowingly fulfilled the divine prophecy by slaying his biological father Laius at Phocis.

That, Oedipus has a noble bent of mind is portrayed by the fact that the moment he gets the proof of his own wrongdoings, he convicts himself guilty. Oedipus laments –

“Revealed as I am, sinful in my begetting,

Sinful in marriage, sinful in shedding of blood!”[2]

He blinds himself as a way of self-punishment and repentance. Interestingly, at this point, Oedipus does not present any argument to defend himself and his actions. He, however, does so in *Oedipus At Colonus* –

“He whom I killed

Had sought to kill me first. The law

Acquits me, innocent, as ignorant,

Of what I did.”[2]

Oedipus correctly voices his defence argument. His ignorance is his biggest claim for acquittal.

Ancient Greek Plays as Commentaries on Human Nature

Ancient Greek plays dealt with various traits in man and his inherent nature. Through tragedies, comedies and satyr-dramas[5], the Greek playwrights showcased the human life and its twists & turns – situations that the audience could relate with. Sophocles, Euripedes&Aesychlus^[4] were masters of this art. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is a perfect example of Greek tragedy. Sophocles drew the story of *Oedipus Rex* from popular myths^[5] regarding the Royal House of Thebes. However, Sophocles brought about a number of important modifications in the play^[5]. The final plot of the play must be shaped The fall of Oedipus, is a grand moment of tragedy. The fall of Oedipus also highlights the uncertainty of human life and the crucial role destiny plays in it. All of Oedipus's resourcefulness could not save him from his eventual ruin. Oedipus alludes to his past achievements in the play, but they are not enough to save him. In his personal crisis, destiny was definitely not on his side. The play *Oedipus Rex* ends on a tragic note with Queen Jocasta committing suicide and King Oedipus blinding himself. The life of King Oedipus is shattered forever. Oedipus would carry this burden of infamy throughout his life as is shown in *Oedipus AtColonus*.

The fatal curiosity of oedipus

Oedipus Rex is about the quest of King Oedipus in search of knowledge about his own past. He declares philosophically and very significantly –

“Born thus, I ask to be no other man

Than that I am, and will know who I am.”

The curiosity of King Oedipus brings about his downfall. He begins the quest with a vow to discover the killer of King Laius. Teiresias, the blind prophet, was reluctant to tell the truth about the killer of Laius. However, Oedipus's insistence makes Teiresias declare that Oedipus himself was the killer of Laius. After the revelation by the messenger of Corinth about King Polybus not being his real father, Oedipus leaves no stone unturned in his quest to solve the mystery of his own birth. He is advised by Jocasta to refrain from searching the truth – yet his curiosity leads him on. Oedipus summons the shepherd who used to work under Laius and who was the sole witness of Laius's death. In spite of the shepherd's reluctance, Oedipus forces him to speak the truth. Jocasta reproaches him for his unfaltering urge to learn the truth –

“Doomed man! O never live to learn the truth!”[2]

Oedipus is determined to find the truth – he almost seems to be under a spell to find the truth –

“Let all come out,

However vile! However base it be,

I must unlock the secret of my birth.”[2]

It is a great dramatic irony that, when Oedipus gets to know the complete truth, he cries –

“Alas! All out! All known, no more concealment!”[3]

Oedipus is devastated after securing the knowledge that he was so desperately seeking. Oedipus solves the mystery of Laius's death and his own birth, only to approach his own destruction.

Conclusion

Oedipus Rex is the tragic tale of King Oedipus's downfall. The cursed fate of Oedipus coupled with his curiosity lead him to his utter ruin. Oedipus is a magnanimous tragic figure whose fall from power and fame is a spectacle captured in this play by Sophocles. The play is named after Oedipus and he remains in the focus throughout the play. The play unfolds the drama of his sudden descent from the heights of glory and power. Oedipus, the glorious king of Thebes, is flung to the very nadir by his fate. The play underlines the uncertainty of human life and explores the crucial role that destiny plays in it. The tragedy of Oedipus is shaped by his own natural curiosity and the adverse destiny. His strong curiosity expedited his destined downfall.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It would be worthwhile to acknowledge the kind help from the faculty at the Department Of English, Presidency University, Kolkata. They have always enthusiastically answered all my queries. They were always ready for discussions and debates on various key issues.

REFERENCES

- [1] <https://www.behindthename.com/name/oedipus>. Accessed 13 August 2017.
- [2] Sophocles. *The Theban Plays*. Translated By E.F. Watling, Penguin Books, 1974.
- [3] Storey, Ian C. and Arlene Allan. *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- [4] Kitto, H.D.F. *Greek Tragedy : A Literary Study*. Routledge. 2011.
- [5] Beer Josh. *Sophocles and The Tragedy of Athenian Democracy*. Praegar. 2004.

Das.Soham (ICSE – '15, ISC – '17). Soham Dasis a student of Presidency University, Kolkata. The major field of study of Soham Das is English Literature.

His papers have been accepted for presentation at PSSIR 2017 at Singapore and AICLEP