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The Agamemnon on Sri Lankan stage - A critical survey of Gayan Randeera's adaptation

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Aeschylus is the most ancient of Greek dramatists in the classical period whose works have survived the test of time. Born in 525 BC in Eleusis near Athens, it is believed that the god of Drama, Dionysius himself appearing in a vision when he was in his father's vine yard, had ordered him to write tragedy. The reason was that he had wanted 'a poet whose mind was naturally of a religious bent.'¹ Fort and Kates² maintains that the command would have been to write tragic dramas for their glorification in the religious festivals. After the dream, awakening, Aeschylus had made an attempt and discovered his facility for dramatic composition. Some are of the view that he had produced around seventy plays during his life time.³ But others refute the above and claim that Aeschylus had written around ninety plays.⁴ However it stands as a fact that only seven tragedies have survived the test of time to come down to the modern reader.

Aeschylus had presented his dramas at the City Dionysia for the annual dramatic competition in honour of the god of drama. The theatre, which was situated in Athens was in the open air providing seating capacity for more than fifteen thousand spectators.⁵ The requirement for the competition was that each contesting dramatist had to present three tragedies and one satyre play. Aeschylus for the first time innovated trilogies to the contest. This meant that he introduced three separate dramas which could be also seen as a series of dramas as well. The introduction enabled him to handle wider scope of a theme and its evolution. **The Agamemnon** is the first play of such a trilogy. Prominent themes under discussion are the theme of justice as well as the position of women in society. The trilogy enabled the author to handle the evolution of justice in successive stages and the position of gender relations in three stages of civilization. The themes are discussed through the dramatic development of an ancient Myth. Hence the plays are called the **Oresteian Trilogy**, Or the **Oresteia**. It involved the tragedy of the house of Atreus.⁶ Myths were common knowledge among the ancient Greeks. Therefore the poet is free to handle his material according to the message he intends to convey for he does not have to deal with the element of surprise concerning the actual storyline itself.

Superficially the Oresteian Trilogy is a violent story of primitive family feud. But it is much more than a tale of vengeance. Aspect after aspect reveals itself when searched deeper. The subject matter handled by Aeschylus is very near to the core of human feeling. It is near the central experience of life. But the reader might be compelled to turn aside, once to history or prehistory, or then to philosophy and theology, or may be ethics and again to the development of drama as an art. But at all times the central unifying element would be the author's poetic conception.

Peter D. Arnott compares a great play to an onion.⁷ The further we penetrate, the more layers of meaning one reveals. According to him impressive works of art could be appreciated at many levels. Each generation examining them in the light of its own culture and beliefs finds something to admire.

The story involved in the first play of the **Oresteian Trilogy**, the **Agamemnon** is the dramatic and victorious home coming of king Agamemnon after the capture of Troy. Agamemnon had been the commander of the Greek confederacy that sailed against Troy. But before sailing it so happens that he has to appease the gods by sacrificing a virgin. He makes a choice between his duty to the states and his family. The choice is that he sacrifices his own daughter to appease the gods and lead the assembled joint army to war.

His wife Clytemnestra, while ruling the country in his absence, awaits his return. For she feels according to the old form of justice, invoked no doubt by her love for the daughter and her sense of betrayal, that she should to punish Agamemnon. The old form of justice meant 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth form of justice. Therefore one murder would inevitably lead to another. Though the background story and situation is revealed through many a choral ode, the story starts with the announcement of victory and the home coming and ends with the murder of her husband. Clytemnestra, the wife kills her husband the king, in revenge for the killing of the daughter. The reason is that according to the old form of justice the killer had to be killed by the nearest and the dearest.⁸ In the **Oresteian Trilogy** the three plays deal with three forms of Justice. The first play is the old form of Justice. This is where the killer had to be killed. And the punishment had to be carried out by the nearest kin. The second play deals with the intermediate stage where after purification the guilty is forgiven. The Third is where the homicide is tried under a court system. An Independent Jury is selected and both sides are provided an opportunity to present their case.

As Bowra points out⁹ ancient tragedy was deeply concerned with current problems. Aeschylus considered that what was correct for their

generation was right material for tragedy. “They transposed the disturbing problems and the passionate disputes of the Athenian democracy to the world of ancient myth and gave to them a distance and dignity which made their issues clearer and set them above the confusions of ephemeral controversy. And the issue dealt with in the **Oresteran Trilogy** is the transference of jurisdiction regarding murder to the Areopagus. It is an explanation to this problem that the theme of justice in the trilogy is relevant.

The above stated, somewhat brief background information lies as evidence to the formidable challenge that would be confronted by any modern dramatist when producing **Agamemnon** of Aeschylus.

The foremost facts that have to be noticed are the, changes in the time-period of production. Then the place, the country, the society, the people and their knowledge is important. The relevancy to the social and political atmosphere counts as well. Even the conditions of the theatre poses challenges. The theatrical conditions and atmosphere comes next.

Despite the above mentioned problems concerning the actual production, the 21st century Sri Lankan stage seems to find the Greek Classics quite interesting. If so in what manner had the modern local playwrights presented the Greek Dramas to the Sri Lankan audiences? What changes have they introduced? And how fair would be the adaptations to the original? These are the questions proposed to investigate through an analysis of Gayan Randeeras production of **The Agamemnon** of Aeschylus.

The first comment that one is compelled to make regarding the production is that the total effect was electrifying. The united tension in the audience was almost tangible. The play was performed indoors. The modern dramatist had not made use of the traditional masks of the Greeks. Since the masks were needed mainly for the visual effect this omission could hardly be noticed. But the ability to see the facial expressions added a positive impact, and provided a greater scope for the dramatist.

Since the intention of the study is to focus on the innovations, the first change from the Greek play the spectator confronts is the scene depicting Clytemnestra's lone figure on stage while the chorus sings a string of odes.¹⁰ Being the first of classical dramatists whose works have survived, Aeschylus uses the chorus to the utmost. The odes are of various descriptions or dramatizations, depicting the background situation, state of the mind of characters or commenting of the action itself. They vary in subject matter as well as the moods generated. Hence they sing songs relating to the siege of Troy, the action of the war, patriotism, potents and their interpretations leading to the requirement of human sacrifice, the state of Agamemnon's mind before the decision is taken and the dramatic

portrayal of the sacrifice itself in words. There is also the reference to the old form of Justice.¹¹ The queen, Clytemnestra is shown on stage, a silent formidable figure rigidly turning her back to the chorus and the audience. Aeschylus had used this dramatic device in a very expressive manner. It signifies -

- * The isolation she would have felt during the course of events. The betrayal.
- * Her disregard for public opinion which failed her once at the time of need.
- * Reveals a considerable amount of her character. She is proud, strong, nursing a burning resentment and hostility. Is arrogant and aloof.
- * She disregards all. She is self assured and has the strength and mind to stand against all.
- * She stands tall and strong - outstanding among the many. She is definitely superior to the chorus. The chorus plays as a foil to highlight her royalty.



But the Clytemnestra in the Sinhala modern production faces the chorus and the audience. Since masks are not used one also is able to watch the facial expression. One tends to wonder if the director had surpassed a chance to exploit the situation for dramatic effect. For the question stands, could any person express emotions evoked at the above mentioned incidents effectively? May be if the character expressed no emotions at all and no facial expressions it would have had a better effect. This may be a subjective observation. But one does also notice that the actress playing the part wears a slight smile on her face, while

listening to the odes. Irrespective of the above observations the scene seems to be quite effective on the audience.

The next observation stands quite controversial. This is the manner Iphigenia, the daughter that was to be sacrificed is brought on to stage

while the chorus sang. It just may be that the director had been influenced by modern films produced on the play.



It does add a very humane touch to the play. It also displays to the beholders eye the father - daughter relationship, bringing home to him the trauma the king would have had in making the decision. The little girl runs among the chorus and springs on to the arms of the king. But

the Greek convention is that there should be shown no violence on stage. Violent acts are dramatically related so that one paints the scene before the spectators' eye - mentally. This may enable the audience to personally participate and thereby experience the action.¹²

In the modern production the struggling, protesting, screaming young girl is sacrificed on stage. Although this is done artistically and modestly one feels that it may have been more effective if at least the protesting girl had been carried off the stage.

In the original text Iphigenia is prevented from screaming since she is gagged. The chorus relates -

'Limp in her flowing dress
The priests' attendants held her high
Above the altar, as men hold a kid.
Her father spoke again, to bid
One bring a gag, and press
Her sweet mouth tightly with a cord
Lest Atrous' house be cursed by some ill-omened cry'.¹³
'The pity her dumb looks beseech
Struggling for voice;'¹⁴

There is a purpose for not letting the girl scream - the sound may bring bad luck.

But the modern Iphigenia screams.

This is different from the pathos created by the dumb Iphigenia of Aeschylus.

The decision to sacrifice his own daughter was not easy for Agamemnon. He is shocked and appalled at the suggestion at first. It was later, in the same stanza that he decides that he must yield. The poet brings out the shock, the grief, the refusal and then the struggle before the ultimate decision within a single stanza. -

'What can I say?
Disaster follows if I obey;
Surely yet worse disaster if I
yield.

And slaughter my own child,
my homes delight,
In her young innocence and
stain my hand
With blasphemous unnatural
cruelty

Bathed in the blood I
fathered!¹⁵

And then,
earn the deserter's badge -
abandon my command,

There must be sacrifice, a
maid must bleed -

Their chafing rage demands
it - they are right!¹⁶

The difficulty of making the decision is not emphasized in the modern version. If it had been emphasized, his ultimate fate would have been more pathetic and would have appealed to the audience more.

The handling of the chorus had been done with delicacy. The dramatist had retained its part as an integral part of the play as in the original version. The innovation made in the adaptation is that the odes have been modified to a certain extent. Modern theatre provides many theatrical devices that makes certain descriptions etc. unnecessary.

The entrance of Agamemnon is quite effective. Special concentration had been given to the dramatic electricity in the interplay of the dialogue. The dialogue had retained its forceful yet subtle irony in the translation. The rapid dialogue persuading Agamemnon to tread on the crimson carpet against all sound judgment is powerfully presented. However, the triumphant cry that escapes Clytemnestra's mouth at the moment he treads on the crimson carpet ensuring her victory is not used by the translator. It may be that a suitable word or sound could not be found in the Sinhala vocabulary or contemporary use. But it should be noted that Aeschylus uses the sound on other occasions as well to indicate triumph. In this scene however it may be interpreted as a blood



curdling sound that would have made the audience uneasy. The two other occasions in which this cry is used are :

1. When she heard of Agamemnon's return and
2. After the killing of Agamemnon.

On watching the modern production another observation that one might make is the entrance of Cassandra, the Trojan princess and priestess of Apollo. In the Greek tragedy Aeschylus dramatize this event with the use of visual media. Cassandra is brought in with the rest of the spoils in a chariot.¹⁷ Since theater provisions did not allow this in the modern era some other device could have been employed to highlight the pathos. Aeschylus had even used the scene as symbolic of the splendor of Troy now brought in as spoils. If at least her costume was in the traditional color of a virgin priestess of Apollo indicating femininity youth and innocence it might have added much to the occasion. i.e. Traditional yellow with black patches to indicate the priestess, me of trimer girl, the fall. Her dress to indicate the priestess, the girl and the fall of Troy. In the modern version her dress..... is of a dull green shade. Furthermore, the casual entrusting of Cassandra to Clytemnestra is missing from the modern version. But this incident had throughout the years been a basis for the argument resting on double standards for men and women in the ancient world. But this again is a debate applicable even to the modern day in a more subtle sense, irrespective of culture and self acclaimed equality of sexes. It seems perfectly acceptable socially for the victorious general to bring back a concubine among other spoils and entrust her to his wife. The effect of this on Clytemnestra however could be seen in her cold attitude to the newly acquired slave.

'You too, Cassandra, this palace bears you no ill will;

You shall stand
near our sovereign
altar, and partake

With many other
slaves, the cleansing
ritual'.¹⁸

'then leave that
chariot: do not be
proud. They say

Heracles was once
sold and learnt to eat
slaves' bread?¹⁹



In the **Agamemnon** of Aeschylus the king is killed off stage, according to tradition of not depicting violence on stage. It is through the reaction of the chorus to the sounds coming from within the palace that the audience is made to mentally recreate the scene. But in the adaptation Agamemnon is killed on the stage itself. But the scene is handled in such a manner that as feared by the ancient Greek critics it does not become repulsive to the finer sentiments of the audience. The director had used contemporary modern theatre techniques boldly to enhance the tragic effect. The scene is powerfully presented by the actress playing the part of Clytemnestra. The gender theme is powerfully highlighted where the ultimate act of the killing itself is similar to the sexual union with the woman on top and the king underneath her. The hatred the lady had nursed for so many years is visibly seen and made to realize in the manner she carries out the murder. Even in the conversation she immediately has with the chorus after the killing, with the blood spattered clothes she displays the strength of her character. It is with deep conviction that she justifies herself and rejoices in her accomplishment.



In the original play, although Aegisthus boasts of planning the deed Aeschylus indicates that it is Clytemnestra that is stronger. She has the personality to face the criticisms of the chorus and answer them boldly through logic. She seems to be quite collected after she had attained what she wanted. But Aegisthus exhibits his weakness in threatening the chorus. The famous words of the chorus that Aegisthus is like a 'cock

that struts before its hen'²⁰ that strikes a poignant note has not been included in the translation. If it had been it would have illustrated in a nutshell the shallowness of Aegisthus as against that of Clytemnestra.

The translation also indicates that it is Aegisthus who becomes the ruler. But in the original, according to Clytemnestra, it is a joint rule she establishes.

'You and I
Joint rulers, will enforce due reverence for our throne.'²¹

But the portrayal of the two characters show who really was the superior.

Irrespective of some of the criticisms made, it stands as a fact that the challenge the Sri Lankan director had undertaken was a colossal one. Production of a Classical Greek tragedy is not an insignificant venture. Adopting it for the local audience while being faithful to the original is no small task either. Gayan Randeera had met and surmounted this challenge. Attempts of this nature should be commended and encouraged. The beauty of the venture is that the classics surpass in its appeal, the boundaries and limitations imposed by time place and culture. So it is with this play, irrespective even of the difference in the motive and circumstance of the production, the new director had reached over to touch the hearts of the theatre goers. He has done justice to the original.

Endnotes:

1. Pausanian, Description of Greece, 1.21.1
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3. The Oresteian Trilogy, Translation by Philip Vellacott, Penguin Classics, 1979, introduction
4. Tragic Drama of the Greeks, A. e. Haigh, Dover Publications, New York, 1968, p. 48
5. The Greek Theatre and its drama, Roy C. Flikinger, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968, p. 221
6. Edith Hamilton, Mythology, New American Library, New York, 1969, p. 237
7. Peter D. Arnott, Introduction to Greek Theatre, Macmillan and Co., London, 1982, p. 63
8. Agamemnon, Aeschylus, lines 240, Aeschylus and Athens, George Thomson, Lawrence Wishart, 1973, p. 525
Introduction to Greek Theatre, Peter D. Arnott, Macmillan and Co., London, 82, p. 64
9. C.M. Bowra, The Greek Experience, Sphere Books, 1957, p. 125

10. Agamemnon, Aeschylus, lines 90-257
11. Idem
12. Aristotle, Poetics, Cha. 14
13. Agamemnon, Aeschylus, lines 225
14. Ibid, lines 257
15. Ibid, 204
16. Ibid 214
17. Aeschylus, Agamemnon, lines 780
18. Aeschylus - Agamemnon, lines 1045
19. Idem
20. Aeschylus, Agamemnon, lines 1667
21. Ibid lines 1671