

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Agamemnon, Oedipus and Pentheus are men descended from different families and different cities of Greece. They met disasters of different kinds and met them with varying kinds of action. But what they did not differ was that they were kings possessing arete of the first water and when the gods punished them (all of them finally succumbed to the will of the gods), they met their fate with courage and determination. They sacrificed their lives, their prestiges, their futures and even their beliefs in line of duty towards the people of the countries they ruled and in so doing revealed their arete--the grandeur and heroism rivalled only by a very few in the course of the history of mankind.

They were in various stages of confrontations with the gods and though the punishment meted them was unwarranted and harsh to the extreme, they met those punishments without a tremor of hesitation. One of them, King Oedipus, had the

courage to punish himself over and beyond the pre-ordained penalties prescribed by the gods.

In confrontation with the gods, Agamemnon, was caught in a vise of exquisite agony--the dilemmas that may still be unequalled to the present day. By obeying one or a group of the gods, he would be punished severely by another group of gods. In every action and decision that he faces, he met this kind of "no win" decision. He made his choice and lived up to his resolution, come what may, and was destroyed inevitably. The three judgment decrees that he made will stand as landmark decisions made by men under duress which shows man at the height of grandeur. He was not rewarded by the gods who wanted these decrees enacted but was dealt with by the other side who were angered by these very acts of defiance towards their omnipotence.

Oedipus' acts of hubris were of a nature pre-ordained by the gods themselves. They were horrendous crimes of parricide and incest, which no human being would even contemplate. He was resisting the decrees of the gods from the very instant he discovered it, which took him away from his foster-country right back to the country of his birth where fate awaited him. Here again, we see him using every

minute strength of cerebral strength to prove the gods' predictions false but in vain. It was when the reversals were revealed that Oedipus showed his mettle. It was the time when he showed the world at large that he was a truly heroic and tragic figure filled with unequalled grandeur. He punished himself for the crimes of extraordinary depths of degradation with self-blinding, self-banishment and self-exhibition so that the people would recognize such crimes of magnitude are given such penalties. It takes a man of extraordinary courage and moral stamina to undergo such degradations and yet remain alive for all the world to see. Oedipus was such a man and he made the final sacrifice of his good name and prestige to show his country the final act of his benevolence towards them.

Pentheus' confrontation was with a god who did not declare himself as such. He remains incognito as a means of punishing non-believers of his "cult". Fairnes does not come into play when dealing with gods of the time, but Pentheus did not realise this fact and challenged the new religious leader with all the power he possessed. It would have been very straight-forward to have declared himself a deity and everything would have ended the way Dionysus wanted, but that was not to be. Instead it was like baiting

a mortal in a "cat-and-mouse game" of the god. It was quite unlikely that Pentheus would give in to Dionysus' way, even if he had known immediately that the orgiastic cult leader was a god and it was the new way of new religious fervour that would sweep the countryside for years to come.

He would still have resisted for the good of his country. It was his bounden duty to lay his life for his country and he would very gladly have done it. It was arete of the first degree and Pentheus is a Greek who would like to "take possession of the beautiful". He would not like to see his country degraded with women deserting their homes lusting in the woods, and men drunk and disorderly clutching at any women they see. It was orgiastic to the levels of animals and the bestiality did not end with that but with the final devouring of the barely stilled and quivering flesh of sacrificial animals. Pentheus, like any other sane man, would have felt disgusted with these extremely libellous acts of horror. But being a king with arete refrained from indulging his natural instincts and departing from the mireants, but went into the fray with determination as an act of duty towards his misled subjects. All of this was done not for personal gain and egoistic claims. It was purely a self-less act which shows the true spirit of man and the call of duty.

All the above heroes of the Greek masters have shown the tragic spirit in its essential grandeur and few men can attain the arete they have won. It is thus an awe-inspiring spectacle of man's greatest moments seen through the works of the greatest artists the world had ever known. It gives the Western world and thence to the scholars and students of literature, what man could become in times of trials and tribulations, in times of stress and strain and see the greatness and the grandeur of man in such moments. The common denominator in all the heroes was that they did all they could for their fellow men and were not rewarded by the gods for it. It was a particularly harsh lesson for the audience to realize that the way of fate is such and it might not be beneficent and just to the sufferer. It might compensate in different ways that may be unexpected. It might reward the sufferer in his last days on earth and might heap laurels as befitting a god--which was what happened to old King Oedipus; or it might just be a moral ending to show that the gods' anger is not easily averted as was done to Agamemnon and Pentheus. Nevertheless, the ancient playwrights showed the audience in the course of their heroes' sufferings, what man could attain by way of tragic heights. The heroic spirit, the grandeur of man's immortal aspirations and achievements were shown by these

Greek masters and the world as a whole benefitted from their acts and strife the same way the Greek audiences of the fifth century B.C. gained from these tragedies--the tragic sense.

Muller sums up the tragic sense:

To me, the tragic sense is the deepest sense of our humanity, and therefore spiritual enough. But all men may profit from it, whatever their faith. It is certainly valid as far as it goes, or this life goes. It sizes up the very reasons for religious faith, the awful realities that men must face up to if their faith is to be firm, mature and responsible. It also makes for sensitiveness to the tragic excesses of all faiths, the inevitable corruptions of all ideals--in the West, more particularly, to the rugged, irresponsible individualism that has battered on the ideal of freedom, and the bigotry and self-righteousness that have flourished in the name of Jesus. It may deepen the sense of community that has been one end of religion. The tragic writer may most nearly realize the ideal mission of the artist stated by Joseph Conrad:

He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation--and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in allusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other,

which binds together all humanity--the dead to the living and the living to the unborn." ¹

Whether later writers have accomplished the ideal mission as set forth for tragic writers by Joseph Conrad, remains still under dispute. Most critics and readers will support their ideal playwright while some might demur. What every critic and reader concurs wholeheartedly is the fact that the ancient Greek masters reached and accomplished this mission with flying colours. Edith Hamilton in The Greek Way suggests a way to reconcile what the ancients have achieved with the spirit and heart of mankind in the modern world:

We cannot capture the Greek point of view; the simplicity and directness of their vision are not for us. The wheels of time never turn backward, and fortunately so. The deep integration of the idea of the individual gained through the centuries since Greece can never be lost. But modern science made generalizations of greater truth than the Greeks could reach through a greater knowledge of individual facts. If we can follow that method and through our own intense realization of ourselves reach a unity with all men, seeing as deeply as the great tragic poets of old saw, that what is of any importance in us is what we share with all, then there will be a new distribution in the

²Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of tragedy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 286-287.

scales and the balance held so evenly in those great days of Greece may be ours as well. The goal which we see ourselves committed to struggle toward without method or any clear hope, can be attained in no other way: a world where no one shall be sacrificed against his will, where general expediency which is the mind of mankind, and the feeling for each human being which is the spirit and the heart of mankind, shall be reconciled.²

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides showed the world the magnificence of man when faced with a crisis. The greatness of man as reflected in the decisions made in times of crises, shows that man can be heroic with unequalled grandeur. The tragic spirit of a hero with arete can really "take possession of the beautiful". It is a concept worthy of noting in perpetuity and we can only wish that the reconciliation of the mind of mankind with the spirit of mankind be effected without any undue delay and pray for deliverances from sacrifices against our wills which has become a way of life in close proximities around us.

² Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way, (New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 1983) pp. 246-247.