

The Overbearing Presence of Male Protagonists Renders Jocasta Voiceless: A Study on *Oedipus Rex*

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Abstract: Women are neglected in our society from the very beginning. They speak but practically are made silent by the dominant male society. They are expected to be polite, obedient, gentle, shy, beautiful, loving, caring, sacrificing, etc. Most importantly, they are projected as the ones who should live for others, even die for others quietly. The hypothesis of this paper is that Jocasta, the female protagonist in *Oedipus Rex*, gradually loses her identity under the over shadowing presence of the male protagonists like Oedipus, Creon, and Teiresias. To be more precise, playwright Sophocles creates such a narrative where Jocasta, though vested with royal respect, is given a personhood so meagre as to become separated from any dialogic involvement in the play. The objective of this paper is to find out how Jocasta becomes voiceless under the imperious illustration of the male protagonists by Sophocles in his drama *Oedipus Rex*. I have used content analysis method for my paper. I have taken three Anglo American Feminist literary criticisms spanning between the first wave and the second wave of feminist criticism. And then I have analysed how an author resist women from literature.

Keywords: Greek Classics, Jocasta, Male protagonists, Immascultation, Scapegoat, Gynocriticism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Jocasta is portrayed as a female character in the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. In the fifth-century BCE classical drama, roles of women are conceived by men, because all the ancient Greek playwrights were men (Allan). It can be assumed that women were represented in those dramas such that their roles could emphasize women's situation and duties towards that society, because social, political and economic situation and ideology may not affect an author to mull over the condition of the deprived positively and/or seriously. *Oedipus Rex* is a Greek tragedy which tells the mythical story of how king Oedipus killed his father, Laius, and married his own mother, Jocasta, unconsciously. At first Oedipus does not know the truth and then he asks for Teiresias. The blind prophet refuses to speak at first, but finally accuses Oedipus of killing Laius. Oedipus ridicules and refuses the prophet angrily, ordering him to leave, but not before Tiresias mentions of a darkly incestuous marriage and a future of blindness, infamy, and wandering. When he realizes that he killed his father, married his own mother and finds that Jocasta has killed herself, he blinded himself due to his cursed fate. In this play Sophocles has shown the *power of fate* (my italics) in human life through some characters his writing unequivocally. But the condition and depiction of a female character is somehow kept hidden in his narrative. A mother's affection towards her child, a wife's duty and love towards her husband, etc. makes the character Jocasta loses her identity in some way. And it can be presumed that through an *impalpable design*, Sophocles creates a narrative where the overriding presence of male characters renders a female character like Jocasta voiceless. She is bulldozed into the margins and hardly has any role to play.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part begins with the review of Gilbert Murray. He wrote about the subjection of women in Greek tragedy in his book *The Rise of the Greek Epic* which is a collection of his lectures delivered at Harvard University. To him, Greek women were not *subjugated* (my italics) by men, and they were the first nation to realize and protest against the subjection of women. Here, he saw Jocasta as a free woman who got respect and sympathy like a male character (19-20). Here, he acknowledged Jocasta as a splendid heroine besides other female characters, but he did not mention anything about the drive for her suicide. Although he said that Jocasta got the same respect as other male characters in that play, the reason of her silence after knowing the ugly truth was absent from Murray's description.

Sheila Murnaghan raised the issue of "breaking the silence of women" in Greek tragedy in her article "Women in Greek Tragedy". She mentioned multiple female characters from Greek tragedies, but she did not stand guard for Jocasta in comparison with other characters. She explained how Jocasta wanted to make peace

between her husband and brother. But the question of her peace and happiness remained unanswered in her article (n.pag).

Thomas Gould, another critic, demonstrates Jocasta's situation in his article "The Innocence of Oedipus: The Philosophers on Oedipus the King, Part III". However, the title of this article itself is an irony for the character Jocasta. Gould argued that Laius's action and misdeed towards Oedipus and Jocasta is not remembered at all. When Laius heard about the oracle that, he will die in the hand of his own son and his son will marry his (Laius's) wife, he and her wife decided to abandon his new born son. So they ordered a shepherd to abandon the child in the mountain side and its feet cruelly pierced with an iron pin so that the child cannot move from one place to another. According to Gould, Laius's action about piercing Oedipus's feet and abandoning him from his kingdom is cruel which is unanswered and at the same time, the dominance towards Jocasta by Laius, is also not remembered at all. He also goes on to say that in the play *Antigone*, Antigone and Ismene feared about the family curse which is the result of the accidental marriage between Oedipus and Jocasta. But none of them feared about what Laius did in the past. Gould thinks that this kind of studied silence regarding Laius's crime is in fact a remarkable technique in Sophocles' writing (39-40).

In another book titled *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, Vol-1*, the editor Richard Claverhouse Jebb seemed to have given more emphasis on the character of Jocasta. He supposed that the key-note "of a dominant mood" "struck by a short utterance" is hardly swathed in significance, "just as, in life itself, the sayings most truly significant of character are not always long or marked" (30). He said conclusively that for Jocasta such a key-note passed unnoticed in her dialogue with Oedipus about the oracle for Laius. The priests of Delphian temple made Jocasta as well as her husband, Laius suffer by coercing her to sacrifice her first born. Jebb's interpretation makes quite clear that Jocasta did not believe in any mortal interpreter of decrees from gods. She suffered enough in the hands of the Gods and as well as the dominant patriarchy. The playwright Sophocles also made her suffer in his storyline in a similar way.

David Allan in his article "The Ideal Image: Women in Fifth-Century Drama" talked about multiple characters from classical Greek plays. He mentioned that some authors depicted women as mere housewives, often put them in the position of political leaders, heroines and murderers. In this way, those authors wanted to show how a female character should maintain both family and home. In his article, he repeatedly mentioned about women in an "ideal image" and stressed the importance of this image in Greek patriarchy. In *Oedipus Rex*, Jocasta gave up her life because the incestuous act she did unconsciously with Oedipus was forbidden in that patriarchal society. From this perspective it can be said that women should give up their lives for the betterment of her family and home if it is necessary (n.pag).

The above analysis garners a clear notion that quite a few critics shed light on the characters of Oedipus, Creon and Teiresias, but the case of Jocasta remained to them a hidden fact, as it were, gratuitous and needless to address. None of them seemed to pay attention to her struggles. In this paper, the author has analyzed, and studied Jocasta as a voiceless character in a throng of dominant male characters. She has also examined her shocking departure from life as well as from society.

III. FEMINISM

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* feminism is "the belief and the aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim" (466). Actually the beginning of the feminist movement is set in the late eighteenth century and connected with the writings in social theory, polemics, and the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. This movement took a huge shape and organization in the late nineteenth century in the Great Britain and the United States when it was mobilized specifically under the question of women's suffering. This paper consists of the issue of Jocasta in the light of the thoughts expressed by Kate Millett and Elaine Showalter and Judith Fetterley.

Kate Millett is an Anglo-American feminist critic whose book *Sexual Politics* is a thesis paper where she emphasizes the nature of power relationships between the sexes, the fate of feminist struggle and finally how the sexual power relationship is enacted in different works by different male authors. This book mainly deals about male authors. Millett defines the essence of politics as power and seeks to prove that "however muted its present appearance maybe, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concepts of power" (25). Millett's book comes extremely close to Katharine M. Roger's third proposition in her study about male misogyny: "Patriarchal feeling, the wish to keep women subject to men. And it is the most widely and firmly established in society" (272). Millett's book showcases a challenge to the author's authority in writing at every turn.

Another Anglo-American critic Elaine Showalter can be truly acknowledged as one of the most important feminist critics. In her article "Towards a Feminist Poetics (1979)" she distinguishes between forms of feminist criticism. The first type entails women as readers which she terms "feminist critique" and the second type implies a woman as writer which she terms "gynocritics". She said that "gynocritics frees itself from pandering to male values and seeks to focus . . . on the newly visible world of female culture" (28). And this

-muted female culture can best be carried out by applying anthropological theories to the female author and her work when she said, “Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female subculture” (28). In another article titled “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, she repeats the same theme.

Judith Fetterley’s essay “On the Politics of Literature” expounds that a keen politics is implicit in literature which “neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate” (561). In the first part of her article Fetterley focuses on the idea of *scapegoating*. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* scapegoat is, “[a] person who is blamed for something bad that someone else has done or for some failure” (1139). She also mentions that for women “biology is destiny” (564). To Fetterley, women’s situation in society obviates an ugly truth that they must show their affection for the man who have confined them to their biological functions. Judith Fetterley uses another term called “immascultation” (567) in the later part of her essay. Here she argues that a woman has lost her perception of femininity, or to be more precise, she has consciously given it up in order to fit into the society’s requirements, as she taught to think like men. Jocasta, in *Oedipus Rex*, is a victim of such a male-dominated society where she cannot raise her voice, even if she speaks; she has to speak through the voice of the protagonist.

Kate Millett has shown various male authors dominance in their writings in American literature. Her impression of power relationship between sexes and challenging the author’s authority at every step can be put in this Greek classical drama. By putting her notion in this drama, Sophocles’ authorial issue over his narrative and female’s suppression through several protagonists’ presentation with the situation of the female character Jocasta, can compare. Hence, Sophocles, by exerting his authorial *power* (my italics) and by harbouring the *impalpable design* as articulated by Fetterley effaces her femininity in his drama.

IV. DISCUSSION

Women in Greek Play:

Greek plays were often presented to honour the god Dionysus. On the southwest slope of the Acropolis in Athens, plays were presented on the round flag-stoned dance floor of the theatre. This was the celebration of the Great Dionysia, a festival for the god Dionysus, but for men only. In other parts of Greece festivals for the God Dionysus included women; so, festivals in Athens were exclusive, but it was also unique how those plays were produced. The question of whether women participated in play and what was her part is the subject of great debate. Most information about women is that they were excluded from the theatres in the classical times. Before this, the situation was unclear. The theatre grew out of religious festivals and there is evidence that women participated in festivals where women played the part of a Goddess in the Minoan Culture (“Women”).

Greek women were restricted to living within a patriarchal society in the ancient Greece. “The purpose of the female being staged in socially unconventional ways is to reinforce what will be defined as the ‘ideal image’: a perfect wife, regarding a woman’s familial, social, cultural, and lawful role in many aspects of both home and family. But through this way, those females become voiceless in drama” (Morris and Powell 28)

Jocasta of *Oedipus Rex* is the representative of this society where females were shown in the form of an *ideal image* that is loyal to both home and family. But the sacrifices she made, however, remained unseen to us.

Portrayal of Jocasta in Oedipus Rex:

Jocasta portrays the role of both mother and wife in the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. The relationships conveyed in the play are very controversial, as Oedipus is both a son and husband to Jocasta. There are many interpretations of Jocasta, her relationship to her son, and the characters’ knowledge of the situation. Jocasta represents different ideas to different people.

The plot of the drama interprets the story as: Laius and Jocasta were king and queen of Thebes, a town in Greece. One day, they had a baby boy. An oracle prophesied that the boy would grow up and kill his father and marry his mother. To stop the prophecy, Laius and Jocasta decided to kill their baby. In those days, it was usual to leave an unwanted or defective baby in the wilderness. Laius and Jocasta did this. To be extra-sure, they pierced his little feet and tied them together so that the baby might not even move slowly and safely. A kind shepherd found the baby. He gave the baby to a friend, who took it to Corinth, another town. The king and queen of Corinth could not have a baby of their own. So they adopted the foundling. By chance Oedipus heard about the oracle and questioned his parents, but they denied it. Oedipus visited various oracles to find out whether he was really adopted. All the oracles told him instead that he would kill his father and marry his mother.

To ruin the oracles, Oedipus left Corinth permanently. Travelling the roads, Oedipus got into a traffic squabble and killed a stranger who (unknown to him) was King Laius. When he arrived in Thebes, he married the widowed Queen, Jocasta. Eventually, Oedipus and Jocasta found out what had really happened. Jocasta committed suicide, and Oedipus blinded himself and became a wandering beggar.

In this drama, Sophocles portrays the character Jocasta in a fifth-century Greek patriarchal society where a woman has no value. Dwelling in a complete masculine drama, she becomes a victim of negligence and thus was neglected and abandoned from all spheres of her life. In this play, Jocasta has a fairly passive role as a wife of Oedipus and mother of his children. She does not have any opinion regarding the marriage with Oedipus. She has to marry him because of the society's and as well as the author's requirement. Sophocles presents Oedipus as a brave young man who solves the riddle given by Sphinx and kills it. But he mentions Jocasta only a few times. He shows that a woman can give up her life when her heart cannot bear the pain anymore.

It was a shared decision from both Laius and Jocasta that the child should be abandoned on the mountain side. Both of them take the guilt of infanticide. An ideal mother can never abandon her child. But Jocasta does it because of her security and respect as she deserves from Laius. It can be presumed that if she denied abandoning her child, she might be killed or banished from Thebes. Her survival is important to maintain the social order. She is muffled under the dominance of patriarchal society. Here, Fetterly's idea of *scapegoating* (my italics), where a female has to sacrifice herself or take the blame for which she is not responsible, can be compared directly.

An oracle soothsays that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his own mother, but there is no oracle about Jocasta's suicide from the god Apollo. It can be assumed that, the oracle opens the path of incestuous work for both of them unknowingly. When Jocasta learns the truth, she tries to abstain Oedipus from knowing the ugly truth by saying, "Doomed man! O never live to learn the truth! . . . O lost and damned! This is my last and only word to you forever!" (55) But Oedipus did not pay any heed to her request; rather, he seems craving for the truth which may be, in the final judgment, unwise. Nevertheless, Jocasta tries to be supportive of her husband in the teeth of such looming danger: "No! In God's name—if you want to live, this must not go on. Have I not suffered enough?" (55) A supportive woman generally gives suggestion and comfort as does Jocasta. But the truth is too much for her; she cannot bear the humiliation of it. She kills herself in agony and out of social stigma. Sophocles circumscribes her surrounding and makes her die instead of Oedipus; whereas, both of them are found committing mistakes unconsciously.

Jocasta has been pitied by countless generations of readers of tragedy. Yet in the drama *Oedipus Rex*, her role is not one that reveals her treatment. Rather her role is to reveal the thoughtless nature of her husband's behaviour. In this play, she said: "Misguided man, why have ye raised such foolish strife of tongues? Are you not ashamed, while the land is thus sick, to stir up troubles of your own?" (33) For a while, Jocasta appears to be the voice of reason. But her husband does not listen to her suggestion and she is being treated neither with respect nor with reason. In the end, he has his own way and her life is doomed. Judith Fetterly's idea of neither leaving a female character nor including her in the text, can expressed this situation of Jocasta more accurately.

There are other important characters in this drama such as Creon, Teiresias, a Priest, a Messenger, a Shepherd, and Attendant (my capitals) etc. All of them are male characters. In this play Jocasta's dialogic participation is surprisingly stunted. Unlike these male characters, she is not considered as one of the decision makers as well as sinners. Being a "queen", she does not have the authority to declare anything. In the middle of the play Creon and Oedipus quarrel with each other regarding Laius's death; at the end of their conversation Jocasta says compliantly, "I will do nothing other than your wish" (49). Jocasta knows that the god's oracle cannot be undone. But she tries every measure in her power to stop Oedipus from knowing that hideous truth. When she realizes that Oedipus is desperately yearning for the terrible truth, she understands that it will not be accepted in her society. Because the incestuous act, as she surmises she did with her husband-cum-son, it is socially and religiously forbidden. She will be an outcast in her society who can be killed or banished. Helpless, insecure and appalled by the grimness of the forthcoming future awaiting her, she eventually puts an end to her "never-so-significant" life. Once again, patriarchal society's image is illustrated here by the playwright Sophocles. Kate Millett's notion of "sexual power politics in a society" once again is proved here through the social insecurity of Jocasta.

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, "The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors" (Butcher ch. xviii). It should be a vital part of the whole and should share in the action in the manner, not of Euripides but of Sophocles. In this play, the chorus can be considered as the inner psyche of male protagonist Oedipus. It can be analyzed from the dialogue of Oedipus and the chorus. In the last part of this drama, when the hideous secret is exposed to everyone, Oedipus says: "I will not believe that this was not the best that could have been done. Teach me no other lesson. How could I meet my father beyond the grave with seeing eyes; or my unhappy mother against whom I have committed such heinous sin as no mere death could pay for? . . . Could I want sight to face this people's stare?" (63-64)

The last chorus of this drama says:

Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold: this was Oedipus, greatest of man; he held the key to the deepest mysteries; was envied by all his fellow-men for his great prosperity; behold what a full tide of

misfortune swept over his head. Then learn that mortal men 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. (68)

These two quotations emphasized self realization and repentance of what Oedipus has done with his cursed fate. Though the chorus is a part of ancient Greek play, but here it can be consider as a part of Oedipus's own psychology.

Sophocles depicted the character of Jocasta in a very diminutive role, which became voiceless under the *impalpable design* (my italics) of the male protagonists, and eventually she committed suicide. Through this drama, Sophocles conveys his impression of the perfect image of women who is emblematic of a loyal, honourable wife and a loving and caring mother. It is clear that Sophocles has expressed through his play his belief that sacrifices must be made for the good of both home and family purposes, and that the ultimate woman would do anything to honour the family as well as society. With this impression he wrote the drama *Oedipus Rex*, where he has given a royal respect and personhood to a woman, but gradually demolished her participation from the drama. Rather it can be said that, Sophocles choose a woman character to construct a sympathetic narration for male protagonists within his own drama *Oedipus Rex*.

Two Other Works Dealing with this Issue:

Euripides's *Alcestis* is a tragedy where the storyline centres on a fated king whose wife volunteers to die in his place. Admetus, the king of Pherae in Thessaly, was fated to die. God Apollo found Admetus to be a noble and kindly man. Consequently, he tried to prevent the death of Admetus when he was fated to die. The Fates, three goddesses who control human destiny, agreed to postpone the death of Admetus if Apollo could produce someone who was willing to die in the place of Admetus. But Apollo discovered that none of the king's friends, not even his own mother and father were willing to die for him. However, his young wife, Alcestis, agreed to die in his place. In the end of the play Hercules saved her. In this case, Alcestis chose to die for Admetus out of love. To be more precise, she did it to maintain the social duty. Throughout the whole play, perhaps the most astounding aspect is that Admetus selfishly clings to his own life while allowing his wife to die for him. Euripides presents Alcestis as a "role model" of women in that society. In the ancient Greece, women were expected to be loyal, gentle and dutiful to husbands ("Women"). Euripides created a path for Alcestis, through a constructed narrative, to show loyalty to Admetus in this play like Jocasta from *Oedipus Rex*. On the other hand, it can be presumed that, Euripides mocked a society, who's gracious males cling to life cowardly, whereas a housewife, a female can make the ultimate sacrifice.

Antigone, from Sophocles's play *Antigone*, was the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta from *Oedipus Rex*, hanged herself soon after she was locked in a cave. In this drama, the character of Antigone is portrayed as a strong female in every way imaginable. But at the end of the play, the author's lopsidedness in the narrative again made her die like Jocasta. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Antigone was young enough and always remained dutiful to Oedipus. When Oedipus's banishment from Thebes was finally pronounced, his younger daughter, Antigone, followed him in his wanderings to the road to Athens, and to the country and sea-coast. Here, it can be assumed that Antigone took the place of Jocasta and acted as a *stick bearer* (my italics) to blind Oedipus. This very *stick* helped Oedipus in every way. To some extent, Antigone raised her voice against the brutal laws of Creon, bears the legacy of her parents.

Greek tragedy uses mythological scenarios, which—knowingly or unknowingly—expose the weak points in human society, and from time to time dramatize the emergence of women. Tragic women come forward, often unwillingly, under painful circumstances created by men's absence, mismanagement or through the author's portrayal. Women were seen as possessing non-understandable minds and a special skill to deceive others, preferably men. Jocasta from the tragedy *Oedipus Rex* can hardly be equated to those women, as she loses her identity due to the "over-representation" of male protagonists by Sophocles.

V. CONCLUSION

All through my study I have tried to explore and evaluate Sophocles' drama *Oedipus Rex* from feministic point of view. Jocasta is the only female character in this drama that couldn't bear the ultimate truth and committed suicide. In fifth century drama, the representation of women in literature was felt to be one of the most important forms of "socialisation" because it provided the role models which indicated the acceptable and legitimate version of feminine goals and aspirations. Sophocles also conveyed his impression by portraying female character that, a woman can be sacrificed for the betterment of both family and society, in *Oedipus Rex*. He created a tragic circumstance for Jocasta where she doesn't have a choice to live. Sophocles portrayed Oedipus as a sympathetic character in front of us. But he effaced Jocasta's femininity by sacrificing her and ended up her with silent death, is totally unseen to us.

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