WOMEN IN TIMES OF VIOLENCE: A READING OF EURIPIDES' *THE WOMEN OF TROY*

Neeru Anand

Abstract

Greek dramatist Euripides' prize-winning play The Women of Troy, written at the time of the brutal Peloponnesian war when Athens was involved in an imperialist war against her sister-states, is set during an earlier war: The Greco-Trojan war, considered one of the most glorious chapters in Greek history and immortalized by Homer in the epic Iliad. The paper, however, discusses how Euripides subverts the idea of a glorious war and through the plight of the Trojan women brings to the surface the sufferings that women undergo during times of violence when their bodies become territories for men to wage war upon and conquer. Through the characters of Hecabe, Andromache, Cassandra and others, Euripides critiques the idea of valor and glory as embodied in the Greek generals and shows that bravery can easily slip into brutality.

Keywords: Drama, mytho-history, violence, war-literature

Describing the Athenian devastation of the island of Melos during the Peloponnesian war, famous Greek historian Thucydides did not mince words: "The Athenians put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and inhabited the place themselves" (306). The Athenian atrocities and guilt as regards the island of Melos finds an expression in a dark and brooding play: Euripides' *The Women of Troy* (WT). Produced a year after the incident at Melos, that is in 415 BCE, and the third of a trilogy that consisted of the tragedies *Alexandros* and *Palamedes*[1] as well as the satyr drama *Sisyphus*, it won the second prize at the 91st Olympiad; but it also

* Associate Professor, Department of English, Dyal Singh (E) College, University of Delhi, Delhi.

"set a flame of discord forever between himself (Euripides) and his people" (Murray 89).

Not that Euripides was from the beginning against the war. Initially, he saw it as a life and death struggle against anti-intellectual, provincial, and militaristic Sparta, and hurried to Athens' defense not only as a soldier but also as a propagandist who exalted her ideals. Thus, his plays like *The Children of Heracles* (430 BCE) and *The Suppliant Women* (423 BCE), exalt the humanitarian nature of Athens.

However, the imperialist policy of Athens became a ruthless instrument for the subjugation of her sister states. As the war with Sparta became prolonged and Athens suffered defeat after defeat, the people were in no mood for reason or tolerance. The narrow minded peasantry from the countryside, seeking shelter from invading armies within the city's walls, only swelled the ignorant majority that had no patience with the "enlightenment" ideals and even blamed them for the catastrophes suffered at the front.

In such a volatile atmosphere, with his friends and masters either driven away from the city or silenced, to have written a play like *The Women of Troy*, which shows the dark under belly of war; challenges set assumptions about heroism; and subverts a glorious chapter of Greek history into something shameful, required courage.

It was the courage that Euripides had!

The play opens not in the victorious Greek camp but in the devastated and brutalized Troy. The Gods, their shrines violated, are moody and angry; erratic enough to change their affections at any time. The Trojan women a real held slaves, separated from their children, and about to be herded like animals to the ships of their Greek masters. The victorious Greek generals remain in the background but cast huge shadows as their bloody deeds are recounted throughout. The only one who appears is Menelaus, who disgusts us by his insincerity and fickleness. To show a Homeric hero in such a light, at such a time, was equal to committing treason. The audience would not have tolerated it but for the fact that Menelaus was a Spartan!

Rather than the men, it is the women who occupy the stage from beginning to end, and lament for the dead who lie unburied around them as also for the sufferings that the living have to endure. Action does not occur so much on stage as off it. It is in this context that Talthybius' recurrent entries at various points of the play become important. As he brings one message after another, one becomes aware that there is a lot of action and discussion going on off stage.

But, Euripides also drives in the point about the utter helplessness of these women. Their fate is being decided yet they have no say in it.

Questions have been asked regarding the structural unity of the play. Does misfortune after misfortune as it piles on the Trojan women, leading to lamentation, constitute tragedy? If the plot is something that has a beginning, a middle and an end, is there one such in this play? Gilbert Murray has defended a lack of plot by regarding the drama as, "a study in sorrow, a study too intense to admit of plot interest" (90).

Other critics have, however, seen a structural unity in the play. Shirley A. Barlow has argued that the unity lies in the figure of Hecabe who is on the stage throughout from beginning to end and that to a certain extent all the other characters act as a foil to her. She continues that poeticunity is also achieved by a network of connecting images running through the play," Ships-wall-fire are recurring themes used both symbolically and literally to generate action" (32).

Another critic D.J. Conacher sees structural unity in the way the hopes of the women alternatively rise and then are snuffed out:

> A mere sequence of disaster does not make a drama, and in default of real-action... there appears a faint outline of policy and even of a curious intermittent hope which punctuates the sufferings again and again, this hope is stamped out and gives way to desolation, only to flicker forth in some new place until its final quenching at the end of the play. Thus a certain rhythm is introduced (333).

H.D.F. Kitto, on the other hand, maintains that while the Trojans might be the collective victim, the Greeks are the tragic heroes, doomed right from the start and the damnation piles up as they indulge in still more atrocities.

However, I would like to argue that the play is not so much a Greek or a Trojan tragedy, as the tragedy of what it means to be a woman in a time of violence[2]; when her entire world has collapsed, and from being an individual she is reduced to being merely a spoil of war.

This fact is stressed with the entry of Andromache on a cart piled high with Trojan spoils, and her first utterance, "The Greeks are carrying home their property" (WT 109). For the men, then, the women are nothing but possessions to be picked and possessed. But the women themselves are still human, not pieces of property, and as such they are full of doubts and conflicts.

The tragic conflict lies in the question that Andromache asks Hecabe, whether it would not be better for all of them to die; for to

live means being a slave and a concubine to a man who has not only killed one's husband and family, but has also ravaged one's body.

Unlike Conacher who considers this as trite (in the essay mentioned earlier), I would say, that this dilemma adds that extra edge to the play and saves it from being merely a melodrama. Further, this question raised by Andromache is from the beginning, troubling the women:

> And I-never again
> Shall I sway to the shuttle's song,
> Weaving wool spun from a homebred fleece
> Instead, one last, last look at the faces of my dead sons,
> Then go to meet yet worse-
> Forced, maybe to the bed of some lustful Greek-
> Listen, gods, to my curse
> On the night that hides such wrong (WT 96).

Moreover, it is not merely confined to that alone. If they accept the new man in their life, they prove disloyal to their former husband, yet such are the rules of propriety and the duties of a slave, that they are supposed to be absolutely loyal to the new master too. Walking on such a razor's edge, Andromache expresses her anguish:

> "If I put from me my dear Hector's memory,
> And accept my new husband with an open heart,
> I prove a traitor to the dead; but if I hate
> This man, I shall be hateful to my own master" (WT 112).

And immediately the chorus too bursts out with, "Your suffering is the same as ours; your bitter words teach us to sound the depths of our own misery" (WT 112).

This reinforces the fact that at this particular moment all the women are alike in their suffering. It hardly matters now that Hecabe and Andromache belonged to royalty while the other women were of an inferior rank. The tragedy has done away the class distinctions and has become gender specific. As Andromache puts it, "Now vultures wheel, Waiting to tear the dead (i.e. the men) stretched at the feet Of Pallas, while we" (i.e. the women).

And here she pauses and then, equating them all together, adds:

> "- are slaves and must look on" (WT 109).

Reduced to being mere spectators of their own lives, they wait for orders as the conflict rages within.

Surely, it is no coincidence that Andromache, who personifies this

problem, appears in the central episode of the play, preceded and followed, as she is, by two women who give their own views about how to cope with this problem. First, Cassandra arrives on the stage, holding torches and in frenzy. Most astonishing of all, she seems in a hurry to be taken away by Agamemnon. She offers one way out of the predicament —the murder of the man who has grossly violated one's body and happiness, "I shall kill him and destroy his house in vengeance for my brothers' and my father's death" (WT 102).

Cassandra continues this idea of a woman avenging herself when she calls herself one of the Furies, "The prisoner you will bring to Greece comes as one of three avengers" (WT 105). The deed (the murder of Agamemnon) would not be done by her though she would be instrumental in it; but for the other women who have no vision of the future (and thus cannot guess what Cassandra is raving about) this might be one way of avenging their humiliation. The women must take the initiative and kill the man unaware and in the throes of passion: "My bridal-bed promises death to my worst enemy" (WT 103).[3.]

The woman who comes after Andromache is Helen, and no contrast could be greater. Helen, who left a husband and a child to elope with Paris, experiences no qualms or guilt over her actions. Furthermore, with Paris barely dead, she starts searching for a new man and in fact has a grouse against the gods because they did not help her in such a search. "When Pariswas in his grave, And no god was concerned to find me a husband"... (WT 121).

This then is another response to the situation: to have no feelings for thepast, to change one's men as and when one desires. The women can if they want so, forget all their past attachments and establish new ones.

Thus, there are two responses to the women's predicament. One, keep the hatred alive in yourself and kill the man who caused your ruin. Second, forget all about the past, think only of your happiness and forge new relationships. Caught between these two extremes the women feel the pull of the past the pressures of the present; and a flickering hope for the future. Despite their desperate conditions, one still finds them hoping for something good to happen to them.

Thus, the women of the chorus want to be enslaved in a good land. Andromache's and Hecabe's hope, meanwhile, is centred on Astynax. They furtively wish for the day when he would raise Troy from its ashes. This is what makes Hecabe ask Andromache to be loyal to her new master. With the killing of Astynax even this hope is dashed. Significantly, after Andromache hands him over to Talthybius, she

and Hecabe do not exchange any word. Both of them have realized the futility of consoling one another.

In fact, the future is so bleak that Andromache cannot even heap curses on the Greeks for putting her son to death as this will result in his remaining unburied:

> "If you say anything
> To make the army angry,
> This child will receive
> No mourning rites, no burial" (WT 114).

The victors had no hesitation in putting a child to death and they would have one in taking out their ire against one dead.

And it is then that Andromache resigns herself completely to her fate:

> "Hide me
> Fling my miserable body
> Into your ship" (WT 115).

And we find her years later reflecting on her life, "My name is Andromache.

It was an envied name in those days; now there is no woman living whose life holds such bitterness" (Euripides *Andromache*: 145).

Yet, the hope flickers in Hecabe when she entreats Menelaus to kill Helen, in a vain hope for some justice. For this she goes to the extent of kneeling in front of him. But to no avail. And the woman who said once, "Death is an extinction but in life there is still hope' becomes desperate enough to jump into the flames and end her life" (WT 111).

Even this wish of hers is not realized!

Such then is the helplessness of women. Unable to do anything, they just endure as one misfortune follows another. Even the end of the play is not the end of their tragedy but rather the beginning of another: their life in subjection and concubinage.

This is then the ultimate irony of human life that while it goes on, there is still something further to know:

> "there is always more... suffering has no limit, none;
> And each new misery outdoes what went before" (WT 110).

– in tragedy the as yet unimagined becomes real.

Notes

1. The scene of *Alexandros* is Troy at an earlier stage. Hecabe and Priam had exposed their son Paris at his birth because of the prophecy that he would destroy Troy when he grew up. The child does not die butis brought up by a shepherd. When he attains manhood, he comes to Troyto compete in the games as an unknown competitor. To every one's astonishment he wins and eventually after much discussion and intrigue, his true identity is discovered.

   The second play *Palamedes* takes as its subject the Greeks before Troy and their false condemnation at the instigation of Odysseus of one of their members, the wise Palamedes, who is subsequently put to death.
2. Though it is only the sufferings of the Trojan women that are being presented, the play also refers to the miseries undergone by the Greek women as they wait for their men to come back. For many the wait would be eternal.
3. In Aeschylus' *The Suppliants* (458 BCE), the women resolve to kill their husbands on their nuptial beds.

References

Barlow, Shirley A. *The Trojan Women*. London: Arien and Phillips, 1986.

Conacher, D.J. "The Trojan Women." In Erich Segal (Ed.) *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 332-339.

Euripides. *Andromache*. Trans. Philip Vellacott. London: Penguin Books, 1972.

—. *The Women of Troy*. Trans. Philip Vellacott. London: Penguin Books, 1974.

Murray, Gilbert. *Euripides and His Age*. London: Oxford University Press, 1955.

Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Richard Crawley. London: Everyman's Library, 1968.