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## An Intellectual on Theatre Stage: Euripides

### ABSTRACT

This study will focus upon Euripides whom we come across in the depths of theatre history and the intellectual sources of his playwriting, the contributions of intellectual internalizations of the playwright will be examined during the production of dramatic texts. It is intended that Euripides, who can be called as a modern intellectual playwright, lights the way for considering and producing today's art and theatre in an intellectual manner.

### INTRODUCTION

Euripides (B.C. 480-405) did not side with building of reality as the previous playwrights did, but he sided with picking up and inquiring the reality. He did not edge towards metaphysics, excluded what was already given, prioritized the reason, acted in the spirit of critique and doubt. It can be said that it was Euripides, who opened the door of critical and inquisitorial thinking for the first time in theatre history. While doing so, the playwright has faith in humanity and in its capacity on starting point. Viewing the humanity as a principal value, dealing with it in a realist manner and then questioning the status of humanity within society and universe are the dynamics lying on the basis of Euripides' intellectual desire.

The source of such characteristics which do not appear in case of Aeschylus and Sophocles but are specific to Euripides should be looked up in sophist thinking. The sophists are in a way, the pioneers of today's intellectuals. Their significance is that they were not contended

with the data of the established order, they questioned the state, law, tradition and belief systems, which were called “nomos” and were deemed to be sacrosanct and celestial and they put “physis” meaning the coherent coupling of human and nature against the whole set of rules. Unlike the philosophers before their time, they did not side with the act of building reality but picking up and inquiring what was called real. They did not edge towards metaphysics, they took reason as the principal factor and they acted in a skeptical way. The sophists can be thought to be the representatives of critical thinking, which might appear on the history of thinking for the first time.

Moving from the fruitlessness of problematic existence, which was the subject matter of naturalist philosophy before him, the Sophist Protagoras centered upon the impossibility of reaching the absolute and objective knowledge with the naturalist philosophy. He uttered that in an abode of existence changing constantly, one phenomenon could have been interpreted differently from another, consequently there could not be a possibility of an absolute existence. So, it can be concluded that the philosophy of Protagoras depends upon relativism. Moving from the notion that there could not possibly be general reality and truth everybody should accept, that the thing called truth could change from person to person, he uttered his famous saying. *“The human being is the measure for all things, the existent for the sake of existence and the non-existent for the sake of non-existence...every single thing appears as they are to me, and appears as they are to you... The wind is cold for the one who feels chilly and it is not for the one who does not feel chilly”*(Kranz,p.194) It is thus emphasized that the whole structure of the existence depends upon the individual. That said, if the whole structure of the being depends upon the individual, it can be argued that moral principles, customs and manners, laws and religion, which are in effect in a society, are nothing but mere contracts concluded between the individuals, and that they have a provisional nature. Every single structure that is man made can be changed,

transformed by the mankind again. Protagoras, who also centered upon the society, tried to express his thoughts via mythology. Setting forth the problematic origins of the being living in society in the dialogue of "*Protagoras* by Plato " (Plato,p.18-20), the philosopher explains the reason why and how the society was ever born amongst the people, how the society was shaped during the history and he further tells that the state is an association established by the people with volunteer agreement so that they could live together. All living things in nature are equipped with necessary opportunities to let them carry on with their survival struggle alone. However, the human species are deprived of such opportunities. The thing to do is cohabitation and mutual help. Such thinking leads us to a view that the state was born out of an agreement that was concluded amongst the people. The entire humanity would enter into this agreement and they are equal because they are impotent one-on-one. Within the state order which these people will establish amongst themselves based upon a mutual agreement so that such people who are equal to one another in terms of impotency are protected, everybody needs to benefit from the same rights and opportunities of the society equally. It is obvious that such a view leads to the principle of social equity. Again in the same dialogue, "*Even though the Athenians are right to consult with the professionals for certain problems, they are right to listen to everybody as for justice, measurement, that is, state art...*"(Plato,p.20) says Protagoras emphasizing that every citizen had the right to be active in social order as well that the politics was not only a profession for the aristocracy but for every one. With his saying "...*Virtue is something that could be obtained by means of effort and working...*"(Plato.,p.22), he rejects the hypothesis of the aristocracy that virtue is hereditary "... *It is highly possible that the son of a good flute player could be bad and the son of a bad flute player could be good...*"(Plato.,p.25) thus saying, he suggest that virtue can be acquired, learned, taught subsequently. Replacing "nomos" (conventions) which is presented in aristocratic culture as the absolute, fixed and Olympian orders with "human" , he criticizes the

aristocratic belief and values. “...*I am helpless in gathering information about the Gods as to whether they exist or they do not exist, because there are so many things that block the path to cognition: such that they cannot be sensed and life span is very short for the human beings...*”(Kranz., p.194) So, he has an incognita-like approach against the Gods of his time. However, the order in which Gods are dominant is the one in which the aristocracy is able to sustain its own dominance. The Sophist Prodicus did also strive for rationalist explanations about the resource of Gods and religions and argued that virtue was not a congenital attribution, emphasizing that everything could be acquired through effort, building an amalgamation between virtue and effort (Kranz.,p.204)

Sophist Antiphony who lived in the fifth century B.C. argues in his work called “Truth” as in the following: “...*The commands of the law depend upon the desire, whereas those of Nature are compulsory, the commands of the law should be determined by a contract ... Most of the things that are right according to the law is in a state of animosity with Nature. Because there are certain rules for the eyes as to what they should see and not is determined by the rules, then for the ears as to what they should hear and not, then for the tongue as to what it should tell and not, then for the hands as to what they should do and not, then for the feet as to where they should go and not, then for the thoughts as to what they should listen to and not. Now, the nature of the rules and what they want us to do is not nature friendly and does not comply with Nature. .. The advantages determined by the law are an obstacle to Nature.*”(Kranz.,p.199) Therefore, moving from the discrimination of nomos-physis of Antiphon, it is obviously seen that he argues that the humanity, who did not have any other option but to live according to a set of assumed rules, was estranged from what was natural, the freedom of humanity diminished within restrictions and were vis-à-vis in an adverse existence. “...*We are barbarian to one another, yet were all created out of the same essence in nature. Even if it is Hellenic or non Hellenic: the*

*similarly compulsory things for humanity prove it...*”(Kranz.,p.200) .”*We all inhale air orally or through the throat and we all use our hands to eat...*”(Şenel.,p.349) He thus emphasizes the futility of the artificial inequality between the Greek communities and non-Greek communities, he appears to be the supporter of an absolute equality, furthermore he paves the ground for critique of the discrimination between Greek- Barbarian, slave-citizen, aristocratic-non aristocratic, male-female.

The Sophists that emerged in the Ancient Greek world of the fifth century initially principally discussed the human beings and then the society in relation to it. They did not side with the building of reality but with picking it up as is and inquiring the reality. Moving from the notion that the human being is the measure for all things, the Sophists did strive to display that everything could be taught to human beings and that every knowledge was learnable, which actually leads us to the universality of knowledge. Briefly, according to the Sophists, cognition was handled as a mere activity of human beings without paying attention to any of the concepts such as geography, class, race, so the human beings were granted with an absolute superiority. Once it is fulfilled, it is obvious that an inquisitorial and critical attitude would be adopted against the powers that define humanity in a state of hierarchy and suppress under pressure. They centered upon the conceits such as belief, customs, law and slavery and argued that any conventions arising from such conceits were redundant. Such thoughts of them were influential on the intellectuals of their age and particularly on Euripides who comes with progressive opinions in theatre history.

The playwright must have shared the same point of view as the sophists of the same age that he wrote about the discussions of the Sophist age, the human beings and human psychology, emphasized the relations of human and society. Aristotle, in his “*Poetica*” highlights a distinguishing characteristic of Euripides in comparison to other tragedy playwrights. He

expresses that “*Sophocles describes the characters as they should be whereas Euripides describes them as they really are.*(Aristotle, p.77) It can be said that, in the same way as the Sophists dealt with the human beings and society under the concept of humanism for the first time in the history of thinking, taking its velocity from the fruitlessness of the naturalist philosophy, Euripides underlined the not the stereotyped, idealized virtues of supreme heroes but their human traits, he examined them as if the ordinary people of the age and emphasized their problems in society. The mythological-origin characters in his plays are handled not in terms of their nobility and superiority but selfhood and intimateness. (Gasner.,p.61)As it is the case in *Medea, Phaedra, Electra, Orestes*, he paid particular attention to the inner conflict and devastating aspects of his characters, he turned his face to psychology for the matters of life. His characters are open to all failures and falls of humanity. What is tragic in essence derives from the inner contradictions and failures and desires of the characters that they cannot resist.

Even though Euripides feeds from the traditional mythology in producing his works, he somehow altered these tales, he even changed the myth radically or produced brand new tales for the heroes that are only mentioned by name in mythology. For instance, in his play named *Helen* concluded with a happy ending, it is observed that he changed the legend of Troy radically. Helen, who is pointed to be responsible for the Troy wars in mythology, has never been there in Euripides’s play and she is in Egypt. The Gods send an illusion of Helen to Troy, so to speak the Greek believe in the illusion and attack Troy. Euripides , like the Sophists, argues the dominance of Greek aristocracy and the relationship between the human beings and society in order to solidify political powers thereof that the differentiation of Greek- Barbarian is actually a convention that is explained in terms of customs and traditions as a product of God’s will. The notion of equality of communities before Nature leads to the question of wars and the actual imperialist intentions arising from wars. He focused upon the fruitlessness of war and its

devastating effects on society, as an Athenian, he criticized the imperialist attitude of Athens. While doing so, he altered the mythology in a smart tendency, which was an ideological means of the aristocracy and accepted undisputedly, he attacked aristocracy with its own weapon in a way.

*“Chorus... You are mad, you men, who think that war's the proof of manhood, squabbling with spears and lances - A futile way to solve man's problems. If we settle things by seeing who can bleed the most, War will always haunt our cities”.*(Euripides.,p.88)

It is observed that Euripides in his tragedy named *The Trojan Women* he wrote(Thomson.,p.419) one year after the Athens blocked and acquired the Melos Island in 416 B.C., which actually desired to remain unbiased, and killing the people of Melos and enslaving the women there, emphasized that he questioned war, touched on the pain and despair of the women and children acquired during the war, and how war lead humanity towards devastation. It is suggested that such a case, being adverse to the existence if humanity, is not compatible with reason.

Gods and their order, which we often come across in Euripides's works, are the source of all negativity. The furious, capricious, jealous, selfish, deceitful Gods taking pleasure in torment (quite like the aristocracy) want to have an absolute dominance over the characters. Nonetheless, at the end of plays such as “Ion”, “Iphigenia at Taurus”, “Alkestis”, “Helen” , the fulfillment of human desire causes that the plays end in happy endings, which can only be explained in Euripides's recognizance of human beings and its capabilities against the order of gods.

In *Bacchae* which is the last tragedy of the playwright, a situation occurs which could seem to be a paradox in the first scene. However, on explicating first the Sophist thinking influencing the playwright and then the real traits of Dionysus the real hero of tragedy, this situation needs to be viewed not as a paradox but as the recent point reached by the thesis Euripides has set forth from the beginning. It can be said that what is approved in *Bacchae* is the

nature represented by Dionysus. Moving from the Sophists' discrimination of nomos-physis (nature), it is thought that the humanity, who did not have any other option but to live according to a set of assumed rules, was estranged from what was natural, the freedom of humanity diminished within restrictions and were vis-à-vis in an adverse existence. There is such a natural order that the humanity has to take part in it. Once the humanity digresses the order due to being carried away by tradition, belief and status, then it digress from that natural existence and passes to the other side of badness, which separates the individuals from one another and confronts them. Whereas the path to make people happy and together is to reconcile the wit and natural powers in a balanced way.

#### CONCLUSION

On taking a look at the works of Euripides, it is seen that he puts the human being integrated with the nature against any kind of conventions. Therefore, he questions the structure existing in his plays with all its values and conceits. He suggests thoughts that do not comply with the aristocracy, denies the heritability of virtue. Slavery is a matter upon which Euripides emphasizes. For instance, in *Ion*, it is reminded that slaves are human beings too, the head of the Chorus in *Hekabe* comes out against slavery. The social status of woman, who was not treated any different than the slaves is displayed in *Medea*. Again, moving from the invalidity of Greek-Barbarian discrimination, he wrote anti-war plays, emphasized the cruelty of war and its adverse nature for the existence of humanity and questioned the imperialist intentions underlying the wars in "*The Trojan Women*".

Various research workers describe Euripides as a modern playwright. The definition of modern involves the preservation of human wit and potentiality against any dogmatic command as well as the denial of the old and affirmation of the new. Consequently, it is necessary to replace the dogmatic principle, arbitrariness with the knowledge relating the rules of nature. In

contrary to the milieu of interests, the introduction of a structure arising from the combination of nature and wit, direction towards the reconciliation of humanity and universe is a distinguishing feature of modern thinking. In the works of Euripides, who is a modern playwright, the aristocratic social structure, social relations and gods defining the human beings in a negative way and their orders are all criticized mercilessly in a witty tendency. In his works, it is observed that the humanity is opposed to god's will

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