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Reconciling the Opposites: The Oresteia in Perspective

Abstract

The ancient Hindu philosophy, chiefly the Samkhya school of thought, and the Greek Sophists, believed in the dualistic concept. The 'prakriti' and 'purusha' analogous with the female spirit and male spirit respectively were regarded as the primal forces in creation. Coexistence and harmony between the two was essential for the sustenance of the world. They also symbolized nature and order. Thus they parallel the concept of 'nomos' and 'physis'. 'Nomos' stood for convention, while 'physis' stood for nature. The world was looked upon as a conflict between the two forces. While 'nomos' appealed to the higher consciousness and convention, 'physis' appealed to the nature, and instinct. In *The Oresteia*, the House of Atreus has been largely governed by 'physis', with its violent past. All the actions are a manifestation of the 'prakriti'. The social order, conventions and the consciousness of the individuals have been overshadowed by the 'tamasic' aspect of 'prakriti'. The coexistence between 'prakriti' and 'purusha' is of utmost importance for harmony in the world. Similarly, the conflict between 'nomos' and 'physis' has to be resolved for the betterment of the society. The primitive practice of blood vengeance has perpetrated a cycle of violence that is beyond the control of anybody. It results in Agamemnon's murder. Clytemnestra subscribes to the primitive notion of justice. She avenges blood, by shedding more blood.

It is the role of the Olympian divinities championing the cause of 'nomos', to check the malevolent influence of 'physis'. Harmony must be established between the male and female forces along the lines of 'prakriti' and 'purusha'. The conflict in *The Oresteia* reaches its pinnacle, when the Eumenides threaten to lay waste to the city of Athens. They symbolize the primitive matriarchal force. Their actions are natural and instinctive. On the other hand Zeus, Athena and Apollo symbolize the 'physis'. They seek to achieve a balance between the conflicting forces. Orestes becomes the agent of the action which reconciles the opposing forces. Once the conflict between the male and female forces has been resolved, balance and order are restored in the society. The avenging Eumenides metamorphose into benevolent matriarchal divinities.

Keywords: 'Nomos', 'Physis', 'Prakriti', 'Purusha', Matriarchy, Justice, Vengeance, Order.

Introduction

The Oresteia is a trilogy of Greek tragedies written by Aeschylus concerning the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, the murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes, the trial of Orestes and the end of the curse on the House of Atreus. The only extant example of an ancient Greek trilogy, *The Oresteia* won the first prize at the Dionysia festival in 458 BC. In ancient Greece, tragedies were performed in the form of trilogies and were accompanied by the performance of a Satyr play. In the first play *Agamemnon*, the king of Mycenae, Agamemnon returns from the Trojan war, only to be murdered by his wife Clytemnestra. The second play *Libation Bearers*, follows the events concerning Orestes' return from exile. He avenges the murder of his father Agamemnon by murdering his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. But he is pursued by the Furies, who intend to punish him for the crime of matricide. The final play, *Eumenides* presents the trial of Orestes in a court of law constituted by the goddess Athena,

and his subsequent acquittal from the guilt of matricide. The *Eumenides* also depicts the transformation of the Furies. “Athena persuades them to make their home in Athens as guardians of order and bestowers of fertility. The Furies become Eumenides (the Kindly Ones) and a court of law replaces the vendetta of blood justice” (Storey 249). As Alfred Bates writes, “in Agamemnon, arbitrary free will prevails in the plot and perpetrator of the deed; the principal character is a criminal, and the piece ends with the triumph of insolent and audacious tyranny” (Bates 103). In *The Libation Bearers*, Clytemnestra’s murder is partly the decree of destiny and partly the result of Orestes’ natural impulses, his desire to avenge his father’s death. In *The Eumenides*, he becomes a passive instrument of fate.

The Oresteia by Aeschylus, uses the legend of the House of Atreus as raw material for examining various themes. These themes range from the nature of justice, to the social order. “The story of Orestes is a stratified piece of social history, embodying the accumulated deposits of the primitive tribe, the early monarchy, aristocracy and democracy” (Thomson 248-249). The themes in this play are centered on the argument, which stipulates human minds in very violent and problematic aspects due to the lust for power and the violent acts associated with it, such as the chauvinistic clash of male against female dominance. *The Oresteia* highlights the conflict between the masculine and feminine forces. The play belongs to an era when women could be seen to take leadership roles in the society. Aeschylus’ portrayal of Clytemnestra is that of a woman who is powerful and ruthless to the extreme. She rules Mycenae while her husband Agamemnon is away in Troy. Despite belonging to the weaker gender, she does not flinch from murdering her husband. Cassandra does not believe that Clytemnestra has the right to brutally murder her husband, although she is vengeful on account of Iphigenia’s death.

If Agamemnon was wrong by sacrificing Iphigenia, then Clytemnestra is also not free from guilt. Her behavior results in the destruction of Agamemnon and his House. The violent action on her part does not cleanse the house of the evil that had been perpetrated in the past. On the contrary, “Every correction is a blood bath which calls for new correction” (Lattimore 14). For Clytemnestra, blood vengeance comes naturally. All her actions stem from her natural impulses. Ancient Greeks often thought of the world as being a conflict between the forces of rationalism and chaos, or between law and order. One of these two forces was called “nomos”, which stood for law, order and rationalism. The second was known as “physis” meaning nature. According to Karen Carr, “Women in general tend to be on the side of ‘physis’, while men are generally on the side of ‘nomos’; men make and obey laws, but women do what comes naturally.” *The Oresteia* portrays the transition of the nature of justice from the ancient matriarchal views governed by ‘physis’, the vengeful and irrational cycle of life and death into the emerging patriarchal concept of ‘nomos’ signifying law and order.

The ‘nomos’ and ‘physis’ dichotomy

There were notable Pre-Socratic philosophers who discussed and postulated the existence of a natural law, which exists alongside the conventional law. “The nature (physis) and convention (nomos) dichotomy, with respect to legal or ethical matters, ultimately proved to be the cause of conflicts in the ancient world. Nature (physis) is a term that represents any event, reaction, impulse that occurs naturally” (Burnet 108). An example of ‘physis’ would be human instinct. In contrast, convention (nomos), is a term given to any human order. The examples of human conventions include varying forms of government. The Sophists also established the notion that men are somehow better or more virtuous than women. With this in mind, it is clear that natural law and conventional law can come into conflict.

Civilization may be defined as a combination of the physical, spiritual, social, and intellectual forces. Harmony and balance of these forces ensure stability within society, completeness of life, and social longevity. If any of these constituents gets affected, especially the natural one, disharmony, degeneration, or even complete extinction of human society is not unlikely. The Greek philosophers believed that there exists in nature a way or law to maintain the individual and the wholeness of the world. The Orphic Hymns describe the 'nomos' as a personification of law, the righteous seal of all.

The concept of 'physis' associated with the matriarchal being has its origin in the Greek myths. According to the Pelasgian creation myth described by Robert Graves, Eurynome was the creatrix, the primal female entity from whom the creation sprang forth. Similarly, according to the Homeric and Olympian creation myths, Uranus and Gaea were the primeval divinities who engendered other life forms and divinities. "Uranus, the more refined deity, represented the light and air of heaven, possessing the distinguishing qualities of light, heat, purity, and omnipresence, whilst Gaea, the firm, flat, life-sustaining earth, was worshipped as the great all-nourishing mother" (Berens 11). In all these accounts, the female being emerges as the dominant force in the creation. It is Gaea who aids her son Cronus in dethroning Uranus. It is Gaea again who gives birth to the demons like Enceladus, Mimas, and Typhon who plunged the world into chaos and disarray with their conflicts against the Olympian divinities. Her actions are a reflection of the nature. The ancient matriarchal order consisting of divinities such as Gaea, Rhea, Nyx, and The Erinyes do not follow any established convention. They are in sharp contrast to the Olympian deities like Zeus, Apollo and Athena who champion the cause of law and order.

‘Prakriti’ and ‘Purusha’: The duality

A similar parallel can be noted in Hinduism. ‘Purusha’ and ‘prakriti’ are two abstract entities clearly defined in Samkhya philosophy. It is a dualistic and realistic philosophy which discusses the two main principles called ‘purusha’ and ‘prakriti’ in a detailed manner. ‘Purusha’ and ‘prakriti’ are two basic, opposite, independent and eternal principles that are the main cause and reason behind the human existence. ‘Purusha’ is a Sanskrit term which means spirit, person, self or consciousness in Indian philosophy. In Samkhya it means the principle of spirit or pure consciousness. It represents the male aspect of creation. “Prakriti is the source from which the things of the world are produced; but it has also come to refer to all the products of prakriti, that is nature as a whole” (Taylor 1299). ‘Prakriti’ is an active, changeable, earthly and eternal entity. It represents the female aspect of creation. The ‘purusha’ is the universal cosmic male, the supreme Brahman, the subject as well as the object of sacrificial ceremonies, whose self-sacrifice results in the manifestation of life and worlds and by making a sacrifice to whom, a person gains an entry into the higher worlds or achieves liberation itself. “The principles of matter (prakriti) and consciousness (purusha) were transformed into cosmological and divine principles. Prakriti as the material cause of the world was understood as dependent on the divine principle, and was personified as a goddess” (Taylor, 1300). According to Sir John Woodroffe, “there is Prakriti, taken from the Samkhya philosophy, primeval matter, Nature, who stands in contrast to Purusha, the male spirit, and is identical with Shakti” (Woodroffe 118). The concept of ‘Purusha’ is well documented in the Vedas, especially in the Purushasukta of the Rigveda which describes how the worlds were created, beings came into existence, and the social order was established from the ‘purusha’. “Prakriti is better conceived of as force or power rather than a specific material object. It contains within it three different forces with three different qualities (gunas): sattva leads towards the good, rajas towards activity or passion and tamas towards darkness and decay” (Lochtefeld 556).

Similar to the Greek creation myths, the Indian creation myths also involve a male and female primal being who bring forth the creation. According to the Rig Veda, it was the 'purusha' or the cosmic male, who brought forth social order. 'Prakriti', the embodiment of the female, represented the nature. Sir John Woodroffe, identifies 'prakriti' and 'purusha' as the divinities Shiva and Shakti. As he mentions, "Shiva is the unchanging Consciousness and Shakti is its changing power appearing as mind and matter. Shiva-Shakti is therefore consciousness and its power" (Woodroffe 12). Shakti, the primal female force is similar to the idea of the supreme female being represented by Gaea, Nyx and the Eumenides in the Greek myths. While 'purusha' is largely inert and passive, symbolizing the consciousness and cosmic order, 'prakriti' is active and dynamic. The latter is the cause of action and changes. "The fully Real, therefore, has two aspects: one called Shiva, the static aspect of consciousness and the other called Shakti, the kinetic aspect of the same" (Woodroffe 44). The coexistence and harmony between these two forces is essential for the survival of creation.

The clash of the opposites in *The Oresteia*

In *Agamemnon* we encounter the conflict between the male and female forces as the blood soaked history of the House of Atreus is revealed. When Atreus slaughtered the children of Thyestes and laid them in a banquet before their father, he was following a gruesome and barbaric tradition that was largely primitive. In *Agamemnon*, the ancient matriarchal cycle of vengeance, blood lust, and irrationality dominates the house of Atreus. It begins with Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice Iphigenia in order to save Helen. Outraged by this decision, Clytemnestra seeks revenge. She believes herself to be a part of the cycle of blood for blood vengeance, and Fate requires her to murder Agamemnon. This form of justice, served by an individual rather than an institution, is characterized under 'physis'. The only person who could end the cycle is Orestes. The Chorus look upon him as the glorious arbitrator of justice who

will one day return and free Mycenae from the tyranny of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. In the actions of Atreus, Agamemnon, Aegisthus, and Clytemnestra we encounter a movement towards darkness and decay. The whole house has been corrupted by violence and bloodshed. This is due to the tamasic influence of 'prakriti'. It forces the individual to become indolent and engage in actions which are anything but good. In *The Libation Bearers*, it is Orestes who must avenge the past wrong. His action is an attempt on his part to set things right. It is also the desire of the divine order to establish harmony and order. But the path Orestes adopts, involves shedding the blood of his mother, Clytemnestra. Though he claims that he has purged the House, yet he incurs upon himself, the ire of the Furies. Orestes avenged his father's death, but his action clashed with the female spirit. The Furies refuse to accept authority of any kind. Despite being purified by Apollo, Orestes cannot free himself from the pursuing Furies. They "denote the dark mysterious powers of primeval nature and are nearly allied to chaos. The younger gods represent what enters into the sphere of consciousness, into a world that has begun to assume form and order" (Bates 103).

The house must make a progress, a movement from its barbaric tradition to one of civilization, influenced by conventions. It is a journey towards a higher consciousness. Orestes is the one who must cleanse the house of its past. To set things right, he must act, and the action on his part is again a manifestation of 'prakriti'. But the difference is that it is no longer dominated by the 'tamas' guna. On the contrary, it is largely 'rajasic'. His action also gets the divine approval of Apollo who defends his cause. Apollo and Athena embody the 'nomos' that strives to reign in the malevolence of 'physis' that manifests through the actions of Clytemnestra and the Eumenides. Orestes has to liberate himself from the cycle of violence and bloodshed, in order to recognize his Self (purusha) through the universal principles laid down by the Olympian divinities. "Without purusha, true knowledge cannot be attained"

(Woodroffe 59). Orestes makes a journey towards attaining the knowledge, which in turn will liberate him from the vicious cycle of blood vengeance, perpetrated by the 'physis' governing the House. In *The Eumenides* he has reached a higher level of consciousness being aware about his duties. He is no longer a member of the primitive and cursed House of Atreus. On the contrary, he becomes a protector of social order and rights. The trial of Orestes was a step forward in the direction of realizing a more peaceful and orderly coexistence.

Analyzing the interaction

The conflict between the male and female forces runs through the greater part of the trilogy. Their clash has plunged the House of Atreus, and the society in general, into disarray. The blood vengeance of the past has only led to more bloodshed. The ancient matriarchal order has been at the bottom of all the brutal actions. On the other hand, the rule of law presides in Athens. The Areopagus constituted by Athena is a semblance of the earliest law court. She hears the argument of Apollo and the claims of the Eumenides as well. "Orestes admits to striking down his mother in violation of the sacred tenet of kinship" (Thomson 287).

I was an exile in the time before this. I came back

And killed the woman who gave me birth. I plead guilty. (*The Eumenides* 462-463)

Orestes defends his matricide by claiming that he killed Clytemnestra in order to avenge his father's death:

My father was dear, and this was vengeance for his blood. (*The Eumenides* 464)

This shows that Orestes was fully aware of the act he was committing, that he wilfully committed it and must suffer for it. The Eumenides' right to vengeance cannot be dismissed. Clytemnestra committed a murder, yet the Eumenides find no guilt in her action:

The man she killed was not of blood congenial. (*The Eumenides* 605)

Clytemnestra claims over Agamemnon's corpse that she killed him in order to avenge Iphigenia. But it is also quite clear that her love for Aegisthus compelled her to carry out the

murder. However, Orestes possesses what he believes to be a just motive for revenge. Unlike his mother, Orestes has reservations about killing. He does not wish to strike down his mother but realizes that he must. The defense of Orestes is rooted in the fact that Apollo, ordered him to do so.

A compromise must be made between the male and female forces for the betterment of society. The conflict between 'nomos' and 'physis' has to be resolved to restore peace and order in the world. The enraged Eumenides have to be propitiated by a new order. The Eumenides are older than Apollo and Athena, and being older, they are barbarous; attached to Clytemnestra as mother. They are themselves female and represent the woman's claim to act. On the other hand, Apollo and Athena stand for everything which the Eumenides are not, that is, Hellenism, civilization, intellect and enlightenment. "Athena, whose nature reconciles female with male, has wisdom deeper than the intelligence of Apollo. She clears Orestes, but concedes to the detested Furies what they had not known they wanted; a place in the affections of a civilized community of men, as well as in the divine hierarchy" (Lattimore 30). This evolution on the part of the Eumenides, signifies a shift in the gunas. The blood thirsty Eumenides, under the influence of *tamas*, proved to be a destructive matriarchal force. Athena, through persuasion transforms them into benevolent divinities. They no longer are subject to *tamas*; rather their 'prakriti' is largely dominated by *sattva* than it was before. Threats and the use of force are of no avail against them. They are primitive and powerful in their own way. They claim they are the children of "that black winged Night, a goddess of whom even Zeus stands in awe" (Graves 20).

Great the sorrows and the dishonor upon

The sad daughters of Night. (*The Eumenides* 791-792)

Despite being defeated in the Areopagus, they still pose a formidable threat to Athens and the social order. Being aggrieved, they threaten to unleash destruction:

I, disinherited, suffering, heavy with anger

Shall let loose on the land

The vindictive poison

Dripping deadly out of my heart upon the ground. (*The Eumenides* 780-783)

Being a part of the ancient matriarchal order, the Eumenides act naturally, “they have archaic uprightness and strictness with its attendant cruelty; they insist on the fact against the idea, they ignore the justifications of Orestes, for the blood on his hands means far more than the reasons why the blood is there” (Lattimore 30).

Conclusion

The reconciliation between the Eumenides and the Olympian divinities also reflects the reconciliation between the male and female forces. It would be incorrect to say that the Eumenides were subjugated by Apollo and Athena. On the contrary, they accept a position in the social order equal to that of Athena. The latter realizes their power and importance. Hence, she, a champion of the male spirit, offers to share her realm with the female divinities:

Put to sleep the bitter strength in the black wave

And live with me and share my pride of worship.

Here is a big land, and from it you shall win first fruits

In offerings for children and the marriage rites

For always. (*The Eumenides*, 832-836)

The primitive divinities become a part of the social order, shedding their primitive barbarism.

With this metamorphosis, they gain new powers and privileges:

Yours the baron's position in this land

If you will, in all justice, with full privilege. (*The Eumenides*, 890-891)

They are no longer avenging deities. In Athens, they are given a seat of power, which establishes them as the benefactors of the city. This echoes clearly in Athena's words:

No household shall be prosperous without your will. (*The Eumenides*, 895)

The ancient matriarchal forces receive their due honor. Their primitive malevolence is curbed and they are entrusted with the welfare of the people:

To them is given the handling entire

Of men's lives. (*The Eumenides*, 930-931)

It is much more than a compromise between the male and the female orders. It is a formation of a new order along the lines postulated by the Hindu myths. The coexistence of the male and female forces, as represented by 'purusha' and 'prakriti', is essential for the stability of creation. Whenever the female cosmic spirit acts and causes changes in the universe that adversely affect the material world, it is the role of the supreme Man endowed with Consciousness to restore the balance and harmony. At the end of *The Oresteia* trilogy, democracy, and justice have been established which mirror the establishment of order and stability. Zeus, the male force remains inert and passive, but it is his consciousness which guides others. "The final act comes down into the present day and seals within itself the Wisdom, neither reactionary, nor revolutionary." (Lattimore, 31). A reconciliation has been attained between two conflicting forces. Apollo and Athena enforce the sanctity of marriage. It also cements the coexistence of primitiveness and modernism. The female force is no longer an independent tool of vengeance. Sharing the space with the male spirit, it achieves a benevolent dimension. The barbaric past has been replaced by a civilized present. Aeschylus "shows us how from a portentous round of guilt arose an institution which became a blessing to mankind" (Bates 104).

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