



RESEARCH PAPER

Freedom, Authenticity and Responsibility: An Existentialist Study of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*

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ABSTRACT

Greek drama is commonly believed to be the tragedy of fate and Aeschylean trilogy is, likewise, studied from Fatalistic perspectives most of the time. However, Aeschylus's vision has mostly been partially understood. This research aims to explore certain Existentialist elements in *The Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus. Since it is qualitative research, Textual Analysis has been employed to collect and analyse data. An in depth and close study of the characters has been made in the light of Sartre's concepts of 'freedom', 'responsibility' and 'existence precedes essence'. The analysis of each character reveals that Aeschylus has not presented his characters as mere puppets in the hands of fate. Instead, he has demonstrated that they are free to make their personal choices with full responsibility to build their own essence and try to lead an authentic life. The trilogy may, further, be studied in the light of other elements of existentialism.

KEYWORDS Authentic Life, Essence, Existence, Fatalism, Freedom, Personal Choice, Responsibility

Introduction

Existentialism is a twentieth century philosophical perspective that is based on Sartre's doctrines (1956). According to Panza and Gale (2008), it centers on an authentic human life in an absurd and meaningless world. It focuses on the human condition, man's choice of his freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. Priest (2001) sums up it in these words, "To say that something exists is to say that it is. To state something's essence is to state what it is" (p. 21). It is a philosophy that deals with the existence of human beings and related conditions. According to Deranty (2009), the term Existentialism exerts emphasis on existence that, in turn, denotes that the presence of human beings in the world is in contrast with that of other beings. Human existence is related to freedom of choice and the capacity to create essence. Priest (2001) enumerates fundamental Existentialist concerns those are as follows: the nature and purpose of existence, freedom, responsibility, and the manner of facing life and death.

Existentialism can be aptly defined with the help of Sartre's (1956) dictum of existence precedes essence; humans create their essence by facing life and by struggling to define themselves. It deals with one of the most fundamental questions of life. Since literature is the mirror of life, many pieces of the literature have dealt with the existentialist stance on life. Though this philosophy dates back to the 19th century, the issues it deals with are applicable to all the previous human history.

Literature Review

Though Existentialism has roots in the 19th century, especially in Kierkegaard's writings (1941 & 1992), it is a 20th century philosophical movement to which Sartre contributed to a great extent theoretically by incorporating the concepts of existentialism in his writings (1956, 2000, 2007, 2021). According to Dreyfus and Wrathall (2006), the term Existentialism was deliberately adopted by twentieth century thinkers after the horrible experiences of the two World Wars. Sartre embraced this term openly. In his writings (1956, 2007, 2021), he has explored numerous themes of Existentialism. Webber (2009) enumerates themes like absolute freedom, the subjectivity of values, responsibility of choice, precedence of essence over existence, anxiety, despair, and bad faith. Sartre (2007) contends that it is only human beings in whom presence comes before substance. Unlike other species, humans are the beings who exist before they can create their essence. They appear in this world, experience themselves there and then define their selves. Sartre's first principle of Existentialism is that man "conceives of himself only after he exists... man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (p. 22). He divides the things which exist into three categories: human beings, artifacts, and naturally occurring objects. In the case of human beings, presence comes before substance. In artifacts, substance comes before presence and in naturally occurring objects, presence and substance coincide. He means that human essence or nature is not pre-determined. It means that, for humans, other things in this universe are meaningless. It is they themselves who construct meanings of these things and their own selves. The Existentialist themes connected with the concepts of responsibility and freedom are anguish, despair, and abandonment. Sartre's (2007) concept of abandonment is invested in that "it is we ourselves, who decide who we are to be" (p. 34). He, further, opines that man is subject to anguish because he is "condemned to be free" (p. 25) and anguish is the result of his own full-fledged responsibility.

Another theme of Existentialism is freedom and authenticity. Man has free choice and responsibility to create his own essence. Society poses various threats to one's individuality. According to Sartre (1992), existentialist freedom and responsibility mean to "find oneself" and then "live in accordance with this self" (pp. 439-440). The Authentic act means the act in accordance with one's freedom as, in Camus' *The Outsider* (2012), Meursault does not bow to the Chaplain and chooses the means of determining his own meaning of life. Sartre's *Nausea* (2000) focuses on his concern with the freedom of will and the nature of existence, which is given full philosophical expression in his *Being and Nothingness* (1956). In the same work, he talks about bad faith that is, in reality, the demands and pressure that the world poses to us and instills in us a feeling of anguish. He condemns bad faith and regards it as escapism and a hurdle in our way of becoming. Priest (2001) articulates that according to Sartre, being is basically of two types: one is subjective and the other is objective. The Subjective being is connected with one's own existence and the Objective being creates the world external to one's own being.

Since this paper is an attempt to point out some elements of Existentialism in Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* (1979), it is pertinent to review previous work in this trilogy. Sartre's *The Flies* (1943) is an adaptation of the story of Orestes and Electra who want to avenge their father's murder. Sartre has incorporated Existentialism into the play and remodeled both the characters. Neuburg (1981) attempts to delineate overall metaphysical and ethical characteristics of the "possible world" portrayed by Aeschylus (1979). Broadly speaking, there are beliefs, attitudes, emotions, outlook on the world and events that come with the world of the individual characters of the play. Hame (2008) analyzes the female control of funeral rights in Greek tragedies concerning the female characters Clytemnestra, Medea, and Antigone in relation to traditional ethical values.

Newtown (1999) sheds light on the fact that there is a transformation in the the justice system in *The Oresteia*. According to him, the rational male law replaces the irrational female ritual. He also refers to Zeitlin (1978) for a discussion on the dynamics of misogyny in the trilogy. Delpont (2020) argues that *The Oresteia* represents the poetics of equity. The progress from the first to the third play is designed to represent ever-increasing awareness of the claims of justice and recognition, and instability of the lexicon of dike- the Greek concept of justice.

The critical review of the research work on *The Oresteia* reveals a lack of the study of Existentialist elements in this trilogy; no related authentic study could be located. This study has been designed to bridge this gap. The significance of this study is that it has highlighted modern philosophical aspects of Aeschylean vision projected in *The Oresteia*.

Material and Methods

This study has selected the text of Aeschylus's trilogy, *The Oresteia* (1979), as data for analysis. Textual Analysis has been employed as a method of collecting and analyzing data. Deeper meanings of the text have been extracted by focusing on the development of the characters. In addition, the selected concepts of Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism have been employed to interpret characters in this trilogy. The researcher has utilized Textual Analysis to explore the characters in *The Oresteia* according to the concept of forming essence after an individual experiences existence.

Results and Discussion

Though Aeschylean tragedy has often been declared fatalistic, the aim of this study is to demonstrate that Aeschylus's characters in *The Oresteia* (1979) build their own essence to a reasonable extent. This section focuses on how the Existentialist choices and responsibility of the characters- Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Orestes, Agamemnon and Electra- make them construct their essence and experience an authentic existence. Even the ending of this trilogy is the externalization of the fact that Aeschylus himself chose to build the essence of Athenian society by establishing authority of reason over revenge, democracy over tyranny and order over chaos. Following is the text-based analysis of the above-mentioned observations through considering how the characters, in this trilogy, build their own essence.

Clytemnestra's character is a striking example in this case. No one, after a close reading of the text, can deny the fact that she is a person who herself builds her essence with her own choice and responsibility, "I brooded on this trial, this ancient blood feud year by year... I did it all. I don't deny it. No" (p. 153). These words of Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*, after she murders Agamemnon and comes out of the palace with his dead body, declare her personal choice and responsibility. It is she herself who has planned this murder; it has not at all been ordained by the gods. She accepts and claims full responsibility for here choice. Her relationship with Aegisthus, the way she rules Argos authoritatively, and her man-like comportment are other instances of the fact that it is she herself who has created her essence through personal choices and making her existence authentic. She very manfully intervenes and stops the men of Aegisthus and the chorus from fighting and voices another Existentialist concern: "No more, my dearest, no more grief... Our lives are based on pain" (p. 163). Her man-like character and vengeance are well reflected in her words in which she challenges the Chorus after the murder of Agamemnon, "But now you witness what I've done" (p. 154). She calls them unjust in their judgment when they try to threaten her and challenges them that she will deal with them "blow for blow" (p. 154).

The watchman also sums up her character quite accurately when he says in the beginning of *Agamemnon*, "She (Clytemnestra) maneuvers like a man" (p. 94). The minute reading of the text makes it manifest that in the absence of her husband, she rules over the country for ten years, that make her choose an authoritative attitude. In addition, her illicit relationship with Aegisthus is also her personal choice that is combined with her motive for her daughter's revenge, determines her responsibility in constructing her essence. No gods ordain her to do so. Thus, the rendering of her character makes Sartrean dictum clear that existence precedes essence.

Aegisthus is another character who validates this dictum. He also builds his essence himself and tries his best to make his existence authentic by making personal choice. He has been harboring vengeance in his heart for a long time against Atreus' family. After long planning in league with Clytemnestra, he gets Agamemnon killed and plans to continue rule in Argos as it is clear from his following remarks in which he answers back the Chorus on their objection against his rule, "I was a marked man, his (Agamemnon's) enemy for ages" (p. 162). He further declares that he will utilize Agamemnon's wealth, rule his people and if someone tries to go against him, he will, simply, crush his opponent. Though he was in exile before coming back to Argos, he keeps on planning to seek revenge during exile as he declares, "link by link I clamped the fatal scheme together" (p. 161). The way he deals with his opponents with an iron hand also demonstrates how he takes responsibility and how he chooses to build his essence himself. There is no Fatalist or Essentialist dimension to his character.

Next, the character Orestes also has Existentialist dimensions, that is., his personal choice, responsibility, authenticity and construction of essence. Though, initially, he is ordered by Appolo to take revenge for his father's murder, the decision to do so is his own. Unlike Hamlet in *Hamlet* (1992), he is least reluctant to do so. His discussion with Electra in *The Libation Bearers* shows that his present character and decision are his own. This fact is well reflected in his dialogue with the Chorus (slave women) and Electra, "Such oracles (Appolo's order) are persuasive...And even if I am not convinced, the rough work of the world is still to do" (p. 181). He enumerates the reasons, and he calls them "yearnings" (p. 181) behind his urge to take the decision and choice of revenge. The reasons include god's order, painful sorrow for his father, his birthright of crown which "presses hard" (p. 182), and his desire to live among his brave country-fellows who are compelled to be the subjects of women, i.e., Clytemnestra and "woman-hearted" (p. 182) Aegisthus. It is a clear indication that the questions of his own choice of being convinced, denial of his birthright, his desire to join his country-men, and his will to make his country rid of the womanish rule are the factors that drive him to take revenge and construct his present essence. He, furthermore, takes full responsibility for his choice authentically when standing on the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus after murdering them. He proclaims that he has killed them because his mother and Aegisthus were adulterers, "I pursued this bloody death with justice" (p. 213). Besides, they have murdered his father and usurped his throne and these acts demand justice. Likewise, he complains to his mother before murdering her that she "flung me to a life of pain... disgraced me, sold me..." (208). Besides, his declaration of the plan of murder to the chorus and Electra demonstrates the fact that he creates his essence, especially when he declares that he will use maneuvers in bearing out this plan, "They killed an honoured man by cunning, so they die by cunning, caught in the same noose" (p. 192).

The character of Agamemnon is another manifestation of the fact that he is a person who demonstrates freedom of choice, authenticity and responsibility for his actions. He is not the one whose essence is pre-determined. His choice to walk on crimson tapestries, his choice to capture Cassandra as his concubine, and his decision to wield

war on Troy are the decisions that help construct his essence. Likewise, Electra, despite being subjugated by her mother, backs her brother, harbors revenge in her heart and help Orestes carry out his plan of murdering. Her choice of taking sides with her father and brother is evident when she tells Orestes that she will take side with him in his cause. Even a weak person like her also tries to make her existence authentic to some extent.

Finally, *The Eumenides* is an attempt by Aeschylus himself to demonstrate the fact that human beings are responsible for their choices, they have responsibilities and they can make their own essence. Through this, he seems to validate the fact that essence is never pre-determined and proves the Essentialist view of human life invalid. It may also be suggested and concluded that through the Existentialist representation of his characters, Aeschylus wants to pinpoint that the essence of society is also not predetermined at all; it can be built by human beings necessarily. Hence, the trilogy ends with a note of building a new era of triumph of reason and democracy over revenge and discord over harmony. It validates that humans have freedom of choice and responsibility to create their essence and thus make their existence authentic.

Conclusion

Findings of the careful Textual Analysis of the trilogy reveal that Aeschylus- apart from being a Fatalist- believed in human freedom of choice, authenticity and responsibility that help humans build their own essence. Thus, it seems appropriate to apply the Sartrean Existentialist concept of constructing essence through human choice on the characters in *The Oresteia*. The analysis of all characters validate that Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Orestes, Electra and Agamemnon create the essence of their own lives by making authentic choices and employing their freedom to act. The analysis has helped to prove that all the research objectives have been met and justified.

Recommendations

Since the scope of the article is limited, only a few elements of Existentialism have been explored in this study. *The Oresteia* can be further studied in the light of other concepts of Existentialism like hostility of the universe, search for meaning in life, and angst etcetera.

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