

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SUDRAKA'S *MRCCHAKATIKA* AND SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE*

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ABSTRACT

Literature engages the emotions of its readers and remains immortal even after the physical presence of the authors cease from the world. Man is transient, but the literature they produce, if sublime enough, never fades away. The masterpieces which had been created in distant past, but still remain popular are often referred to as classics in literature. Each nation has their own texts which have been immortalized in their own language. However, abstract things like emotions are not affected by barriers of language, caste or creed. Hence, the sublime emotions that the classics ignite in its audience are universal. Furthermore, if one analyzes the classics of the world, there are features that could be related and parallels can be drawn between such works. One such pair is the Indian classic play *Mrcchakatika* by Sudraka and Sophocles' *Antigone*. Thus, this paper aims at comparing these two classic plays and analyzing their utilization of the various themes of love, deceit and struggle for power. Moreover, both these works portray strong female characters, an antihero who exploits his power, a righteous but timid hero and the politics in society. Furthermore, there are features of Greek drama which can be witnessed in *Mrcchakatika* even though it is Indian. Despite similar themes, the treatment of them by the writers is what brings few notable differences as well. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the writers use their individual genius in creating brilliant masterpieces that are immortalized throughout generations.

Keywords: Classical literature, comparisons, strong female, political power, society etc.

Introduction

Literature and art are aesthetics which effect human emotions. The sublime pieces of art are meant to ignite pathos and catharsis in its audience. They mean to instruct and entertain. However, one barrier to these is the difference in diction. Since the writers of different nations produce works in different languages, which is mostly their mother tongue, the meaning is not communicated to the audience that is not familiar with that particular language. But fortunately, writers all over the world have made the effort to translate the great works of literature belonging to different cultures into English or their own native language so that his or her own people can enjoy those works as well.

“English literature is a nascent genre which endeavours to transcend geographical constraints. Literature has a serious function of preserving the glory of a country’s civilization, resolving cultural conflicts and providing viable models for popular emulation.”

Indian texts have also been reproduced in English language which has made it popular to the world. A common language also helps in drawing comparisons between pieces of literature from all over the world. Although the language might vary, the emotions of literature ignite in its audience are universal. Furthermore, the message that they aim to convey to the people and the portrayal of the various themes often coincide with each other when analyzed minutely. African texts or American texts might possess similarities with writings of the East and vice-versa. Many works of writers use tropes which are common to those of a different culture and unknowingly, they become replicas of each other, but possess a uniqueness of their own. One such example is the similarities between Sudraka’s *Mrcchakatika* and Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Both are ancient drama which have survived generations and still remain popular among scholars. These are works from two different nations- Sudraka was a writer in India and Sophocles’ from Greece. Neither had they met each other, and perhaps neither lived to read each other’s works as the world was not a global village as it is now. However, when one analyzes their works, one could observe many similarities as well as a few stark contrasts. It is this similarity between *Mrcchakatika* and *Antigone* that shall be analyzed through this paper. Furthermore, some of the opposing portrayals and stereotypes shall also be pointed out through it. Furthermore, the plot of Sophocles’ *Antigone* revolves around the titular character who wants to bury her brother Polyneices against the word of the new King Creon, who orders Polyneices’ body to be left to rot on the battlefield since he committed treason by bringing in foreign forces against Thebes, his own land. Eteocles, her other brother, was the one who did not hand over the kingdom to Polyneices as per the agreement made between them, which forced Polyneices to take help from outside. However, to maintain the State order and abide by its laws, Creon, their uncle who is now the King, declares that only Eteocles will get a proper burial. However, Antigone values divine rules over the state laws and hence, and believes every human deserves the right of burial. Furthermore, her duty as a sister motivates her to try and bury Polyneices despite the death threat and ultimately ends up sacrificing herself for her cause. In Sudraka’s *Mrcchakatika*, the protagonist Carudatta was a kind Brahmin. Owing to his humane character, he donated all his money to poor and he himself became poor and penniless. Consequently, his pitiful circumstance compelled his friends to desert him. But he continued living his life of an honest and upright man. But despite being happily married, Carudatta fell in love with a courtesan Vasantasena at the temple of Kamadeva. She too reciprocated her love. On the other hand, in the kingdom of Ujjayini, an arrogant king ruled where this story is set. The king’s maniac brother-in-law Samsthanaka was after Vasantasena with love proposal. His violence stalking and terrible encounter obliged Vasantasena to take the refuge of Carudatta’s home. Accordingly, their love began to grow and she entrusted Carudatta to safeguard a casket of jewelry to open a window of future encounter. Unfortunately, a poor Brahmin Sarvilaka stole the jewels to free his lover ‘Madanika’ from the slavery of Vasantasena. Though Vasantasena knew about it, she made up her mind to scot free Madanika. Meanwhile, before Vasantasena’s briefing about the situation, Carudatta sent her a rare pearl necklace of his wife in exchange of stolen opulent jewel. This incident led Carudatta’s friend ‘Maitreya’ cautioned him not to engage with her in future. But Carudatta was adamant and he took Vasantasena as his mistress. Later, Samsthanaka again tried to confront Vasantasena. But she had explicitly rejected his offer, he tried to kill her. Eventually, she was saved by a Buddhist monk. But Samsthanaka thought he killed Vasantasena and framed her killer to Carudatta. In the court, the king had blindly sentenced Carudatta to death. In the end, Vasantasena appeared and clarified the situation and all was well. However, the first similarity that can be drawn between the two ancient dramas is in the main female characters. Both the female heroines possess a boldness and individuality that is unique. Antigone is portrayed as a hard and resistant female by Sophocles. She acts as a free spirit, a defiant individual. One of the central questions of Antigone has to do with how a person in the world of the play is obligated to both family and law. As the daughter of Oedipus, former king of Thebes, Antigone is certainly loyal to the city. On the other hand, both Polyneices and Eteocles were her brothers, and Sophocles’ play suggests that she had an extremely close relationship with both of them. Therefore, she is adamant to give Polyneices a proper burial. For Antigone, no law could stand in the way of her strong consideration of her brother’s spirit, not even the punishment of early death. To judge from her attitude towards authority and law,

Antigone would probably take on any task to preserve family dignity and human justice. She is not a frail hearted damsel like her sister Ismene, who fears the punishment of death. Sudraka's Vasantasena is also similar to Antigone in the sense that she does not submit without a fight. Just as Antigone stands against Creon and the State laws, Vasantasena is a woman who values individual freedom and independence. She is bold enough to stand for what is right. A courtesan by profession, Vasantasena does not fit into the traditional roles that are laid for a woman, which is of a respectable daughter, mother or wife. As a courtesan, Vasantasena lacks the social rights, similar to how Antigone's right to freedom was stolen fighting for her cause. According to the State laws of Creon, she was a convict in society. In the words of Muname Mukahrjee about Vasantasena:

"Vasantasena does not fit into the traditional structure of women as daughters, wives or mothers. She is a unique paradox. She is, on one hand, an object of desire and, on the other hand, an independent person who believes in freedom of choice. Vasantasena enjoys economic power, much unlike the usual women figures portrayed in theatre of those times. However, she lacks social rights, because she is a courtesan."

Besides, additional similarity between the two classical plays is how they are both intelligent females who refuse to remain as passive actors. They make their own decisions and express selfless love for their lovers. They do not fit into the traditional image of a heroine. For instance, it is Ismene, her sister, who is more ladylike than Antigone. Ismene is more beautiful and feminine. Yet, Haemon falls for Antigone's bold and unique personality. Vasantasena also does not fit into the respectable role of a woman. Yet, she is a "woman of desire, intellect and every other trait which an urban modern woman aspires to possess" (Gautam N.pag). Furthermore, Antigone does not desire for wealth or power as seen how she refuses to obey Creon even after he tempts her with the prospects of being future Queen if she remains silent and marries Haemon. Vasantasena, too, is not attracted by money. She is attracted towards Charudutta's kind and honest personality rather than the rich Sakara, the King's brother-in-law. Likewise, another similarity between the two dramas is in the anti-heroes of the dramas. In "*Antigone*", King Creon is the tragic anti-hero. Although he is pitiful, his actions against Antigone cannot be forgiven. Creon values the state laws more than the divine laws and thus, he refuses to give a proper burial to his traitorous nephew Polyneices. In the drama, he tries different ways to convince Antigone to forget about Polyneices and think about leading a harmonious life with his son, Haemon. It seems as if he regrets punishing her. However, his male pride is perhaps the reason which pushes his sympathy into a corner. This urge to remain in power over the female is also seen in case of Sakara in Vasantasena. In the play "*Mrcchakatika*", the king was not a man of morality. He did not care about honesty, truth and justice. As a result, he sentenced Carudatta to death. Without the help of Vasantasena, Carudatta would have been dead. In a way, Vasantasena had challenged the king's authority of lawlessness. In the play "*Antigone*" too, the title character Antigone, being a female challenges the power of King Creon and displayed his wrong decree against nature. She dared to challenge king's authority, which proves her intelligent thinking like Vasantasena. Antigone's speech before king Creon regarding his misjudgment is reflected in the following excerpt of the play:

"But I will bury him; and if I must die,
I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down
With him in death, and I shall be as dear
To him as he to me." (Sophocles 55-58)

The similarity between the two dramas can also be seen in how both the dramas deal with the politics and the state. "*Antigone*" is a drama where the main plot is centered on the concept of justice. Instead of distinguishing what is morally just, the play is more about which type of justice is right- Antigone's notion of divine justice or Creon's opinion of justice by the state laws. Ultimately, Antigone dies, thus leaving Creon to rule by the state laws, thus showing how people in power gets to decide what justice is. In *Mrcchakatika*, even after Sakara's fake accusation of Charudatta is revealed, he manages to convince everyone that he was telling the truth. In other words, without Vasantasena's appearance, justice would have been never done. Moreover, the two heroes in the dramas also share similar characteristics. Both the heroes are individuals who come across to the readers as timid and often too good, so as to be taken advantage of. Haemon is a guy who is in love with

Antigone. Yet, he cannot comprehend why Antigone suddenly declared that she cannot marry him. He finds out too late and is also late in taking action. He tries to convince Creon into forgiving Antigone instead of trying to protect his lover and protest against Creon. Perhaps it is because Haemon values both his father and his beloved Antigone and hence, wants them to both be on peaceful terms. His goodness of heart is revealed further when he cannot bring himself to kill his father. Instead, unable to bear Antigone's loss, he runs himself with his own sword. Such goodness often becomes weakness as seen through the drama. Unlike the traditional heroes who portray strength, valor and courage, Haemon is a meek hero who dies without being able to live up to his role as a strong Prince. Similarly, in "*Mrcchakatika*", Carudatta comes across as a hero whose kindness is the cause of his doom. Carudatta was as kind as Antigone. Both share same value for honesty, integrity and love for humankind. In the context of other characters of the play "*Mrcchakatika*", the character "Maitreya" resembles with "Ismene" of "*Antigone*". Ismene has advised her sister Antigone not go anger the king Creon. In the same way, Maitreya suggested Carudatta not to go after Vasantsena. But both characters downrightly discarded the request and took their own path of righteousness. In addition, King Palaka and King Creon also share resemblance in their decision making which eventually led them to suffering and doom. King Palaka turned a blind eye to justice in the way King Creon did to satisfy their ego and power. It means both kings abused their power. The characters Madanika and Haemon have one similarity of true love. But Haemon could not able to convince Antigone for it. Contrarily, Madanika was successful at winning the heart of Sarvilaka by hook or by crook.

Conclusion

It is pointless to argue about the significance of two classical texts "*Antigone*" and "*Mrcchakatika*". Both plays have enriched world literature in splendid way. Nevertheless, unlike "*Antigone*", "*Mrcchakatika*" has not entirely been influenced by Indian mythology. The protagonist of "*Antigone*" is the daughter of former king but the protagonist of "*Mrcchakatika*" is a simple everyday Brahmin man from a typical Indian society. The ending of both plays are certainly left a message of love, care and repentance. At last, Samstanaka asks forgiveness for his wrongdoing in the way the king Creon does. As a matter of fact, the play "*Mrcchakatika*" was written long before "*Antigone*", but it is still relevant in the modern context and society. The love story shared in the play "*Mrcchakatika*" can be seen in the present day and it will be utterly appurtenant in the distant future too.

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