

‘CRITICAL ACQUAINTANCE TO SOPHOCLES’ ‘AJAX.’

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Abstract

The play ‘Ajax’ is about uncontrolled desire of the major male character Ajax. His desire to possess the armour of Achilles. He was not guided properly by the divine character and so he has to pay the penalty. Ajax’ downfall is due to his misjudgment.

Keywords:- Ajax, Achilles, Odysseus, Armour, Revenge, Destiny and Goddess Athena.

INTRODUCTION

Sophocles was one of the great Greek tragedy writers. Achyllum and Euripides were the two other great contributors. The play ‘Ajax’ is one of the seven great plays that has survived. It acquaints us with the art of plot construction and the art of characterization of Sophocles.

COMPENDIOUS CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY ‘AJAX’.

The plot of the play “Ajax” revolves round the major male character, Ajax. He is also a typical Sophoclean hero. In the play once he says to Tecmessa,

“You are a fool if you think you can change my character now”

(lines 594-95).

“This is the glory of a Sophoclean hero: the strength to create an identity in conflict with the way the world works. Man’s adherence to his own desire becomes both his glory and tragedy. The Sophoclean hero is Achilles reborn in a world out of joint”.

Marianne McDonald-‘The Living Art of Greek Tragedy’.2003 (Indiana University Press) page - 56.

The play is about post ‘Trojan war’ scenario. Ajax’ desire to possess the armour of Achilles is overlooked and the same was handed over to Odysseus. This incident provides a platform for typical Sophoclean tragedy because in his tragedies there is bound to be revenge, horror, blood, murder, death, suicide and helpless-dependent female characters. Ajax, who possesses Hector’s sword vows to take revenge on the Greek warriors. But destiny was not in his favour. He was misguided by goddess Athena, who made him believe that a herd of sheep are the Greek leaders. We come to know about that through the report given to Ulysses by the goddess Athena.

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“I kept him off; I cast upon his eyes
Grievous conceits of his infatuate glee
And turned him toward the flocks and common herd
Of captured cattle in the herd man’s charge
Yet undivided”.

As Ajax was blinded by Athena and his uncontrolled ambition to take revenge, he slaughters many Greek warriors (that is what he believed). He imprisons others with an idea to torture them. When he realizes the blunder executed by him, he laments his situation in the following way.

“O darkness, now my light,
O gloom to me most bright,
Take me, yea take me for your habitant:
Take me! For I can brook
No longer now to look
Either to God or mortal, in my want”.

His nature and his blunder pushes him towards his approaching doom. In spite of the warning from the seer, Calchas, and repeated prays of his wife, he decides to bury his sword. He sticks the blade outside, jumps on it and dies. It follows the problem of burial.

“The burial of the dead was—if the paradox be
Permitted—a moral vital issue to the Greeks than
It is to most of us. Even recognizing this. It is a
Surprise to find that two of the seven surviving plays
Of Sophocles turn upon it”.

John Ferguson-“A Companion to Greek Tragedy”.2012 (University of Texas Press) page-134.

But by the end of the play Odysseus comes to help the dead body of Ajax and against the demand of Menelaus and Agamemnon, arranges proper burial of the dead body. Because Ajax was-

“At all points worthy; than whom—
Than Ajax—while living, I say,
In the whole world better was none.”
(Last lines of the play “Ajax”)

This play too is considered as one of the early plays bearing typical tendencies of Sophocles’ play. It also reveals the great spirit of the Greek warriors and the way, some of them, welcome death. To conclude the critical analysis of the play I would like to quote,

“Ajax in the war books pities his victims even while
killing them. Perhaps the closest parallel is Achilles in ‘The Iliad’.
There, at the last, confronted with Priam, the cruel soldier learns to
pity. So it is with Ajax here. Ajax is not at the last a great play, but
Ajax is a great role for a great actor”.

John Ferguson-‘A Companion to Greek Tragedy’ 2012 (University of Texas Press) page-149.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude the article by praising Sophocles' ability as a dramatist. It is true that he has borrowed the themes of his plays from the history of ancient Greece and Greek legends yet his use of language and handling of incidents is marvelous. Ajax is one of the immortal characters painted by Sophocles.

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