

## **Clytemnestra as a Nightmare to Patriarchy in Aeschylus Tragedy, The Oresteian Trilogy**

Azime Aydoğmuş\*

Clytemnestra is a powerful, rebellious, controversial character who dominates in Aeschylus's tragedy, *The Oresteian Trilogy*. In this play, Aeschylus reflects the perception of women in patriarchal democratic Ancient Greek society by Clytemnestra who is a "non-ideal" image of woman. She exposes the imposed "ideal women" identity on females by the male dominant Athenian sociological system by rejecting it. She is a powerful character, because she has political aspirations; she displays masculinity, and she chooses a sexual partner other than her husband. At the time Athens was in transition to be a democratic society which was male oriented. Therefore, women with the qualities of Clytemnestra are considered as destructive. This play is important because Aeschylus demonstrates the mechanisms of patriarchy by the character of Clytemnestra, and moreover confirms the new system. I will study Clytemnestra in *The Oresteian Trilogy* concentrating on the facts of perception of women in democratic Athenian society that was shaped by both the state and the religious system. Both of these sources are apparatuses of male dominant society, and expose themselves in Clytemnestra's life, because patriarchy uses religion to confirm the needs of authorities. In my argument, I will study the interaction between religion and newly established democratic Athens in order to create an ideal woman image. Because non-ideal woman is considered as destructive and a threat to a man driven society.

### ***The Oresteian Trilogy***

Aeschylus wrote *The Oresteian Trilogy*, and its first production was in 458 B.C. *The Oresteian Trilogy* ends the mythological curse on Atreus family by involvement of judge system in Athens. The source of *The Oresteian Trilogy* is a mythological curse that has led one crime after another one which continued generations. The trilogy Includes: *Agamemnon*, *The Choephoroi* or *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. This is the only trilogy that survived

---

\* M.A. in Theatre, CUNY-Hunter College

as complete. It is an important literary work of Aeschylus, because it presents three different types of justice. The first justice is followed by Furies who wanted to take the revenge for the murder of Clytemnestra. The second one is done by Apollo's instruction to Orestes by taking revenge for Agamemnon's murder. The last one is done by Athena at the court. This trilogy shows the transition in justice system, and transition from matriarchy to patriarchy.

*The Oresteian Trilogy* ends the mythological curse on Atreus family by involvement of judge system in Athens. The source of *The Oresteian Trilogy* is a mythological curse that has led one crime after another one that continued for generations. The first play in the trilogy is *Agamemnon*. The play starts just a few hours after when Troy has fallen. The signal of the beacon indicates that Troy lost the war. Agamemnon comes back with his concubine Cassandra who is a prophetess. Clytemnestra kills both of them, most likely with her lover Aegisthus. The major driving forces for this double murder are: Clytemnestra's motherly feelings because Agamemnon slaughtered her daughter to sooth Artemis' anger to be able to sail, Clytemnestra's aspirations for political power, and Agamemnon's betrayal by bringing Cassandra as his mistress. *Agamemnon* is a very intense play, because it has many layers and Clytemnestra as a fantastic character. This play presents with unfairness between men and women; and it portrays Clytemnestra as a powerful character against all injustice.

In the second play, *The Libation Bearers*, Clytemnestra's son Orestes returns from exile. Apollo instructs him to kill his mother. Clytemnestra's unmarried and almost slaved daughter Electra meets with Orestes, and she encourages him to murder too. Even though Orestes is hesitant about killing Clytemnestra, he murders both his mother and Aegisthus. The murder of Clytemnestra tells us that she doesn't succeed to live as a strong, controversial women. Following the killing furious deities, Furies, start chasing Orestes to take Clytemnestra's revenge and bring justice. Besides the matter of justice, these two plays present a controversy between pre-Olympian religion represented by Furies and Olympian religion represented by Apollo. The controversy between these two is the altercation between men and women. Furies try to get justice for Clytemnestra, and Apollo tries to get justice for Agamemnon.

In the third play, *Eumenides*, Orestes seeks protection from Apollo in Delphi, Athens, seven years after the homicide. Meanwhile, Furies have been chasing him. Athena makes this case a public trial, and calls the citizens as jury. Furies carry out the prosecution of Orestes; Apollo advocates him; and Orestes defends himself. At the end of the voting, the votes are counted as equal. Athena votes on behalf of Orestes, and frees him by winning the case. It is considered that he was purified while he was running away from the Furies for seven years. After the trial, the generations of curse and revenge ends. The case of Orestes is considered as the first court of justice in the Athenian democracy. In his article, “*The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy*,” Hall states, “Orestes...causes the foundation of the Athenian’s court” (Hall, 102). This statement shows that *The Oresteian Trilogy* represents the beginning of a new system mainly based on human judgement, but still including the religious factor according to the needs of the system. Moreover, the decision of Athena gives men superiority over women. In conclusion, Clytemnestra doesn’t become successful. Giving more credit to Orestes represents the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy.

### **The Mythological Background and Religious Implications of *The Oresteian Trilogy***

*The Oresteian Trilogy* is rooted in mythology more than a millennium prior to its writing. It presents living interactions between gods and human beings. It also demonstrates certain irrational qualities of goddesses that would be associated millennium after as general features of females. Two instances of the interactions between gods and human beings are the household of Atreus whose father Tantalus once betrayed Zeus, and the household of Tyndaros, the king of Sparta. In Tyndaros household: Clytemnestra and Helen were the daughters of Zeus. Zeus fell in love with Leda, the wife of Tyndaros. Zeus visited Leda as a swan, and she gave birth to Clytemnestra and Helen who was exceptionally beautiful.

The passionate feelings and decisions of female goddesses are dominant in this mythology, which involved the destruction of Troy and the families, and caused a lot of bloodshed. When the patriarchic democratic Athenian system was established, they associated the qualities of women with the qualities of goddesses of the old religion such as being jealous, passionate,

irrational and violent. Therefore, women were considered as destructive to the new ideology so the old religious system was reorganized for the benefits of modern Athens.

According to the mythology, Zeus who is a descendant of Ouranos, the king of gods-sky god, defeats the anarchic living of the god Cronus. This war indicates the start of a new religion, which is based on law and order. One day Zeus throws a wedding party for Thetis, a nymph. This was the time when Prometheus compromised with Zeus, and revealed the prophecy of her mother, the earth. By this way, Zeus freed him from his thousand years of punishment. The goddess of strife, the one who enjoys human bloodshed, Eris, came to the party as an uninvited guest, and brought a golden apple. All the goddesses started to quarrel to possess the apple. Zeus sent Paris, the prince of Troy, to solve the problem. Goddesses offered bribes to him. He was attracted to Aphrodite's bribe which was the most beautiful women in the world. Then Paris gave the golden apple to Aphrodite.

Mythology continues with the stories of Atreus and Thyestes. The brothers had power issues for the throne of Argos. Thyestes seduced Atrius's wife. Atrius killed Thyestes's two sons for revenge. He cooked them and served it to Thyestes as a meal. After this incident, Thyestes left Argos. However, he had another son, Aegisthus. After a while, Atreus' son Agamemnon became a king in Argos. His brother Menalaus took the throne in Sparta by marrying Tyndaros's beautiful daughter Helene. Then Agamemnon married Helen's sister Clytemnestra. One day, Paris of Troy visited Menelaus. However, Menelaus went to a business trip, and left Helen to entertain him. Paris stole her heart and they went to Troy. By this way, Aphrodite fulfilled her promise. An angered Menelaus declared a war on Troy, but the wind didn't allow Agamemnon to sail. Agamemnon slaughtered his daughter Iphigenia to make Artemis happy and to be able to sail.

Apparently, this is a long mythology. Mostly, it is about one family. The myth starts with possibly anger of Eris. Most likely, she knew the golden apple would cause a quarrel among the goddesses. Therefore, the golden apple symbolizes the beginning of the bloody events. It follows with Aphrodite's plan to fulfill her promise she made to Paris. This ignites the decision of war on Troy. The third key factor for the continuation of the bloody events is the murder of Iphigenia for Artemis. Seemingly, the passionate feelings of goddesses

played a major role in this mythology, as disruption of societies and families. Moreover, Helen as a woman was responsible for a ten years long war. When democratic Athenian society was founded, these type of irrational attitudes were considered as dangerous to the society because of destructive qualities.

In the following sections, I will explain the perception of women in democratic Athenian society, and how the image of an ideal woman was created by cooperation of the state and religion. All this quest was made to suppress the woman as much as possible, and to save the male dominant system from the threat of destructiveness of woman.

### **Women are Disruptive to Society**

Athenian democracy regarded women as disruptive to the society, because they caused male anxiety. This anxiety was closely related to man's political power, economic interests, and the continuation of the family line. Sexual nature of women was seen as the primary threat to destroy men's status and interests in the society. Clytemnestra lives her sexual nature freely, so she poses a threat to society and her husband.

Male citizens were scared that women could commit adultery while their husbands were away for war or business reasons. They thought women had improper sexual urges. Hall says, "Women were regarded as more susceptible to invasive passions than men, especially eros and daemonic possession, . . . instigators of tragic events, and effective generators of emotional responses" (Hall, 106). Aeschylus' Clytemnestra is a good example to embody the fear of man. When her husband Agamemnon was away for the Trojan War, Clytemnestra took Aegisthus as her lover. In fact, anxiety of man from adultery had further implications such as political power, and economical interests. Hall indicates,

*"A citizen's family life was a component of his political identity. It was important to be seen in law courts as the responsible head of a well ordered household; it was customary for a citizen involved in a trial to introduce his decorous children onto the nostrum of the public display. His private conduct was seen as an indicative of the manner in which he would exert political power"* (Hall, 104).

Being childless, or not having legitimate children meant the end of a family line. Therefore, they saw potential in women as troublesome to their patriarchal system. Clytemnestra would be a nightmare for Agamemnon and Athenian society, because she sent Orestes in exile; she did adultery; and she took control of the political power. She destroyed everything that would make Agamemnon a proud citizen.

The economic interests of men through childbirth were also legitimate reasons to fear about women's sexuality. In Athens society, male children were essential. The property transmission was occurring through them; and the continuation of family line was dependent on male children. Therefore, not having legitimate male heirs was frightening for men (Hall, 104). In addition, democratic society required male citizens for the continuation of the system since only male citizens were eligible to vote and speak forward. Clytemnestra exiled Orestes. This meant, the household of Agamemnon didn't have a male heir to continue the family line.

Because of the reasons above, women's sexual nature was necessary for the continuation of the male race. Thus, giving birth and having a healthy sexual life of women were important for the continuation of the patriarchal system. However, women's sexuality should have been controlled by orderly households, and faithful, submissive wives in order to continue of the democratic system. Otherwise, the family lines, and the race of the male citizens would be cut off as Agamemnon's household experienced. Clytemnestra's actions destroyed Agamemnon's life sources that would make him a proud citizen. On the other hand, her actions made her rise as a powerful woman, until she was killed.

### **The Status of Women in Democratic Greek Society**

In the democratic Athenian society, women were the minority, and had a low status as slaves. In Poetics, Aristotle says, "A woman can be good, or a slave, although one of these classes (sc. Women) is inferior and the other, as a class, worthless" (Else, 43). Women were removed from public places, and limited to the private sphere. Men participated in political and economic activities, while women were engaged in religious events and festivals. While men were having unrestricted access to the public places,

women were immobilized. Even in their homes, women were enclosed in *kurios*, which were certain specific rooms that separated them. They neither had a right to vote nor to speak up. They were treated as a commodity: first women were owned by their fathers, then transferred to their husbands. Women would always be under a male guardian to protect their chastity. A silent, submissive, and an obedient woman was considered as an ideal woman. The basic function of a woman was to produce more male Athenian citizens by childbirth, and to support the city's health. In contrast, Clytemnestra was a queen, and she was responsible for managing the city. She spoke up. She engaged with anybody she wanted to. Therefore, she was a non-ideal women. Moreover, she was the daughter of Zeus, so she wasn't an ordinary woman who was born to ordinary people.

### **Clytemnestra as a Controversial Protagonist**

Clytemnestra is a fascinating, powerful character that dominates the trilogy, and she is the protagonist in *Agamemnon*. Clytemnestra carries the qualities that male dominant democratic Athens is anxious about: Clytemnestra has political aspirations; she is powerful; she is a superior strategist; and she chooses a sexual partner other than her husband in the play. Clytemnestra is represented as a non-ideal a woman who is considered to be destructive by the male oriented society. Moreover, she is the killer of her husband and his concubine, Cassandra.

Killing her husband and Cassandra guarantees that Clytemnestra remains in power and fulfills her political aspirations and gives her freedom. If she didn't kill her husband she would be punished severely or possibly killed. In her thesis, Nickerson says, "Clytemnestra successfully carries out her revenge by means of masculine actions and intends to remain in a position of power" (Nickerson, 24). Even though taking revenge for her daughter Iphigenia's murder by her husband Agamemnon seems a driving force, staying in power is also important for Clytemnestra. She displays this desire through her masculine attitude, her choice of words, and even her choice of lover, Aegisthus. Killing Agamemnon gives Clytemnestra a chance to stay in reign. She is not apologetic for this murder, and she believes that she did the right thing. Clytemnestra almost convinces the chorus with her persuasive use of language. She says; "This is my husband Agamemnon,



now stone dead;/His death the work of my right hand, whose craftsmanship/  
Justice acknowledges, There lies the simple truth” (Vellacott, 91).

Clytemnestra’s masculine, bold attitude, and her courage to speak openly about this horrific murder does leave only one choice to the chorus: to accept her power.

It is clear that she chooses a lover, Aegisthus, who is almost feminine. It seems like he accepts her authority, and he is fine with that. This is an advantage for Clytemnestra to stay in power alone rather than to share it with a man. The Chorus makes a few remarks about Aegisthus, “You woman! While he went to fight, you stayed at home;/ Seduced his wife meanwhile; and then against a man/ Who led an army, you could scheme this murder! Poh” (Vellacott, 98)! The chorus ridicules Aegisthus. They think Aegisthus is a coward and a woman pleaser. This intensifies the thought that Aegisthus’ identity is not to be in power, but to support the power of Clytemnestra.

The third evidence that emphasizes Clytemnestra’s power aspiration is the exile of Orestes. She claims that she sent Orestes to Agamemnon’s friend Strophius for safety reasons. True or not, this act of Clytemnestra opens a path to take the throne. In *The Choephoroi*, Orestes confronts Clytemnestra. He says, “I was born free: you sold my body and my throne” (Vellacott, 137). Even though we don’t hear any words from Clytemnestra regarding her aspirations for power, her current status, her attitude, use of language, her relationship with people, and Orestes asserts that she has political aspirations.

Clytemnestra is powerful, because she has been a queen for ten years; she is outspoken; and fearless. She knows how to use language to make men obedient to her. She makes clear that she is not an ordinary woman. She oscillates between masculine and feminine roles to fulfill the necessity. Her masculine role is persuasive, and she uses the language skillfully. Her open, bold, and straightforward masculine language use allows Clytemnestra “to gain power needed to take revenge on her husband” (Nickerson, 10). On the other hand, her language use for her feminine role is deceptive and duplicitous. Her feminine role is to act as a faithful wife as part of her plan. Nickerson says, “...the language the men of classical Athens would have expected of women: deceptive and duplicitous....Clytemnestra plays the part of a faithful wife before the male chorus, the messenger, and ultimately her husband, but abandons



this disguise once she has successfully carried out her plan” (Nickerson, 10). Clytemnestra’s power comes from how successfully she plays between these two socially made roles. Obviously, she is more comfortable with masculine role she pursues, because it carries her to power. All her deeds show that she is not in an ideal woman category. By her means, “Clytemnestra disrupts the balance of the male-centered society” (Nickerson, 10).

Moreover, Clytemnestra is a brilliant strategist. She sets up a communication system that would give news about the result of the Trojan War shortly after it is ended. She sets up a beacon to sign the news, and places a watchman on the roof. When Clytemnestra told the news to the chorus, the elderly men think that she is acting according to her dreams and it may not be true. The men don’t think that women can make rational strategies. Clearly, they underestimate Clytemnestra by saying, “Chorus: Surely you feed yourself on unconfirmed report? Clytemnestra: You chose to criticize me as an ignorant girl” (Vellacott, 32).

This is an obvious example of how women were perceived in Athenian society: females believe in irrational news and they are incapable of making realistic decisions. Clytemnestra’s strategy disrupts this perception. In fact, setting up a clever communication is just one part of a big plan. The big plan is to kill Agamemnon, and to take the revenge of Iphigenia; furthermore, to stay in power. Therefore, the early arrival of news gives Clytemnestra and Aegisthus enough time to prepare for the murder.

### **The Organization of Religious System according to the Patriarchal Democratic Athenian Society**

*The Oresteian Trilogy* also shows a switch in perception and practice of religion. The religion is organized to give more credit to patriarchy, and to better respond to the complex needs of modern society such as justice. The democratic Athenian society was urban, and improving in terms of literature, philosophy and science. The physical world was explained by logos instead of supernatural ways of thinking. In this world, society was organized according to rationale. Men were considered superior to women, since women were historically connected to the irrational and passionate part of the old religious system such as Furies who made justice by taking revenge.

Even though social reorganization by cooperating with religion seems inevitable because of historical evolvement, mostly it worked for the benefit of patriarchy. It costed women their freedom, and suppressed them. It also questioned what justice was, and who benefited the best from justice in patriarchy.

The story of *The Oresteian Trilogy* was rooted at the time when Zeus defeated anarchy of Cronos. This symbolized the end of the old religion. In old religion, the sky gods revered to the gods of the earth such as Gaia, Furies, Fate, and other Cythorian gods. The sky gods always tried to placate with earth because of death. Earth was thought as female. The Olympian religion started with the dynasty of Zeus. In contrast to pre-Olympian religion, he wanted to be the only one in power. The start of Olympian signifies the start of the human race, increasing number of deities with distinct functions, and the beginning of certain principles.

Furies and Fate are pre-Olympian deities. Their function is to serve justice by vengeance. According to Furies there are three big sins; “Blasphemy against the gods; treachery to a host or guest, and shedding of kindred blood” (Vellacott, 17). In *The Oresteian Tragedy*, Clytemnestra threatens Orestes by saying that Furies would take her revenge. However, Orestes follows Apollo’s order, and he kills his mother. Apollo’s order represents an alternative justice to Furies, in terms of to stop bloodshed.

In Clytemnestra’s case Furies take the side of women. Apollo takes the side of man, and he belittles woman by saying, “The mother is not the true parent of child/Which is called hers, she is a nurse who tends the growth/Of young seed planted by its true parent, the male” (Vellacott, 1669) Both approaches are radically biased.

Vellacott states that according to Aeschylus, Furies and Apollo present shortcomings. Apollo’s guidance is barbaric, because he ordered Orestes to murder Clytemnestra. On the other hand, Furies can’t resolve complex cases like Orestes’. Their method is blind and it causes a series of murders. Consequently, both religious practices for justice don’t respond to the complex needs of democratic Greek society.

Finally, Athena brings the trial to the court. Athena opens the case to vote between the citizens and the Furies. The number of votes are counted

as equal. Athena votes on the behalf of Orestes and frees him. She also makes a deal with Furies by offering them honor, changing their names to Eumenides, and giving them a place to live under the ground. This decision is a symbolic acknowledgement of male dominance, and suppression of women. In her article, "Gender," Case interprets the decision as,

*"Woman are below and men above; women are now sequestered in the privacy of their home; women according to formula used in the wedding ceremony are given to be ploughed for the propagation of legitimate children; the female Furies are thus associated with the fertility of the earth; women are equated with forces of political instability: if the lower orders of society are not accommodated, the power structure will collapse"* (Case, 71).

Case's study tells us that Athena stamped on mutually practiced, restrictive guidance on women.

Athena's decision ended an almost one millennium long myth which started with a quarrel over a golden apple. It began with the anger of the goddess Eris over being uninvited to the wedding party. The turning points of the mythology also happened because of the role of different goddesses like Eris, Aphrodite and Artemis. There was always high emotions of goddesses involved in this bloodshed. Moreover, the Furies' actions, which were based on revenge didn't help to solve the problems. Since these female figures presented irrational attitudes and caused destruction anger, jealousy, madness and sexual desire were women qualities associated with women. Therefore, women were expected to be destructive.

### **Tragedy of Aeschylus and Clytemnestra**

The death of the Clytemnestra at the end of the trilogy symbolizes the unsuccessful quest of a woman, as a non-ideal woman to actualize herself in a patriarchal society. This reflects Aeschylus' own political and social view of the world which was patriotic and patriarchal. The youth of Aeschylus' and his contemporaries passed in a highly politically active environment, so they desired for stability and different moral laws to conduct the society.

The Athenians absolutely defeated the last tyrant in 490 B.C at Marathon. The movement of freedom, the desire for democracy as uprising, and Athenians were excited about this. Aeschylus was already grown up in the middle of the revolutionary movement and wars. There was a concern to create a new morality in the civic community, and the role of the male citizens. Thus, tragedy functioned as a sort of guide to establish the new ideology. Hall indicates, "Tragedy consequently defines the male citizen self, and both reproduces this ideology of the civic community" (Hall, 95). Hall's statement tells us that the new social and political order was male oriented. Therefore, we need to look at the social arrangements by the perspective of the benefits of the men.

Philip Vellacott mentioned Aeschylus' and his contemporaries political stand as, "The new moral responsibility of citizen was fully accepted and deeply felt" (Aeschylus, 15). Since Aeschylus' was appraising the new system, it wouldn't be wrong to say that he wanted to confirm the new ideology in *The Oresteian Trilogy* by the perspective of patriarchy. Case calls this text as "patriarchal propaganda" (Case, 72). Therefore, Aeschylus approves the gender politics in his play by ending Clytemnestra as unsuccessful, placing the Furies (angry ones) underground, and changing name of the Furies as Eumenides (kindly ones). This tells us that he agrees that women like Clytemnestra are destructive to the society. Therefore, they should be kept suppressed, and should be kept in private places.

## Conclusion

Clytemnestra's death along with suppression of Furies as Eumenides confirmed the power of patriarchy in democratic Athenian society. Clytemnestra wasn't a type of woman that man driven democratic Athenian ideology wanted to see, because women like Clytemnestra would be destructive to their patriarchal ideology. Clytemnestra presented herself as powerful, because she was masculine; she had political aspirations; she was outspoken; and she had sexual freedom. This was the opposite of an ideal woman that the state wanted to create for a healthy polis. Aeschylus who witnessed all the political upheaval in his youth, saw the social and political instability. He deeply felt for the new system, and new moral orders. Therefore, he supported Athenian democracy. The gender politics of the new ideology required

women to be submissive and have in minor status. This is considered as an ideal women. Females like Clytemnestra's characters were considered as destructive to the continuation of the patriarchal system because of their historically close association with religious activities that promoted irrational, passionate actions like Furies did. Therefore, in *The Oresteian Trilogy*, Aeschylus ended Clytemnestra's life as being unsuccessful, and suppressed the Furies who mainly looked for justice for women. As Case stated, "in *The Oresteian Trilogy*," Aeschylus does patriarchal propaganda by demonstrating Clytemnestra as a non-ideal woman and destructive to patriarchal society.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Vellacott, Philip., translator. *Aeschylus The Oresteian Trilogy*. Penguin Books, 1959.
- Else, Gerald F., translator. *Aristotle Poetics*. The University of Michigan Press, 2012.
- Hall, Edith . “The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy.” *Cambridge Companions Online*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Nickerson, Bethany. “Rebellious Performances: An Examination of the Gender Roles of Clytemnestra And Electra.” *University of Colorado, Boulder CU Scholar*, 2012,
- [scholar.colorado.edu/honr\\_theses](http://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses).
- Case, Sue-Ellen. *The Feminism and Theatre*. New York: Methuen, Inc., 1988.