

Aeschylus' Clytemnestra as a 'Seductress'

TAHSINA YASMIN

The character of Clytemnestra in *The Oresteian Trilogy* has been analyzed as an example of twisting of gender roles, as Aeschylus' portrayal of the character differed from that of Homer's shadowy presentation (McDermott 1). Critics have analyzed how this reversal calls the role of women in Greek society into question. However, this paper will examine how Clytemnestra very easily falls into the category of power-seeking individuals who use the art of seduction to satisfy their lust for power. Clytemnestra's resemblance to a charismatic seducer and a masculine dandy, in terms of building personal relations and exploiting the masses is subtly reflected in the dialogues and actions of the drama. Her victim playing, aura of mystery, eloquence, theatricality, uninhibitedness, adventurousness and magnetism lead to a particular characterization of a seductress. Thus this paper will bring Aeschylus' classic creation to modern light of seduction, "the ultimate form of power and persuasion" (Greene xx).

According to Encyclopedia Britannica the term "seduction" means "the act of a man enticing (without the use of physical force) a previously chaste woman to consent to sexual intercourse. In broader usage, the term refers to any act of persuasion, between heterosexual or homosexual individuals, and excluding the issue of chastity, that leads to sexual intercourse." However, seduction is no longer associated to 'sexual in nature' rather it has led many people to power after they have successfully used the skill. Likewise, seduction is a skill which is practiced and exercised by both men and women to achieve their way. If we look back at the Greek pantheon, we see that the king of gods Zeus appeared again and again as one great seducer in the original sense of the term. Robert Greene rediscovers the historical figures in the light of their seductive charms. The world has seen examples of powerful seducers like Cleopatra who captured the hearts of both the warlike Caesar and Mark Antony to the modern day Marilyn Monroe who captured the hearts of the mass and became an icon (9-11). Even life of political figure like J F Kennedy has revealed how seduction of the mass leads people to the

peak of power (Greene 123-25). The skill has been and is present in the world of power.

Robert Greene opines in *The Art of Seduction*:

Many of us today imagine that sexual freedom has progressed in recent years – that everything has changed, for better or worse. This is mostly an illusion; a reading of history reveals periods of licentiousness (imperial Rome, late-seventeenth-century England, the ‘floating world’ of eighteenth-century Japan) far in excess of what we are currently experiencing. Gender roles are certainly changing, but they have changed before. (48)

Clytemnestra is a powerful woman and a powerful character in Greek plays of the classical period. Aeschylus presented the character of Clytemnestra in contradiction to the roles to which female characters were ordinarily assigned. Greek men wanted women to be passive and servile. Clytemnestra was a self-actualized active woman. Her character has been analyzed as a mother who requires vengeance on the killer, as a grieved wife who is treated by her husband in cold and dismissive manner and finally as an adulteress. Her prominence in the first play of *The Oresteian Trilogy*, titled *Agamemnon*, is remarkable. She commands the readers’ respect in terms of her strength of character, her oratory skill, her emotion, intelligence, persuasion as presented by Aeschylus. Moreover, if we probe deep into her character certain features can be located with which we might associate her with a masculine dandy and in certain features a charismatic seducer as theorized by Greene. Thus we can draw the conclusion that she is a seductress who with the hidden intention of gratifying her lust for power uses the art of seduction. The lines to interpret this lust appear at the end of the play *Agamemnon* – “You and I, Joint rulers, will enforce due reverence for our throne” (100).

Clytemnestra does not appear passive even in Homer’s shadowy presentation. In Book XI of *The Odyssey*, we have the dead Agamemnon’s statement to Odysseus in the underworld where he delineates how Aegisthus asked him to visit his house for a feast and brutally murdered him, but he also mentions:

I heard Priam's daughter Cassandra scream as Clytemnestra killed her close beside me. I lay dying upon the earth with the sword in my body, and raised my hands to kill the slut of a murderess, but she slipped away from me; she would not even close my lips nor my eyes when I was dying, for there is nothing in this world so cruel and so shameless as a woman when she has fallen into such guilt as hers was. Fancy murdering her own husband! I thought I was going to be welcomed home by my children and my servants, but her abominable crime has brought disgrace on herself and all women who shall come after- even on the good ones.

The following lines from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* stand in strong contrast to the above mentioned description. Clytemnestra admits:

To prevent
Flight or resistance foiling death, I cast on him,
As one who catches fish, a vast voluminous net,
That walled him round with endless wealth of woven folds;
And then I struck him, twice. Twice he cried out and groaned;
And then fell limp. And as he lay I gave a third
And final blow, my thanks for prayers fulfilled, to Zeus,
Lord of the lower region, Saviour - of dead men!
So falling he belched forth his life; with cough and retch
There spurted from him bloody foam in a fierce jet,
And spreading, spattered me with drops of crimson rain;
While I exulted as the sown cornfield exults
Drenched with the dew of heaven when buds burst forth in Spring. (90-91)

The first description raises the question why Orestes would be so fervent in killing his mother in retribution in *The Libation-Bearers* if Clytemnestra did not lift the axe to kill his father in the first place. Obviously by placing the axe in Clytemnestra's

hands Aeschylus puts her in control and thus the shock of the Chorus at the 'unnatural' jubilation of Clytemnestra:

Vile woman! What unnatural food or drink,
Malignant root, brine from the restless sea,
Transformed you, that your nature did not shrink
From foulest guilt? (91)

Greek society did not deem women to be capable of showing cruelty, revenge, violence, deception in the general sense. Thus, the topsy-turvy situation where Orestes questions and contradicts his mother in *The Libation-Bearers*:

Clytemnestra: Your father sinned too. Count his sins along with mine.

Orestes: Silence! He spent himself in battle, you sat at home.

Clytemnestra: A woman without her man suffers no less, my son.

Orestes: The man's work keeps and feeds the woman who sits at home. (137)

The general notion of woman as one who takes care of the household and childcare has been challenged in literature again and again with examples of characters like Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth's lust for power was no less than Macbeth's and her way of seduction by pushing Macbeth to his limits by presenting herself capable of cruelty and violence and resolute is an example of a masculine dandy.

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (*Macbeth* 1.7.60-65)

In the same manner, Clytemnestra calls the role of Greek women into question by the abhorrent deed of killing her husband.

Robert Greene theorizes:

The Masculine Dandy succeeds by reversing the normal pattern of male superiority in matters of love and seduction. A man's apparent independence, his capacity for detachment, often seems to give him the upper hand in the dynamic between men and women. A purely feminine woman will arouse desire, but is always vulnerable to the man's capricious loss of interest; a purely masculine woman, on the other hand, will not arouse that interest at all. . . . Men do not know how to fight women who use their own weapons against them; they are intrigued, aroused, and disarmed. (47)

Clytemnestra in her relationship with Aegisthus proves to be a masculine dandy. The Chorus highlights Aegisthus' cowardice by comparing him with a "cock which struts before his hen" (100). The statement nonetheless enforces the idea of Clytemnestra's superiority in the relationship. The commanding authority of Clytemnestra is evident when she stops Aegisthus from causing more bloodshed by going against the Chorus which also shows her farsightedness and intelligence.

Antiquity's other great seducer, Cleopatra, also sent out mixed signals: by all accounts physically alluring, in voice, face, body, and manner, she also had a brilliantly active mind, which for many writers of the time made her seem somewhat masculine in spirit. These contrary qualities gave her complexity, and complexity gave her power. (Greene 192)

Clytemnestra has been compared with a man in the play a couple of times, for instance, by the watchman in the very beginning of the drama "in whose woman's heart/ A man's will nurses hope" (41) or by the Chorus "your words are like a man's" (55). Even Agamemnon notices in the battle of words before making the decision to walk on the purple carpet and bringing his doom that "It does not suit a woman to be combative" (75).

Whether it was Aegisthus who seduced Clytemnestra or Clytemnestra herself seduced Aegisthus is not presented by Aeschylus. But we can definitely say that

even if the words of the Chorus are true “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!” (98-99) the way Aegisthus interprets their role in the murder by commenting, “To lure him to the trap/Was plainly woman’s work” (99) clearly reveals how Clytemnestra sowed the sense of superiority in the mind of her consort. It is the fine skill of the seducer to present himself/herself desired by projecting the image that the victim is the pursuer and the seducer is the pursued (Greene 383-391). Thus we might draw a conclusion that Clytemnestra was willing in the relationship rather than being “cajoled” by Aegisthus “with incessant flattery” (*Odyssey* Book III) and dealt with men on their own level. Clytemnestra’s understanding of Agamemnon as one “who was sweet to every Trojan Chryseis” (92) puts her in the right to be ‘sweet’ to Aegisthus.

At the end of the play, *Agamemnon*, when Clytemnestra draws the conclusion by saying “You and I,/Joint rulers, will enforce due reverence for our throne” (100) the power seeking thirst is clearly evident. The long ten years she ruled Argos in the absence of Agamemnon, the desire to rule the land after killing her husband, the seven years reign after killing Agamemnon do not portray her image to be seated at home and expect her consort to deal with the problems and hazards at all. She includes Aegisthus in her task of ruling the country just to stick to the norms of the society. This is evident in her words to the Chorus:

I have no fear that his avenger’s tread
Shall shake this house, while my staunch ally now as then,
Aegisthus, kindles on my hearth the ancestral fire.
With such a shield, strength marches boldly on. (92)

Greene says, “The nonconformity of Dandies, however, goes far beyond appearances. . . . Dandies are supremely impudent. They don’t give a damn about other people, and never try to please” (49). When Clytemnestra speaks of her love for Agamemnon in public with sexual connotative words “no seal of his have I unsealed” the Herald rather finds it conspicuous and comments, “Is it not scandal that a queen should speak such words?” (64). The readers do have a picture of a

queen who does not show any sense of propriety and is obnoxiously careless of what others think or feel about the way she is presenting herself in public. This 'careless' sense is enough to entice the mass and that is what Clytemnestra does.

The idea of reversal of roles in the trilogy helps us identify Clytemnestra as a masculine dandy. However, Clytemnestra possesses certain characteristics, interpreted through her words, actions and how other characters respond to her, with which we might also associate her with a charismatic seducer. Charisma "comes from an inner quality – self-confidence, sexual energy, sense of purpose, contentment – that most people lack and want. . . . Charismatic can learn to heighten their charisma with a piercing gaze, fiery oratory, an air of mystery. They can seduce on a grand scale" (Greene 96). Clytemnestra's authoritative nature is explicit in the way she deals with the twelve elders of Argos. In the scene where the Chorus wants to know the reason for sacrifice and offerings, she is dismissive towards them. The lines uttered by the Chorus "I ask in love; and will as loyally receive/Answer or silence" (52) give us the understanding that the Chorus could not easily thwart the superiority of her position as the Queen even though they feel that their throne is 'unfilled' in the absence of the King Agamemnon.

The way 'charismatic' seducers charm the mass might vary in the manner that they do not always entice but also germinate fear. The historical figure Rasputin's command over Czar Nicholas and Czarina Alexandra along with the mass of Russia resulted due to the fact that he proved himself to be a saint in his spiritual deliverance, but he also proved himself 'wicked' in the many sexual advances (Greene 105). This 'charismatic' seducer became the most powerful man in Russia. In the similar manner, the people of Argos feel that Clytemnestra is not in the right but also could not do anything about it because she exhibits such energy and eloquence that she is a figure to be respected with fear though not loved. The words of the Watchman at the onset of the play – "For the rest, I say no more;/My tongue's nailed down" (42) give expression to the common people's idea that Clytemnestra is notoriously involved with Aegisthus. Woman involved in extra marital affair not taking into consideration what people or society would think about them in the then Greek society was a rare scenario.

Clytemnestra's theatricality is shown when she welcomes her husband with her long welcome speech and purple carpet. Though it cannot be compared with the way Cleopatra, one of the world's greatest seducers, thrilled Caesar with her opulence and theatricality, Clytemnestra's way of pampering and projecting Agamemnon's superiority by enforcing him to walk on the rich purple carpet is with an intention. However, the unexpected drama provided by her does instigate the sense of pride in Agamemnon just the way Cleopatra's presentation of herself as a Greek goddess enchanted Caesar and pampered his sense of superiority and enthralled him (Greene 8). Clytemnestra can be called a 'Femme fatale' who is a woman of great seductive charm leading men into compromising or dangerous situations. She is such an alluring, mysterious woman that even a great commander like Agamemnon who the Chorus praises to be worthy 'to know his flock' fails to guess her evil intentions and like 'an ox for sacrifice' moves forward in her laid trap.

Clytemnestra has a sense of purpose and that is to avenge her daughter, Iphigenia's, murder. This is understandable from the fact that she waits for long ten years, waits for Agamemnon's safe return and proclaims with irony in front of Agamemnon, "Justice herself/ Shall lead him to a home he never hoped to see" (73). Nonetheless, she also plays the victim to smoothen her mass seduction. According to Ofer Zur, "In claiming the status of victim and by assigning all blame to others, a person can achieve moral superiority while simultaneously disowning any responsibility for one's behavior and its outcome. The victims 'merely' seek justice and fairness." Clytemnestra tries to convince the Chorus after the murder of Agamemnon by saying that they should have indicted Agamemnon for his sacrifice of Iphigenia, not mulct her now for the killing. She further portrays herself as a grieved mother to justify her present action: "When on my virgin daughter/ His savage sword descended, / My tears in rivers ran" (95). Ofer Zur says, "The victim stance is a powerful one. The victim is always morally right, neither responsible nor accountable, and forever entitled to sympathy." Clytemnestra fits into the role of victim playing by presenting herself as a grieved mother and by justifying her murder of Agamemnon. It is very possible that she kills Agamemnon simply to save her own life and not out of any idea of retribution for past acts.

Clytemnestra applies the strategies of power-seeking individuals who use the art of seduction to gratify their desire for power. Her uninhibitedness, victim playing, aura of mystery, eloquence, verbose, theatricality, adventurousness and magnetism lead to a particular characterization of a seductress. She was a woman of power and powerful woman who attempted to use politics for her own purposes. She is viewed as evil by many, but this is unfair and results from a lack of careful judgment. The creation of the character of Clytemnestra is Aeschylus' salute to "the ultimate form of power and persuasion" (Greene xx).

Works Cited

- Aeschylus. *The Oresteian Trilogy*. Trans. Philip Vellacott. London: Penguin Books. 1988. Print.
- Greene, Robert. *The Art of Seduction*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Ltd., 2002. Print.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Samuel Butler. *The Literature Network*. Jalic Inc., n.d. Web. 18 April 2011. <<http://www.online-literature.com/homer/odyssey/11/>>.
- McDermott, Jennifer Rae. "Transgendering Clytemnestra." *Hirundo: The McGill Journal of Classical Studies* 2 (2002): 1-8. Print.
- "seduction." Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010. CD-ROM.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Amanda Mabillard. *Shakespeare Online*. n.d. Web. 2 Jan. 2010. <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth_1_7.html>.
- Zur, Ofer. "Rethinking 'Don't Blame the Victim': The Psychology of Victimhood." *Zur Institute: Innovative Resources and Online Continuing Education*. Zur Institute. Source: Zur, O. "Rethinking 'Don't Blame the Victim': Psychology of Victimhood." *Journal of Couple Therapy* 4 (1994): 15-36. Copyright The Haworth Press, Inc. 23 June 2011. Web. 7 July 2011. <<http://www.zurinstitute.com/victimhood.html>>.