P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344
E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817
Remarking An Analisation
RNI No.UPBIL/2016/67980 Vol-I* Issue-V*August - 2016

Conventions of Production in Greek Tragic Theatre

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study the conventions of Greek theatrical productions in the context of Greek tragic plays, extensively written and performed around fifth century B. C. Through a careful examination of various dramatic and thematic conventions, I propose to highlight the communal as well as communicative aspects of Greek drama. The Greek lived in a participatory democracy, and the communication between the 'I' and the 'society' was very important to them. The tragedies penned by the prominent Greek playwrights are a clear example, as is evident through a close look at their various productions on stage. It is thus all the more important today, to read critically, the reflections of this seminal relationship in the modern adaptations of Greek tragedy, for which, an engagement with the original conventions of production seems indispensible.

Keywords: Greek Tragedy, Greek Theatrical Conventions, Greek Theatrical Productions.

Sonali Garg
Assistant Professor,
Deptt.of English,
Shivaji College,
Delhi University,
New Delhi

Introduction

Theatre, like most great works of art, is so deeply rooted in the throes of human reality that audiences in most cultures and historical periods have felt the drama enacted on their stage close enough to the drama of their lives. This semblance of theatrical art to the real business of life is proof enough of the fact that not only life, but also life's mirror (which art supposes itself to be) is dominated by the conventions that engender, enrich, and enlighten human culture in all times and ages. No wonder then, that readers and critics of Greek drama in the twentieth century should successfully detect the influence of the fifth century Athenian conventions on the aspects of production in the extant tragedies and comedies, and see an interaction between the two sets of conventions as adding a new dimension to the dramatic meaning itself. As Rush Rehm elaborates:

...Greek theatrical drive was towards reality, a grounding of issues in a public forum where the human world was set in meaningful relationship to nature, a theatre where the world was included rather than shut out. (Rehm 42)

One might add that this 'inclusion' of the external world into the theatrical folds was an inevitable feature of Greek theatre owing its origins to the very basis of drama in Greek society; the plays being part of the ritual celebrations of the great Festival of Dionysus. They thus reflect the entire public culture of fifth century Athens, where a participatory democracy enacted its political and ethical roles in an aggressively public and performative fashion.

In the context of tragedy, the conventions of representation exploited a variety of contemporary elements so as to give the dramatization of ancient myths and legends an intimate and recognizable colour. This paper shall try to examine these very physical and stylistic conventions of Greek tragic theatre both of which provide the form and expressive mode of Greek tragedy. The term 'convention' is used in a broad sense; as an expression of the tacit agreement between the actors performing on stage and their collective agreement with the viewers off-stage that enables drama to communicate its thought effectively. How positive, pulsating or purifying was this 'conventional-theatrical' experience? Let's see.

Aim of the Study

Conventions of production are the mainstay of theatre, especially in a day and date when the society was closely bound by a common set of religious and social beliefs, as in the case of fourth and fifth century B. C. Greek society. Distanced from this culture and its nuances in time and space, it seems quite essential to understand the Greek drama in the very terms in which they wrote and produced it, if we are to engage with its

P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344
E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817
Remarking An Analisation
RNI No.UPBIL/2016/67980
Vol-I* Issue-V*August - 2016

cultural and philosophical intent and content. A close look at the theatrical conventions is meant to be the first step.

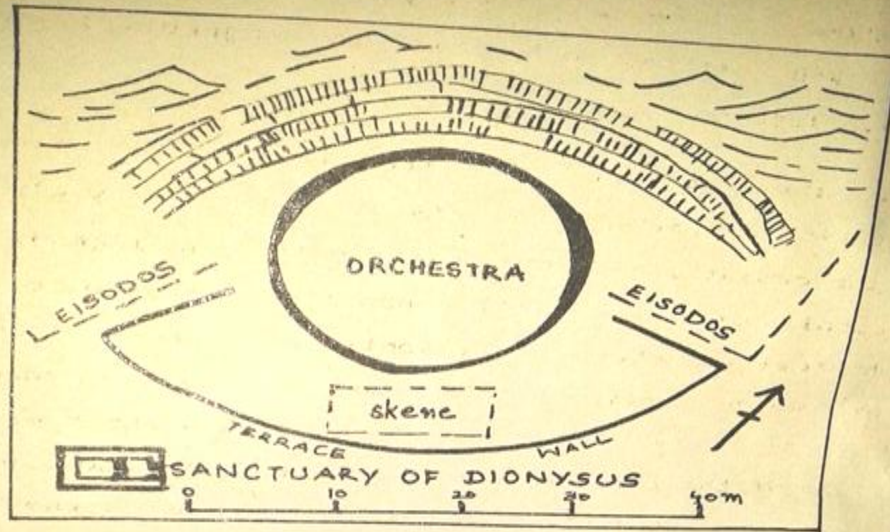

FIG 1: A GROUND PLAN OF THE THEATRE OF DIONYSUS.

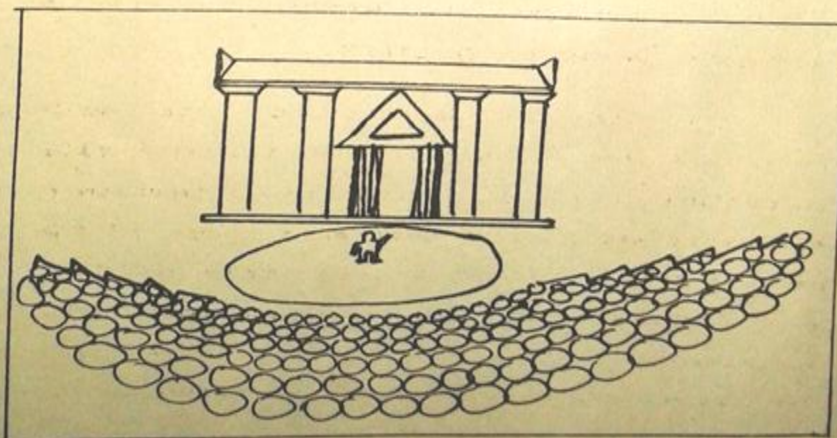

FIG 2: AUDIENCE'S EYE-VIEW OF THE ORIGINAL ACTING-AREA IN ATHENS.

The Setting, the Scene, the Story: the physical and formal components of the Greek Stage.

The Athenian stage and did not alter much between the period extending from Aeschylus to Euripides – till the end of the fifth century. Fig. 1 depicts the situation of the theatre of Dionysus as it was in the south-east slope of the Acropolis at the annual festival of the Dionysus, held in late March. The ground plan consists of a huge, round dancing floor or the centrepiece about 20 metres in diameter, called the orchestra. On its either side are the broad ramps - *eisodoi* acting both as entering spaces for the audience as well as the exits and entrances for the actors.

The *skēnē* or the stage building is placed at one side of the orchestra, which houses the actor's changing room and whose front is taken as a place or temple or as any other structure needed during the performance. Made of wood, about 12 metres long and 4 metres high, the *skēnē* was often used as a canvas for the popular landscape painting and as an object for other ritual decorations associated with the great cultural celebration that Greek drama was.

Besides these fixtures, there might also have been a low, wooden stage platform used as per the demands of the play but not overbearing on the orchestra circle. Large stage-properties like altars, statues, a cave mouth, chariots etc. could be stationed on it. In addition, two stage instruments especially associated with tragedy were the *ekkyklēma* (meaning, something which is rolled out) and the *mēchanē* (denoting something like a crane). The former was a low platform on wheels which could be brought from the central doors servicing as scene 'indoors' or 'outdoors'. The *mēchanē* was used to swing a flying object (usually a God) and set him on the stage. The human and the divine aspects of the tragic play were thus, carefully looked into, and

earmarked in a magnitude clear enough to be accessible to a crowd of almost 15000 (Taplin 10-12).

The human elements that constituted the dramatic world of the *orchēstra* were the chorus and three male actors, who did all the speaking. The chrous was an anonymous group of fifteen, whose function was to sing and dance the choral odes which occur at significant points in Greek tragedy. For the fifth century Athenian audience, they were a reflection of an integral part of their religious and secular life - the festivals, weddings, victory celebrations – all were lent ceremony and gaiety by the chrous. Though no clues have been found as regards the music and choreography used by the choral groups, the textual evidence of the choric odes clearly indicates how the convention was used by the tragedians to extend the play from its specific sequential ground into the greater and universal relief of thought.

Once the living and non-living components of the Athenian stage have been outlined, the most obvious question that props up is of their effective management i.e. the use of stage-directions. The text of the plays does not substantiate this feature, leading us to imply that whatever was 'significant' for the action of the play was included in its words. Besides, there is every reason to believe that all 'active' and plausible stage-directions were executed on the stage and the actions themselves were responsible for charting the course of that larger "action" which determined the "direction" of the play (Taplin 17).

The plays in Greek tragedy often relied for their subject-matter on the heroic/mythic accounts, with a striking emphasis laid on the element of debate (found even in the comedies). Argument and abuse were as much a part of Grecian culture as they are of the modern; in fact much more florid and uninhibited in the former than in the latter. This argumentative nature was shaped into the convention of a set debate (*agon*) by the tragedians and comedians alike; forming almost the heart of the play in tragedy. Debate being the heart of litigation as well, a formal trial often occurs in most famous tragedies, such as The Eumenides. The court of the Aeropagos is created by Athena to hear the case of Orestes. She herself presides; Apollo is summoned for defence, the Furies comprise the prosecution and the verdict is derived from a jury of select Athenian citizens (Arnott 105-106). The audience of fifth century Athens would immediately link the fortunes of the legendary hero with the operations of Athenian justice, and what's more, participate in the jurisdiction, for, "they are all lawyers; and we must remember that the Greek loved lawyers" (Sartre).

'Seeing' the story: Greek stage and Dramatic Illusion.

An important question which emerges in relation to every dramatic performance is the way in which it is accepted as a dramatic presentation by its viewers. One set of scholars believes that actors in Greek tragedy never acknowledged the audience as such, and the latter, in turn were content to view the play as a play of the actors alone; in other words, the dramatic illusion was complete. Yet, the relationship between the material and matter of Greek tragedy is so inter-dependent that the audience cannot fail to notice the former if they are responding successfully to the latter. Moreover, as Rush Rehm elaborates:

...the tragic playwrights were aware of the shifting relationship between the characters on stage and the audience, manipulating with artistry (and an admirable willingness to experiment) the spectators' perspective on, and commitment to, the action. (45)

This recognition of the relationship between the operations on the stage and their reception off-stage throws up a number of issues related to the status of actors and the methodology of acting. As regards the former, Aristotle clearly states how tragedy's biggest achievement over epic was the appearance of characters as "living and moving before us" (Poet*i*cs, 14489.24-25) i.e. characters as physical presences. The physicality of characterization, which now appears a mundane feature of drama was a crucial achievement for an age which had, till now, only legendary/mythic exponents of life's experiences. In the context of dramatic illusion however, it is the manner rather than actual presentation which engages our attention, especially when we consider the constraints of a theatre holding fifteen thousand, where, "an actor six feet high would look about three and half inches high to the spectator in front and three quarters of an inch high to the spectator at the back" (Webster 4).

In such conditions, a great amount of dramatic weight is clearly bound to be laid on a repertoire of gestures that would now appear as a prerogative of opera than that of theatre. Tragedy employs a complete range of these. One of the most prominent is that expressing grief. Euripides' *Herakles* shows a vivid example, where Herakles, after murdering his wife and children, does not wish to live. He throws his cloak over his head, bearing himself from the sight of others. Later, when Theseus persuades him to live, his coming back to life is again symbolized by the uncovering of his head.

Another popular ancient gesture is that of supplication. The petitioner kneels at his interlocutor's feet, throws one hand around his knees, and with the other hand grasps his beard, implying the meaning of "I beg you by your beard", so often heard in Greek tragedy. Aeschylus shows no example of this convention, but Sophoclean plays are full of these. In Sophocles' *Philoctetes,* Philoctetes supplicates to Nepotolemus, and in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Antigone to Polynices, who cannot break the embrace around his knees, however much he tries. Gestures of fear and horror involved one arm half outstrectched, the hand raised up as though trying to drive the object of horror away. Illustrations of Pythia, the priestess of Delphi recoiling from Furies testifies the use of this gesture. Gestures expressing joy are less identifiable, for obvious reasons in this type of drama, yet rapid motion and a whirling dance occasionally connotes the few happy moments in tragedy. Orestes' admonition to Electra in *Choeporoe*: "Ah; calm yourself. We must restrain our joy" (Thomson 199) is also suggestive of Greek decorum for women; slow movements signify culture, while the wild ones show a lack of it (Arnott 65-66). Other ways in which tragedy drew attention to itself was the use of a poetical and imagistically charged language and the intra and inter-textuality of plot, inviting audience response in a fuller and more complex sense. Hence the recognition

P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344
Remarking An Analisation
E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817 RNI No.UPBIL/2016/67980 Vol-I* Issue-V*August - 2016

scene in Euripides' *Electra* weighs down the notions of Orestes' heroism in his return under the traditional signs of his identity, to suggest how his heroism would only be an appendage to Electra's cunning in the conspiracy against Aegisthus. The audience are thus invited to recognize this anomaly, and hence become active agents rather than passive recipients of dramatic meaning.

The Shadows that Matter: the Chorus.

The interaction between the actors' rhetoric and choral lyrics is the basis of the play's movement on Greek stage; the communication between the two modes helping the communication between the two worlds of the stage and the audience.

The formal constitution of the chorus bears a strong testimony to this. Originally consisting of twelve members it grew to include fifteen, with the last uneven member assuming the role of a leader – Koryphaios, the chief participant in the conversation with the actors. The choric group entered through the *eisodoi* (ways in) or *parodois* (side roads), hence the name *parodos*, or the first chorus. Most choric odes consist of paired stanzas – a *strophe* (meaning 'turn', henceforth strophe) and antistrophe (counter-turn). The metrical pattern in one stanza is repeated precisely in the next, then a different metrical pattern is introduced in a new strophe, followed precisely in its antistrophe, and so it runs: a-a'/b-b'/c-c'/... and so on. At times, a *mesode* (middle song) is placed between two parts of a strophic pair, effecting a rhythmical break before the pattern may be repeated in the antistrophe.The *epode* (after-song) was occasionally employed to close off the chorus, irrespective of the proceeding strophic pairs (Rehm 53).

Many complex innovations were wrought upon this basic metrical scheme; such as dactylic hexametre, which was used to instill a heroic feeling within the lyric. Another generic incorporation was that of the 'Victory ode'; invoking the world of the 'beautiful and noble' ideals that the Olympian victors aspired for. In Euripides' *Electra*, the chorus hail the return of Orestes and Pylades; such an ode crowning then in the fashion of Olympic victors, not knowing the crudity of the revenge to be worked by them on Aegisthus.

Such incongruity between the choric expectation and the actual action defies the chorus' position as the mouthpiece of the poet and his intention, but at the same time shows how their role is important, as Simon Goldhill indicates:

...for its insufficient understanding of events, for its failing attempts to offer complete explanations [and] for the juxtaposition of the passionate individualism of the hero to a less extreme, more traditional attitude. (271)

All these functions are borne out in the very ties and conflicts that are developed between the chorus and the actors. Antigone's quarrel with Creon gets a sharper focus in her relation with the chorus of Theban elders than in her interludes with Creon himself. The civic elders in *Odeipus Tyrannus* on seeing the plight of their environs ask: "Why is it necessary for us to dance?"; the question reflecting not just the woes of their city, but of general humanity as a whole. Why should the Athenians celebrate; placed as they are in a fragile cosmos? This shifting of tragic focus is achieved by the extreme flexibility of character and function that the chorus enjoyed, helped by techniques such as *Kommos* (breast beating ritual as if in a mourning) wherein they shared their lyric with a dramatic character, and making of speeches etc; techniques which had served the play's subject since Aschylean times. Such is the chorus in *Choephoroe* who initially serve Clytemnestra; later, persuade the Nurse to lure Aegisthus to his doom, and yet shall not bear the burden of the matricide.

They remain, but only as voices recounting past murders; reminding the audience that all and yet not all is to be taken as mere drama. The chorus not only serve but unnerve the convention they are set in, for they are given to perform something not expected to be performed but felt: the dynamism of the dialectic called theatre.

Dressing up the Play: Characterization, Costume & Props.

Greek tragedy is usually set in an anonymous environment, working from moment to moment and from scene to scene. Therefore, the training of the Greek actors was such as to contribute to this conception of the play as a series of individual moments.

The number of actors was restricted to three, even though the entire play was to be carried on their shoulders. This called for an inevitable 'doubling' of roles within a single play - be it of a God, a slave or a maiden. This doubling of characters might have had a thematic relevance in some cases. In the first half of The Madness of Heracles, the hero saves his family from the tyrant, Lycus. *I*n the second half, he murders them himself. This shocking reversal from the role of saviour to that of an oppressor actually calls for a 'doubling' of the single role of Heracles within a single character. Similarly in *The Bacchae* it is most fitting thematically that the actor who played Pentheus should also play Agave, his mother who kills him, and returns, in a sense with her own head in her hands.

Conversely, a major role could be apportioned among several actors. The role of Theseus in *Oedipus at Colonus* must have been shared by all the three actors. In the *Agamemnon* Aechylus played Clytemnestra and later, in the *Choephoroe,* became Orestes, leaving his former role to assistants. The division shows a preference for a dialectical structure; achieved at the expense of psychological delineation of character (Arnott 165-166).

The delineation and continuity of character is important, however, if the story is to make some sense. This function was performed by mask and costume; in fact, they were the character; his primary *persona* accessible to the audience. Behind the mask, the actor could have changed without hampering the role, and his *persona* would thus remain constant. This equation between mask/costume and *persona* suggests interesting consequences in theatre. A dead character for instance, could have been represented by an actorless mask. Agave returned in *The Bacchae*, it seems, with the mask of Pentheus in her hands than any other prop suggesting a head (Arnott 175). By an extension of the same logic, we recognize a convention whereby any damage to the mask/costume denotes the same to the *persona* of

P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344
Remarking An Analisation
E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817 RNI No.UPBIL/2016/67980 Vol-I* Issue-V*August - 2016

the character. The wild appearance of Philoctetes, the defeated Xerxes dressed in rags (*The Persians*) and the poison burnt robes of Heracles (*Women of Trachis*) all suggest powerfully the woes inflicted on them by political and individual causes.

The props employed on the Greek stage evoke a rich cultural and ritualistic contemporary world along with heightening the dramatic impact of the play. Agamemnon's trampling of the richly decorated *Poikila* (purple cloth) *i*n Agamemnon is a symbolic destruction of his own wealth, suggesting the later demolition of every positive cultural value. Similarly, in the *Choephoroe,* the lock of hair symbolizing Orestes' return means not just hope, but also fear for Electra, who needs the evidence of another piece of cloth to come to terms with this unexpected arrival. Traditional symbols are thus employed imaginatively by the dramatists to fit into the thematic scheme of the play (Taplin 83).

The fact of death being one of the major sources of human sorrow, appearance of corpses and formal funeral processions are the mainstay of many a tragic play like Alcest*i*s and Suppl*i*ant Women. The issue of burial becomes in fact, the main dramatic fuel in Antigone. The heroine in punished for burying her brother honourably, and the punisher himself has to bury the corpses of his family members, having enraged the code of rites that death demands.

The most striking association of costume, props and corpse in the service of the play's subject can be seen *i*n The Bacchae. The spying Pentheus wears a long garment that reaches up to his feet like a burial raiment signifying approaching death. In the end, the props that Cadmus returns with are the pieces of the corpse of Pentheus, torn by women under the influence of Dionysus. The play's devastated, fragmented end is held together by this stunning network of visual images, built more by the objects, rather than the subjects of devastation (Rehm 67).

Talking on the Stage: Messenger Speeches and Stichomythia.

Give the increasing importance of rhetoric in the Athenian society (dating from 462 B.C. perhaps, when jurisdiction was handed over to the large popular courts) talking modes on the Athenian stage derived their chief formal nature from this popular social convention of debate and argumentation. No wonder than, that the extended speeches found throughout Greek tragedy work with conscious artifice upon an audience accustomed to the same procedures in the *ekklesia* and in the lawcourts.

An important convention of the rhetoric of tragedy, the messenger speech aims at bringing an off-stage world into the theatre in a focused and emotionally charged manner. The main purpose of the presence of an anonymous reporter is the personification of a reliable eye-witness who can report events coherently, though not affect them in any direct way. In a way, the messenger claims to be a member of the audience who were privileged to be present on the actual scene of the action being reported. The convention of messenger speech thus involved the quoting of at least one passage of direct dialogue from someone on the scene. In *The Bacchae* the second messenger actually repeats Pentheus' desperate appeal:

Mother please have mercy on me. I have done wrong,

but I am your son. Don't kill me.

Moreover, it is these speeches which defy the notion that all violence was kept "off" the stage. For instance, the messenger reporting Pentheus' dismemberment uses every gruesome expression to convey the gory action:

One of them bore an arm,another a foot still in his boot, and his ribs were

stripped with their rending. (1133-36)

These speeches are important, therefore, not for their reportage of violence "off-stage", but for their total reliance on the audience's imagination "in" the theatre, to visualize that violence in their minds. The comparison with radio play is inevitable, where language and imagination together create the 'visual' that is theatre, even if the real actors are available only behind masks; talking at a distance measurable in miles (Rehm 61-62).

The dialogue between actors on the Greek stage adopts a strict form, *stichomythia* (meaning telling a story line by line) wherein the characters converse in alternating verses; the speaker changing at the completion of each line. See the debate between the sisters in Sophocles' *Antigone:*

Antigone

Will you help me? Will you do something with me? Will you?

Ismene

Help you do what, Antigone? What do you mean?

Antigone

Would you help me lift the body...you and me?

Ismene

You cannot mean...to bury him? Against the order? (41-45)

The form, though rhythmic, does seem artificial to modern ears, especially in translation. Yet, what needs to be examined is the validity of its constant use against the more realistic devices of mask and costume. Sir John Myres suggests that the form reflects a pre-dramatic riddle convention, wherein the correct answer is elucidated in a series of questions. A more plausible answer lies in the requirements of Greek stage speech. On a stage where three actors are sharing a variety of roles, entirely dependent on masks for their identity, the problem of who is speaking what' is far more conspicuous than we can imagine. But the stichomythia convention assures that the conversation is regular and predetermined, and at the end of every iambic line, the speaker will change. The dialogue thus bounces back and forth between the conversing actors in a rhythmic fashion accessible even to the most distantly placed member of the audience (Arnott 103).

The Beginning and the End: the Prologue, Dues Ex Machina and the God's Eye View

The constraints of a time bound presentation insist that most theatrical performances, including Greek tragedy, emerge 'out of nowhere' and depart into a 'no-man's land'. The opening section of the play is therefore used to denote the main line of action,

P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344
E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817
Remarking An Analisation
RNI No.UPBIL/2016/67980 Vol-I* Issue-V*August - 2016

while the concluding part tries to articulate why or how the play ended as it did. The convention, by its very lack of definition afforded ample space for innovation; hence the variations in the very nature of the prologue. *The Persians* opens with the chorus, as is befitting a play concerned with individuals rather than a single individual. The elders of the group invoke the armed convoys, and the end, their kommos with Xerxes indicates how the hopes infused with their arrival have died along with the moving mournful procession (Rehm 68).

The more common mode of opening the play is a monologue delivered by a dramatic character before the chorus enters in the *parodos*. The primary speaker (who may be the protagonist, a lesser character, or even a non-entity) might be joined by another character to induce the prologue with the dramatic effects of the dialogue. The prologue delivered jointly by the Nurse and the Tutor in *Medea* serves to bring home a contemporary atmosphere before the shattering of the heroic code which takes place in a mother's slaughter of her own children.

As regards the ending of tragedies, a most dramatic yet problematic convention is the 'deus ex machina' or 'god from the machine' wherein a flying figure, usually a god, was descended upon the roof of the *skene* through a crane-like machine. The 'dues' figure does not attempt a perfunctory ending of the play, but rather, as Rush Rehm puts it:

...provides an explanation of what has transpired, predicts what lies ahead and offers an aetiology for the foundation of a cult connected with tragic events. (70)

The cult practices described by the *dues* were known to the fifth century audience. For the present critical attention, the '*dues*' become symbolic of the irony, iconoclasm and camouflage that are characteristic of man's relationship with divinity. Their presence on the scene of human confusion often ends up, as Greek tragedy shows, in the hashing up of real issues beneath and absolute injunction, as confounding and insensitive as the problem itself. Castor and Pollux, the divine godheads who appear at the end of *Electra*, hold Apollo responsible for the matricide irrespective of the actual action, and unmindful of the emotional turmoil, order Electra's marriage with Pylades. Similarly, Athena's presence in *Ion* does little to assure Ion of the Apollo's paternity, and she herself tells Creusa to conceal her real relationship with Ion (Rehm 71).

Yet, the '*dues'* can also provide reassurance in cases when the appearance of a mortal character in a godlike manner changes the tempo of a situation haunted by divine interference. At the end of Euripides' *Herakles*, Theseus redeems on human level the tragedy that Lyssa and Iris have heaped in the form of Herakles' madness. His efforts to make Herakles live again on the strength of personal grit is a powerful re-examination of the actual power of the faith that human beings have registered in the divine across the centuries (Rehm 72).

They came; they saw; they were conquered: the Agon in the Audience.

To understand how Greek tragedy affects its audience, its conventional nature must be remembered as well as forgotten. For, though the prescriptions of theatrical production successfully delineate the dramatic framework of a play, the real communication of its subjective thought transpires through the subjective variations that each dramatist attempts within these conventional limits.

A set of critics, however, have unnecessarily instilled uniform fallacies regarding the fifth century audience response (See Taplin 160-167). The most popular assumption is that all the important action in Greek tragedy takes place off-stage and is merely spoken and sung about on stage. A careful textual study of the plays shall reveal that all action which is significant does take place 'on' stage, and that which is spoken and sung about is supposed to be the backdrop, not the frontispiece. To count events such as battles, massacres, natural disasters etc. as true action is to forget that real tragedy consists of the effects of such catastrophes and in the way they form or deform human lives – which are depicted on the tragic stage with full force.

Another misconception is to equate the response to Greek tragedy with its so-called "ritualistic" nature. Though these plays were located at the site of ritual celebrations (the sacred area of Dionysus) and were preceded and followed by fixed rituals, there is nothing inherently ritualistic about Greek tragedy. In fact, Oliver Taplin convincingly justifies how a necessary precondition of the great age of tragedy was its 'anti-ritual' stance; and adds:

...It had to be human and various, beyond the control of repeated superstition; ancestral taboo, actions stylized and codified beyond anything mimetic - it had to exploit ritual, not just conserve and subserve it. (161)

By the same logic of purposeful exploitation' of ritual, one can defy the notion that all among the audience knew the story; usually derived from a popular myth. The story was indeed known as a mythic legend, yet it was totally unknown what "plot" the tragedian would carve from the inherited mythic material. The distinct treatment of the Electra myth by the three great tragedians is a case in point. The treatment moreover, did not reflect any political or philosophical propaganda, but the true moral and social pre-occupations of the fifth century in association of course, with the heroic setting of the play.

If all the notions discussed above do not constitute the real audience response, what does? A scrap of fifth century criticism provides an important clue:

The man who deceives show more justice than he who does not; and the man who is deceived has more wisdom than he who is not. (qtd. in Taplin 167)

In writing this, Georgias, the Sicilian theorist and teacher of rhetoric has shown how dramatic fiction deceives (as Plato believed) only to educate and enthrall. Hence the tragedian who is able to capture the emotions of his audience is more just than all moralists put together, and the captivated are none the worse for it. For they are feeling pity and fear for individuals unrelated to them; learning how the universal chain of compassion knits them with people and events lost beyond centuries. This compassion is both the message as well as meaning of all great

tragedy, for it teaches the audience the skill/grit to confront the tragic turns of their own lives. This understanding, perspective or persuasiveness is not just the *agōn* which tragic drama inspires, but also a concrete example of the fact that art does not merely imitate, but often super-ordinates human life.

Conclusion

This paper, in its attempt to scrutinize the main conventions of Greek theatre, has thus presented a bird's eye view of what the Greek tragic plays attempted to do or were able to do on stage, produced as they were, for a comprehensive public viewing. The seven main subheads of the paper deals with seven major components of these productions. Part A talks about the formal setting and the scene of the plays; also, how the playwrights used theatrical space and actions as part of their instruments of storytelling. Physical action and verbal speech were thus intermittently combined to constitute the total meaning, and this gave Greek tragedy its distinct artistic colour.

Part B talks about the very notion of connecting with the players on stage; something we now term dramatic illusion. Greek philosophers clearly point out the psychic and emotional impact of living players performing for a living audience. This automatically implies the use of gestures and actions that are familiar to the audience, and Greek tragic plays employ a variety of these as part of their acting on stage.

Part C elucidates the significant role played by the chorus, whose songs and commentary provide not only the background to many a scene on the stage, but also add to their meaning and initiate a strand of critique.

The costumes and props used on the Greek stage are elaborated in Part D, which emphasize the use of masks and other prominent aspects used by the players. They are of special importance on a stage removed from its audience by a distance measurable in miles, and connote how theatre still managed to communicate and inspire an audience response that was similar to that felt on a close reading of the plays.

Part E is devoted to a study of the dialogues, the messenger speeches that bring an off-stage world onto the stage and create the right ambience for the dramatic emotion. Part F talks about the beginning and the end; two most important moments in any time-bound production. They set the tragedy in its proper context and also further the oncoming audience response, which is the mainstay of how certain universal emotions are seen or felt by a common society. Part F tries to surmise upon this very response, the *agon,* which is common to a modern reader of Greek tragedy even today.

Findings

The richness and multifarious usefulness with which the conventions discussed above served the fifth century Greek tragic theatre can hardly be over-emphasized. For the twentieth century director of Greek tragedy in translation, what do they mean? One, that these channels of dramatic meaning must never be ignored, but their verbal and visual impact must be carefully studied before a play is actually 'adapted'. Secondly, though these conventions may appear defunct when placed in the technical world of modern theatre, their subjective use can still be exploited for an unusually rich dramatic impact; especially in the case of costume and props. One can only hope that modern directors, in their zeal of 'free invention' do not under-estimate the rewards of 'imitating' these theatrical conventions, for they are, as T.S. Eliot beautifully put it:

...the actual and felt play, which is always the real thing ... the amazing unity of Greek ... the unity of thought and feeling, action and speculation in life.

References

1. Arnott, Peter D. (1989), *Public and Performance* in the Greek Theatre, Routeledge, London.
2. Eliot, T. S. (1951), "Seneca in Elizabethan Translations*", Selected Essays*, OUP.
3. Goldhill, Simon (1986), *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge UP, London.
4. Rehm, Rush (1992), *Greek Tragic Theatre*, Ed. John Russel Brown, Routeledge, London.
5. Sartre, Jean Paul (18 June 1961), Interview with Kenneth Tynan, *Observer.*
6. Taplin, Oliver (1978), *Greek Tragedy in Action*, Metheun, London.
7. Webster, T. B. L (1970), *Greek Theatre* Production, Metheun, London.
8. Figs. 1 and 2 reproduced from:Taplin, Oliver (1978), *Greek Tragedy in Action*, Metheun, London.
9. AESCHYLUS: Vellacott, Philip, trans. (1961), The Persians, By Aeschylus, Penguin, London.
10. Thomson, George, trans. (1965), The Oresteia Trilogy, By Aeschylus, Ed. Robert W. Corrigan, Dell, New York.
11. SOPHOCLES:Jameson, Michael, trans. (1957), "Women of Trachis", By Sophocles, Complete Greek Tragedies, Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, U of Chicago P, Chicago.
12. Watling, E. F., trans. (1953), Electra and Other Plays, By Sophocles, Penguin, London.
13. -----------------, trans. (1947), The Theban Plays, By Sophocles, Penguin.
14. EURIPIDES: Way, A. S., trans. (1965), Euripides: Plays, By Euripides, 2 Vols, Dent, London.