

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Referred & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Vol. 1 Issue 2 April 2015

Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh

Email: editor@expressionjournal.com
www.expressionjournal.com



REFLECTION OF ATTIC ELEMENTS IN THE DEPLOYMENT OF CHORUS IN 'MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL' BY T S ELIOT AND 'SAMSON AGONISTES' BY JOHN MILTON: A CRITICAL COMPARISON

Shahad Bin Aly

**Assistant Professor of English
Rouzathul Uloom Arabic College
Farook College PO, Calicut, Kerala**

Abstract

The device of the chorus had its birth in Attic drama. Every Greek play had a chorus, a band of singers and dancers. The chorus remain on the stage throughout the play, and they sang and dance between episodes. The choric songs reported events that took place of the stage or between episodes. Sometimes the chorus gave advise, made comments and generalised. The chorus was thus an indispensable and at the same time a unique feature of ancient Greek drama. Most of the Greek tragedies have their beginning with a choral performance, in which a group of men and women sing and dance in praise of god Dionysus. Choral performances were an inevitable part of the plays until the time of Aeschylus, one of the greatest Greek tragedians. Sophocles, another greatest Greek tragedian, changed the structure and pattern of the chorus, through his plays. Modern theatre has dispensed with this structural uniqueness of the Greek theatre on the ground that it is artificial and unnecessary. But many writers like John Milton and Eliot have cleverly deployed the chorus to interact with the audience and to convey the messages of the writer.

Key-Words

Murder in the Cathedral, Samson Agonistes, Greek Tragedies, Chorus, Martyrdom, Classical Drama, Oedipus Rex.



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'Murder in the Cathedral' by T S Eliot and 'Samson Agonistes' by John Milton are two most famous tragic plays that have used the elements of Chorus in the finest way possible. In 'Murder in the Cathedral', the chorus is introduced to represent and interpret Becket's, the protagonist of the play, Martyrdom. In introducing this classical feature, Eliot is not merely imitating the ancient theatre, on the other hand, his chorus is vitally connected with the team and spirit of his play that mediates between the action and the audience. It intensifies the action by projecting its emotional consequences. The chorus in the play, 'Murder in the Cathedral', is composed of poor women of Canterbury, the sweepers and scrubbers, who lead a very low life, filled with fear, poverty, misery and insecurity. John Milton has employed chorus in a different perspective in his 'Samson Agonistes'. Coleridge speaking of 'Samson Agonistes' remarked that it was the finest imitation of the ancient Greek drama that ever had been or ever would be written. The classical character of the play, which is so very conspicuous, is too fold. The classical character can be seen both in the form and in the spirit of the play, and also in the structure and in the style of the play. The most important classical features are the use of the chorus. To Milton the introduction of the chorus seemed a notable innovation. He speaks of the chorus in his preface to the play and in the preface, he attempts to justify the adoption of the classical form. Perhaps nothing in 'Samson Agonistes' reveals more strikingly Milton's complete mastery of the mechanism of Greek tragedy than the use of the chorus. In this play, the chorus plays precisely the part which it has in the classical drama Oedipus Rex. In his use of the chorus, Milton is more influenced by Sophocles than Euripides, Milton's favourite Greek dramatist. In Sophocles the chorus is identified with the main interest, the dramatic 'leitmotif'. It reveals what has passed on the stage, prepares the audience what is coming and maintains a very close sympathy with the characters. In Sophocles the chorus is one of the characters, while Euripides operates the chorus in a different manner. The

The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132

aloofness of the chorus from the dramatic developments in place of Euripides is a commonplace of criticism. Euripides assigns to the chorus duties which make it internal in the drama. The interest of his chorus interludes lies rather in themselves than in their relation to the events take place on the stage. In the use of chorus Milton follows Sophocles, not Euripides, but the contents of the chorus recall Milton's favourite Euripides. The moralising nature of the chorus is Euripidean and the choral Odes in the play are full of maxims, the like of which we find in the choral Odes of Euripides. The present paper is an attempt to study how these two legends, John Milton and T. S. Eliot, have deployed the chorus to perform their plays before the audience.

The play, 'Murder in the Cathedral' starts with the speech of the chorus. The poor women of Canterbury moved by some instinctive fear of some unknown danger threatening them, gather in the Canterbury Cathedral. They have come seeking shelter in the security of that venerable edifice. To them their Archbishop is the most important person, for they have recognised and thus venerate his greatness. Even though they deplore Becket's exile, they do not want the archbishop to return home. They have a premonition that if he returned, something terrible would happen. They watch Becket's return to England with a glowing fear. In the play these words of the chorus strike at the very outset the tragic note. The poor women of Canterbury fear that they may be compelled to bear witness to something terrible. They refer to the cycle of seasons which at no stage brings them consolation or security and yet they have faith in God who is standing outside time, works out the pattern of events in the world.

The month of December is ought to be a happy one, for Christmas falls in that month, but in that December, ironically, it is the month that sees Becket's martyrdom. When the poor women wait in the great Cathedral with fear in their hearts, a messenger comes announcing Becket's return. The news throws the chorus into a state of panic, for the past seven years, when Becket was away, they were like flock without shepherd, they were only partly living, managing to avoid the attention of the wealthy and the powerful. But now if Becket returned, they would fall into the notice of the king and the barrens, and the present tenor of their life would be disturbed. That is why they want their beloved Archbishop to return to France and he should return not only to save himself but also to save them. When they express this sincere wish of their hearts, one of the priests rebukes them. When the Archbishop arrives and overhears the last part of the speech of the chorus, and he tells the priest not to reprimand the poor women, for they speak much better than what they know. They seem to have a dim perception of how eternity influences the time. Becket here agrees the premonition of those poor women and tells the priests about the two attempts on his life, on his way to Canterbury. Something more terrible would ensue, but all seem as though they are the preparations for the final event that may happen at any moment. At the temptation scene of Becket, it is immaterial whether the chorus is on the stage. But during this protracted exercise in temptation, the Greek chorus remains on the stage throughout the action. It seems that Eliot also visualised the chorus as remaining on the stage throughout this long scene, but while enacting the play for the sake of theatrical convenience the chorus is withdrawn from the stage during temptation.

When Becket invites those around him to watch the outcome of the event, the chorus expect something dreadful. They knew that nowhere else can they find peace and security. Becket stands triumphant over powerful temptation and the chorus feel that the

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ISSN: 2395-4132

coming moments would spell out something very frightening. They feel that the forces of hell are all around them. They make a last appeal to Archbishop to save himself and by that act save them also. It is clear that the women of Canterbury want to be saved only on worldly blame, the saving here is not the saving of the soul but of their worldly life. The appeal of the poor people and the priests does not have any effect on Archbishop. He sees his path very clearly before him, a very hard path he has purged himself of all elements of egoism in him. He has now submitted himself to the will of God, unmindful of the consequences. When Becket makes his Christmas sermon, the chorus listen in rapt attention. He tells the congregation how a martyr is made; martyrdom is not a chance occurrence, and it cannot be brought about by the desire of the murdered man nor by the work of the murderers, but a martyr is chosen by God. Becket concludes his sermon expressing his belief that soon Canterbury will have another martyr, which means that the chorus can expect Becket's martyrdom. The chorus in their next song once again refers to the cycle of seasons. they are not hopeful of a happy spring, for the thought comes to them that only death for the sake of God, for the sake of faith can purify and redeem the world.

Four days after the Christmas, four knights call on Becket and threaten him and when Becket refuses to accede to their demands, they promise to return with arms and leave. The chorus is now wrapped by abject fear, the fear that has sharpened their senses and they feel that the evil represented by the knights is spreading all over the world in homes and towns, and in far of countries and beyond seas. After expressing their terror and disgust they confess their spiritual weakness, for they are ashamed of themselves, and they pleaded the archbishop to forgive them and pray for them. It is here that we find the chorus becoming penitent and it is their sincere repentance that ultimately makes them worthy of redemption. The archbishop observes that their fear and horror and shame are their share of eternal burden of living, but on the other side great glory awaits them and very soon gods purpose will be completed before their very eyes. The priests using force, take the archbishop to the interior of the Cathedral, a spot considered as safe and secured, but the chorus is not reassured, for they hear a Latin hymn about the day of judgement. They express their feeling about death, hell and heaven. They have become restless thinking of their beloved archbishop's safety. They think that they are surrounded by horror and their fear is that they will be condemned to something worse than hell, the everlasting separation from God. How can they save themselves from a tragic extremity, they thought.

Answer to their prayer comes in a bewildering manner. The knights return and Becket is brutally murdered. The chorus witness the murder in stupefaction and horror, and they believe that the stain of the crime has fallen on everything in the world, including them. The very order of action is changed, all sense of time and space is annihilated. The chorus is conscious of only one thing, all pervasive evil. Thus, they stand unable to collect their thoughts. It seems to them that it is impossible to cleanse the defiled world. The knights now bring out their argument in justification of the murder. The priests who remained equally stunned, like the chorus, now recover their power of thinking and they realise that the archbishop has become a saint. Hence, they must shake themselves of their sense of despair and desolation and offer thanks to God. The chorus also now manages to shake their horror off. God has to be thanked for the many favours shown to them and the glory of God must be recognised in every object. The reasons that come and go are only the manifestations of divine glory of God. In the past god redeemed man through the

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www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132

crucifixion of Christ and the martyrdom of saints and the spots of martyrdom become holy ground, and these spots renew man's faith in God and strengthen his spiritual life. They also realise that martyrs are necessary for the redemption of the world.

The chorus expresses their special thanks to God for he has blessed the Canterbury with a Saint and this truth remain clinging to their worldly wisdom. They were more concerned with their material security than their spiritual welfare. They rejected god's all demanding love and hence the poor women cannot escape the responsibility for the events that culminated in the archbishop's martyrdom. Now that true wisdom has come to them, they appeal for mercy and they hope that their archbishop, who has risen as a saint, will intercede for them. So, they pray, "Blessed Thomas pray for us".

The chorus in the play are primarily interpreters of events and they help with the audience to react to what happens on the stage. The poor women composing the chorus represent a particular group belonging to a particular period in history. Eliot himself has said that; he wrote that choric speeches not for an anonymous chorus, but for the charwomen of chorus. He has identified himself with those charwomen who represent the common people of Christian community of 12th century England. Hence their thoughts and words can be taken as those of the common people themselves. Though they are many in number, they have one voice, one philosophy and one perspective. The chorus reveals change of moods, and they show despair. The chorus reveals change of moods, they show despair, they reveal hope, and at the end they change in their attitude to what has happened. At first, they remain as frightened spectators, but at the end they get to themselves involved in what has happened. Perhaps Eliot's chorus in this play is only example in the theatre of a chorus, that undergoes a change of character while the chorus changes its moods, our moods also change and lead to realise the supreme truth that it is the duty of man to submit himself willingly to the will of God. The play concludes with the fervent prayer of chorus,

“Lord have mercy upon Us
Christ have mercy upon Us
Lord have mercy upon Us
Blessed Thomas pray for Us”

In Milton's play 'Samson Agonistes', the chorus is so built into the structure of the play, and without the chorus the play would fall into pieces. It forms an indispensable part of the play. From the end of the prologue until the final calamity, the chorus never leaves the scene at all. As long as Samson is on the stage, the chorus helps to illustrate Samson's character. The chorus tells us what type of man Samson is, partly by contrast and partly by sympathy. This is true not only of the dialogue in which the chorus joins but also of the long choric interludes. These interludes always grew out of something which Samson or one of the other characters has said or suggested. Again, the chorus tend to make us clear the motives of Samson's conduct. They make us understand the nature of atmosphere of the play, for example, Samson plays for the advent of death, the great reliever and comforter. The chorus indirectly justifies Samson's mood of despair by speaking of the mutability of worldly grandeur. They speak of the changes and chances under which even the strongest may bow and grow faint. When Samson has been repulsed by Dalila, the chorus breaks out into a long condemnation of women. This vehement invective against women carries

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ISSN: 2395-4132

forward the idea of the foregoing scenes in which women hood, as represented by the Dalila, is held up to ridicule. It also reflects what passes in the mind of Samson himself.

In another scene the chorus dwells upon the futility of uninspired strength of Samson. Then it speaks of the beauty of resignation and patience. The chorus again reveals Samson's willingness to die. It is easy for us to understand that many examples are there to show how skilfully Milton has related the chorus to the main motif of the play. When obeying the summons, Samson leaves the stage, it is the chorus along with the Manoa that sustains the interest of the audience. When the catastrophe happens it is the chorus that exemplifies the main purpose of the tragedy. Milton might barely claim to have fulfilled the Aristotelian precept that the chorus must be regarded as one of the actors, and as part of the whole as joining the action. Hence it has been said by critics that the choric part portions of the play reveal more Milton the seer than Milton the singer. Unlike Eliot, the force of moral sentiments in Milton, does eclipse the lyrical beauty of the Odes.

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