

**OEDIPUS, THE ROLE OF MOIRAI AND FREE WILL****Aditi Chaudhary**

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**ABSTRACT**

Sophocles wrote Oedipus the King as a part of trilogy in fifth century BC. It is a tragedy which depicts the power of Fates similar to many other Greek tragedies wherein godly powers are unconquerable and destiny of anyone cannot be controlled. This destiny can be known through the oracles. In this paper the role of Fate has been analysed in reference to Oedipus, the king. It is explored that if the actions of humans are pre-determined then can human effort change the course of destiny. The paper also tries to assess whether Oedipus should be held responsible for his actions, whether he had a choice or was he destined to make the choices he made which caused his downfall.

**Keywords:**

Greek Mythology, Fates, Oedipus, Myths

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**INTRODUCTION**

The collection of all stories, myths and folklore about gods, goddesses, heroes, elements, creatures etc that has been in existence, since ancient times, is Greek mythology. As per Robert Graves, myth serves mainly two functions. The first one was to determine the origins and ends of the world, the formation of first human beings, the destination of souls and the second is to substantiate and explain the rituals, rites and customs in the current social system. Greek myths were introduced in early bronze ages as an oral tradition which unravelled slowly in the ancient texts and literature.

**The myth of Fates: The Moirai**

In Greek mythology, the deities do not possess all the powers and are vulnerable to foibles. It was believed that the Gods such as Zeus, Kronos and Uranos were aware of their demise, the circumstances leading to and times of their deaths. But they also succumbed to their Fates. This led to the concept of Moirai. Apparently, in the Greek culture, they always tried to find logic in the ways of Universe and thus the concept of Fates properly adjusts.

The Moirai, also called as three sisters of Fates, shape the scheme of destiny. They not only represent it but also determine it. They control the lives of the people throughout their existence, right from their birth to their deaths. The Fates were the off springs of Zeus and Themis (Goddess of Justice).

**The tale of Oedipus:**

At a time when Laius was the king of Thebes, he was foretold about the future by an oracle. The oracle told him that he will bear a son with his wife and queen Jocasta. This son would kill his father Laius and marry his mother. As soon as the son was born, King Laius ordered his wife and servants to kill the infant. No servant could do it so the baby was bound by feet and left to die on Mount Cithaeron. As destiny would have it, when the baby was left to die, a shepherd passed by and felt pity for the baby. He took him and took care of him. After sometime, he gave the baby to another shepherd who worked for the king of Corinth. The king of Corinth, Polybus, did not have any children of his own and he took the baby with great pleasure and tended to him as his own. The baby grew up as the prince of Corinth, but there were always rumours of him not being Polybus's son, so he consulted an oracle. The oracle told him that he would slay his father and marry his mother. He became desperate to circumvent the fate and decided to leave Corinth as he believed that Polybus and Merope were his true parents. While he was on his way to Thebes, he met his biological father Laius. They had an argument and in the heat of the same Oedipus pride came in the way and he killed Laius. Later when he went to Thebes, he was able to solve the riddle of

Sphinx. The Sphinx was: "What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?". The answer was a person. Oedipus answered the riddle correctly and moved to Thebes. The people of Thebes were mourning the death of their king Laius. But they were happy that the Sphinx riddle was solved. The reward of getting the city freed from the curse of Sphinx was the hand of queen Jocasta and the crown of Thebes. So, Oedipus was made their king and was married to Jocasta, his biological mother. Although, he was not aware of the prophesy told to king Laius but it came true. Oedipus thus killed his father and married his mother.

The city was shown to be ravaged with the plague sent by Apollo. The priest and elders of the city requested Oedipus's help to get relief from the plague. He sent his brother in law Creon, to pick the brains of an oracle at Delphi. He foretold that the plague will finish only if the killer of the former king Laius is found. The murderer should be brought to justice. Oedipus pledged to find the killer. He summoned the blind prophet Tiresias. Tiresias had the ability to see the truth. He was the son of Everes (a shepherd) and Chariclo (a nymph). His eyesight was taken by the gods because he revealed their secrets. Another tale of his being blind was that he had seen Goddess Athena bathing naked. Tiresias declined to speak as he could see the pain the truth will bring to all, if it is revealed. He suggested Oedipus to stop searching for the murderer, but Oedipus is angered. Tiresias then revealed that Oedipus himself is the killer of Laius. Oedipus doesn't pay heed to what Tiresias has said and accused him of corruption. He left proposing a riddle which says that the one who has slayed Laius will turn out to be both father and brother to his own children, and the son of his own wife.

At this time when Oedipus ordered Creon to be executed for undermining him, Jocasta told him that he shouldn't pay heed to the oracles as they do not come true. She told Oedipus about the oracle Laius received about his son killing his father and marrying the mother. She also told him that the prophesy did not come true as Laius was slayed by the bandits on the roads to Delphi. This conversation reminded Oedipus about the person he had killed and now he started thinking that what Tiresias said might actually be true. At this time, a messenger arrived and brought the news of death of the King of Corinth, Polybus. Oedipus was happy about the news as he believed that the prophesy that he will kill his father would not be true. But he was still fearful that he might commit incest with his mother. When he told the same to the messenger, he revealed that he was an adopted son to queen Merope and Polybus, and he shouldn't worry. This messenger was actually the same shepherd who had tended to the infant and gave the baby to Polybus. He had also seen Oedipus kill Laius. Now Jocasta started to realize what has actually transpired, she requested Oedipus to not ask any more questions. But he is insistent and threatened shepherd with execution if he doesn't reveal the whole truth. Finally, it comes out that, Oedipus was the son Laius and Jocasta had ordered the servants to keep the baby on the mountain to be left to elements.

While Oedipus was analysing the tragedy and cursing himself, Jocasta ran away to the palace and hanged herself. Oedipus, after seeing Jocasta's body pulled two gold pins from her dress and put them in his own eyes. Oedipus asked Creon to take care of his daughters and begs to be exiled.

### **Fate and Oedipus:**

The question here is if actually the responsibility of a persons' action lies in his own hands? Or there is a superior power which has already determined the course of events happening in a persons' life. It can be observed in the plays written by Sophocles that his view of augury and prophecy is traditional and conservative. The prophesies in the Oedipus Trilogy are proved to be true. The protagonist in Sophocles story sustains the sympathy from the audience for the whole part of the play. He is vulnerable and brilliant but at the same time overconfident and rash. This leads him to the very fate he tries to circumvent. He tries to avoid killing his father and so he leaves the kingdom of Corinth. He tries to go away and never return as he has no wish to commit the heinous crimes. But when he gets involved in an argument with Laius and Laius behaves inappropriately and attacks Oedipus, he kills Laius unaware of the fact that Laius was his father. So actually, he is trying to avoid his fate but is running straight into it. Oedipus in his search for the killer of Laius shows brilliance and confidence. He thinks that if he is able to solve this riddle then he would get similar glory as he got when he cracked the riddle of Sphinx. He is assured that the Fate has been circumvented and the destiny as proclaimed by the oracles is not true. This leads him to his fall and blindness. Thus, he actually becomes a victim of Fate.

### **Fate and Free Will:**

In contemporary society fate is used in reference to the power that exercises control over all the happenings of the world and none has the ability to alter its discourse, whereas free will is used in reference to the ability of an individual to exercise control over his decisions and opinions without being influenced by anything. However, according to the ancient oxford dictionary, fate of an individual is predetermined and any modification in one's

fate is impossible. Each individual performs tasks which are prearranged for him. There is no scope of exercising one's own choice or free will. This is akin to the concept of fate and free will in Greek mythology.

In Oedipus Rex, there have been many occurrences wherein significant effort was made to evade Fate by the mortals but ironically the actions taken by them to do so led to the achievement of Fate itself. Oedipus tried to find genuineness of the events happening with and around him. He consistently followed every mystery and does everything to find the truth even without heeding to requests of stopping search. Thus, he acted on his free will because he declined to abandon his search. It can be observed here that Oedipus had no prophesy wherein he needed to find the truth about what has transpired. His character led him to take decisions which were wrong. He had a choice to become the king of Thebes or move on. He took a decision to accept the crown, this action of his led to the fulfilment of the prophesy. When the climax of the play came, Oedipus accepted that it was his actions and choices that led him to his fate and fall from the heroic esteem.

Oedipus had an inquisitive nature. It is not clear from where had this character trait originated. It is observed that the plague was sent by Apollo who is a god to destroy the city. If this had not happened then it wouldn't have been necessary to find the killer of king Laius. This shows that the protagonist Oedipus was humbled by Fate or gods. They were also responsible for his downfall. The gods were not punishing Oedipus for his actions or insolence. They were exhibiting their power. Oedipus should not be treated in this way as he was unaware of committing any crime.

Simultaneously, Oedipus also had a lot of flaws. He was rash, lost temper easily, enraged, judgemental and inquisitive. He had a free will and he freely chose the actions which led to his own ruin.

#### **Conclusion:**

Fate is the main agent behind the tragic life situations of Laius, Jocasta and Oedipus. All these people had done devastating acts to circumvent the events of destiny. Jocasta bore the child which could kill the king Laius. He ordered the killing of child and Oedipus killed his father and married his mother. All of this was done to escape fate but the efforts proved to be futile. Oedipus was so overconfident in his endeavours that he simply did not understand that it is not mandatory to solve every difficulties and riddles by applying logic and intelligence. There are some mysteries which should not be resolved at all.

After observing and analysing all the facts, it can be observed that Oedipus doesn't have a complete free will nor is he a victim destiny. Many of the circumstances in his life are decided by Fate but at the same time his actions had been taken on free will. He himself decided and chose to leave Corinth, murder a man and marry remaining unaware about his origin and identity. All this led to his downfall and his tragic disastrous life.

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