

Political parallels: Contemporary Pakistan and Aristophanes' Comedies

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ABSTRACT

Aristophanes one of the Greek comedians, pointed out very beautifully and tactfully the political parallels of his age through the use of certain rhetorical devices such as invective and pasquinade. The aim of this paper was to trace down the political parallels between the Aristophanes comedies and the Pakistani political situations. Fortunately or unfortunately, the same sort of political parallels were traced down by the researchers in the current Pakistani political arena which is as matter of interest as it was in the days of Greek Comedies. The researchers found in abundance the political parallels through the use of same devices as were employed by Aristophanes in his comedies.

KEYWORDS: Political Parallels, Greek Comedy, Aristophanes, Invective, Pasquinade

INTRODUCTION

THEORETICAL SIGHT:

Talking about Sheikh Sa'adi, a great Persian poet of thirteenth century, Emerson says, "He speaks to all nations and is perpetually modern" (qtd. in The Gulistan of Saadi, Punjab Text Book Board). If we consider this universality and modernity as the yardstick of great literature, the comedies of Aristophanes are great by all means. Almost all of Aristophanes' surviving comedies are "political allegories" (Vickers, p. xvi) that revolve around the political figures of the Greece of 5th century B.C. The readers of Aristophanes's comedies cannot help drawing parallels between the contemporary Pakistani politics and the political condition of Ancient Greece as depicted by Aristophanes. The aim of this research is to lay focus on two of his surviving plays Knights and Wasps. These parallels can be drawn on two levels: explicit level and implicit level. Aristophanes himself had employed both explicit and implicit ways to expose the vile nature of the politicians and statesmen of his time. Sometimes he quite overtly mentions the politicians and their wrong doings, and sometimes he uses similes, metaphors, historical allusions and references to disclose the corrupt politicians, generals, and jurists of the day, sometimes he makes his characters behave in a way which unveils their true nature.

The researchers in the study focused the political parallels found between the comedies by Aristophanes and the current political scenario in Pakistan. Though there exist considerable great gaps of time and space, language and culture, ideas and ideology of both the countries, yet the political parallels in the study found closest one.

The researchers in the current study had employed the political parallels to explore the similarities found between the politicians of Aristophanes' age and the politicians of Pakistan in current situation. First of all, the word Parallel according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, means "a person, a situation, an event etc. that is very similar to another, especially one in a different time and place" (1102). On the other hand, Political parallel: in the light of the definition given above means similarity in the political conditions of two places which belong to two different eras. Further, the researchers exploited the device called invective which according to:

J. A. Cuddon is a "Speech or writing, which is denunciatory, abusive or vituperative... Many writers have employed invective for a variety of purposes, the commonest being to express dislike, disgust, contempt and even hatred. It is often directed against a political person... occasionally against a class or group" (455). Thirdly, the term lampoon has been used by the researchers to trace down the political parallels. Lampoon as literary device "... suggests excess, coarseness, a rough crudity; lampoon in fact is a virulent or scurrilous form of satire. It is most likely to be found in graphic caricature than in writing but there are a few notable examples in literature" (Cuddon, 481).

Practical Sight:

One of the Aristophanes' surviving play Knights is a direct hit on Cleon, the most powerful demagogue of his time. In this play we can trace much political satire, and most of the time the playwright is seen busy satirizing the political intentions, attitude and personality of Cleon. Here Cleon has been mentioned by the name of Paphlagon which means 'Scolder' in Greek (Roche, 66). In the opening scene of Knights Nicias enters the stage exclaiming with great pain swearing and cursing Paphlagon (Cleon) because:

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Ever since he came into this house
He gets us beaten, on and on,
And we're homebred servants, too. (Knights, 68)

This politician wallowing and thrashing other servants reminds us of Wasi Zafar, the Federal Minister of Law and Justice of Shaukat Aziz's cabinet, who is one of the same types of politicians of our history as mentioned in the Aristophanes' comedies. The said minister is reported to have beaten a waiter in the presence of many ministers (Dawn, intl. ed. editorial March 15, 2007). In the play *Nicias* is a co-worker of Paphlagon, and as a parallel we have the same example of Mr. Wasi Zafar, who, during a session of the Senate of Pakistan, apparently eager for a physical fight, dashed to the opposition benches in the Senate after being heckled and criticised (Dawn, intl. ed. editorial March 15, 2007). Even on the day of General Elections, February 18, 2008, Wasi Zafar showed certain typical temperament once again and this time the target of his wrath was a poor constable, who dared to stop the former minister from entering a polling station (Dawn, intl. ed. national February 19, 2008).

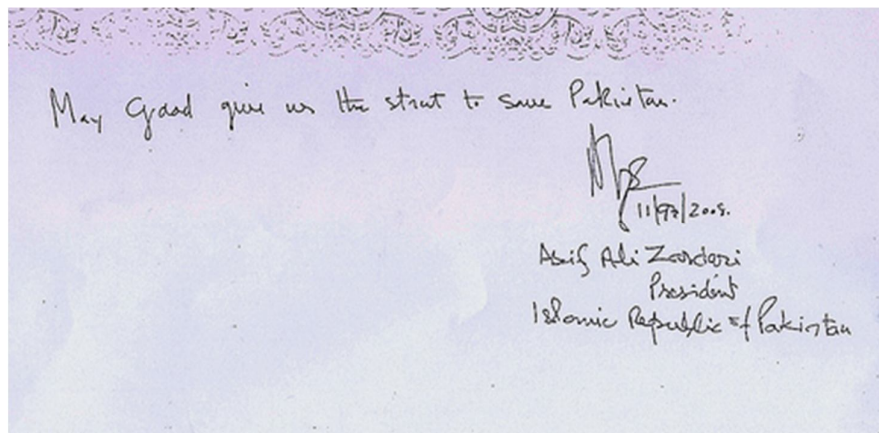
In his comedies, Aristophanes makes munificent use of invective and lampoon to create comic effects, and he is, indubitably, the peerless master of these devices. Throughout the play *Knights* Paphlagon is heard abusing not only other servants but his master Demos (Public) as well. In this field, however, Aristophanes has some very good challengers who have the capability of giving him a tough time. These challengers can be no other than our politicians. Wasi Zafar and Sheikh Rasheed, to name few, are the kings of 'live' political lampoon and invective. The former is an unmatched master of hurling invective everywhere and at everyone, and our Federal Law Minister Wasi Zafar repeatedly hurled invective against a journalist in a live Voice of America (VoA) radio discussion on chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry's deposition, which was heard worldwide (The News, national March 14, 2007).

Another example of this type of invective and lampoons as found in Aristophanes' comedies is Sheikh Rasheed, who mostly uses them against his political rivals. He was reported to speak about Benazir Bhutto on stage during election campaigns on many occasions. He is also reported to use such weapons against the renowned journalists in the presence of the lady anchor of the programme and other officials of the TV channel (News, national November 11, 2007).

In *Knights* the very first encounter between Paphlagon and Agorakritos is an uproarious duel of abusing and invective. Both the contenders blow their tops to outdo each other. It is determined that the louder, noisier, more abusive and more lampooning of the two will be declared victorious. The Pakistani readers of Aristophanes don't need much imagination as they are accustomed to such combats of eloquence held between the prominent politicians on live TV shows like Capital Talk (GEO TV), 50 Minutes (GEO TV) etc. Our sessions of any house of Parliament are the best example of these Abuse Tournaments.

Not only invective, our politics has also pasquinades at its disposal. The most recent instance has been provided by MQM. Imran Khan, a former cricketer and now a politician, has remained a target of the pasquinade of the blackest dye by the MQM workers when he criticized Altaf Hussain, chairman of MQM. This liberty of Imran Khan's had a same reception by MQM workers who made Imran a target of pasquinade through wall chalking and graffiti throughout Karachi and Haiderabad. This pasquinade by MQM workers was well accompanied by invective and lampoon by party leaders (Dawn, intl. ed. national May 28, 2007).

The essentially modern lines of *Knights* are where Demosthenes puts forward the prerequisites of a good politician, and these sine qua non are "ignorance and total lousiness," whereas the only "handicap" for a politician can be having "no money" (Knights, 75). Who can fulfil these conditions better than or politicians? Only one example, we think, can sum up the matter, and that is of our dear 'maybe Intermediate pass' President. Two days after taking oath as President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari paid a visit to Quaid-e-Azam's mausoleum, prayed, and recorded his thoughts in the visitor's book. His one-sentence note has become momentous in our history:



“May gaad [sic] give us the strent [sic] to save Pakistan.” (Dawn, intl. ed. Cowasjee, September 14, 2008)

This is a photograph of the said note:

(flickr.com)

Presidential spokesman, however, condemned all this as fabricated (Dawn intl. ed. 27 September, 2008).

The erudition and academic qualifications of our politicians were totally exposed when in 2002 the then president Pervez Musharraf sanctioned the condition of graduation for the candidacy of National and provincial assemblies. Innumerable politician had to sit at home, and bring forward their sons, nephews and cousins. The situation became so awkward that many of them had to introduce, to much of their embarrassment and chagrin, their women; their wives, daughters, nieces, and daughters-in-law into politics.

No sooner does Cleon enter the stage than he involves in the blame game like our politicians. He sees a goblet and exclaims:

“What’s that Chaldean goblet doing there?

It can only mean one thing: inciting

The Chaldeans to rebel”.

And one finds oneself recalling the childish blame game our politicians are always busy in. Mian Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, for instance, had been calling each other ‘security risk’ for the country for umpteen years (Dawn, intl. ed. national June 23, 2002). After Pervez Musharraf’s coup they had to join hands and most ironically in a duet they started calling Pervez Musharraf a ‘security risk’ (Dawn, intl. ed. front page March 11, 2006). Benazir Bhutto holds the record of being called a ‘security risk’ more than any other politician in Pakistan. After her second homecoming to Pakistan, she was once again bestowed this title by ex-Chief Minister of the Punjab Pervez Elahi (Dawn, intl. ed. national December 04, 2007). Most ironically, after her assassination all these politicians passed a resolution of commiseration in the Senate, vowing to uphold “her legacy,” as she was “‘wrongly accused’ of being a ‘security risk’” (Dawn, intl. ed. front page February 01, 2008). Only after losing her did they realize the sheer absurdity of this practice, but for a short moment, because all is forgotten in the end.

The dialogues between Paphlagon, Agorakritos and Demosthenes unveil the base, vile and money grubbing nature of Cleon. Demosthenes blamed Cleon of “filching mountain of money from the wretched Athenians” and Agorakritos says that he knows “all about the ninety grand you scooped out of the Potidaea Affair” (Knights 86). And then Cleon offer Agorakritos “one grand to keep mum” (Knights 86). These dialogues reflect the true nature of our politicians, as we know that these politicians forget all their enmities and differences to swallow the wealth of their country. We all know the intensity of the enmity existing between Chaudhary Brothers of Gujrat and Zardari-Bhutto family as the former think the latter responsible for the assassination of Chaudhary Zahoor Elahi, the father of Chaudhary Shujat, and Asif Zardari on air condemned Q-League as ‘Qatil League.’ But Rauf Klasra, a journalist has just launched an exclusive story that the Chaudhary Brothers visited Dr Qayyum, President Zardari’s personal secretary to seek impunity for Chaudhary Munis Elahi, the son of Chaudhary Pervez Elahi, who is reported to be accomplice of Hamesh Khan, the President of the Bank of Punjab in the embezzlement of approximately nine billion rupees. (Jang, front page, 31 Oct, 2008). The blood-thirsty enemies of 90’s Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif became ‘Behan Bhai’ and signed Pact of Democracy and once again we can see the paths of Nawaz Sharif and Asif Zardari separated in a matter of months.

In an attempt to outwit Agorakritos in the art of corruption Paphlagon describes his mastery in corruption in culinary terms as:

“I’m someone who can down
a plate of tuna steaming hot,
chase it with a flagon of unwatered wine—
yes, on the spot—then, what is more,
chew those ruddy generals up at Pylos”.

We have examples galore of the corruption of our political figures with no exception. Whether it is Surrey Palace Case of Benazir Bhutto, or the Swiss Bank Case of Asif Zardari or Helicopter Case of Nawaz Sharif, or the Mehrangate Case of Farooq Leghari; all are naked in this Turkish bath. And it is a fact that devouring national wealth is as easy for them as having a slice of bread or a sip of tea.

Another noticeable parallel for a Pakistani reader is Aristophanes’ lampoon on Alcibiades for his lisping speech (*Wasps*, 207) and “audible, articulate, and comprehensible” speech of Chaudhary Shujat, former Prime Minister and Chairman of PML Q.

In *Wasps* Aristophanes has created humour by presenting as absurd an idea as confining a juryman in his own house. Definitely, it would have been sheer ridiculous for ancient Athenians to see a judge caged, and the idea will be even more absurd for the modern readers. But it is no less than irony that in Pakistan we saw the Chief Justice of apex Court detained in his house in a democratic regime. The situation becomes more ridiculous when one would see well nigh half dozen judges incarcerated in their houses, and it was after vary long struggle

of lawyers, the people and media that the detained judges could be able to find freedom. (Dawn, intl. ed. Shafi, December 25, 2007)

The clichéd phrase, “History repeats itself,” though a fallacy to a modern scholar or philosopher seems to bear at least some truth for a Pakistani reader of Aristophanes’ comedies especially when we read about the liaison between the politicians and jurists of Ancient Greece as was depicted by Aristophanes. We have some idea of this liaison of politician and jurists in *Knights* when Paphlagon addresses the chorus and claims “brotherhood” with the “Elders of jury” on the basis that he had “upped your fee to three obols” (78). While another of Aristophanes’ famous play *Wasps* is aimed at criticizing Athenians’ undue fondness of legal system. Besides the play is a Horatian satire on the corrupt, partial and servile behaviour of jurists of the day. In this play the Chorus which comprises the “Elders of jury” tells us about the nature of the case they are to decide that very day.

“Laches is in for it today....
That’s why Cleon our boss yesterday ordered us out
To turn up on time.....
..... to punish him”.

Laches was a successful Athenian general whom Cleon attacked for his first Sicilian expedition. And here we can see a politician joining hands with jurymen to victimize his opponent. The same situation exists in Pakistan where politicians and generals victimize their opponents with the help of judges. An example of this liaison is the invention of the most notorious ‘Doctrine of necessity’ by Federal Court of Pakistan to validate Ghulam Mohammad, the Governor General of Pakistan’s use of non-constitutional emergency powers in 1954. (Wikipedia)

Ayaz Amir of Dawn says:

“The ‘doctrine of necessity’ is not just a millstone round the nation’s neck. It is also a spectre haunting the higher judiciary because around its unhallowed altar some truly macabre dances, rarely seen in everyday choreography, have been performed.” (Dawn, intl. ed. May 5, 2006)

The harm of this hideous doctrine has never been limited to the dissolution of Pakistan’s first constituent Assembly. This doctrine has been a favourite trysting resort of generals, politicians and judges. As Anwar Syed, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, US, says:

“In 1958, 1977 and 1999, the military seized the government, abrogated the Constitution on the first occasion and put it in abeyance on the next two. The president of Pakistan dismissed the National Assembly, and with it the prime minister, in 1988, 1990, 1993, and 1996. The Supreme Court validated all of these actions except the Assembly’s dismissal in 1993. It validated the army’s coup by invoking the “doctrine of necessity.” This doctrine, it should be noted, is not a part of the law; it is a rationale for evading or defeating the law. Resort to it is, therefore, clearly an exercise in judicial activism”. (Dawn, January 15, 2006 letters)

Another example of this dirty liaison of generals (because in Pakistan we have army generals who does more politics than their official duties under the umbrella of Martial Law for “the wider interests of the nation) was the illegal execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Recently Constitutional experts, all of whom are retired justices of Supreme and High Courts of Pakistan, gathered in Lahore and said the judgment should be declared illegal and Mr. Bhutto should be declared innocent as a relief for the bereaved family. (Daily Times, national April 04, 2008).

The list of such parallels of association of politicians and judges is very long. We have another big name shining in the list of judges who are considered ever-ready cronies of politicians and generals.

In *Wasps*, we have a farcical scene of slapstick fighting between the elder jurymen and Hatedleon. In the fight the jurymen have to concede a humiliating defeat, and their retreat creates a comic effect. Most surprisingly here also we have a parallel since only a decade ago, we witnessed the same kind of fight between Nawaz Sharif and Chief Justice of Supreme Court of Pakistan. The scale of this fight was larger than the one shown in *Wasps*. Scores of PML workers lead by the federal and provincial ministers stormed Supreme Court. And the end of both the judicial fights was the same because our Chief Justice, Sajjad Ali Shah, too, had to run for his life. (Dawn, Editorial July 21, 2007)

Conclusion

To sum up we can say that Aristophanes possesses a universal appeal because he really speaks to all nations and he is perpetually modern. What he wrote twenty-five centuries ago for the Ancient Athenians is as fresh, modern and appealing for the Pakistanis of modern times as it was at the time of its creation. It is because he made minute observation not of individuals but also of the entire institutions. He placed his characters in their respective worlds and then observed their nature and behaviour. To him a politician is not only a politician but a representative and an epitome of his profession. Besides his politicians, his jurymen, his generals are men made of flesh and blood with all the weaknesses which come with flesh and blood, the weaknesses which are universal, and the weaknesses which are rampant in this world. The parallels between his comedies and

contemporary Pakistani politics are easy to draw because mentally, socially, and politically we are at the same level that the Athenians were twenty-five hundred years ago. In our society there is an absence of the check and balance, which is quite necessary to run the government smoothly and glibly. The advanced countries of the world have discovered this secret to success. They have set up ideal standards of check and balance and subsequently have been successful in eradicating a lot of problems which have plagued us since the time of the creation of Pakistan.

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