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Pindar - A Lyric Poet

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Abstract

Pindar, born in C. 518 BC and died in C. 438 BC, was an ancient Greek Lyric poet from Thebes. He was regarded as one of the canonical nine lyric poets of ancient Greek. Pindar was famous for his victory odes. These odes are the sources of biographical information, and some of the poems are about historic events which are accurately dated. Victory odes are not the expressions of Pindar's personal thoughts and feelings, but rather as public statements. As it is said about his odes "dedicated to the single purpose of eulogizing men and communities". Pindar had a long and rich and prosperous career as a great poet. He passed away in 438 BC at Argos at the age of 80. He was such a popular and great poet that is said about him that when Alexander, the great, attacked and plundered Thebes, more than a hundred years after Pindar's death, the poet's house was the only one that was not plundered and attacked. It is said that Alexander, the great refused to destroy the poet's home in Thebes. Pindar's work has been divided into 17 books of different type of poetry, but only victory songs composed for the formal celebrations at the four Panhellenic festivals survive. In his works there are references to contemporary history, religion and mythology of Greek, contemporary history – athletic victories, past heroes with culture's values and beliefs. His poetry's theme is of divinity, human striving for excellence, and the celebration of athletic achievements. His literary works reflect his learning and his aristocratic background and so his work became difficult to read. During his life, he was honored among all the Greek cities for his poetic works and poetry. He was so great poet that he was invited by the tyrants and kings to their court for reciting poems. It is said about him that he died in the theatre of Argos, while he was reciting his poem.

Key Words: - victory, mythology, panhellenic, athletic, aristocratic, values, belief, cultural.

Pindar, born in C. 518 BC and died in C. 438 BC, was an ancient Greek Lyric poet from Thebes. Pindar was born in an aristocratic family at

Kynoskephalae, a village near Thebes. Pindar belongs to aristocratic family. His parents were Daiphantus and Cleodice. He had a wife, Megacleia

and three children, two daughters – Protomache and Eumentis and a son – name Diaphantus. He was one of the foremost authors of lyric poetry. Pindar's father was a famous flute player and belonged to the ancient and noble family of Aigidae. Pindar spent most of his life at Thebes and Delphi. Pindar's family claimed ties to the royal families of Sparta, Cyrene and Thera. Pindar is the English name for the ancient Greek lyrical poet Pindaros (it is related to the Pindus (Pindos) mountains in Northern Greek).

Pindar was regarded as one of the canonical nine lyric poets of ancient Greek. Marcus Fabius Quintilian, a Roman educator and rhetorician, wrote about his poetical works "of the nine lyric poets, Pindar is by far the greatest, in virtue of his inspired magnificence, the beauty of his thoughts and figures, the rich exuberance of his language and matter, and his rolling flood of eloquence, characteristic which as Horace rightly held, make him inimitable" (1). His poetical works reflect on the nature of poetry and on the poet's role. His poetry depicts the beliefs and values of ancient Greek. Pindar has not created any new lyrical genres but his individual genius is apparent in all his compositions. "he was however innovative in his use of the genres he inherited – for example, in one of his victory odes (Olympian 3), he announces his invention of a new type of musical accompaniment combining lyre, flute and human voice". (2).

Pindar was famous for his victory odes. These odes are the sources of biographical information, and some of the poems are about historic events which are accurately dated. Victory odes are not the expressions of Pindar's personal thoughts and feelings, but rather as public statements. As it is said about his odes "dedicated to the single purpose of eulogizing men and communities". (3)

Pindar is considered one of the greatest classical Greek poets. His only 45 odes of victory survive in their original and complete form while other poems are in form of quotations used by Papyrus discovered in the 19th and 20th century. Richard says about Pindar's poetical career that "he began his poetical career at the age of twenty, with an ode on a Thessalian youth's victory in the games. He grew to be the national lyrist of Greece. It is a sign

of the coming time that he also pays his homage to Athens – 'the bulwark of Hellas' the city that 'laid the foundation of freedom" (4). Victory odes were written on the commissions from victor's family, friends or benefactors so victory odes intended to be sung by chorus to celebrate the victory of athletes of the Olympian, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean games. So in odes he depicted the family history, festivals and stories of the gods. He revealed the Greek world in his literary works.

Pindar had a long and rich and prosperous career as a great poet. He passed away in 438 BC at Argos at the age of 80. He was such a popular and great poet that is said about him that when Alexander, the great, attacked and plundered Thebes, more than a hundred years after Pindar's death, the poet's house was the only one that was not plundered and attacked. It is said that Alexander, the great refused to destroy the poet's home in Thebes.

Pindar's work has been divided into 17 books of different type of poetry, but only victory songs composed for the formal celebrations at the four Panhellenic festivals survive. In his works there are references to contemporary history, religion and mythology of Greek, contemporary history – athletic victories, past heroes with culture's values and beliefs. His poetry's theme is of divinity, human striving for excellence, and the celebration of athletic achievements. His literary works reflect his learning and his aristocratic background and so his work became difficult to read. Despite to this, his style and the beauty of his language have influenced generations of poets, who created Pindaric odes that reflect his imagery and emotions. He was the greatest lyrical poet of classical period who influenced literature, music and culture for centuries. Norman F. Cantor wrote about Pindar's greatness as a poet he named Pindar "the greatest of the poets who wrote choral works" (5).

Pindar's Victory Odes are known as Epinikia. It contains the themes of athletic excellence, the divine nature of the Gods, and the interplay between accomplishment and religious worship. Epinikia is Pindar's most popular, famous and influential works. It has a dream like quality. It was

originally choral works, sung in celebration of athletic victories at the four Panhellenic games – (1) The Olympian games, held in honor of Zeus at the sacred city of Olympia every four years. (2) The Pythian games, held in honor of the God Apollo, to celebrate his victory over Python, in his oracular city of Delphi every four years. (3) The Nemean games, held in honor of Zeus near the site where Heracles is said to have slain the Nemean lion every two years. (4) The Isthmian games, a major biennial games or festivals, held in honor of Poseidon near the Argive city of Corinth. About his main theme Richard Jebb writes that "Pindar usually takes some heroic legend or group of legends connected with the victor or the victor's city, and makes this his main theme....in treating the legends, Pindar aims especially at bringing out their moral and applying this to the victor or his city. If we wish to understand Pindar's place among his contemporaries, we must never forget how closely these legends which he interpreted were bound up with Greek religion, and with the belief of Greek cities and great Greek families about their own origin" (6).

Buller Jeffrey L. writes about his odes that "his poems are typically follow a structured format, often featuring strophic units that enhance their musicality. While the odes are primarily focused on individual victors, they also explore broader themes of innate human excellence and the moral superiority of the gods. The poet's intention is to immortalize both the achievements of the victors and the glory of the divine, suggesting that athletic triumphs elevate humanity to a divine level, even if momentarily. Pindar's work remains a significant cultural artifact, offering insights into ancient Greek values surrounding sports, religion and artistry". Pindar's odes not only praise a young victor, but they reveal a man with a deep sense of the tragedy of life. In the words of Everitt - "it reveals the glory, however fleeting, of human achievement. He cites an ode which depicts the tragic sense:

Creatures for a day, what is a man? What is he not?

A dream of a shadow Is our moral being. But when there, comes to men

A gleam of splendor given to heaven
Then rests on them a light of glory

And blessed are their days". (Lines of ode) (7)
Pindar's myth or hero associated with the victor's city. In his victory odes he has put the victor in a relationship to a particular God or Goddess. Anthony Ervitt, a historian cites one of Pindar's odes that show the relationship between men and Gods.

Single is the race, single of men and gods
From a single mother we both draw breath
But a difference of power in everything Keeps
us apart For the one is nothing, but the
Brazen sky Stays a fixed habitation forever
Yet we can in greatest of mind Or of body be
like he immortals". (Lines of ode) (8).

His literary works have been divided into 17 books by its Alexandrian editors – book of Hymns, book of Paeans, two books of Dithyrambos, two books of Prosodia (professional songs) three books of Partheneia (maiden songs), two books of Hyporchemata (dance songs) book on Encomia (songs of praise), book on Threnoi (dirges), and four books of Epinicia (victory songs). Eupolis, the Athenian comic playwright, once remarked on the poetic work of Pindar that "they are already reduced to silence by the disinclination of the multitude for elegant learning" (9). Epinicia is considered Pindar's masterpiece. His Epinikian victory odes are types of lyric poetry, which celebrate the victory of the winner in panhellenic games. Chorus or solo singer performed the odes, when the victor's return to their city. His poems appreciated or praised the ruler, communities and victors and relating them to past through myth. His poems immortalized the achievement of victors and rulers and aristocratic values. There are number of themes in Epinikia. But the most important theme is the quality of human excellence. He has expressed his views on the moral and political issues of his time. He believed in aristocratic values, so he regarded excellence as an innate quality. Here is an example, as he says –

"that which is best by nature is best of all, many men have been eager to win glory through skills that they have learned. But what God has not given is best passed over in silence". (Lines from Olympian Ode) (9).

Second theme that appears in Pindar's poems is his efforts to present a true account of God's

deeds. He regarded the gods as superior to human being and incapable of crimes and injustices those others attributes to them. Pindar in his poems presented the true account of the patron's victory and the glory of the Olympian gods. Pindar rejects the ancient myths that depicts Heracles as doing battle with the Olympian Gods and says - Cast away, O lips, such stories from me! To insult the gods is mere sophistry – hateful to me! And to boast beyond measure is akin to madness. Do not repeat such rumors. Let the god be seen as free of all hostility and discord. (Lines from Olympian Ode 9). It is rightly said about Pindar "of Greek poets only one, Pindar expressed the full range of ideals which achieved so much prominence in the last decades of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century. The themes of military victory, national glory, personal triumph and emancipation linked with the freedom of the community were enforced in Pindar with a vehement intensity which spoke to the new aesthetic, and in England the first poet to respond to these widening opportunities was Gray" (10).

The poems in the Epinikia are either written in strophic form or composed of three verse units – it consists of a strophe (a turning as these lines were being sung, the chorus would turn), an antistrophe (turning backwards' chorus would reverse its direction) and an epode (an end song' it brought the chorus to sing from its original position).

Pindar never forgets his high and noble birth. He represented the aristocratic society and its values. His attitude and his consciousness about aristocratic society can be seen in his one simple sentence – "A state is strongest when ruled by the counsels of old man and the fighting spirits of young men". (11)

Pindar travelled freely and in Athens under the musicians and poets Apollodorus and Agathocles he studied music and poetry. Thebans called him 'the eagles of Thebes' and compared him with the roar of the river'. During his life, he was honored among all the Greek cities for his poetic works and poetry. He was so great poet that he was invited by the tyrants and kings to their court for reciting poems. It is said about him that he died in the

theatre of Argos, while he was reciting his poem. He was honored by Athens. Athenians made him ambassador and erected a grand statue after his death. He was accused and fined by Thebans for appreciating and glorifying Athens, but Thebans made a temple near his house in honor of him. Pindar was the most difficult of all the Greek poets to read and understand. Edith Hamilton writes about Pindar's poetic style "Pindar was the most difficult of all the Greek Poets to read and 'of all the poets that ever were' the most impossible to translate of all the poets that were..... he is seated among the immortals..... consummate craftsman and an artist in the fullest command of the technique of his art". (12).

Pindar was scared about the dying ideals of aristocracy, as it were visible in his poems, but he believed that great and powerful people should use their power for the benefits and upliftment of others. Powerful people must protect the weak and poor people. Edith Hamilton writes about Pindar's concept of aristocracy that "he believes that the nobility of birth must be matched by nobility of conduct". (13). He celebrated victories of the major festivals throughout Greek. He was the last spokesman for the Greek aristocracy. About his aristocratic ideals and beliefs Hamilton writes that "Pindar is austere, splendor can be cold, and Pindar glitters but never warms. He is hard, severe, passionless, and remote, with a kind of haughty magnificence. He never steps down from his frigid eminence. Aristocrats did not stoop to lies, and his pen would never deviate from the strict truth in praising any triumph. He would glorify a victor so far as he was really glorious, but no further. As he himself puts it, he would not tell 'a tale decked out with dazzling lies against the worth of truth'. Only what was in actual fact nobly praiseworthy would be praised by him" (14).

Pindar was accused for being a mercenary of associating with tyrant, as during the Persian wars in 492 BCE. He had loyalties to Thebes but he appreciated Athens. But his poems depict a man who did not change his beliefs. Pindar once said "even wisdom has to yield to self interest". (15). His poetry depicted the customs, values, beliefs and tradition of archaic Greek. Jacqueline writes about

Pindar "like other poets of the Archaic age, he has profound sense of the vicissitudes of life but he also articulates a passionate faith in what men can achieve by the grace of the gods, most famously expressed in conclusion to one of his victory odes" (16).

Pindar was criticized by his contemporaries for his proud on aristocratic heritage. Paul Cartledge writes about his nobility of aristocracy that "Pindar's goal was to achieve imperishable fame and glory not only for the victor and client but also for himself..... The victory odes helped Pindar to display his great learning. Oddly, his odes often praised the victor but failed to mention any details of the victory, it was a fixation on the victor, not the achievement" (17).

Pindar has credit of a large number of works – among these choral pieces, including Paeans – songs of praise, and Hymns – song sung at religious festivals at the time. He had written odes to athletes competing at the games which were popular in Ancient Greece.

Pindar was a prophet-like figure who used poetry to reveal the divine in the world. He is known for his divine inspired poems / odes. He believed that Muses gave him ideas and he shaped them into poems. He honored the victors and linked their victory to the gods. Pindar had the high ideas and beliefs about gods. When Apollo, abducted a nymph, it was not considered a shameful act. According to Pindar men cannot judge the works of gods. For Pindar "a mortal woman who is loved by a god is an outstanding lesson in divine favors handsomely bestowed" (18). He has given the credit of victory to both victors and gods. He emphasized the supremacy of Zeus (chief deity, father of gods and humans and god of sky, weather, thunder and lightning) and the justice of Apollo (god of music, light, knowledge and beauty). He had close relationship with Apollo's oracle at Delphi. He enjoyed special privileges. It is said that after his death, every night before dinner, a herald to announce around to oracle "Pindar is coming to have dinner with the gods".

Pindar's language is highly ornate. He avoided the language of everyday conversation. The

theme he selected for his poetic work is of high quality – Greek hymns. So his language and style are also grand. His poetry became complex due to the use of elaborate metaphors and difficult allusions. Pindar's one ode named Pythian 12, is written about the musical competition, in which he celebrated victory of Midas of Akragas in a flute contest. His songs are also represented as religious acts as his poems celebrate the victory of hero and make it immortal. He elevated the victory of athletes to the divine level. In this way glorifying the victors he glorified to gods.

Richard Steele, in *The Spectator*, wrote about Pindar "I saw Pindar, walking all alone, no one daring to accost him till Cowley joined himself to him, but, growing weary of one who almost walked him out of breath, he left him for Horace and Anacreon, with whom he seemed infinitely delighted" (19).

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