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Sophocles' *Antigone*: A Feminist Representation**Saptorshi Das**Department of Humanities,
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West Bengal University of Technology, India.**&****Dr. (Prof) Arindam Modak**Department of Humanities,
National Institute of Technology, India**Abstract:**

A woman who rebelled against a distinctively patriarchal, male-dominated Greek society. A woman who defied the orders of the King to follow her heart. A woman who acted in accordance with her sense of right and wrong. A woman with great reverence for relationships and an even greater allegiance towards family values. Such a woman deserves applause. A rebel. A legend. An example. A woman. Antigone.

Sophocles' *Antigone* has as its backdrop a very rigid and conservative Greek society and Greek culture when it was certainly against the norm of a typical ancient Greek woman to rebel against a male authority. And therein lies the reason to believe that Sophocles' protagonist in *Antigone* showed signs of early feminism. Antigone dared to raise her voice against a patriarchal order at a time when women in ancient Greece were generally fearful that rebellion against male authority would lead to unfortunate circumstances.

Keywords: woman, patriarchal, society, Greek, rebel

For a homage she thought was rightly deserved
she practiced her devotion,
and till the corpses both were out of sight
hung fiercely to the notion
that those who've died deserve as much respect
as those who carry on,
but who can blame survivors who suspect
that she, like Metatron,
would like to be the one who's in control?
She crosses that fine border
that circumscribes the playing field whose goal
is set for law and order.

The ancient Greek culture when deeply examined reveals much turmoil on the basis of gender rights and personal roles within the society, as examined by Aristophanes, Plato, Bingen, and Pizan, each seemingly ahead of his or her time with respect to feministic values. Although some "enlightened" philosophers did not believe that there existed any more depth than comedic folly for women in political systems, others like Plato determined that it be essential for women to take part in governmental affairs. Even in today's world, such conflicts are manifested, particularly in poor countries, without a resolution in such a long and drawn out social dilemma.

The treatment of women has been an issue for hundreds of years. In ancient civilizations, women were seen as inferior beings. In Ancient Greece, women had no social, political, or economic importance. Socially, women were considered to be secondary to men, who were respected and honored. According to ancient Greek culture, women could not be independent, and relied entirely on the men in their lives. A woman's role in ancient Greek society was to bear children, prepare meals, and watch after the household. A man however, fulfilled the "important" duties in Greek society. These duties included political advocacy fighting battles, protecting his family. In Ancient Greece, feminism was unheard of. Women lived in fear of speaking out against men, and would not dare contradict the ways of society. Women feared facing physical abuse, angering the gods, and sometimes death.

So, this was Greek society and Greek culture. Rigid, conservative. It was a society when it was certainly against the norm of a typical ancient Greek woman to rebel against a male authority. And this is reason to believe that Sophocles' namesake in *Antigone* may have shown signs of early feminism. Antigone dared to raise her voice against a patriarchal order at a time when women in ancient Greece were generally fearful that rebellion against male authority would lead to unfortunate circumstances.

In *Antigone*, Creon and Antigone have distinct conflicting values. Antigone first demonstrates feminist logic when she chooses to challenge a powerful male establishment, personified by her uncle Creon, newly crowned as the King of Thebes. Creon poses to be a prominently authoritarian figure in a patriarchal society, whose regard for the laws of the city causes him to abandon all other beliefs. He feels that all should obey the laws set forth by him, even if other beliefs, moral or religious, state otherwise. Antigone, on the other hand, holds the gospels of the gods in high reverence, and holds the firm belief that the laws of the gods should be obeyed above all others, especially when in respect to family.

Antigone followed her beliefs strongly, and ignored the threats of higher powers telling her to do otherwise. This bold, tradition-braking character of Antigone clearly clashed with the overpowering patriarchal dominance of Creon. And this collision between characters gives rise to the conflict between the sexes in *Antigone* by Sophocles. The fact that Antigone went against the orders of Creon shows definite female power. Antigone took responsibility for her actions, and did not try to hide the fact that she was rebelling. Also, the fact that Antigone commits her own death at the end, shows her unwillingness to accept male conquer. On the other hand, many have come forward with the view that Sophocles may have been trying to show female ignorance and stupidity; the fact that Antigone rebelled against male power, may show her so-called lack of understanding of her social status. Although Sophocles' intentions can never be known, this point may prove valuable in opposition to the thought of Antigone possessing feminist qualities. Although there are two separate viewpoints, "Antigone, the Feminist" proves to be stronger. Antigone can absolutely be said to be an early example of a feminist because she possesses the qualities seen in both historic and modern day feminists.

Antigone represents the highest ideals of human life, courage and respect for the gods. She believed that the law of the gods, which dictates that a body be given proper burial rights, was more important than the law of the King. In the prologue, Antigone tells Ismene that she will do what is necessary to give their brother a decent burial, whether or not Ismene agrees. Ismene being too weak is afraid to defy the king. On the other hand, Antigone is brave enough to go ahead with her decision. Even without her sister's help, she is willing to risk her own life to give her brother what he deserves and what the gods say should be done, despite Creon's edict. Unlike her sister, Ismene refuses to challenge the male authority, even if it means to not fulfill her duties as a sister. Her view of the inferiority to men came from the many laws restricting the lives of women. After Antigone carries out the

deed, Ismene now feels responsible to die with Antigone. This sense of responsibility is probably the result of Antigone's earlier pleas for help and Ismene's fear of being without any family.

Throughout the play, Antigone amazingly retains the traditional role of a woman; while at the same time boldly challenges this depiction. Creon becomes angry that a woman questions his sovereignty and condemns her to death even though she was the daughter of his sister, Jocasta. His patriotic values clash with Antigone's ethical ones. Besides, Antigone does not give Creon additional respect either because he is a man in a patriarchal society or because he is king. In such way, she argues for an equality of the sexes, as well as equality under God. One way to read the play, in contemporary terms, is to see Creon as the figure who embodies the patriarchal order, to which Ismene conforms and against which Antigone rebels. Antigone's affront is not simply against Creon, but against everything he stands for. Her passionate resistance to an unjust law appears to arise from what some feminists, most notably psychologist Carol Gilligan, have seen as a distinctly feminine trait that develops under patriarchy: an ethic of care, grounded in female emotional experience, over and against the masculine ethic of justice, which appeals to rational (if nonetheless arbitrary) principles.

The inherent problem in considering *Antigone* a proto-feminist heroine, of course, is that her rebellion against the patriarchal order proves fatal for her. Through this her name, too, joins those in a long list of iconic figures of feminist rebellion for whom the only alternatives to patriarchal conformity are either madness or death (often by their own hands). As radical feminist Mary Daly remarked a generation ago, revolting against patriarchy requires existential courage. More recently, feminist philosopher Judith Butler, too, has reread the *Antigone* story as a critique of conventional feminist approaches to political agency.

Antigone cannot help but be who she is, a necessarily divergent figure:

Over and over again
Because I am who I am
I retrace that fatal line
And the ghastly love I sprang from.
(<http://www.classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/antigone.html>)

One thing must be borne in mind when reading *Antigone* as feminist icon, and that is the deeply ironic fact that the play that bears her name is not in the end her tragedy: it is Creon's. All of the action leads to his downfall, and Antigone is ultimately a player in that larger scheme. As Haemon tells his father, behind closed doors the people are saying that Antigone should be honoured as a woman who rebelled. Butler might add that too many of the issues raised by Antigone are still relegated to "behind closed doors" discussions in contemporary society.

Although Sophocles put a lot of effort into developing Antigone's character, the focus of the play shifts to Creon by the end. In most Greek tragedies, the main character (and usually protagonist) suffers from some *hamartia*, or fatal flaw, that ultimately leads to his or her death or misfortune. Sophocles sets the stage well for Antigone to become the tragic heroine. The audience assumes from the title that Antigone herself will become the tragic heroine, as is the case in the titles of many other tragedies. The play opens with Antigone trying to persuade Ismene to accompany her in burying their brother, Polyneices, against the edict of the king. From the beginning, the audience sympathizes with Antigone's grief for her brother and agrees with the values that drive her actions. As expected in any Greek tragedy, Antigone sadly commits suicide in the end of the play. However, in contrast to most

tragedies, Antigone's downfall was not a result of her own tragic flaw, but of Creon's. Creon's unwillingness to please the gods by honoring the dead and refusal to open his mind to the words of others results not only in the death of Antigone, but also the deaths of his beloved heir, Haeman, and his wife, Queen Eurydice. It is Creon who is left to live out the remainder of his life alone, having lost all of his loved ones, a fate that some may argue is even worse than death itself.

Thus, although the play was initially centered on Antigone, its focus shifts to Creon by the end. Sophocles knew that his audience valued the male more than the female, and in order to satisfy them, he shifted his focus back to a main male character. Nevertheless, Antigone's presence as a dynamic female force was an unprecedented transformation in Greek drama.

Many scholars have regarded Antigone as the first literary feminist in history. As a woman in Thebes, it was not her place to stand up to any man, let alone the king. In addition to disobeying King Creon, she admitted to the deed and continued to defy him in person. She stood up against him for what she believed. She knew that the gods would have wanted her to honor her brother with a proper burial, and she explained to Creon that the gods' priorities were above his as a mortal king. In addition to her actions throughout the play, Antigone's words also show her lack of acceptance for the passive female gender role. After being condemned to death, Antigone recites the following soliloquy:

Oh my tomb and bridal chamber
my eternal hollow dwelling place,
where I go to join my people. Most of them
have perished—Persephone has welcomed them
among the dead. I'm the last one, dying here
the most evil death by far, as I move down
before the time allotted for my life is done.
But I go nourishing the vital hope
my father will be pleased to see me come,
and you, too, my mother, will welcome me,
as well as you, my own dear brother.
When you died, with my own hands I washed you.
I arranged your corpse and at the grave mound
poured out libations. But now, Polyneices,
this is my reward for covering your corpse.

However, for wise people I was right
to honor you. I'd never have done it
for children of my own, not as their mother,
nor for a dead husband lying in decay—
no, not in defiance of the citizens.
What law do I appeal to, claiming this?
If my husband died, there'd be another one,
and if I were to lose a child of mine
I'd have another with some other man.
But since my father and my mother, too,
are hidden away in Hades' house,
I'll never have another living brother.
That was the law I used to honor you.
But Creon thought that I was in the wrong
and acting recklessly for you, my brother.
Now he seizes me by force and leads me here—

no wedding and no bridal song, no share
in married life or raising children.
Instead I go in sorrow to my grave,
without my friends, to die while still alive.
What holy justice have I violated?
In my wretchedness, why should I still look
up to the gods? Which one can I invoke
to bring me help, when for my reverence
they charge me with impiety? Well, then,
if this is something fine among the gods,
I'll come to recognize that I've done wrong.

But if these people here are being unjust
may they endure no greater punishment
than the injustices they're doing to me.
(<http://www.classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/antigone.html>)

Antigone's words show that she was conscious of her youth and was in the prime of her life. She knew she would not be able to experience a long life of marriage and motherhood. However, she was still fearless in death. Her ability to stand by her own values even in death shows that she had a strong heart and solid mind. She was not willing to let go of what was most important to her. Furthermore, in saying that she would not have performed this deed for her husband or children, she is denouncing her traditional gender role as a female whose only purpose was to become a loving wife and mother. Antigone's expression of her independent spirit is what makes her stand out as an ancient literary feminist and martyr. Antigone's legacy will live on, and provide inspiration to many other rebels to stand up for their rights and everything they believe is correct. Antigone's strong feminist stance in defying a patriarchal tyrant shows how individualistic ideas and actions can be very effectual.

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