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## The Relationship between Feminism, the Female Subject and the State: A Reading of Antigone's Claim

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### **Abstract:**

*Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (henceforth *Antigone's Claim*) is a close reading and response to Hegel, Lacan and Irigaray's interpretation of the Greek tragic character Antigone by Judith Butler. Butler's main contention is that all three thinkers, irrespective of their theoretical difference and variegated approach have placed Antigone outside or before the political. In *Antigone's Claim* she sets herself the task of undermining such 'pre-political' readings and in fact shows the instability of the uncontaminated and neat binary divisions between Kinship/State (Hegel) Symbolic/Social (Lacan) and Matriarchal Alliance/Patriarchal Order (Irigaray). By highlighting Antigone's 'kinship trouble'-for unlike previous thinkers for whom Antigone represents Kinship, Butler reads her as 'kinship's fatal aberration' (*Antigone's Claim*: 15)- Butler initiates her reader into understanding the contingent nature of heteronormative kinship based on the Oedipal code and makes an ethical gestures towards them who have been rendered 'unintelligible', 'ungrievable' and 'unlivable' by normative and exclusionary structure of kinship founded on that very code.

**Keywords:** Feminism, State, Female Subject, Kinship, Heteronormativity, Political.

### **Introduction:**

*Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (henceforth *Antigone's Claim*) is a close reading and response to Hegel, Lacan and Irigaray's interpretation of the Greek tragic character Antigone by Judith Butler. Butler's main contention is that all three thinkers, irrespective of their theoretical difference and variegated approach have placed Antigone outside or before the political. In *Antigone's Claim* she sets herself the task of undermining such 'pre-political' readings and in fact shows the instability of the uncontaminated and neat binary divisions between

Kinship/State (Hegel) Symbolic/Social (Lacan) and Matriarchal Alliance/Patriarchal Order (Irigaray). By highlighting Antigone's 'kinship trouble'-for unlike previous thinkers for whom Antigone represents Kinship, Butler reads her as 'kinship's fatal aberration' (*Antigone's Claim: 15*)- Butler initiates her reader into understanding the contingent nature of heteronormative kinship based on the Oedipal code and makes an ethical gestures towards them who have been rendered 'unintelligible', 'ungrievable' and 'unlivable' by normative and exclusionary structure of kinship founded on that very code.

To substantiate her claims Butler implicates the categories of the State, Subject and Feminism within her project and she does so with respect to each of the previous readers of Antigone she herself reads in *Antigone's Claim*. Consequently, I will divide this paper into three sections dealing with the readings of Antigone and the idea of State, Subject and Feminism as found in the works of Hegel, Lacan and Irigaray respectively, these sections will be interspersed with comments on Butler's own ideas as put forward in *Antigone's Claim*. To make her position clear I will refer to her other works namely *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter* and *Psychic Life of Power*. I will also very summarily look at Foucault and Derrida to draw her intellectual lineage and by extension ground her argument.

## **1. Lacan**

### **1.1 Subject**

In this section we will discuss, Lacan's notion of subject formation and discuss in details, Butler's uneasy relation to it. According to Lacan subject formation takes place by being mirrored by the Other. Put another way, the Subject's sense of the Self is not innate but is founded on a desire for recognition from the (sexed) Other. Further more sexed subjectivity is produced during the Oedipal phase which coincides with the child's entry into language or into the Symbolic Order. Lacan formulates his discussion of the sexed subject around the phallus, which is a primary signifier and not an anatomical organ. Desire in Lacan's formulation is not only a desire for recognition but also a desire for what the (m)/Other desires-the phallus. Consequently, to *be* the phallus means being a female subject, this claim is made following the logic that phallus is the desire of the mother and Lacan's is a heteronormative structure. Following the same logic to *have* a phallus is to be the male subject. Following this logic then the Ego is always alienated, even in the Symbolic. This means that neither 'having' nor 'being' the phallus can fend off lack and so

sexed subjectivity is doomed to perpetual failure. It needs to be mentioned here that non-normative sexual subjectivities are viewed by Lacanian psychoanalysis as aberration. Anyhow, drawing from and extending Freud's argument Lacan talks about the Law of the Father which in *naming* kins, prohibits the incestuous relationship between the child and mother/Other and becomes the foundation of sexed subjectivity. The incest taboo then for Lacan is the structuring principle for Subject formation.

Butler's main criticism of Lacanian Subject formation is that it fails to take into account the sexed subjectivities that are not immanent to heteronormativity. Now as discussed above, according to Lacan the two positions within the Symbolic that can be occupied by a sexed subject are male and female, which happens through a phantasmic identification-through a desire for the phallus which is never totally achieved. Any other position is thought of as inversion of the 'normal' heterosexual position and leads to psychosis. Butler's contention is that Lacan fails to comprehend identification fully. Drawing on Freud's notion of melancholia, Butler argues that identification can be multiple, in the sense that a boy may phantasmically identify with the mother and want to be the phallus instead, or a girl may want to have the phallus.

## 1.2 State

As far as Lacan is concerned in this paper, we are treating the Symbolic as the State, because the Symbolic is the realm of Law, which is inaugurated and sustained through the Law of the Father. Now in the Lacanian framework, the Law of the Father which creates heteronormative subjects is rigid, universal and originating. Butler's main concern is how in Lacan's formulation, the Law which regulates the Symbolic is held to be absolute. Butler in reading Lacan's reading of *Antigone* accuses Lacan of situating *Antigone* in a pre-political, pre-Symbolic realm. What Butler accuses Lacan of is this- in situating *Antigone* outside of the Symbolic-in the Imaginary-what Lacan does is precisely to pretend to give space to resistance while in actuality keeping intact both the Law and the structure that it gives rise to. Any direct resistance to Law-that structures heteronormative structure- is impossible in Lacan's formulation. *Antigone's* resistance actually becomes nothing more than a sorry excuse and an act in consolidation of the Law of the Father- *Antigone* has to die and the Law that she opposes is reaffirmed. This failure to change/challenge the Law in Lacan argues Butler reinstates heteronormativity as the ideal.

In *Bodies That Matter* Butler extensively engages with Lacan to show how resistance to Law is possible *from within*. Butler's intellectual ancestor to this notion of resistance from within Law is of course Foucault. Drawing from Foucault's repressive hypothesis as theorised in *History of Sexuality*, Butler argues how power/Law is both repressive and creative. To explain it further, Foucault through empirical evidence shows in *History of Sexuality* how the taboos on sexuality before and during the Victorian Era actually led to a proliferation of discourses on sexuality. From this empirical evidence, Foucault makes the theoretical interference that Power is both prohibitive and productive. For Butler resistance is made possible through what she calls reiterability.

Butler argues that when the Law of the father 'names' a subject, it(he?) does not originate a Law but re-cites it, in other words cites a Law that is already in place thus consolidating its place. However, Butler argues that it is in this very reiteration that the possibility of resistance is located, the resistance is located in the resignification of Law through being re-iterated.

### **1.3 Lacan's reading of Antigone and Feminism**

Now as far as Feminism is concerned, Butler's main criticism of Lacan is that his theory is heteronormative which sees the subject in binary opposition of substantive male/female opposition and is thus founded on violent exclusion of non-normative sexualities. She accuses Lacan of essentialism and exclusion, we will discuss these two aspects in great details in the section dealing with Butler's criticism of Irigaray's Feminism. For now, we will chart out how this plays out in connection of Antigone.

As mentioned earlier, Butler's uneasiness with Lacan stem essentially from Lacan's treatment of the Law of the Father as indisputable and unchangeable. Now according to Lacan, the stability of the Law is based on the fact that it names/originates certain positions within the socio-cultural structure-father, mother, daughter, son etc. And because the incest taboo or the Law of the Father, originates these positions-not to be confused with people who occupy these positions-it not only sets itself beyond question but also sets limits to which positions can be named within the structure of which it forms the *centre* in the process setting a limit to *free play*, to use two much used and abused poststructuralist terms.

Enter Antigone, who confounds all the kinship position that Lacan holds so dear and challenges the Law of the Father, and as Butler will show from inside. As Butler puts it:

Antigone is the offspring of Oedipus and so raises the question for us: what will come of the inheritance of Oedipus when the rules that Oedipus blindly defies and institutes no longer carry the stability accorded to them by Levi-Strauss and structural psychoanalysis? In other words, Antigone is one for whom symbolic positions have become incoherent, confounding as she does brother and father, emerging as she does not as a mother but—as one etymology suggests—“in the place of the mother.” Her name is also construed as “antigeneration”(gone<sup>-</sup> [generation]). She is, thus, already at a distance from that which she represents, and what she represents is far from clear. (*Antigone's Claim*: 22)

Lacan's retort would obviously be that because she defies the Symbolic Law, she is doomed from the very beginning, in other words she dies in the end. Her defiance can momentarily shake the Law but cannot invalidate it. But what if the Law is not a Law at all, but only *Law like*, a construction which through its diachronic reiteration became stabilised? According to Butler “by refusing to do what is necessary to stay alive for Haemon, by refusing to become a mother and a wife, by scandalizing the public with her wavering gender, by embracing death as a bridal chamber” (*Antigone's Claim*: 76) Antigone completely destabilises and shows the contingent character of heteronormativity based on the Law of the Father. It is important to realise that her *death was not inevitable, but a choice*. In choosing death, in committing suicide, she exposes the contingent nature of the Law. In other words, the Law cannot make her assume heteronormative position or curb her incestuous desires for her brother(s?). Butler does not claim that Antigone is able to lead a non-heterosexual life, in fact far from it. What however is important is the fact that she does not confirm to it.

## 2. Hegel:

### Hegel's reading of Antigone: The Laws of the State/The Laws of Kinship

As far as the question of feminism goes, Butler has never engaged directly with Hegel with regards to his negative evaluation of women, as has famously been done by Beauvoir or Irigaray.

Butler's criticism of Hegel stems from how Hegel's notion of subject formation does not have space for radical alterity, this alterity could well be women but Butler never spells it out. In fact doing so would be against the larger ethico-political stance that Butler takes towards Feminism. Her brand of Feminism steers clear of the essentialised naming of women as the subject of feminism, is inclusive of non-heterosexual and non-normative entities and aims at laying bare the contingent nature of the heteronormative matrix. Butler has never fully engaged with Hegel's notion of the State either. Consequently, in this section I will read Hegel's and Butler's understanding of Antigone as put forward in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Antigone's Claim* and try to point out how both Feminism and the State gets implicitly implicated in them.

Hegel reads Antigone in connection to 'The Ethical Order'. According to Hegel Antigone represents the negative ethical law of the family. It should be pointed out here that in Hegelian scheme of things, negative is used not as a value-laden term but in the sense of a spatio-temporal concept that needs to be simultaneously negated and assimilated in the Consciousness's journey towards Absolute Spirit. Creon on the other hand represents the ethical Law of the State. Thus, by going against Creon, Antigone defies the State. Hegel sees these two realms in a relationship of co-constitution as well as opposition. The State needs the Family as a provider of labour for its proper functioning. Nonetheless the State has to repress the Law of the Family and more so the womankind in order to act rationally. The State needs to curb individuality. Hegel is of course of the opinion that men are capable of understanding and hence their individuality needs to be curbed by State whereas women are incapable of the same and consequently lie outside of the rational Law of the State. Women according to Hegel are therefore the internal enemy of the Law of the State, and this Law is enforced on them from outside.

Butler in her reading of Antigone criticises Hegelian understanding of the place of woman in the realm of kinship which is outside and before the political. Through a detailed analysis of the deeds, speeches and acts of Antigone she shows precisely how Antigone does not represent what is pre-political but is immanent to the political. For instance, Butler shows how in resisting Creon, Antigone talks in the same language of sovereignty, which she opposes, in fact she usurps Creon's sovereignty through her acknowledgement of her deed. This not only brings her within the realm of the political but at the same time makes her resistance itself immanent to the structure she is

resisting and renders her ‘manly’. In a passage where Antigone acknowledges her deed of burying her brother, Butler says:

‘Yes, I confess it’, or ‘I say I did it’ – thus she answers a question that is posed to her from another authority, and thus she concedes the authority that this other has over her. ‘I will not deny my deed’ – ‘I do not deny’, I will not be forced into denial, I will refuse to be forced into a denial by the other’s language, and what I will not deny is my deed – a deed that becomes possessive, a grammatical possession that makes sense only within the context of the scene in which a forced confession is refused by her. In other words, to claim ‘I will not deny my deed’ is to refuse to perform a denial, but it is not precisely to claim the act. ‘Yes, I did it’, is to claim the act, but it is also to commit another deed in the very claiming, the act of publishing one’s deed, a new criminal venture that redoubles and takes the place of the old.

*(Antigone’s Claim :8)*

In fact, Butler argues that the binary that Hegel draws between the divine laws of kinship and the rational laws of the State are in fact porous and that the two co-constitutes each other. Though the Law of the State violently excludes womankind, Butler opines that the State needs the family to work. As Butler puts it:

From this discussion of the hostility toward the individual and toward womankind as a representative of individuality, Hegel moves to a discussion of war, that is, a form of hostility necessary for the community’s self-definition...The community’s necessary aggression against womankind appears to be transmuted into the community’s aggression against its external enemy; the state intervenes in the family to wage war. The worth of the warring male youth is openly acknowledged, and in this way the community now loves him as she has loved him. *(Antigone’s Claim: 37).*

### 3. Luce Irigaray

#### 3.1 Irigaray's Reading of Antigone

Luce Irigaray's reading of Antigone is a critical reception of Hegel's reading of the character. A detailed analysis of the same is beyond the purview of this paper, however some elementary comment needs be made so as to make Butler's critique of Irigaray clear. Now as has already been mentioned, Hegel's reading places Antigone, the representative of kinship ties, in opposition to Creon who represents the law of the polis. Further Antigone's love for Polynices is non-erotic (which defines the relationship between husband and wife) and devoid of ontological dependence (which defines the parent-child relationship, as one *causes the other into being*). What is perhaps most important however, and the reason of contention between Hegel and Irigaray, is the fact that for Hegel an ethical order of the polis is reached by negation of the kinship order which Antigone represents. Irigaray's argument is that within Hegelian dialectics there is no space for feminine desire, sexual difference and condition for feminine self-recognition. In other words, Antigone's only mode of recognition is through her non-desiring relationship with her brother. Consequently, Irigaray argues that the Hegelian Self which makes the journey towards the Absolute Spirit is male and dialectics is a male imaginary.

With an affirmative nod to sexual difference and female desire, Irigaray then reads Antigone as representative of maternal order/alliance and the tragedy ensues because the patriarchal order represented by Creon violently suppresses it. The reason Irigaray cites for making Antigone the representative of the maternal alliance is that Antigone risks everything out of her devotion to her mother's genealogy and mother's desire. We will do well to remember that both Polynices and Antigone comes from the 'same womb' and so does Oedipus, and thus argues Irigaray, in burying Polynices Antigone is being both respectful towards her mother's genealogy and towards the object of her mother's desire- Oedipus. Her incestuous lineage helps make sense of this displacement of desire from Antigone's father-brother Oedipus to Polynices.

#### 3.2 Subject

What becomes clear from the above discussion and as Irigaray has argued herself is that the patriarchal structure-here signified by Creon-fails to give space to the female subject. Put otherwise the Law of the patriarch/Creon and the structure that it gives rise to have no space for

Antigone and her maternal kinship ties. What Irigaray consequently argues for is the creation of the female subject *outside* of this order. And for her Antigone epitomises that outside. But the question that Butler poses to Irigaray is:

what precisely precludes the latter [patriarchy] as kinship? There is the symbolic place of the mother that is taken over by the symbolic place of the father, but what has instituted those places to begin with? Is this not the same notion of kinship after all, with an accent and a value being placed on separate terms? (*Antigone's Claim*: 4)

Butler does not pursue these questions, at any rate not in terms of Irigaray's reading of Antigone. However, Butler's detailed engagement with Irigaray in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* in context of language and subject formation makes her position clear.

Irigaray's sees language as essentially phallogocentric, founded on the hierarchized binary structuration which signifies women as other, absence, irrational, body, animal etc. against man who signifies Self, Presence, Reason, Mind, Spirit etc. Irigaray's response is that the female subject is *unrepresentable* by such masculinist structures (language and patriarchy) because woman is more than man's negative inversion and hence beyond the representation of masculinist structures. Thus, argues Irigaray that Woman, *the female subject is outside of language*, much like Antigone is outside of Creon's patriarchal order.

The problem that Butler has with Irigaray's idea of the female Subject is its colonising tendency. As Butler puts it, her defining of the Woman

constitutes an appropriative act that risks a repetition of the self-aggrandizing gesture of phallogocentrism, colonizing under the sign of the same those differences that might otherwise call that totalizing concept into question  
(*Gender Trouble*: 15)

In other words, though she defines Woman as the Other and highlights its transgressive potential, she colonises *difference* under a *totalising sameness*. In fixing 'Woman' to a stable referent she repeats the masculinist totalisation that she accuses patriarchy of. Secondly, in placing Woman outside of language, Butler accuses Irigaray of falling prey to the binary division

(linguistic inside/linguistic outside) that she finds problematic with phallogentric language. For Butler, and here the acknowledged influence of Foucault's idea of subjectivation is clear, there is nothing outside of discourse, in fact it is within discourse that resistance is possible.

Now if we replace the female Subject/ Woman with Antigone then Butler's criticism of Irigaray becomes clear. She is wary of the fact that in pitting the rule of law based on maternity against the rule of law of the patriarch, no real resistance or engagement within hierarchized binary actually takes place in Irigaray's reading of Antigone. It is just a replacement of one by another. Butler in fact has shown how Antigone *troubles* such easy binary divisions of sexual difference, kinship and language and emerges as a resisting figure who lies not outside but inside the very structure of what she resists. What situating Antigone outside of the masculinist political sphere does is that it renders her "not (as) a political figure, one whose defiant speech has political implications, but rather . . . one who articulates a pre-political opposition to politics representing kinship as the sphere that conditions the possibility of politics without ever entering into it" (*Antigone's Claim:3* ) thus robbing her of political agency and potential for resistance. The pre-political as we saw actually serves very political ends.

### 3.3 Feminism

In the very second page of her book Butler distances herself from feminists (read Irigaray) who claims for Antigone a position of representation of Feminism/Feminist politics and asks

But can Antigone herself be made into a representative for a certain kind of feminist politics, if Antigone's own representative function is itself in crisis? ... as a fiction, the mimetic or representative character of Antigone is already put in question but that, as a figure for politics, she points somewhere else, not to politics as a question of representation but to that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed. (*Antigone's Claim: 2*)

Antigone, says Butler, exposes the limits to representation and representability, this however is not to be confused with Irigaray's claim that Antigone is unrepresentable because she

lies outside of Creon's paternal order, or that Women are unrepresentable because they lie outside of language. Rather Antigone is what Butler in her work calls the *unintelligible*. Butler, influenced by Foucault is of the opinion that it is discourse that *produces* subjects, it makes subjects *intelligible* within a certain discourse. But this intelligibility is exclusionary, because it renders certain subjectivities *unintelligible*. Intelligibility then is given rise to through a process of normativisation. This idea maybe made clear through the notion of *différance* in Derridian deconstruction. Broadly speaking, Derridean deconstruction shows the need of any definition as origin to *differentiate* itself from all that it is not and how the definition is also dependent upon the diachronic *deferral* of all other-than-origin in order to be instituted. Thus, to be named/defined/made intelligible depends on *the exclusion of all that the definition/intelligible/named is not*. Derridian deconstruction seeks to counter Logocentrism-a prioritising and guarding of pure origin, by un-conceal the concealed 'trace' of the differed-deferred. Butler in a similar vein tries to unconceal the workings of norms in defining the intelligible and makes an ethical gesture towards non-normative subjects, whose life have been rendered unintelligible and unliveable by normative structures. In *Antigone's Claim* it is a gesture to them who have been rendered unintelligible by a heteronormative structure based on Oedipal code. At the receiving end of her criticism are of course structuralists, feminists and psychoanalysts. However, to come back to the point of Feminism, Butler is of the opinion that Irigaray's dependence on the *metaphysics of substance*, which uncritically defines who or what a woman is heteronormative and by extension feeds off the very patriarchy that it tries to resist. Further it also is party to the process of rendering certain lives unintelligible, the ones that fall outside of the Man/Woman binary.

From the above discussion we can conclude that Antigone as read by Butler points towards the larger issues that has informed her intellectual life. As a scholar Butler has concerned herself with exposing the contingent nature of any universalist claim, in this case the incest taboo/the Law of the Father/The Oedipal code, that makes certain subjectivities-the non-heterosexual and non-normative-unintelligible, violently excluding them from the realm of the liveable and grieveable.

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