



Sophocles' Antigone: A Woman's struggle for Family Ties and Obligations

Naresh Kumar
Assistant Professor,
Department of English, Govt. College, Narwana (HRY)

Nirmala Sharma
Guest Lecturer,
Department of English, Govt. College, Narwana (HRY)

“..... cannot force their way against men.”

Abstract:

*The position of women from the ancient time is always thought to be the lowest. In the case of Greek women, the freedom is limited and there are set rules and regulations for them to behave in the society. In such confined society and time, Antigone, a female character in Sophocles' work **Antigone** takes a strong stand for a good cause challenging the then social values and rules. Her rebellion is threatening as it is against the gender role set by the men and the hierarchy made by the same men in their favor. She rejects to be passive and follow whatever the men say. The turn of events exposes the suppression, and the resultant resentment from Antigone.*

Keywords: Women, Society, Challenge, Gender and Subordinate

In this famous tragedy, Oedipus, Antigone and Ismene's father, had two sons, Eteocles and Polynices. Upon Oedipus' death, it was agreed that each would take the throne from one year to the next. After the first year, however, Eteocles, the elder, refused to step down. Polynices and six foreign princes marched on Thebes. All were defeated. The brothers killed each other in a duel, making Creon king. Creon ordered Eteocles buried in honor and left Polynices to rot on the pain of death. Sophocles uses the characters Ismene and Antigone to show the different characteristics and roles than women are typical of interpreting. In Antigone, Sophocles portrays women in two different lights. However, in general, he presents women as being oppressed but as also handling their oppression in two different ways. Using the character of Antigone, Sophocles portrays woman as being strong and able to fight against the restraints of society. Antigone is restrained by Creon who declared that their brother Eteocles shall be given proper burial but not their other brother Polynices. Creon's decree is significant in that it breaks laws already made by the Gods but also in that it denied one of the few essential rights granted to women.

But Polynices, just as unhappily fallen-the order
Says he is not to be buried, not to be mourned;
To be left unburied, unwept, a feast of flesh
For keen eyed carrion birds.(Theban plays 127)

Traditionally women are characterized as weak and subordinate and Ismene is portrayed in this way. Through the character of Antigone, women finally get to present realistic viewpoints about their character. Classical Athenian tragedy was written and performed by men for a largely male audience. The drama of Antigone hinges on the conflict between competing moral claims. For

Creon, good citizenship trumps all. In Antigone's transgression, he sees the dangerous primacy of personal will over the authority of the state. "If a man puts family or friend ahead of fatherland," Creon declares, "I count him absolutely good for nothing".

You crawling viper! lurking in my house
To suck my blood! Two traitors unbeknown
Plotting against my throne.(Theban plays 140)

Antigone appeals to a higher order. Antigone should be a woman made sense to Hegel, a German philosopher, who saw this conflict in gendered terms. Creon, in Hegel's view, stands for the masculine law of the state, whereas Antigone represents the feminine law of the home. For Hegel Antigone captures the way that the interests of the state and the interests of the family are often irreconcilably opposed. Hegel's gendered division between the state and the home may seem slightly outdated, but he was right to highlight the play's essential conflict between masculine and feminine. Creon's anger at Antigone takes on a distinctly misogynistic tone: "I will not be bested by a woman", he rages. "tie them up! No more free running woman!"

Antigone was not only a daughter, sister, niece and lover, but also a political actor, and an allegory for resistance to authoritarian rule. Antigone believes that a woman should be intrepid strong, even at the risk of challenging men's authority. When she proposes to bury Polynices, Ismene answers, "we are not born to contend with men".(75) Antigone's response, "that death will be a glory," (86) does not directly address gender issues, but it expresses her fury at Ismene's passivity. After the burial of Polynices, Antigone defiantly states, "I did it. I don't a thing," while being interrogated by Creon (492) and later comments that she was "not ashamed for a moment, to honour my brother". (572-73) Antigone's gallant speech and defiance towards traditional gender identifies audaciously shows her revolutionary desire for gender equality. Antigone wants woman to have as many opportunities as men and a woman's life should not be predestined because of her sex. Antigone starts the play with the idea of disobeying men's rule over women, and later takes her plan into action, leading to the demise of Creon's authority due to his rigidity. Antigone's show of bravery throughout this play defies gender roles of her time, and makes her death meaningful. Antigone's death, though by her own hands, was caused by Creon and his misguided laws. Antigone rises above Creon's restraints by burying her brother in secret, showing her strength of character.

O but I would not have done the forbidden thing
For any husband or for any son.
For why? I could have had another husband
And by him other sons, if one were lost;
But, father and mother lost, where would I get
Another brother? (Theban plays 150)

The sexist stereotypes presented in this tragedy address many perspectives of men at this time. Creon the arrogant and tyrant leader is, the very character that exemplifies this view point. Antigone's spirit is filled with bravery, passion and fury; which allow her to symbolize the very essence of women. She is strong enough to do what her conscious tells her despite the laws of the land. Antigone opposes Creon's law and buries her slain brother. She does this because she is compassionate and loves her brother very much. Creon, however, believes that his laws must be upheld and would do anything to prevent any type of rebelling. He is even more infuriated when he hears that a woman has broken his laws. He tries to show Antigone who's in charge by sentencing her to a life of imprisonment. Secondly, Antigone shows how determined she is by accepting her consequences with pride. She does not try to hide that she is responsible for breaking Creon's laws, moreover, she takes all the credit. All the while she maintains her strength because she truly believes in her actions. These sorts of action ultimately prove that

Antigone is courageous and willing to stand up to men, which was completely against the norm at this time. Her spirit refuses to submit to the role of a helpless woman like her sister Ismene. Ismene proclaims, we are only women, we cannot fight with men, Antigone!”(Sophocles, pg. 187) She is unwilling to do the right thing if it means standing up to a man. The play is filled with instances of a sexist male view point. Creon is the leader of the Theban throne a position he highly regards. He believes that he has a divine rule and therefore his laws are just and fair. Creon is so upset that his laws are broken by Antigone that tries to hurt her as much as possible. He tries to act as prideful as possible, he states, No woman shall seduce us. If we must lose, let’s lose to a man, at least. Is a woman stronger than we? (Sophocles, pg. 212) This is proof that Creon does not see women as equal to the authority of men. He feels that women have no common sense and, therefore, must be punished for their irrationality.

You see me, countrymen, on my last journey,
Taking my last leave of the light of day;
Going to my rest, where death shall take me
Alive across the silent river.
No wedding- day; no marriage-music;
Death will be all my bridal dower. (Theban plays 148)

The Greek tragedy Antigone by Sophocles is one of the first dramatic plays that demonstrate the different roles women play in society. The two sisters Ismene and Antigone portray major female characteristics. While Antigone plays the role of a strong and sensible woman, Ismene portrays the typical, meek and mild role. The character of Creon demonstrates through his tyrants’ role, the sexist male viewpoint of the ancient Greek world. This play proves that gender difference has always been present in society.

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