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## **The Subaltern Speaks : Revisiting Sophocles' *Antigone***

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### **Abstract**

Every realm of human experience is marked by the ideological weight of hierarchy and power. The play of power and politics patterns subaltern and subordination in every system. The problematic of binary opposition and the dynamics of superiority inferiority inscribe and reinscribe in the individual as well as social psyche. Diverse institutions – family, religion, culture, society, literature – bear the imprint of hegemony. Language is the potent tool with which dominant groups in a society create binary opposites. With the use of language, one group is given priority and the other is pushed to the margin. The present paper concentrates on the process of cultural Othering which creates a subaltern at all levels – social, personal, sexual, political, cultural.

**Key words** hegemony, patriarchy, hierarchy, feminism, binaries

Patriarchy is the primary ideology that subjugates women. It reinforces the systems of exploitation of the subaltern. Simone de Beauvoir explains cultural othering in the following words: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the

incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (1972;16). Feminine is constructed with reference to the male, the masculine, the norm and the centre. Beauvoir believes that masculine is the absolute human type against which the deviant feminine is measured and analyzed.

Patriarchy ensures continuous dominant masculinity and dominated femininity. It perpetuates gendered subjectivity and maintains an ideology which gives man superiority. Patriarchy renders women to marginalization and cultural Othering. Literature represents the marginalized women. The literary works by male authors, governed by the ideology of patriarchy, provide prejudiced views on womanhood. Women are misrepresented as angels, emblem of purity and of sacrifice or even as evil ready to tempt men (leading them to havoc). Male constructed literary texts represent woman as paragon of all virtues or demon of all vices. These women have no voice, language or history of their own. They function with a borrowed and unauthentic voice. They are denied access to both the mimetic and political forms of representation. The discourse of patriarchy reads women’s liberation and exercising of rights as forms of aberrations.

The patriarchal dominance gets subverted when a writer provides space for female sensibility in literature. The creation of women’s literature envisions an alternative history – “his” story to “her” story. Such writings challenge patriarchy and reassert the true subjectivity of women. The narrative strategies and literary structures are a medium through which identity of women gets redefined. The subordinated, muted, subaltern women attempt to articulate reality when they start speaking. An increasing awareness about injustices done to women gives rise to a feminist’s movement that raises voice against marginalization and patriarchal oppressions.

Feminism focuses on women and the problematics of oppression of women in patriarchy, colonialism and politics.

Feminism, which critically interrogates theory and social action, deals with political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual, racial and institutionalized inequality of women. It systematically registers protest against various oppressive structures that inflict injustices upon women. Every strand of feminism-Marxist, psychoanalytic, postmodern, liberal-addresses the marginalized status of women in society. Feminism also mobilizes movements on issues of gender-based discrimination. The notion of a universal patriarchy manifests every social institution and weilds a great influence on individuals of diverse cultures, histories and religion.

In order to maintain and perpetuate the relationship of domination and subordination between the two sexes, patriarchy hands over the reigns of power to men. Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics*, observes: "...that military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance-in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in make hands" (25).

Patriarchy intersects with the caste, class, race, religion and culture of perpetrate marginalization/inequality of women. The feminists endeavour to address the victimization/dehumanization of women at the social, political, intellectual and existential levels. Liberal feminists assert that society will develop only if individuals are provided with the right to act freely and rationally. Liberal feminism voices the need for the realization of complete self of all women.

Patriarchy, according to Radial feminism, is the primary form of oppression of women—at home and in society. The Radical Feminists believe in eliminating patriarchy and inequality of sexes (Willis 118). They challenge the gender

roles and call for a radical reformulation of society (Tong 95-96). Maria Dalla Costa locates and analyzes the role of women in both the public and private spheres. She believes that the role played by women in both spheres determines her awareness of self (21). Women are alienated in a system because of their being trapped in domesticity. Friedrich Engel believes that women are confined to homes by marriage and do not remain centres of production (26,151). According to Simone de Beauvoir, patriarchy deflects women from their existential destiny and immuses them in “otherness”(17). Man, believes de Beauvoir, assumes the role of *self* in society and relegates women to the position of *other*. Man attains self because he enjoys all rights and privileges, explains Beauvoir. Woman, she adds, becomes the *other* because she lacks power (55-90). Men assign women passive roles of matrimony and motherhood and hence confine her to domesticity or the private (285,469). Woman, argues Beauvoir, should seek her own self and be the subject of her actions (689). When woman is free to act, she attains the right to equality and freedom (734). This, believes Julia Kristeva, can be achieved by transgressive and non-phallogocentric feminist works.

Language, in Kristeva’s views, is a system of differences and discriminations (*The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* 42). The entire patriarchal project could be revolutionized through language, according to Kristeva (*The Revolution of Poetic Language* 96). Helene Cixous also asserts that woman as the repressed *other* could be articulated by language (*Coming to Writing* 23). The patriarchal language could be ruptured to lead to the emergence of a new language (*The Newly Born Woman* 95-96). Kristeva and Cixous emphasize that women should be perceived as a political category.

The disruption of the binaries through language in literary texts plays a great role in promoting equality of sexes. The articulation of women experience and voicing of their rational thoughts in literary texts attempts to promote a democratic perception. Such a perception dissolves differences and projects women as thinking and acting freely. The deconstruction of binaries and identity makes space for the equal rights of the women. Many writers, in diverse fictional works, focus on the female perspective. Though the majority of feminist theorist and writers are women, men have also written from the female perspective. Annis Pratt believes that gender roles are oppressive not only to the women in real life but also in literature. Fiction, she believes, reflects those experiences of women which thwart their growth in society. Pratt writes that women are 'outcasts'- they have neither a homeland nor an ethnic place within society (6). Sophocles play *Antigone* brings out this state of women in ancient Greece.

Sophocles, one of the three great Greek tragedians, is known for his classic writings. The plays penned by Sophocles (496-406B.C.) provide insights into the political and social aspects of ancient Greece. His plays belong to a period after Aeschylus. Greek tragedies have a religious background. While Aeschylus introduced the idea of divine will shaping the course of events, Sophocles adds the element of human will working in harmony or in opposition with circumstances. The plays written by Sophocles include *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Ajax*, *Electra* and *Antigone*. Out of 123 plays written by Sophocles, only seven are available in complete form. Sophocles, son of Sophilus and Jocasta, made his first artistic achievement in 468 BC by defeating the reigning master of Athenian drama, Aeschylus, in Dionysia theatre competition.

*Antigone*, which is from Theban plays, is one of the famous tragedies by Sophocles. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, is imitation of action. It offers a concrete means of interpretation of human condition. Sophocles tragedy, *Antigone*, occupies a privileged position in modern political thought. It articulates the issue of the place of women with respect to both the state and the household. Sophocles speaks for the women constrained by the state/politics. The theatre, in ancient Greece, expresses political articulations. It establishes elements of political, moral and religious foundation of *polis* in Athenian democracy. The performance of tragedy in the theatre of Greece, transposes political debates of the polis on the stage. Hence, theatre offers visibility to people-lets them “see” and “be seen.” The plays conceptualize both the narrative and the political. With the power of narration, the plays exhibit imitation of an event that relates to subaltern. These plays describe human deeds and the consequences of human action. Sophocles brings *Antigone* to visibility and gives her voice. While the central position in the play belongs to Creon, Sophocles has reversed the emphasis (De Witt 395-96). He gives prominence to the part of *Antigone* in the story of Creon. Necessity and chance make the writers shape history and legend. Great writers never simply uphold the doctrine of art for art’s sake. They can bring anomalies and disrupt the dominant style of writing to make the part seem greater than the whole.

In his book *Almost a Girl: Male Writers and Female Identification*, Alan Williamson focusses on the difficulties male author have while writing from female perspective (2). He explains the feelings of a male author writing for a female identity with the understanding of oedipal stage. He perceives a commonality between son and mother at the oedipal stage. At this stage, Williamson believes, there is emotional and imaginative attuning between the two. Once the oedipal stage

is over, the male identifies with his father and masculine side. This transition involves a grief over the lost bond with mother (5). If the male child turns this grief into anger, it has a negative effect. This effect is positive when the child tries to regain the bond shared (with his mother) by re-identifying with women. "Writing from the female perspective allows male authors to achieve a re-identification" (Lange 2).

Sophoclean tragedy *Antigone* is structured on principles of dramatic construction (derived by Aristotle three-quarters of a century later). The pattern of the play is marked by a shift of emphasis from "tragic hero" to a secondary figure. Sophocles tells the story of Antigone with the familiar theme of hubris (hybris). He could not tell her story without bringing in the edict. Antigone dies because she defies the edict forbidding the burial of Polyneices' body. Creon, the King is the protagonist and the story of Antigone is told through his story. With the force of her rhetoric and personality, Antigone captures the interest of the audience. Though Antigone departs Creon's story and is in subordinated position, Sophocles modifies the theme of hybris by developing her character. Sophocles' characterization of Antigone shows her dominating and outweighing the character of Creon. Sophocles presents Antigone as he *sees* her and titles the play after her name (Adams 47-48).

Sophocles highlights the issues of authority, democracy and freedom in *Antigone*. Antigone, the heroine, is associated with civil disobedience. She fights against the absolute power and represents the principle of natural law. It is through Antigone that Sophocles voices the female claim against the rules of patriarchy. The dialectics of Sophocles' *Antigone* explains the contradictions of the modern age and of the human condition in the modern age. Human beings, in the Sophoclean World, realize that they no longer can regulate their choices. The divine laws of piety give Antigone the right

to bury her brother. The polis' law gives Creon the right to condemn Antigone. As both rights are legitimate, it gives rise to conflict.

Antigone and Creon produce a parallel discourse of kinship and citizenship, of family and polis. By doing so each promotes a distinct vision of the city's future that attempts to alter the course of Theban time. Creon fails to rebuild Thebes on the foundation of distinctions that are rigid and gendered. But Antigone's failure works to a different effect. Antigone's voice suggests the possibility of a new beginning. She transcends the narrow realm of household and rises to the realm of politics. Sophocles presents both the private and the public selves of Antigone in the play. He integrates the principles of private behaviour of Antigone – the love of a sister who desires funeral honours for her brother's body – with public law.

Many literary works portray women as weak-willed, obedient, law abiding and in subordinate position and men as strong, independent and dominating subjects. Although men dominated in Greece, Sophocles' work *Antigone* represents women in an empowered position. The authority of Creon cannot dampen the courageous spirit of Antigone. She firmly believes that there are laws above those laws which are made by men. Antigone is quite assertive and has faith in Gods.

The opening scene of the play brings out the conflict between men and women. When the two sisters-Antigone and Ismene-exchange views, they articulate the traditional notion of gender. Ismene represents traditional belief that women must not challenge men's laws. She refuses to help Antigone as she fears. Ismene says :

And now the two of us, left all alone – think how we will die, most miserably of all, if in defiance of the law

we transgress the decree and power of the king. We must remember that we were born women, not to fight against men; and that since we are ruled by stronger hands and must listen in this matter, and in others still more painful. (Sophocles 7)

On the contrary Antigone's arguments represent the force for social change. She argues that unjust laws of men should be challenged.

After Oedipus' death in Colonus, Antigone and her sister Ismene return to Thebes with the thought of helping their brothers (Eteocles and Polyneices). According to a prophecy the brothers would kill each other in a battle for the throne of Thebes. Upon their arrival to Thebes, Antigone learns about the death of both her brothers. Creon (Antigone's uncle who inherits the throne) gives a proper burial to (Eteocles). He issues a royal edict and bans the burial of Polyneices. Antigone defies the law and buries her brother. She is imprisoned. Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's fiance, and Tiresias (blind prophet) plead with Creon to release Antigone. When Haemon reaches the jail, he finds that Antigone has killed herself. Out of despair Haemon and Creon's wife also kill themselves.

Antigone opposes Creon's law and buries her slain brother. When Creon comes to know that it is a woman who has broken his laws, he is infuriated. Antigone confronts Creon's anger and sentence with determination and courage. She shows an acceptance of the consequences of her doing. Her free spirit refuses to submit to the role of a helpless woman (like her sister Ismene does). Antigone's words ring in a possibility of a new beginning. Her voice and actions are suggestive of setting aside the past practices of the dominance in Thebes. Antigone's action in the past envisions a change

and promotes a perception which permits women to make decisions that could alter the course of events in a state.

Creon, son of the House of Menoeceus and brother of Jocasta, ascends to power under the “new conditions given by the gods.” The Greek text indicates a gap in Creon’s lineage. On assuming power Creon regards women to be passive conduits of kinship. Creon’s new order relies upon the exclusion of women from both political and familial authority. He demands the guards to remove Antigone and Ismene from the public space in which his authority is challenged. Creon’s rule is absolute not only in the city but also in the House. He tells his son, Haemon, who is betrothed to Antigone, “But there is no worse evil than disobedience. It destroys cities, and leaves houses abandoned; ... we must uphold the laws, and never be worsted by a woman” (Sophocles 51).

Ismene, the dutiful niece, recognizes Creon as patriarch of both House and city. In the opening scene, she advises her sister not to fight against man. Creon holds Antigone’s defiance as a double challenge to his public rule and to his manhood. He considers Antigone to be a man because she wants to move ahead with her decision. Creon replaces the rule of tradition with rule of law by transforming the terms of kinship that organize the family and the city. Kinship, in new Thebes, no longer signifies a shared ancestry. It establishes the links that relate men to one another through marriage. These are the links which formalize women’s presence but enforce their invisibility in both House and city. Though the law of marriage links men, it establishes juridical distinctions between men and women. As the founder of this new order, Creon enforces a series of distinctions conferred by the state – woman and man, old and new, dead and living, enemy and friend. The new order is marked by distinctions that are actually oppositions politically congealed and impervious to reason, human action and even death.

Creon's inflexibility with respect to laws results in his failure. His imposition of the new order invites transgression in his own family. Creon's rule is brought down by not the living but the dead. His son's and later his wife's suicide make Creon realize his own investments in the House : "Alas, the guilt can never be attached To another mortal To relieve me... Oh! Oh! I ... killed you" (Sophocles 99). Haemon and Antigone strike the foundations of Creon's new order- the power of the state to regulate kinship through marriage. They consummate their marriage not with the imprimatur of Creon's state but in the house of Hades. Creon is condemned to loneliness and lives like "an animated corpse" from which there can be no expiation.

If Creon initiates a fundamental reorganization (of the House, of kinship, and of state), Antigone defends old ways. Her actions break the cyclical course of Theban time. Her acts cut across Creon's rigid and gendered distinctions of state and home. Antigone's difference and defiance heighten the strangeness of Theban discourse because any woman who speaks and acts publicly in Creon's order is "unwomanly." By speaking and acting as she does, Antigone transgresses the rules which are limitations imposed on women. Antigone thinks differently and interferes with the workings of the House and polis. She likens herself to the Phrygian stranger (once married to a Theban King). Antigone's "minute deviation" makes a world of difference for mobilizing (the otherwise immobile past) and altering the terms of the past in terms of Theban present and future.

Sophocles' *Antigone* shows a woman acting explicitly unwomanly (in ways that contest and defy the constraints imposed upon women) which compound and confound the orderliness of gender in Creon's Thebes. Her story brings out the confrontation of a subaltern with a male dominated system. Antigone's insistence upon securing her brother's

place in Hades does not establish her as a new leader. This ‘insurgency’ (to use Gayatri Spivak’s words) or female participation as a subject challenges the ideological construction of gender. Antigone, “the subaltern as female . . . deeply in shadow”, through her actions transforms herself from familiar to stranger (Spivak 28). Antigone’s strangeness, her rhetorical stance, her defiance of Creon and her suicide return to Thebans the possibility of acting and speaking freely. Her actions and death introduce another generation to Thebes. Her doomed family is the last to suffer. Even her name, Anti-gone, translates to mean “anti generation”. Though Antigone dies unwed, unwept and friendless, she is successful in breaking the repetitive cycle of Theban crimes. Antigone cannot survive her own acts but her death returns to Thebans an opportunity to begin anew by continuing on different terms. Sophocles representation of the dispute between Antigone and Creon, in the play, clears space for a political present. The political present, though divisive, prepares for possibilities that would engender equality of sexes and promote democratic perception.

Antigone is unable to secure Ismene’s help and sets forth alone to bury the body. This is a case of *tolma* or *thrasos*, “rash daring” or “recklessness” against *sophrosyne*, safemindedness or wisdom. Sophocles brings out the essential trait of tragic figure by setting it in sharp contract with the opposite trait in another character. Ismene symbolises wisdom common to Greek morality. *Sophrosyne* of Ismene declines Antigone’s proposal. Antigone proposes to make a ‘folly’ even when it means death to her. Antigone’s recklessness is right and transcends the parameters of wisdom, according to Sophocles. He envisages the criterion of a body of Unwritten and Eternal Laws- laws which govern things by instinct to be right. Instincts compel Antigone to defy the edict, abandon *sophrosyne* and take to *tolma* and *thrasos*.

Sophocles justifies Antigone's *thrasos* as virtue (and not vice) because she has a wisdom that rises above sophrosyne to demand piety to man (Adams 48-49). Antigone upholds divine law above laws of man.

Antigone takes the course of action in the conflict between rights of conscience and duty of obedience with deliberate coolness. She anticipates the consequences of her action but has the courage to forego her pleasures. Antigone views her death as a triumph. She remains convinced about the righteousness of her conduct. She regards herself as a second Niobe looking forward to a happy reunion with father, mother and brothers (De Witt 393-394). Antigone does not fear death and goads Creon to take her life. Creon does not want to be guided/ruled by any woman. He believes that imprisonment and threat of death may bring Antigone to her senses but in vain. Haemon, Creon's son, recognizes Antigone's action with honour. His attitude is democratic and Athenian (Adams 54-56). The Chorus sides with Antigone's obeying of eros/instincts and the Unwritten Eternal Laws. Sophocles' *Antigone* is the tale of the woman who defies the King to honour her traitorous brother. This, for Hegel, illustrates the conflict of interests of women and family with the functions of State power. Men leave home to become citizens but sisters remain behind to guard the divine law within the household. Their speech/act to transform the universal end of the state into work/property of family positions the women as internal enemies of the State. This threatens the dominant order but Antigone's action in the play restates new possibilities for the formulation of expanded space for the subaltern. The tragedy of Antigone provokes reflection upon the nature of modernity. It highlights the narrow political space assigned to women in the past and the present. Antigone's anti authoritarian voice generates a political discourse. *Antigone* chronicles the suppression of

traditional female social world. It rejects the amoral statecraft in order to preserve the social world. It also defends the prerogatives of family against the overweening state power (Holland 1108-1111). Antigone speaks against Creon to inscribe an absence for a more participatory citizenship. She emerges as a citizen of Thebes. She challenges the patriarchal vision with her unwomanly acts. Antigone connects the contemporary readers with prepatriarchal and preauthoritarian past. Sophocles' heroine shows, even in the present times, the value and significance of a minute deviation which could usher in transformation in any culture or nation (1129-1130). She cultivates 'a difference', and encourages men and women to speak and act to bring necessary reforms in oppressive structures and orders. Sophocles' *Antigone* enables one to assimilate the past to remake inegalitarian present and develop a vision for a better future.

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